

Research problem

Nineteenth century, Victorian age, better known as period of transition throws up a number of questions about position of women in society. From time immemorial women have been forced to remain in a secondary place in relation to men. This secondary standing is imposed on them by the strong forces of the institution of marriage, education and social traditions. The women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century did not occupy a dignified place as independent beings. It is in this age with limited opportunities for the 'lesser sex' however women did strive for a distinct identity which would be of their own.

In this thesis, I will analyse selective works of two major writers of Victorian age i.e. Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Gaskell which will be discussed against the backdrop of the theme- status of women and education in the Victorian age.

The chief questions that I will investigate are: what was the system of education in the Victorian era? How did education affect the status of women economically and socially? How self motivation helps in the evolution of women? Whether education narrows or widens the prospects of growth for women? How are these gender inequalities presented in the works of both the writers? What are the conditions of women described in the novels of Victorian age? How did question of patriarchy and concept of gender inequality affect the position of women in acquiring education?

Most of the novels that would be taken up for analysis in the research work have women at the centre, as protagonist. Many of the female characters in these works appear brave, independent women who rise against the prevalent norms. They are self-motivated to attain certain level of education. These characters can be witnessed evolving as polished females in the Victorian society securing an independent place for them as Jane Eyre in the novel *Jane Eyre*.

In testing my hypothesis, i will analyse and compare the works by the two writers: Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Gaskell. It will consist of a detailed study of primary

sources which will then be compared by the works of other contemporary writers of Victorian age like Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. Along with the novels, short stories will also be considered in this study. I will also include autobiographical material like letters by Mrs. Gaskell and some biographies, one being *life of Charlotte Bronte* by Elizabeth Gaskell.

Definition of terms

- 1. Gender:** It refers to the social identity of men and women. It cannot be understood at the level of individual (Eitzen, 2000; 247). Gender is stereotype characteristics of males and females and is a social construct not a biological construct.

- 2. Gender inequality:** It is an unequal and biased treatment between the two sexes. Sociologically the word gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles. The distinction between sex and gender was introduced to deal with the general tendency to attribute women's subordination to their anatomy. For ages it was believed that the different characteristics, roles and status according to women and men in society are determined by sex, that they are natural and therefore not changeable. Gender is seen closely related to the roles and behaviour assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences. (Many Faces of Gender Inequality, An Essay by Amartya Sen., Volume 18 - Issue 22, Oct. 27 - Nov. 09,)

- 3. Identity:** It is a term used to describe a person's conception and expression of their individuality, the term is used more specifically in psychology and sociology, and is given a great deal of attention in social psychology. "Identity" may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual. An important part of identity in psychology is individual.

Identity relates to self-image (a person's mental model of him or herself), self-esteem, and individuality. Gender identity, as this dictates to a significant degree how an individual views him or herself both as a person and in relation to other people, ideas and nature. In cognitive psychology, the term "identity" refers to the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self. (Leary & Tangney 2003, pp.3).

4. **Self:** The philosophy of self defines the essential qualities that make one person distinct from all others. There have been numerous approaches to defining these qualities. The self is the idea of a unified being which is the source of consciousness. Moreover, this self is the agent responsible for the thoughts and actions of an individual to which they are ascribed. (*The Meaning of the First Person Term*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.)

5. **Self-motivation:** Ability to do what [needs](#) to be done, without [influence](#) from other people or situations. People with self motivation can find a reason and [strength](#) to complete a [task](#), even when challenging, without giving up or needing another to encourage them. (dictionary.reference.com/browse/self-motivation)

6. **Realism:** Realism is commonly defined as a concern for fact or reality and rejection of the impractical and visionary. Realism in literature is associated with a rejection of fantasy, mythology, and highly complex and, therefore, implausible plots. Instead, a realist novel will tend to concentrate on 'ordinary people', and feature stories either based on, or similar to, real events. In the visual arts and literature, Realism is a mid-19th century movement, which started in France. The realists sought to render

everyday characters, situations, dilemmas, and events; all in an "accurate" (or realistic) manner. Realism began as a reaction to romanticism, in which subjects were treated idealistically.

