

Self Made Or Serving Maid: A Study of Women's Rights In The 19th Century

Vishakha Singla

Student. Mata Jai Kaur Public School

Abstract: *This article traces the changes that came in the social, domestic and educational conditions of women in the 19th century England. It dissects the information into the three above-mentioned spheres and tries to analyse the conditions of women's lives. The study also links the various biological and evolutionary aspects of gender divisions to the literature studied in an effort to explore the medical side, if any, of women's subordination.*

Aims: *The aim was to analyse if the 19th century- a period of changing family values, Industrialisation, and reform in various fields like Medicine, Law and Education- reformed the secluded and restricted lives of English women.*

Methods and materials:

The information within the article has been gained from three literary works of the early, middle and late 19th century periods. The analysis is based on information presented within the given literature, and is supplemented by various studies listed within the references.

Results and Conclusion:

The results indicate that there was more acceptance of spinsterhood and remarriage, and working-rights for women were being enforced, giving them more autonomy. However, women were confined to un-skilled work and not allowed to branch off into professional fields. There was a need for conserving the chastity of women for marriage, and financial conditions generally dictated a woman's capabilities and marital prospects. In this sense, true autonomy was still a long way off. All throughout, a repetitive pattern was observed- various unfounded claims to men's superiority were made in reference to evolutionary aspects and the theory of Social Darwinism, whereas actual evidence for such claims was found lacking.

Keywords: *marriage, education, nineteenth century, women's rights, occupations.*

I. Introduction

Make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives; - that is, if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers.

-Mary Wollstonecraft [1]

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

....

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

-Sylvia Path, Mirror [2]

Women have constituted the other half of humanity since its very beginning. Ironically however, they are never shown any humanity. Since time immemorial, they have been considered the “second” sex, the “inferior” sex, one with no aforementioned “preconceptions” of their own. In the 19th century especially, women were entrenched in the continuous and arduous societal norms- the perfect body, the perfect mannerisms; a docile housekeeper. Due to these reasons she is constantly “Searching my reaches for what she really is.” Torn between following the oppressive rules of society, and the inner desires of emancipation, she is “rewarded” with “tears and an agitation of hands.” Every day as she fights this unending battle, she turns into a “terrible fish”, a fish out of the water, or more precisely the patriarchal waters, trying to make her own unique place as a woman, as the other half of humanity, in a male-dominated culture.

It is with this obscured reality of femininity in the 19th century that this study concerns itself with. Through reading and analysis popular literary works of the century, it aims to arrive at a comprehensive idea of how women's lives were dictated by the various expectations of the societies they were brought up in. For the ease of analysis, the 19th century has been trifurcated into Early period (1800-1833), Middle period (1834-1866), and Late period (1867-1900), and the different spheres with which the study concerns itself are-

1. Education imparted
2. Legal rights and Occupations
3. Marriage and Etiquette

These spheres were specifically selected for they act as stepping stones for autonomy in various other fields of life. For, as Brigham Young rightly puts it-

You educate a man,

You educate a man.

You educate a woman,

You educate a generation.

II. Materials and Methods

For a peek into the Early 19th century, we have chosen the infamous classic ‘Pride and Prejudice’(published 1813) by Jane Austen. The reasons for this selection need not be elucidated for two important reasons. Jane Austen was in herself an extremely clever writer, knowing the art of concealing worlds beneath words, and being an expert in the art of “writing between the lines”. The second reason is the protagonist of the book, Elizabeth Bennet: not only was she a rare female lead in a male dominated literary world, she was also not the servile, docile housekeeper that women were generally referred to as. This offers a very interesting blend of characteristics for a research.

For the Middle 19th century, we analyse 'David Copperfield'(published 1850) by Charles Dickens. Some may consider this book as an inappropriate choice for the main protagonist is a male, and tells the story from a different, and perhaps, biased perspective. But, this novel portrays a colossal array of female characters. Not only that, they often hail from various economic and social backgrounds, which helps us arrive at a universal understating of the woman of the 19th century, and not just the upper class, lower class or middle class female.

And the century ends with 'Tess of the D'urbervilles'(published 1891) by Thomas Hardy. This books was again selected for two reasons enumerated below. Firstly, this books places a special emphasis on the lifestyle and conditions of the rural woman, something the first two books do not explicitly centre their attention towards. Secondly, it deals with another previously unexplored aspect of womanhood; motherhood, more specifically unwed motherhood. At the same time, it leads the reader into a complex dissection of female sexuality and "feminine" virtues.

