

Emerging Female Voice in the Victorian Women Novelists

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ABSTRACT:

*After centuries of male domination in all the realms of literature, the Victorian age spawned a galaxy of women novelists who would rival their male counterparts. Their novels comprised the entire range of human spectrum from the isolated individual to the collectively social, and conferred the age with new sensibilities and new subjects unprobed by the male psyche so far. In the novels of the Bronte sisters, the social is eschewed by the subjective. With fierce imagination, terrifying passion and unadorned realism, Emily Bronte revolts against the Victorian sense of male-dominated propriety in *Wuthering Heights* (1847). The chief females voice a struggle of archetypes representing elemental forces. The Brontes painted the sufferings of an individual, and presented a new conception of the heroine as a woman of vitality and energy. Their works are as much the products of imagination and emotion as of intellect and reality. George Eliot, the pseudonymous Mary Ann Evans, is*

*perhaps the greatest of Victorian feminine voice. Her major novel *Adam Bede* or *Middlemarch* pictures English life among the humbler classes, be it in rural or urban society. George Eliot's basic preoccupation is with the intellectual problems and psycho-analysis of her heroines. Not meant for entertainment and delight, her females become a suitable medium for the serious discussion of moral issues. Elizabeth Gaskell chiefly concerns with the social problems. As a detached observer of life and a zealous crusader for morality, her female protagonists like *Mary Barton* or *Sylvia* delivered ironical commentary on social life.*

KEY WORDS: Male domination, Woman's point of view, Feminine voice, Ironical commentary.

INTRODUCTION:

After centuries of male domination in all the realms of literature, the Victorian age spawned a galaxy of women novelists who would rival their male counterparts. The

spread of education and the extension of universal franchise chiefly accounted for the emergence of women. Their novels comprised the entire range of human spectrum from the isolated individual to the collectively social. The feminine fancy fascinated by fictions revealed striking originality and attained much success. The emerging female voice is actually an idealistic reaction in the search for balance.

The Victorian women novelists are no declared feminists (feminism as a cult of perception or outlook was yet to be developed taking into the consideration of time zone). But they have definitely raised certain problems that can easily echo the serious gravamen of feminist theorists. They chiefly relate the dolours and dilemmas of the female protagonists placed against the males who treat women not fit for independence and in the process reveal their rigidity and unchanging nature. The males expect women to follow and respect behavioural norms set by patriarchy. She is considered his property and used in the way he likes. The emerging female voices not only dethrone the mischievous and deep-seated myth of femininity but also deromanticize the body politic of falsification.

Successfully leading a financially independent life, they find themselves superior to the socially defeated. The sensations of the body and its pleasures are aspects they enjoy like men. But society pressurizes a woman to be passive. The shame of unwedded motherhood is one such powerful pressure. Oscillating between desire to give the children a respectable birth and dread of legitimacy, the eternal mother is enforced to actively hunt for a father. Her mothering creates gender roles by which “male domination as well as female subordination is ensured” (*The Reproduction of Mothering*: Nancy Chodorow).

Social Female Voice and the Brontes:

In the novels of the Bronte sisters — Charlotte, Emily and Anne — the social is eschewed by the subjective. Their works are a queer mixture of romantic commonplace and personal inspiration, primitive feeling and spiritual exaltation. Charlotte’s major novels *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* and *Villette* record her own mental feelings and sufferings from woman’s point of view. In *Jane Eyre* (1847) the love-story of the heroine is unfolded with a surprising frankness and a depth of understanding new in fiction. Its greatness

lies not in the melodramatic plot, but in the fiery imagination and poetic passion with which characters and situations are conceived. The female voices are a satisfactory blend of romance and realism. Jane follows the dictates of her refined conscience. Her quest is to find a partner worthy of her intelligence, her judgmental wit and her determined selfhood. She aspires for such a man who would learn to respect her integrity and her determination. Her is a co-existence of alternative duties and vocations. Finally the mature heroine embraces secular happiness as a means of salvation. In *Shirley* Charlotte reverts to a more normal and less inspired portrayal of life. The main interest of the story derives from its distinctive female characters and their gradual empowerment. Written in reminiscent vein *Villette* is based on the author's life. Lucy, the central female protagonist is somewhat priggish and frosty. The female voices in Charlotte bring into novel energy and passion that give to the commonplace people wonder and beauty of the romantic world. They are of an animating force and of a romanticism of individual passion. The heroines are usually pure and their outspoken confessions touch the readers' knowledge of the heart.

Emily Bronte (1818-48) is perhaps the only novelist to have attained immortality by writing a single novel. *Wuthering Heights* (1847), a novel of fierce imagination and terrifying passion, revolts against the Victorian sense of propriety. Its appeal arises not from a conventional love-triangle, but from a struggle of archetypes representing elemental forces. In a series of climaxes the sustained intensity is carried to almost unbelievable peaks of poetic passion described with a stark and unflinching realism. The females who are fashioned from the fabric of the writer's dreams are the embodiments of the eternal spirits. Although they are products of imagination, they are unarguably convincing and can easily be recognizable. Anne Bronte's *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are much inferior to those of her sisters, for she lacks nearly all their power and intensity. Unhappy marriage and escape from marriage is the central concern of the heroine.