7. **Governess:** Acc. to M. Jeanne Peterson, A governess is a girl or woman employed to teach and train children in a private household. In contrast to a nanny or a babysitter, she concentrates on teaching children, not on meeting their physical needs. (M. Jeanne Peterson *Victorian Studies* Vol. 14, No. 1, The Victorian Woman (Sep., 1970), pp. 7-26).

8. **Patriarchy:** It is a social system in which the male acts as the primary authority figure central to social organization, and where fathers hold authority over women, children and property. It implies the institution of male rule and privilege and entails female subordination.

Background

Women in the nineteenth century lived in an age characterized by gender disparity. They enjoyed a very limited legal, social and political rights like they could not vote, they could not testify in court, they had extremely limited control over personal property after marriage, they were rarely granted legal custody of their children and were barred from

institutions of higher education. Women were expected to remain subservient to their fathers and husbands and their occupational choices were also extremely limited.

Education in the nineteenth century was gender based. Gentlemen would be educated at home by a governess or tutor whereas a girl was deprived of such an opportunity. Girls received less education than boys, and could obtain only elementary education necessary to fulfil household works.

Rousseau in *Emile* (1762) expresses his ideas on education by making a statement: “but for her sex, a woman is a man..., the difference is only in degree” (Rousseau, 321). The difference is difference of roles where man should be strong and active; the woman should be weak and passive. Woman acc. to Rousseau is defined for the delight of man. Other writers protested against this disparity in educational system. Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) was critical of Rousseau’s theory of education and argued in favour of giving women the same kind of education which was being imparted to men. Wollstonecraft writes; “I, therefore, will venture to assert that till women are more rationally educated the progress of human virtue of improvement in knowledge must receive continual check” (*Vindication of Rights of Women*, 45)

It is in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft, in her work, *a Vindication of the Rights of Women*, first pointed out to the literacy rate and status of women in the Victorian society. In this work, she rejected the established view that women are naturally weaker or inferior to men. This disparity in gender-relations, she proposed was because of lack of education that kept the women in secondary position.

Wollstonecraft asserted that women must be treated as equals as they play a crucial role in society. Women themselves should strive to become ‘equals to men’. For this change in status and role, acc. to Wollstonecraft, women should therefore acquire education. She was one of the first thinkers to propose that gender roles are social and not natural.

Women in Victorian age could obtain only low-paid jobs. Restricted from all well paid professions, women were left with small range of occupations, one being of the governess.

With the publication of *Emma* (1815) the character of governess in literature became conspicuous. It continued to appear in fiction in the succeeding years and was portrayed in a variety of ways for example as a grotesque figure, an evil influence and a virtuous maiden. The governess first appeared as a central character in British literature with the serial publication of Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* in 1847. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* also appeared in 1847 and critics have pointed out that an intense interest in the status of Victorian women contributed greatly to the popularity of the novels like *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor* and *Shirley* (1849).

Governess populates nineteenth century fiction. The term governess was often used indiscriminately to indicate governess in private homes as well as mistress at schools. There were three types of governesses- a school teacher, a woman who resided at one place and travelled to another home to teach; and a woman who lived in a household in order to teach the children and serve as a companion to them, a private governess. The nurse, was a member of the servant class and responsible for all the physical and emotional needs of the children.

Victorian literature has always fascinated research scholars. Lot of research work has been done on these two authors as well. Scholars have categorised Gaskell's works as regional novels or novels of domestic realism or industrial novels. On the other hand myths & symbols have been the focus of study in Bronte's novels. But to the best of my knowledge there has not been a single study taking up the theme of women's status and education in the nineteenth century with special reference to the two writers- Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Gaskell.

In this study, I am interested in exploring the works of other writers whose focus was on introducing a definition of freedom and creativity for the women of nineteenth century. I will analyse these writings in the context of status of women in education and profession

in the Victorian age, identifying major turns in the development of the idea to build and express the Idea of a female 'self'. Women's education has been a subject of discussion and has witnessed much debate that whether women should have an access to learning if so, what should be the role and nature of this learning?

The two books which attacked the conventional ideas and focused the attention on the rights of women and individualism were J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869). These books aimed at establishing a view of free life and thoughts for Victorian women. The publication of these two books was the turning point between the early and the later Victorian age. The secondary schools were much improved and women's colleges were opened. These years were also the years of professional and social emancipation.

