



19th century Britain, a time of reshaping women in the ideology of “separate spheres”

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Abstract— *The main issue of this article is to analyse the 19th century Britain, a time of great progress and reform in British society due to industrialisation and social upheaval. But one of the most controversial debates were the “gender inequality” in the then period. How in this era women were discriminated against by men. Throughout the 19th century a system existed which was entirely patriarchal. Britain was run by common law; a law which dictated that once a woman married, she ended up with no rights to anything. Patriarchal society did not allow women to have the same privileges as men. Consequently, women were ascribed the more feminine duties and pursuing the outlets of feminine creativity. The most ridiculous thing was that this era symbolised by the reign of a female monarch, Queen Victoria, still the women were subject to the voice of men. They were deprived of their own property, voting rights and even right over her own body. People believed in Tennyson's words, “men for the field, women for the home”. So in a sense it can be rightly said that the age is the supreme example of the proverb “Darkness reigns at the foot of the light-house”.*

Keywords— *Suffrage Movement, Blue Stocking, Separate Sphere, Socio cultural study, Feminism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The accession of Queen Victoria on the throne of England has a greatest inconsistency in terms of “gender ideology”. Since the time immemorial it has been engraved in the minds of the women that in all ways they are the subordinate to male authority. “According to Nina Auerbach the perfect woman in the Victorian society was “an angel, submerging herself in family, existing only as a daughter, wife and mother”. They have to be dependent on fathers, husbands, brothers even to their adult sons in different stages of their life. We can cite the quote for reference, “Of all creatures that can feel and think, we women are the worst treated things alive”. (Euripides, Medea) And in the Victorian England this idea reached its highest peak. But the greatest contradiction was that when Victoria as a monarch ascended on the throne in 1837, she was merely a girl of 18 and socially, politically superior to all the other citizens in Britain.

II. ANALYSIS

In Charles Petrie's article, “Victorian Women Expected to be idle and ignorant”, he explains exactly what the Victorian man was looking for: “Innocence was what he demanded from the girls of his class, and they must not only be innocent but also give the outward impression of being innocent. White muslin, typical of virginal purity, clothes many a heroine, with delicate shades of blue and pink next in popularity. The stamp of masculine approval was placed upon ignorance of the world, meekness, lack of opinions, general helplessness and weakness; in short recognition of female inferiority to the male”. Apart from this the groom being 4 to 5 years older was a natural criteria for any marriage as it established the natural superiority between husband and wife. And the financial stability for men was highly demanded criteria for marriage so that the women do not need to earn for maintaining the livelihood.

The age witnessed such a polarised gender roles that it can also be analysed according to the different functions assigned to men and women more commonly known as the ideology of “separate spheres”. It was in the Victorian period when the idea of “separate spheres” originated. The “separate spheres” framework held that “men possessed the capacity for reason, action, aggression, independence and self-interest when women inhabited a separate private sphere, one suitable for the so called inherent qualities of femininity: Emotion, passivity, submission, dependence and selflessness. For men it was public and for women it was private. The women were assigned to a specific duty where she had to look after the family members and to perform the domestic responsibilities. Men were considered to have much more knowledge and strength whereas Women were treated differently. She was portrayed as gentle, soft, pure, sacrificing.

Another development that took place in this era was the emergence of reason. Darwin’s “Origin of Species” challenged the words of the Bible that shook the man’s faith in God. He established with scientific proof that all species adapt and survive through the process of natural selection. Such as human being are evolved from an ape and not born from God. It led to a lot of susceptibilities. As the theory spread over, it provoked in Victorian letters a wave of pessimism and scepticism about the human condition. Therefore, it was a blow in the age old belief that human beings are the descendants of God. So suddenly the disappearance of God from the inward mindset makes people much more pessimistic and leads to a certain point of compromise. People suddenly started portraying women as angel, pure, gentle, meek, timid which substituted the disbelief of God by providing them mental peace and calmness. And the theological imagery shifted from the sacred onto the secular figure of women.