III. Results

3.1 Early 19th period

3.1.1 Education

The term 'Education' held different meanings for different classes. Where rural Britain regarded it as the ability to know the ins-and-outs of running a farm, keeping up with farm requirements and knowing how to tend to cattle and other domesticated animals, urban Britain considered it the ability to be able to tally account books, open up a business, and earn an effective income through commercial transactions. In both these accounts though, the 'Education' imparted to women was regarded as completely different from than of men. A report by Newham College, University of Cambridge states-

"Education was seen as a way of making women better wives and mothers, not as a way of transforming their lives." [3]

This holds true as within the story we see the Bennet sisters, none of whom are imparted any formal education. Quite in contradiction to any intellectual talents, women were compared and evaluated on the basis of their external beauty and "womanly" skills. Throughout the first few pages of the novel, the character of Jane has only been described by her "beautiful" or "handsome"[4] features; objectification of women thus has roots well beyond the 21st century.

Gilbert and Gubar would later describe it in their book as women being

"destroyed by traditional female activities- cooking, nursing, needling, knotting.....buried in (and by) patriarchal definitions of their sexuality....enclosure without any escape."[5]

At the same time however, access to education depended upon financial status too. Women of more financial resources were generally more likely to have better knowledge and skill than those of relatively lower classes. However, as we use the word 'skill', we must define it's context in the different economic sections of the population. For the weaker sections, 'skill' included domestic chores; having the ability to cook, clean, dress, and sew. This term however, drastically changes it's meaning when viewed in light of the upper sections of the society. As we see in the case of Miss. Darcy, women of her money and status were often groomed in the art of being a 'graceful' woman, one who could serve to be a better woman to her husband.

In Miss. Bingley's own words-

"A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and the manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expression, or the word will be but half-deserved."[4]

This could be reflective of the the 'Angel in the House' Gilbert and Gubar mention in their critique on literature- "While poor girls learned primarily how to pray and sew, daughters of the elite are portrayed acquiring mainly frivolous accom- plishments." [5] This is reflected in the way, Ms. Darcy and Ms Catherine De Bourgh are 'groomed' in the formal arts of music and portraying themselves as frail and dainty women; for them to be "ac- complished". [4]

This was the definition of female education that the Early 19th century confined itself to. However, an aspect is not well recognised is that often these social limitations have supposed biological origins.

An article by Bergman states how throughout medieval and modern societies, men have been used to physical exercises, hunting and gathering, war and other physically straining work, whereas women have been confined to private and domestic spheres. Thus, according to the theory of survival of the fittest of Darwin, males have become more adapted to their surroundings, becoming more capable of cognitive as well and physical activities. [19] This theory of evolutionary biology was often used to justify claims of male superiority over women as well, and also became a key reason why it wasn't felt necessary to extend equal educational facilities to women in the 19th century.

3.1.2 Legal Rights and Occupations

Where 'education' had reduced women to mere objects, there was not much scope to expand their rights in the legal sphere. An instance in the story dictates that upon Mr. Longbourn's death, the official title of the house would pass down, "in default of heirs male", Mr. Collins, "who may turn..all out of this house, as soon as he pleases." [4]

However, a rare exception to this rule stands to be Lady Catherine DeBourgh, who was the sole owner of Rosings Park after her husband's death. Her comment- "I see no occasion for entailing estates from the female line." [4] puts forward a deep regard for women's rights, probably a reflection of Austen's own view of feminism.

To explain this portrayal of an independent woman, peculiar of the 19th century, Deborah Simonton notes-

"Although there appears to be little doubt that married women of this class did withdraw from the formal world of work in line with the identification of them as dependant, they certainly maintained an interest in and influence over the business activity of their husbands and wider kin." [6]

But through her portrayal as a mean and cold independent woman in contrast to the fragile and delicate Jane Bennet, we see a direct contrast between the 'Angel' and the 'Monster', a concept elucidated in "The Madwoman in the Attic"; women writers in the 19th century often sought to make a "mad double" within their stories in comparison to the societally dictated 'perfect' woman; "the psychic split between the lady who submits to male dicta and the lunatic who rebels." [5]. This was a technique whereby women writers could not only spread their work in an increasingly male-dominated world, but also secretly express their desires for an independent life- style.

For occupation rights, women generally remained in the dark; from lower economic classes, women often em- ployed themselves as governesses and housemaids, but the actual idea of a 'job' for women was too dreadful even to contemplated within the British society of the early 19th century.

Institute of Education, LibGuides notes - "In the 19th century, teaching was one of the few professions open to women though their status and position was much lower than their male counterparts.....Female teachers were paid significantly less than male teachers," [7]. In a study by Simonton, she writes about the "state that family and home became synonymous with woman and femi- ninity in nineteenth-century Europe." [6]

Furthermore, for women attempting to enter the field of literature, Gilbert and Gubar describe the Western literary world to be dominated by “paternalistic rulers” , who is the owner of the “male generative power”[5], and thus has been given the soul ownership of the pen, and thus the ability to support themselves through a literary career. This sharp distinction between males and females is very obviously a product of various social customs and practices. But various times, such social inequalities have tried to be masked and justified as emerging out of biology and the inherent genetic traits of both the genders.