The Brontes painted the sufferings of an individual personality, and presented a new conception of the heroine as a woman of vital strength and passionate feelings. Their works are as much the products of the imagination and emotions

as of the intellect. In their concern with the human soul they were to be followed by George Eliot and George Meredith.

Moral Female Voice and George Eliot:

George Eliot (1819-80), the pseudonymous Mary Ann Evans, is sometimes regarded as the greatest of Victorian novelists. *Adam Bede* pictures English country life among the humbler classes. Hetty Sorrel's pitiful plight and poignancy almost achieve Shakespearean height. *Silas Marner* studies the life of a foundling. *The Mill on the Floss*, a partly autobiographical novel, deals with the moving tragedy of the estranged brother and sister. Here the character of Maggie is a profound study of the inner recesses of human personality. *Romola* is a historical novel on the Italian Renaissance. The late 15th century Florence is recast in and through the eyes of a sensitive female. Here the female voice is of noble nature full of trust and confidence along with missionary zeal. The heroine is finally rescued by the discovery of her duty in self-sacrifice. George Eliot's greatest novel *Middlemarch* presents with an inexorable realism a complex picture of urban life. Dorothea, the major female voice, is idealistic evoking the importance

of marital loyalty. The female protagonists presented in the novels *Felix Holt* and *Daniel Deronda* are of stereotypes.

Even if George Eliot's females sometimes make excursions into the uncomfortable regions of animal passions, they are mainly preoccupied with the moral and intellectual problems. May be sinners but no self-deceivers, they make no concession to sentiment. Their interest in psycho-analysis is essentially modern. Usually drawn from the humbler section of the rural society, they voice great understanding and sensible insight. They are not meant for entertainment and delight in the hands of the males, but become a suitable medium for the serious discussion of moral and social issues. It is this unflinching realism and truthfulness that makes the female voice of George Eliot so penetrative and remarkable.

Female Voice: A Symptomatic Compromise in Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell:

Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell chiefly concerns with the social problems as an off-shoot of the Industrial Revolution. Her chief novels *Mary Barton*, *Cranford* and *Sylvia's Lovers* are idyllic as well as ironical commentary on social life. *Mary Barton* dramatizes the urban ills of the Victorian

period. Apart from raising social issues, the novel exposes the conditions of the working women in the Manchester slums. Margaret, the highly perceptive heroine of *North and South*, speaks of market economy. The class conflict between the artificial country-gentry of the South and the anti-gentlemanly world of self-made manufacturers of the North is really a contrastive analysis on the question of women empowerment. Miss Matty, the main focus of the rambling narratives of *Cranford*, acquires social status and true gentility because of her financial independence. *Ruth* treats the problem of the unmarried motherhood, and the heroine struggles hard to win back respect from society. Sylvia, the central female in *Sylvia's Lovers* is self-willed and passionate. *Wives and Daughters* portrays the initial insecurity of Molly, the daughter of a respected doctor. Gradually Molly grows into maturity and becomes an epitome of women empowerment.

Mrs. Gaskell stands midway between Jane Austen who was a relatively detached observer of life and George Eliot who was a zealous crusader for morality. Generally guided by tempered perception and delicate sensitivity, Gaskell's female

characters voice the need for social reconciliation.

CONCLUSION:

Repressed by and thoroughly indoctrinated with patriarchy, the females are pressurized either to abide by blindly all its norms and values, mores and morals as absolute and irrefutable, or to adapt with them by hook or by crook. Their recognizable inferiority and not inordinate superiority, of course imposed from the outside socio-political agencies, is publicly paraded as the cardinal virtue of an ideal mother, wife or daughter. The Victorian women novelists have deliberately attacked the stable values of the frustrated and underprivileged women. The females are never allowed to question patriarchy and are deprived of both financial and emotional freedom. The Victorian women novelists picture a conflict between patriarchy and the rebellious female with a predetermined outcome. The social attitude towards women still clings to medieval times of crude domination, and if women refuse to be considered as 'thing', the society adopts every possible means to subjugate them. As Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal book *The Second Sex* so pertinently put it:

“Marriage... alone permits a woman to keep her social dignity.”

One of the seminal features which distinguish the Victorian literature from that of other ages is the large place in it which women’s works fill. By the middle of the 19th century the vogue of the historical romance was over and the public taste demanded quiet studies of contemporary characters and manners, a work for which the female voices were peculiarly fitted. Some female voices were of conventional and sentimental nature, but a serious demand for the mature response was in the air. The emerging new women are no more men’s property just to be treated as a commodity, nor do they represent mere instruments for producing and upbringing children, especially male children. Side by side their male partners, they emerge as the fighting crusaders of progression and development, a sure sign to the emergence of a new world and a new heaven.

The novels of the Victorian women writers conferred the age with new sensibilities and new subjects unprobed by the male psyche so far. The female world — their success and failure, their likes and dislikes, their love and hatred, and what they think about themselves or about their

male counterparts — projected by the female writers evolves a paramount importance and achieves a permanent place in the English literature.

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