



Gender Role in the Victorian Era: A Case Study of Charlotte Bronte's "The Professor"

Mostafizar Rahaman

The present research deals with the gender roles during the Victorian Era and the literature produced during the period that reflects the social status of women in the patriarchal society. In "The Professor", Charlotte Bronte highlights the female journey towards the independence and equality. The study under investigation aims at investigating the gender roles during the Victorian Era and the way women tended to reject the limitation of their role to housewives and mothers. Thus, the gender role presented through the protagonist's eyes challenges the Victorian imposed roles, but it still did not make women free and independent.

Women in Victorian Literature

The literature, which was written during the period of Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901 in England, was called Victorian literature. The Victorian age was described as the golden age of the English novel. However, this kind of literary genre was concerned with serious social issues which were mostly related to the Victorian woman. It was either poetry, fiction, essays, or letters. This Victorian Literature was characterizing the period and it was considering as one of the great changes that the age witnessed. The historical writer Margaret Oliphant describes this change as ***"a period of transition, in which many great names were falling into silence, and the men who were destined to take their places were but slowly pushing to the front"***.

During the Victorian era, literature has been replaced by prose. Victorian age was, according to the historical critic David Diaches, the great age of English novel. The Victorian period associates with a realistic works that reflects the Victorian world mainly its social issues, concerns, and moral values. So, the Victorian novel was the ideal form to describe the basis of life. During this period, many female writers emerged and contributed to the growth of the novel. Some of them published their works using their real names in contrast others wrote under a male pseudonyms in order to cover the issues of inequality and women's situation in Victorian society in addition to gain recognition. Bomarito Jessica and Whitaker Russel claims that women in better circumstances became either travelers, readers, or writers. Their writing was not appreciated by the male masses. This obliged them to publish under male pseudonyms. In other words, women's suffering and troubles were important for women

novelists who are more aware of their social rights. So, their themes were related to women's oppression, hardship, success, freedom, career, and ambitions.

Limitations of Women during the Victorian Age

In 19th century and in such a patriarchal society (Victorian society), the status of women and their importance were neglected in all domains. They faced different difficulties although England was a powerful and wealthy nation.

Economic Status

Victorian society viewed them as an ideal women, ***“whatever their social rank, in the eyes of the law women were second-class citizens” (Gallagher 57)***. They did not have identity or fair rights because of the Victorian laws which were discriminatory ones. This law discouraged women and did not allow them to improve themselves. As a result, they were an oppressed and abused member in their society. This Femininity's ideal encapsulated in model daughter, wife, and mother.

Victorians followed their queen. They considered her as a great example of loyal and obedient wife. The Queen Victoria represented the ideal womanhood. Abrams Lynn views her as ***“an icon of late-19th -century middle-class femininity and domesticity” (para.3)***. So, the pure woman, for them, is associated with the private sphere (the home). This sphere protected woman, guaranteed the feminine purity, and made home as heaven. Victorian age had its own social classes. Each class determined woman's life, to which she belong. The role of women remained unchanged in social categories. They were deprived of taking an important job. More specifically, woman of the higher class, Nobility class, enjoyed life. Her daily activities were visiting family, friends, sewing, dancing, reading and writing letters. She was highly educated. This wealthy women liked and preferred going to evening parties. They wore expensive clothes with jewels.

However, lower class women were very poor, and treated unfairly. They had only the choice of working to survive. They often earned low wages and worked in bad circumstances. Some of them sold food to others, repaired fishing nets, worked in factories, or as, servants. Others took menial jobs like laborers and prostitution. Commonly, these women remained single all their lives. Barrett Kara confirms that woman who were involved in the work place were viewed as being damaged and somehow less worthy of a good life and reputation than those woman who were spared from the often brutal working conditions and hours which the woman faced. The working class women worked to death. The critic Neff Wanda Fraiken states that all women were a problem not only the working ones (11). She shows the common belief of the Victorians. They considered women and children as a helpless creatures who needed men to protect and to support them. Even women worked more, better, harder, and longer than men, they were paid lower wages. Mostly, the bad conditions in the mills caused the death of workers and prostitution.

Conventional Status

On occasion, Victorian woman had conservative view related to dresses. They believed that all their dresses should be long, go all the way to the floor, and sleeved. They never wore pants or any dress showed their legs in public. According to pattern of traditional family, women were supposed to remain at home and obey men. Almost all of them were housewives and accepted the domestic values. Thus, there were women worked either nurse, laundress, maid, teacher, or social worker. Some other wives stayed at home and earned money through selling milk, butter, and other farm products. Moreover, woman never traveled alone in Victorian society. Most of them traveled with family or husband.

Educational Status

For Victorians, education is not important and not obligatory to women. They thought that wife should not appear more intelligent than her husband and woman could live without it. Perkin Joan claims that it was inadvisable for wives to appear to be more intelligent than their husbands, even if that were the truth. Though, some daughters, of aristocrats and middle class, had very limited education. They were educated singing or painting at home.