"Regarding the existence and origin of patriarchy, traditionalists do believe that men are born to dominate and women to be subordinate. They believe that this hierarchy has always existed and will continue, and like other rules of nature this one too cannot be changed." [20]

Such attempts to pass off socially created traditions as natural and inherent differences only lead to the rights and occupations of women to be restricted, for as they were biologically and scientifically inferior to men, they must also be given a lower social status than men.

Even women walking out of their homes without an escort or some company was considered ominous- “Women had no right to vote and couldn't own property. The husband was the chief breadwinner, and the woman was not supposed to work. Women couldn't even leave their homes alone without being considered prostitutes. They were educated by their mothers at home for domestic labour.”,[8] Nico Hubner notes. Elizabeth walking three miles “...alone, quite alone..” to see her ailing sister was also considered as “an abominable show of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum.”, and not “fit to be seen when you get there.”[4]

Pursuing personal interests and gains was also considered as opposition to the nature of womanhood as defined by nature. A study notes about the character of Rosamund from Virginia Woolf's ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’, -

“As her relation to children is not what is traditionally expected from a woman, and that is to be a full-time carrying and devoted mother, but she is a woman who is devoted to her career, to her own life and interests; this makes her a ‘half-good’ mother.”[9]

3.1.3 Marriage

“The idea was that upper and middle class women had to stay dependent on a man: first as a daughter and later as a wife.”[10]

“Marriage was idolised as as the only safe harbour where a woman could live and be accepted as a normal member of society.”[8]

Marriages in the Early 19th century were increasingly seen as a way to increase one's individual economic and social status, further the family name, and expand one's family business.

The notion of marriage was based more on the class of the society that the concerned families belonged to. Where aristocratic preferred marriages into either their own bloodlines or into other families of equal, if not more wealth, lower circles living especially in rural areas preferred partners from their own working class circles. This is evident when Bingley was persuaded by Darcy not to pursue Marriage with Jane, because of the “the inferiority of her connections”[4]

Gilbert and Gubar would further describe about Austen's work- “marriage is crucial because it is the only accessible form of self-definition for girls in her society.”[5]

Certain ‘Marriages of Convenience’ are often depicted within the storyline as well such as when Charlotte decides to marry Mr. Collins, for she “accepted him solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment, cared not how soon that establishment was gained.”[4]

Such 'favourable' marriages were often used as a tool by the economically weaker sections to marry into wealthier families or aristocratic circles. Throughout the story we see the strong influence of this idea in Mrs. Bennet's mind, as she constantly pushes Jane and Elizabeth to command the attentions of the Bingleys, Wickhams, Collins and the Darcys of the story, to open up their prospects of marrying into families which would provide them monetary and social benefits, and not necessarily emotional. In Mr. Bennet's sardonic words to his wife-"if your daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness-if she should die, it would be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Mr. Bingley, and under your orders." [4]

In fact, it was not uncommon to see young women married off into families without their consents. Denying a marriage proposal was considered a disgrace and often forbidden, wasting an opportunity to go through the inevitable societal ritual of marriage, and rejecting the 'proper' duties of a woman. Elizabeth refusing to accept Mr. Collins hand in marriage made her very own mother deem her "headstrong and foolish" ⁴ and call her "undutiful" [4], perhaps due to disobeying her duties of being a "natural" embodiment of the role of a mother and a wife. Because that is what marriage had become, a 'ritual' of sorts, a social expectation. However, many women increasingly started viewing spinsterhood as a means of asserting their independence, and rejecting the traditional values of their families. Elizabeth Bennet here again provides us with a beautiful example of this statement when she states that she would "say no more...than I might say in any house in the neighbourhood." [4], perhaps overcoming those social restraints of character which were deemed "feminine".

Writing of bachelorettes,

"More recently, the place of the spinster has been rehabilitated by those who urge us to interpret spinsterhood as a choice for some or even an opportunity to reject the chains of domesticity as a form of resistance to the institution of marriage and motherhood." [6]

Nevertheless these spinsters were often viewed as 'freaks' or 'outlaws', due to their inability to conform to the ideals of their societies.

3.1.4 Conclusion

"...Austen examines the female powerlessness that underlies monetary pressure to marry, the injustice of inheritance laws, the ignorance of women denied formal education, the psychological vulnerability of the heiress or widow, the exploited dependency of the spinster, the boredom of the lady provided with no vocation." [5]

No better sentence summarises Austen's work than the one above by Gilbert and Gubar. 'Pride and Prejudice' paints a picture of a conventional woman; greatly invested in her household chores, and patiently waiting for her Prince Charming to whisk her away to a better life (Jane's "modest hopes" which she "entertained for Bingley's regard." [4]). Through the Bennet family, Austen shows how the 19th century woman was living a deep life of ignorance, bundled up in her "nerves", where their sole purpose in life was to 'advertise' themselves at social events to be married off into wealthier families. However, the existence of rebellious characters like Elizabeth and Lydia Bennet contemplates the existence of a deeper meaning hidden within the pages of the book.