Women were not considered safe outside the home. So a general tendency to confine women inside the houses developed. Auerbach says that the depiction of women as angels was worked out from a tradition that went back at least as far as the German poet and novelist Goethe whose Faust in Faust (1808 /1832) is redeemed by the “eternal feminine” {das Ewigewebliche} which draws man’s mind to higher things. He produces ample imageries from religion to portray the good mother as a kind of angel or Goddess. So gradually women became a symbol of purity, chastity, love and innocence. The majority was conscious of not being recognised as a “blue-stockings”, the term designated to those who represented themselves as modern and intellectual women and considered themselves accomplished and well versed in many fields – artistic, literary and political. The effect was thus that many parents were reluctant to let their studious daughters attend

the universities like Oxford and Cambridge just for mere rejecting as a product of marriage. This unfortunate stereotype was so firmly entrenched that it even made its way into an 1883 edition of the popular Encyclopedia, where in a blue stocking is defined as a “pedantic female “ who has sacrificed the “excellences of her sex “to education and learning. Maria Haweis, in her 1883 book *The Art of Beauty*, states, an excess of education had the all too frequent side-effect of turning attractive young ladies into unfashionable dowds. She urges her female readers not to succumb to this unhappy transformation, “Recollect that you have a body, although exceptionally gifted with a mind: a little attention to it will neither nip your mental powers nor impede you as you clamber up the tree of knowledge. Busy sisters, if you climb at all, climb gracefully, rather than bring the tree into disrepute”.

The Victorian women were the victim of sexual abuse and spousal rape. The chief Justice in England Michael Hale, pointed out that the marriage contract was such which forced women to give up their right to their own body and no consent was required for men to satisfy their physical gratification. Women’s life where devoid of any security and only bound to perform the conjugal duties. From William Acton’s medical text, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 1857 it is known that “The majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled by sexual feelings of any kind”.

The most infamous rule existed in the Victorian society which deprived women from their property rights. After passing of the “Married Woman’s Property Act “(1870-1908) women got their right to handle their own property not by depending on anyone else.

In the Victorian society there was an alarming growth of prostitution in the middle class women. The reason which pushed thousands of women into this profession was unemployment. They maintained the needs of the men of the houses. According to Doctor Acton who presented an alarming picture of the increasing rate of this problem of prostitution which led spread of sexual disease namely “Syphilis “ amongst the male population. In 1860 Contagious Diseases Act were instituted which forced the medical examination of any woman who was suspected of being a sex worker. This immediately led to reform movement bringing together political and personal demands for equality, the slogan: “votes for women, chastity for men “ was coined.

In the Victorian period the most significant incident started to be developed and that was the “Suffrage Movement”. The word “suffrage “means the “right to vote.” Women’s struggle for the right to vote was named as the “Suffrage Movement”. All over Europe and USA, Women and the

poor have had to fight for participation in the government. It resulted a passage of the 19th amendment to the US Constitution, which finally allowed women the right to vote. The woman “Suffrage Movement “ has promoted human welfare in numerous ways .American women got the right to vote in 1920 while women in the U.K got it on the same terms as men some years later ,in 1928.But the process was not so easy. As the campaign intensified,suffragettes endured imprisonment,hunger strikes and force -feeding. Many carried the scars ,physical and mental for the rest of their lives , some died .But the result was positive because it ended with an unprecedented changes.

In 1832 and 1867 Reform Bills passed ,a law which changed the British electoral system. It was known as the Great Reform Act . For many years people criticising the electoral system as unfair.For example there were constituencies with only handful of voters that elected two MPs to parliament. In the Reform Bill there was a series of proposals to reform electoral system in the British Parliament .It increased the number of voters belonging from all sections of society .

This was reflected in 1848 ,a new document“Declaration of Independence “with the statement that “All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights ,that among these are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness”. A journal “The Revolution “was published right away to spread the doctrine that It declared that all men and women were created equal. .

During this period, Victorian literature grew up as world moving with many features. It was complicated and multidimensional ,which consists of huge changes among romance and reality. This was also the era of the professional woman writer, a time in which more women were writing professionally and demanded a place alongside men in the literary world.The socio,cultural and literary condition of the 19th century was so poor that the women writers were measured against a “feminine”, rather than a “literary ideal”. Even the term “women writer”, in its straightforward juxtaposition of a neutral feminine term with a neutral professional one, was a paradox for the Victorians; the associations of “women “and the associations of “writer” were too far apart to be connected without strain .So the Victorians frequently substituted other terms – “authoress”, “femalepen”, “femalewriters” and most characteristically, the delicately chivalrous term, “lady novelist”. Such terms served as constant reminders that women writers were a separate and inferior species of artist. One of the strategies the women writers turned to was the use of male pseudonyms .This name represented the male identity necessary to succeed during the time in

which they were actively writing. Charlotte Bronte originally published Jane Eyre and all her works under the name Currer Bell. Anne Bronte who was her sister published her novels with the pseudonym Acton Bell. Emily Bronte also published her only known novel, Wuthering Heights,under the male pen name Ellis Bell..Such is the case of Mary Ann Evans who was a prominent author and journalist during the Victorian period chose to write under her male pen name George Eliot. So there are plenty of proof as to why women had to use male pseudonym . Charlotte Bronte , Emily Bronte ,George Eliot and many other female writers took the pens to speak for the oppressed women in society . Such novelists were the torch bearer of the feminist movement which flourished during the 19th Century . Today, Jane Eyre is considered one of the most important and influential English novels in history irrespective of gender and time .