Victorians believed that women should be isolated from aspects as education, sex knowledge, and work. In this context, Mitchell Sally stresses that ***“a respectable girl should be completely ignorant about sex and sexuality until initiated by her husband on the wedding night”***. In addition to that, sex and sexuality were prevented topics. People were not allowed to talk about them nor do sexual behaviors. Specifically, women were banned from reading about it. They should be naïve and innocent about it. Woman had to stay chaste until marriage. She was not allowed even to speak to man unless a married woman attended as a chaperone.

Marriage

In Victorian law, man and wife were one person. That's to say she had no legal existence. She suffered inequality in marriage and society. It was believed that women belonged to the domestic sphere. That belief required them to lost ownership of wages, and to be excluded from land property. Before marriage, single woman and widows were allowed to own possessions. After it, their rights and property were given to the husband.

Besides, wife and children were considered as one of husband's property. Her actions were under his direction. He had a complete control over her earning, property, and money even her body. He controlled all what her body produced such as sex, children, and domestic labour. That was because of Victorian laws which legitimated beating wives and marital rape. They were obliged to do as what their husbands desired. According to Porter Roy, a married woman had these following functions: obeying her husbands, producing heirs, running the house hold, and being ladylike an ambassadress of grace. Victorian society viewed woman as weak, inferior, and more emotional. She was like slave in it. She should satisfy her family, her father, and her husband. She should devote herself for them without thinking. Gilbert Sandra

and Gubar Susan say that woman became an evil when she tried to think about herself. She had to live an oppressed.

Married Women

Marriage was the primary goal and an important step in Victorian women's lives. It was believed that a married woman was more respectful than an unmarried woman. As a result, the main purpose of them was to find appropriate husbands. Wollstonecraft argues that ***“the only way for woman to rise in the world is by marriage”***.

According to Calder Jenni, Victorians saw marriage as a stake. It was bargain, for the upper class Victorians, in which the father of woman and the husband tried to get the most of it. Furthermore, it was different from one social class to another. William Bridges Adams thinks that, as quoted in Perkin, marriage was a matter not of love but of bargain and sale, in the upper classes, a legally sanctioned species of prostitution. However, females of the middle class were made to play a double part, housewives on ordinary occasions, and fine ladies when required. Among the poor, conditions of poverty destroyed any vestiges of refinement, and nothing could be done to help poor women until their circumstances were improved. He shows that women, from any social rank, were slaves. The rich person seeks an agreeable and well-taught harem slave, the poor man, an efficient working slave. However the middle class man endeavors to combine both of them.

In fact, there was injustice in divorce. In case the wife wished it, she ***“had to prove adultery plus aggravating offences by the husband” (Perkin 23)***, but man ***“had only to prove simple adultery by his wife”***. After it, Victorian women lost everything even their children, that's why most of them preferred to endure their husbands.

Unmarried Women

Unmarried women were free but they did not have the Victorian social acceptance. They were used as a means of entertainment by men. However, woman of 20years old would not be as spinster. Those spinsters had unsatisfied position in their society. They were marginalized and criticized because they failed in building family but they protected their own property. For Victorians, their existence was as their death. They were seen less respectful and something abnormal. Greg William Rathbone claims that ***“there is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a Number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal, a number which [...] is both Productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong”***.

The Rejection of Female Limitation in the Victorian Era

The Victorian era marked the rejection of social limitation that put on women. It was the period of radical change. During which woman started calling for their deprived rights and their social status. Woman's conditions were changed by the English Common Law. She was granted certain rights as taking care of her children, after divorce, who were under the age of

seven. Men were had no right to treat her with cruelty. She had the right to own property and sue husbands; through passing various acts against Victorian customs and the traditional convictions as the Infant's Custody Act, the Matrimonial Causes Act, and the Married Woman

Victorian period was not characterized by equality between men and women but by the apparent difference between them. In this era, the gender roles can be understood through the varied roles ascribed to both genders, the females and the males. The patriarchic system was the norm. Women inherited the sphere that suited qualities of femininity as all deprived and selflessness. They usually led a more secluded life. On the other hand, men possessed all kinds of freedom, were naturally the head and the guardian of family members.

Moreover, man expected his wife to know things like cooking, washing, and weaving, possess feminine qualities and innocence. According to Petrie Charles, Victorian woman was expected to be ignorant and idle. They also expected them to be sympathetic ear and morality teacher of the home. A successful Victorian male who kept his family safe, provided comfort, was able to work through any hardship, and succeeded financially. This made him respectable by his peers and other men in society.

WORKS CITED

Bronte, Charlotte. *The Professor*. The Electric Book Co., 1998.

Bland, M. (2017). *Protest in Victorian Periodical Press: The Representation of Women, Women's Rights and Gender*

Brontë, Charlotte. "Preface to *The Professor*." *The Professor*, Harper Press, 2012, pp. xiii-xv.

Christen, Yves. "Brain structure explains male/female differences." *Male/Female roles:*

Diaches, David. *A Critical History of English Literature*.

Evans, Ifore. *A Short History of English Literature*. 4th ed., penguin Books, 1976.

Federico, Annette R. *The Other Case: Gender and Narration in Charlotte Brontë's The Professor*. *Papers on Language and Literature*, 1994.

MOSTAFIZAR RAHAMAN

RESEARCH SCHOLAR

COOCHBEHR, WEST BENGAL