In keeping with her ability of "writing between the lines", we find that Austen's characters, and perhaps through them Austen herself, lived a double life. Where on the face of it, they were seen as docile submissive women, they often enjoyed their own personal lives. It is reflected when Lydia elopes to a man she barely knows, and it is apparent, as it is in many other instances, when Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins' proposal, and at first, even Darcy's. However, for her novels to be socially accepted in the conservative times she lived in, Austen always had to make her heroines "fail" at the end, their actions being reprimanded as "tyrannical and coercive" [5]. Till the end of the story, Elizabeth Bennet "grew absolutely ashamed of herself", and felt that she had been "blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd." [4]. However, a last attempt at revolting against patriarchal authority is explicit when we see how Austen always leaves this realisation of the "tyrannical" actions of the heroines as the end, almost as if it to add them was not a choice, but perhaps an obligation (and perhaps it was as well). Gilbert and Gubar note- "Austen never renounces the subjectivity of what her heroines term their own "madness" until the end of each of their stories." [5] Where working class women were often seen as 'unfeminine' and 'unladylike', they often sought employment as meagre agricultural workers or cooks when their families fell upon hard times, and at times even supported their families through the aforementioned "Marriages of Convenience". In other words, "Tired of the tyranny of men controlled society, women sought control over all the aspects of their existence." [11]

Thus, where women were on the surface of reality shown to be the image of domestication and sophistication, the epitomes of grace and dependency, small struggles were brewing deep within their superficial skirts and corsets. Perhaps, as this struggle is buried deep within the pages of the book, it takes root from one somewhere deep within female authors like Austen.

3.2 Middle 19th

3.2.1 Education

For much of this time period, education, especially for women, remained highly decentralised and greatly varying in meaning for different genders. Women still had to learn the essential domestic chores (seen more as social obligations rather than duties now, which might even be rejected). Inwords, women's "role in society was limited to breeding children and taking care of their families"[11] Indeed this tradition of withholding formal education from women had been inherited from the Early 19th century, but one important change permeated women's lives. To these set of required domestic skills, were added some intellectual subjects like accounting and monetary responsibility to facilitate the financial management of the household.

As Simonton puts it -

"The ideological mission of womanhood also charged women with frugality and thrift. Many tasks became more complex, creating new meaning and expectations, so that the way a woman 'kept house' defined her and her family."[6]

This is evident in the case of Dora, who after marriage was 'naturally' expected to become a better housekeeper, and subsequently wife, by learning how to balance the house's balance books- "to show her how to keep accounts"[12]- for "religion and needlework was no longer sufficient for being a good housewife and female worker,"[6]

As private boarding schools emerged in various cities and industrialised towns (as Dora was educated in one herself in Paris), separate schooling for women and men gained some popularity. However, this access to education for women was greatly limited and dependent upon three important factors. One was their geographical residence; women in urban areas generally had more access to literary resources, in comparison to those from rural villages. But the spread of education was education was on the rise; Emily, who grew up in an environment isolated from and most intellectual stimuli, also had access to school and now had "tasks to learn, and needlework to do".[12] Secondly, it depended upon the family's financial status. Where the bourgeois often had the financial ability to impart some form of education to their children, the majority of the proletariat classes considered education a luxury only meant to distract their daughters from the important domestic work that awaited them, so they could take up meagre jobs in the city, earn wages and supplement the household income, as seen in Pegotty portrayal within the story. In other words, "Domestic service became a predominant route for girls searching for a livelihood and dowry."[6] And thirdly, the occupation of the fathers played a great role in determining whether daughters received education; Agnes' father, a lawyer and businessman provided her with ample books to pass her time (even though her father could never send her for a formal education for "His housekeeper must be in his house..")[12].

Rousseau in his treatise "Emile, or Treatise on Education"(1762) states-

"Once it is demonstrated that man and woman are not, and should not be constituted the same, either in character or in temperament, it follows that they should not have the same education....duties themselves are different and consequently also the tastes that direct them. After having tried to form the natural man, let us also see, in order not to leave our work incomplete, how the woman is to be formed who suits this man"[13]

Many strong reformers wrote in protest to such regressive views. Emily Davies (1830-1921) wrote an impactful title called 'The Higher Education of Women', in which she argues that women are unable to progress forward because of their lack of education, and provided convincing arguments about why women deserved the same education as men. She states - "Many persons will reply, without hesitation, that the one object to be aimed at, the ideal to be striven after, in the education of women, is to make good wives and mothers....But having made

this admission, it is necessary to point out that an education of which the aim is thus limited, is likely to fail in that aim.”[14]

In addition to the various view discussed above, we also discussed that theory of Darwinism, which argued for the superiority of intellectual capacities of men over women. In this sense, there became a sort of social stigma around women who were smart. This is discussed by Gilbert and Gubar as they state- “but for women in particular patriarchal culture has always assumed that mental exercises would have dire consequences.” [5]

This view is expanded upon by Karson, when he enumerates that this social distinction based on cognitive capacities follows what he calls the men’s “theory of mind”.