The Victorian resistance to women writers who were keen to pursue a literary career caused many aspirants to suppress their desire; Charlotte Bronte went through a prolonged phase of anxiety and tried to channelize her creative urge into other activities, such as teaching children. When she wrote to the poet laureate Robert Southey for advice, he strictly advised her against the idea of a literary career. Gaskell in her *Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857) refers to this. Laureate Southey wrote to Bronte, "writing cannot be the business of a woman's life and it ought not to be"

Another text namely *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) written by Sandra and Susan Gilbert aims to propound a theory of woman's creativity. The women of nineteenth century possessed a distinctive female power or voice but due to the dominance of patriarchal culture she could give expression to it only in an indirect or a roundabout manner. As stated by Sarla Palkar in her essay "*Feminist Literary Theory: Creating New Maps*, (1996)". For example in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, there is a story to tell which patriarchy tries to suppress.

Commenting on the position of women G.M. Trevelyan in his *History Of England* writes "wife beating was a recognised right of man and was practised without shame by high as well as low...similarly the daughter who refused to marry the gentle man of her parent's

choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion. Marriage was not an affair of personal affection, but of family avarice”.

Jenni Calder observes in *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (1976). “As the Victorian age took shape necessities became conventions and as the walls closed in on the Victorian heroine and the Victorian marriage too grew into dominance, status and boredom.”

It was during the last thirty years of Queen Victoria reign that the real emancipation of women in England could take place. Elizabeth Helsinger in *The Woman Question: Defining Voices* (1979) refer to queen Victoria herself, who feels socially and intellectually inadequate, represented her age adequately revealing the conflicting elements of her personality that characterize the age itself. The influence of social politics, and natural science started a new era altering the social life, education and culture for the woman of the nineteenth century.

The Eighteenth Century Feminist Mind (1987) by Alice Browne observes that by the end of the eighteenth century a number of women writers called for an improvement in women’s position. They emphasized that change was needed in three areas. The first point called for women’s education to be equal to that of men and they denied, rejected the intellectual superiority of men. The second change was related to the legal and economic weaknesses of women’s position especially if they were married. Finally they attacked the double standard in sexuality morality for men to demand chastity of women, but not of themselves was immoral, absurd and damaging to men as well as to women.

Women have both sustained and questioned the patriarchal pressures and the works of women writers show the resistances that the subordinated ones have put up. The female authors had to conceal their identity to avoid being judged by the male dominated publishing industry as the prototype of their sex. Charlotte Bronte had to write under the

name of Currer Bell and Mary Anne Evans had to surface as George Eliot. Thus, choices were limited and the status of women both within marriage and single were subject to subordination. Society was slow to concede them position but public opinion throughout the second half of the century progressed towards change. To some extent the scenario began to change in the nineteenth century, and the careers of Bronte sisters, George Eliot and other women exemplify that great talents were no longer destined to be buried under the uncertainties, though they had to face innumerable problems.

Recent works like *Prostitution & Victorian Society: Women, Class & the State* (1999) by Judith R. Walkowitz and *Early Nineteenth Century Attitudes Toward Women and Their roles as Represented by Literature Popular in Massachusetts* by Elaine Fortin, discuss about prostitution and Victorian society which makes a major contribution to women's history, and social history of the age.

Another work by Kathryn Hughes: *The Victorian Governess* published in 2001, states that the figure of the governess is very familiar from the nineteenth century. This book is the rounded exploration of what the life of the home schoolroom was actually like. Drawing on original diaries and a variety of previously undiscovered sources, Hughes describes why the period 1840-80 was the classic age of governesses. She in this book examines their teaching methods, recruitment, social position and prospects.

A scholarly paper by Beate Wilhelm, *The Role of Women in Victorian England Reflected in Jane Eyre* (2007), mentions that with *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte created a literary work that shook traditional conventions in Victorian England by showcasing the feminist view so clearly. It is a work that refutes denial and ignorance of women's sexual identity and passion. *Jane Eyre* shows that women are capable of being passionate and of experiencing fulfilment in a marriage where the partners are equals. This work talks about the role and some major problems of middle-class women in nineteenth century.

By referring to so many published works as mentioned above and with this research work, I aim at presenting a clear and analysed picture of women's conditions, role & status in nineteenth century, especially in education, social, domestic and political

spheres. It is my hope that my research will add to the existing sources and shall prove useful for the future references.

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