”.In 1847 Charlotte Bronte put strong feelings about women’s limited role into the mouth of her heroine Jane Eyre who is considered as the embodiment of an emancipated woman. She was aware of her repressed conditions due to the dominating patriarchal values and struggled to liberate herself from the domination and sought for justice. Through Jane Eyre, she consistently made the Victorian people believe that women could lead an interesting and important life. She tried to break away from the stereotypes of women laws. In chapter 3 Jane reacted to Rochester’s callous and indirect proposal asked the following questions: “Do you think I am an automaton? A machine without feeling?..... You think wrong I have soul as you-and full as much heart..... “ .Writers like Charlotte Bronte challenges her society and proved her feminine identity. On the basis of such equality Jane wants to have a lover. She refuses to marry Rochester as an unequal life mistress. She proclaims to Rochester that : “I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom ,conventionalities nor even of mortal flesh – It is my spirit that addresses your spirit ; just as it both had passed through the grave, we stood at Gods feet ,equal – as we are” Jane Eyre . Jane Eyre’s story tells us that in a male dominated society, a women should strive for the decency and dignity. “I don’t think, sir ,you have any right to command me ,merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience”.In face of hardships in life, the courageous woman should be brave enough to battle against it. Self -esteem is the primary element to protect. She dares to fight against the conventional marriage ideas, which will reflect all feminists’ voice and wish for a true love.” I care for myself. The more solitary, the more

friends list, the more answer Stand I am, the more I will respect myself". Maybe Janes' choices are considered something shocking, but it really gets a blow to the Victorian society. However, the ahead of age female consciousness of Jane Eyre, the main character challenges men's authority. "I can live alone, if self-respect, and circumstances require me so to do. I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure born with me, which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld, or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give". Jane Eyre is a coming of age novel that is a story of a girl's quest for equality and happiness. A common message that recurs throughout the novel is the importance of independence "I am no bird ;and no net ensnares me : I am a free human being with an independent will".

For the women writers it was extremely and insulting situation.: "Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel ; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute stagnation, precisely as men would suffer ; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags "(chapter 12). Once Margaret 2007 pointed out that Charlotte Bronte who was extremely eager to become a paid writer like the male writers. For this she sought advices to Robert Southey who was England's poet laureate (1774-1843). But he reacted to Charlotte Bronte in 1836 in reply to her petition for advice on being a writer . "Literature cannot be the business of woman's life and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity". Regarding women's writing ,a lot of critics support Southey and agreed with him .One of them is George Lewes, Reef (2012) states that George Lewes asks : " Does it never strike this delightful creatures that their little fingers were meant to be kissed ,not to be inked ". She lost all her enthusiasm by this response and Charlotte defiantly declared that " I am neither a man ,nor a woman ,I am an author".Nevertheless ,as all social progress, It's an ongoing struggle and unfortunately, there are many places in the world where women are still struggling to be heard.

III. CONCLUSION

The social question being raised that for any refinement, for any progress of any society or community has to come through the evolutionary progress of civilisation and

culture. Civilisation refers to the general material progress of society but culture relates to the moral and spiritual side of that evolution. Science was progressing, industry was progressing but was the man in society improving, getting better in terms of moral values or spiritual outlook? Quite often it is the other way round. When science and industry were going forward .They were progressing by leaps and bounds but in the process the human factor ,the human subject got degenerated, deteriorated , degraded, losing its model fibre which got weekend by the time. Some gender ideologies are good some are bad – the society should not be biased for anything and must wake up from the patriarchal outlook to decide which is which. So the demand was people don't need a patriarchal society, people don't need a matriarchal society, people just need a human society. This article unfolds here from a different perspective concerning women's self-realisation, esteem and choices to society or marriage. It helps readers to realise the importance of independence and to be enough to fight for their basic rights as human beings. Furthermore, the paper makes it clear that women are equal as men no matter in personality, economy, or social status.

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