“Due to social darwinism and theory of natural selection- men meant more for social domains and women private spheres- women more secluded and ignorant, whereas men more smart and biologically better adapted to be the breadwinners of the household and the decision makers”[21]

This is again, as Karson shows, biological subversion of women in order to establish patriarchy in society.

Thus, education for women was in this way, made and dictated by men, and sort of became a tool in itself for men to control and subordinate women.

3.2.2 Legal Rights and Occupations

As the years passed, women felt an increasing need to break the shackles of their male counterparts. In Deborah Simonton’s words- “Within such constraints, numerous women strove to create their own meaning and sense of identity out of work.”[6]

At the same time, with the rise of industrial areas and factories, an increasing need for labour was felt, where women were increasingly employed.

This translated into many women from lower classes taking up jobs in small units or shops around their places of residence, or sometimes even at greater distances. This is depicted in the case of Emily, as she takes up a job within Mr. Omer’s workshop as a “article” who had “as elegant a taste in the dressmaking business”[12] and Pegotty who worked as a servant/governess under the Copperfields at the Rookery. These women not only asserted their will to avoid dependency on men, but rather their household incomes through the money there earned.

Ms. Betsey is another example of an independent woman within the story, who not only manages her own finances, but also those of her husband and Mr. Dick within the story, for she had “always kept her money matters to herself”[12]. In addition to these abilities, she even owns property of her own, something at that time quite rare for a woman.

“The flexible boundaries of the early modern household meant that unmarried and widowed women could find a place for themselves, either incorporated into the household of kin or, if finances were tight, of an unrelated family.”[6]

Rosa Dartle’s character provides an insight into the above statement, who lived in the house of Mrs. Steerforth, as her caretaker. She was dependent on nobody but herself, rather supporting old Mrs. Steerforth all by herself- “she had a couple thousand pounds of her own, and saves the interest of it every year, to add to the principal.”[12]

But, following in the tradition of the classic portrayal of women by male writers in the 19th century, the independence of her character was foreshadowed by absurd and odd behaviour; something like the “terrible fish” (out of water) that Sylvia Plath describes within her poem.

Another interesting addition to this group of working women within the story is Ms. Mowcher; self-employed, travelling to various places for the fulfilment of her job, and never afraid of expressing her thoughts- her “professional visits”. Yet again however, her character has been depicted as eccentric and bordering on the verge of

madness, quite similar to the “unfeminine” “Madwoman in the Attic” of Gilbert and Gubar’s novel- “giantess”, “pursy dwarf” and “little creature” among other names.[12]

Such distorted views of autonomous women engaged in gainful employment often stems from certain superstitions surrounding an inherent biological trait of women- menstruation.

Throughout the centuries, period blood has been associated with various magical properties- an association which often associated menstruating women with witches, and led to their condemnation from society.

As Sánchez notes within his study, “it has even been related to states of disease or latent weakness. For other cultures, menstrual blood had evil and harmful qualities for men.”[22]

This “latent weakness” was often used to justify why women could never enter the active workforce, and had to be confined within their homes, forever doomed to a life of domestic solitude. He goes onto explain how menstruating women were subjected to “different types of isolation and confinement” and that they were “were weak with respect to men, specially against disease, given that their bodies did not assimilate all foods and evacuated excesses by menstruating.” [22]

These reasons for inefficacy were often quoted to prevent women from taking up professional work, and often left them with acute psychological trauma regarding their own capabilities and potential. However, these claims seems contradictory to their own selves, for if period blood, and consequently menstruating women, have been associated with causing disease, how can women be more susceptible to this “latent weakness”[22] when they seems to spread it themselves.

Consequently, these claims have been contradicted and proven wrong time and again through extensive medical research and evidence.

At the same time the skill of housekeeping and having major, if not overall, governance of the household was increasingly being transferred into the hands of women- “The newly fashioned home of the urban middle classes became a female space; it was women’s responsibility to transform a house into a home and the home into a haven from the busy, ugly world of commerce.”[6]

This is evident from the character of Agnes, who from a young age, had been given the responsibility of the household, and often supervised its functioning and working, even keeping the “keys” a very powerful symbol, which depicts dominance and authority over the household) since a tender young age. Dubbed “little housekeeper”, it was the “one motive of her life” to be “as discreet a housekeeper as the old house could have.”¹² In other words, her home became her “workplace”. [6]

Land rights, like those from the time period above, still remained scarce. Women could inherit property through various struggles, and more often than not, it remained the property of the male members of the families. Upon their death, the property was often transferred into the hands of the wife, if not viable next male kin was available. However, upon remarriage, that property was to transfer into the hands of the next husband. John Stuart Mill notes-

“She can acquire no property, but for the husband: the instant it becomes hers, even if by inheritance, it becomes ipso facto his... This is her legal state. And from this state she has no means to withdraw herself. If she leaves her husband she can take nothing with her, neither her children nor anything which is rightfully her own. If he chooses he can compel her to return by law, or by physical force; or he may content himself with seizing for his own use anything which she may earn or which may be given to her by her relations.”[15]

This is evident in the case of the Mrs.Copperfield, who upon marriage, had to transfer all her land rights to her next husband Mr. Murdstone, after which she soon got into the habit of referring to it as “your house”, in reference to her new husband.[12]

3.2.3 Marriage

“But she did what they all do—took a husband. And he did what they all do—made her wretched.”

-Betsey Trotwood, *David Copperfield* [12]

“But *we* who are dark, we are dark

Ah God, we have no stars!

About our souls in care and cark

Our blackness shuts like prison bars:

The poor souls crouch so far behind

That never a comfort can they find

By reaching through the prison-bars.”

-Elizabeth Barret Browning,

The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's point [16]

The domestic duties, the charms and her “education”, all prepared a woman for her marriage into a respectable family. Again the notion of the same-class marriages carried forward, as higher circles often preferred to marry within their families or within similar social standings. This is seen when Dora's father outright refused to marry her to David, who belonged to a class economically, and perhaps socially, weaker than her own. In David's own words-

“How miserable I was, when I lay down! How I thought and thought about my being poor, in Mr. Spenlow's eyes; about my not being what I thought I was, when I proposed to Dora;”.[12]

However, even as such marriages continued, many women chose another path for themselves.

When when women like Ms. Mowcher and Rosa decided to stay bachelors, when like Emily decided to take their fates into their hands and elope, when women like Pegotty decided to support their families with their incomes, change came.

At the same time, the encouragement a woman might receive for a second marriage also increased- but only if her previous husband had passed away, not if they had been divorced. As Pegotty lovingly put it to Mrs. Copperfield, she “may”, “if you choose”.[12]

3.2.4 Conclusion

Charles Dicken's literary masterpiece released in 1850, ‘David Copperfield’, offers an altered view of women in the dark dingy corners of the thriving cityscape of London, as well as in the quaint streets of many small towns. It put forward a slightly contradictory view of women compared as to the last book; women now had more autonomy among their peers, and commanded more respect. They could live independently and earn money doing meagre unskilled jobs, which earlier would have been seen as obscenity.

Even in marital affairs, women now had freedom of choice and could exercise this right, denying who they wanted, and accepting who they liked. However, social standing and financial resources still continued to be one of the defining features of a woman's life.

However, here we again enumerate upon -“ the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated”[5] for women. Whereas women who were dependent on men like Emily, Dora and Agnes were portrayed as angels (“diminutive” and “precious”, “good angel” and “beautiful little girl”[12])looking after households and families, independent women like Miss. Mowcher, Miss.Betsey and Rose were shown as absurd

and eccentric figures (“tall, hard-featured lady”, “eccentricities and odd humours”, and “edge tool”[12]). Stating thus, women appear, when seen from their own perspectives and those of others, as inmates of their own existence, trapped within the restraints of their own genders.

Conclusively, women could now take up some small domestic occupations and could earn a meagre keep. This was a big improvement from the condition of women since 1813. However, there was still a long way to go, by means of autonomy of profession, owning a business, and exercising choice in matters of finance and legislating other important decisions in the political and social spheres of life.

3.3 Late 19th

3.3.1 Education

With the changing world of late 19th century Britain, women found themselves exposed to new opportunities, and with them, new types of prejudices and stereotypes.

Women were increasingly gaining education and work rights, for the industrial revolution required an ever increasing work-force.

It is unfortunate to note however, that despite the Education Act of 1870, the reach of this legislation remained limited: women in rural and village areas were rarely ever educated to their full potential, or in any substantive academic subjects. Instead, their education focused on producing good Christian women- “A truly Christian woman”[17] -Mercy Chant, who herself belonged to the richer section of rural society. She was groomed in the art of family-making, rearing good Christian families, and fulfilling their domestic obligations[6]. Poorer girls, in addition, learned primarily how to pray, sew and other practical activities that may help them earn a wage in the future. Women like Tess, who belonged to the economically weaker sections, were often pulled out of schools earlier and encouraged to take up meagre, low-skilled labour to help pay the family bills. Tess schooling, or in other words, “to get my hand in”[17] agricultural or dairy work to supplement the family incomes. This is evident when on seeing Clare, Tess regards him as “an intelligence rather than as a man”, or when she feels as if she is “nothing”¹⁷ in comparison to Clare’s wit, probably because she was never educated or given a proper chance at learning in a formal education system.

Often such distinctions within education of different genders were given a biological basis. As mentioned within the theory of Social Darwinism above, the biological traits of having smaller bodies, and consequently smaller brains and menstruation associated with women made them less suitable candidates to obtain professional degrees. However, as Lambert puts it within her study-

“To equate biological with intrinsic, inflexible, or pre-programmed is an unfortunate misuse of the term biological. Behaviour is itself a biological phenomenon, an interaction between organism and environment. Influences extrinsic to the individual affect biological events within the organism- events by which, in many cases, the structural entities and functional mechanism within the organism develop.” [23]

Thus, as her and many other research results conclude, making evolutionary and biological differences the basis of gender inequality has no justification.

Speaking of women’s education, Nico Hubner would later state- “Even if they got the chance to go to school, their education was often interrupted by the need to contribute to the family economy.” Such a woman were often considered the “farm-woman”[17], often a much more coarse and “unfeminine” version of the female gender.

Again, the traditional concept of the influence of a woman’s financial status remains prevalent- for Clare’s Christian family was to marry him only to “a young lady of his rank”[17]. Women of upper classes were able to get better education and gain skills like arts, music, embroidery, proper etiquette and a good Christian education, whereas women from weaker financial backgrounds were expected to know field and domestic work properly, and assist financially by working in the unorganised sector-

“ought she not primarily to be able to milk cows, churn good butter, make immense cheeses; know how to sit hens and turkeys, and rear chickens, to direct a field of labourers in an emergency, and estimate the value of sheep and calves.” [17]

3.3.2 Legal Rights and Occupations

A progressive change is explicitly visible; the protagonist of the story itself is a woman of the working class. In addition, many women we meet throughout the course of the novel- Marian, Izz, Retty- are women who work for a living and supplement their family incomes. However it is important to note here that all these working women belonged to the financially weaker classes and were engaged primarily in unskilled work as daily wage workers-

“ An unequal status of womenfolk in society remained unchanged. It was hard to get a vocational tutoring. Because of this, woman workers were doomed to unskilled work in a limited range of professions.”[18]

Women opting for a professional university degree or a professional career were still frowned upon, and in general a rare occurrence.

“As more women acquired access to learning, their range of opportunities also increased and yet the available vocational choices for active women in this period before the First World War remained quite limited.”[6]

One of the reasons why women were seen as incapable of entering the active work force was their own bodies. This discussion takes us back to the description of a former disease- Hysteria- one which is no longer recognised by the American Psychiatric Association as a disease. The word Hysteria finds its roots from the Greek word ‘hystera’ meaning ‘uterus’. As such, the victims of this disease were only thought to be women and as Sine states “reflective of a cultural belief that women are simply less capable of being reasonable.” [24] Modern science has now proved that such diseases do not exist anymore, and most definitely confine themselves to specific genders.

However, the existence of this imaginary disease often made women stand at a disadvantage, for it made them more prone to nervous breakdowns and anxiety, which did not render them to be suitable employees.

A study on the origins of hysteria notes-

“The afflictions, diseases and depravity of women result from the breaking away from the normal natural functions. Following natural determinism, doctors confine the woman within the boundaries of a specific role: she is a mother and guardian of virtue.”[25]

Thus, in this sense, even medicine, propagated and practiced in this times by men, was used as a tool of suppression of women, confining them further in the shackles of societal norms of gender divisions.

Despite all these setbacks, it cannot be refuted that work opportunities for women grew, albeit in the unskilled fields-“. These factors meant that women were often seen as casual labourers, assistants, not as real workers, a flexible workforce,”[6]

Now women could venture far and wide from their homes in search of jobs. They could work at dairy farms, at inns, at rich households as servants, as field helpers and more. This all is depicted in the cases of Izz, Marian, Retty and Tess where they travel to places such as the D’Urberville Mansion, Talbothay’s Inn and many other places to scout out suitable occupations in the story. In fact, employers often preferred women because they offered cheap labour or “casual labourers” as mentioned above.

A sensitive issue that this novel addresses, that the previous novels do not speak of, is that of rape and premature motherhood; the society blames Tess for sullyng her chastity, an offence which we may note here was because of a Alec D’Urberville in the story, but the sole responsibility of it’s “shame” rested on Tess. She deemed herself “in the eyes of propriety far less worthy of him”¹⁷ and imagined the young child born out of wedlock to be “consigned to the netermost corner of hell” [17] · Preserving chastity was another orthodox view that is present in all the addressed time periods. Only a virtuous woman was considered an accomplished wife. Similarly, single motherhood was deeply frowned upon, as discerned in Tess’s case-

“The ultimate threat to the new model family, at least in discursive terms, was the unmarried mother. The ‘fallen woman’ stood in stark opposition to the chaste domestic angel of the ideal family, contained by marriage and economically dependent.”[6]

Thinking of single motherhood, the author remarks of Tess-

“In place of the excitement of her return, and the interest it had inspired, she saw before her a long and stony highway which she had to tread, without aid, and with little sympathy.”[17]

In the 19th century English society, even those single motherhood was frowned upon, sentiments towards the use of birth control were even more hostile. Throughout the centuries, and not just in England, birth control has been criticised by patriarchs for its power of enabling women to control their own bodies and families. This control over birth control has often been used as another method to subvert women into domestic housewives with no other purpose rather than breeding and rearing children.

“In the middle ages in Europe, the Catholic Church deemed birth control immoral.”[26] states an article and goes on to explain that “The entire concept of birth control began to raise questions about personal freedom, liberal and conservative values, government intervention, religion and politics, and ideas regarding sexual morality and social welfare.”

Viewed in this sense, the right to birth control and subsequent family planning becomes as important to women as any other constitutional right. Such biological means of suppression however, continued well into the 20th century, with birth control only being legalised in the UK in the 1960s under various restraints.

Carrying the tradition from centuries before, to receive and own property, still remained a struggle for women. As seen in Tess’s case, after the death of her father, neither his widow nor his daughter got his property. Thus, legal property rights were still not granted to women, at least not in practice.

3.3.3 Marriage

A woman’s knowledge and skills were often meant to supplement her husband’s work. Farmers preferred to marry tough-bred country girls who knew the workings of a farm and who could handle hard domestic and farm labours. This is evident when Clare asks “what would be the use of his marrying a fine lady, and all the while ten thousand acres of Colonial pasture to feed, and cattle to rear, and corn to reap. A farm-woman would be the only sensible kind of woman for me.”[17]

Educated scholars and clerks preferred wives belonging to affluent families and well versed in the Bible, knowing skills like reading and writing. The wives of such scholars had to be “pure and virtuous as Ms. Mercy Chant” and had to have “ecclesiastical accomplishments” [17]. This was another factor that propelled the aforementioned same-class marriages.

In RR’s words, 19th century families focused on “the male breadwinner norm”. [6]

3.3.4 Conclusion

Thomas Hardy’s ‘Tess of the D’urbervilles’ carefully portrays the life of a young woman as she weaves through the ups and downs of her Life. He puts forth the image of a hard working farm girl, who earns her own keep and is betrayed by Life and Love at many turns.

It showcases a changed form of women, a stronger, more resilient form, struggling, trying to break free of the restraints of society, and at the same time, enjoying more autonomy than ever witnessed before in the 19th century. The concept of female sexuality was slow to come. Concepts of single motherhood, or pre-marital consummation had a lot of stigma attached to it. People proffered to hide the truth, rather than accept the facts. For after Tess’s misfortunes, she had soon become a “social warning”[17] for the rest of the village.

IV. Discussion

We have seen throughout the progression of the novels that there has been dynamic activity, both in the fictional worlds created by the various novelists, and the real world activities running parallel to the same timeline. To the many changes that have come, we can add-

1. Rise in acceptance of woman's choice in staying a bachelorette and denying marriage as per her wishes.
2. Women have started pursuing more jobs in the unorganised sector and earning their keep.
3. Widow remarriage was now encouraged.

However, there is also an unchanged pattern of facts that emerges from these results.

1. The concept of preserving the 'purity' of a woman before marriage was still considered a necessary attribute of a good wife, while men had no such restrictions.
2. Women were generally not given formal vocational training and forced to pursue ill-paid, unskilled work.
3. A rising trend among 19th century included passing off social inequalities as natural ones. According to patriarchy, women were made inherently different, and the presence of smaller bodies, a uterus and mammary glands mandated that family and child bearing and rearing was the sole responsibility of women. This not only caused various physical, but also psychological traumas to women often resulting in mental disorders like Agoraphobia, or fear of open places, as shown by Gilbert and Gubar within their provocative work. [5]
4. Financial status was a very important determiner of the life a woman led. Generally, women of upper classes had better access to educational resources and were groomed to become better wives. However, women of lower classes were much more likely to pursue an unskilled career in order to improve their financial conditions. This yawning gap is also expressed in terms of inter-class marriages.

This shows that qualitative improvement in the lives of women came about through a painfully slow process involving years of reforms, laws, opposition, books and protests. It was not an overnight change.

V. Conclusion

“An unexamined but crucial assumption is the more general notion that differences among persons justify social inequality. Biological (usually meaning intrinsically determined) differences are often regarded as more reasonable bases for unequal social rewards than are differences that result from variations in the environment, which are held to have more of a claim to compensatory special treatment.” [23]

This sensitive issue of women rights had, and still has many supporters and contradictors, along with many interpretations of its objectives and actions. The debate started as early as human life itself, continued throughout the ages, and rages still. Throughout the 19th century and even after, many reforms came, and the conditions are still evolving and changing to this time. One more objective that now remains, is to make the impact of these changes universal.

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