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Evolution Of Victorian Feminist Literature Acting As A Catalyst In Molding And Curtailing Contemporary Feminism

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Abstract: The pervasive and fluid regulations and societal boundaries have confined women since time immemorial. Female authors therefore relied on writing by portraying fictional characters who revolted against the shackles imposed upon them by the male dominated society. In Victorian age, women were subjected to gendered expectations. Victorian Literature is characterized by the writings that emerged during Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) in Great Britain. The contributions made by Victorian women in the canon of literature is remarkable. Victorian Feminist literature proved instrumental in nurturing contemporary feminist ideas by disrupting established paradigms, championing women's rights and forging the path for modern feminist movements. Yet its dogmatic constraints and social impediments generated circumscribed structures that continue to impact contemporary feminism. Novels such as *Jane Eyre* (1847), *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Aurora Leigh* (1856) impelled against structural subjugation accentuating women's sovereignty, education and economic independence. This research paper will delve into how Victorian feminist literature contributed to and restrained the evolving sphere of feminist inquiry, by inspecting influential authors and the persistent reverberation of Victorian societal norms.

Keywords: Victorian feminism, feminist literature, contemporary feminism, Victorian period, patriarchy, social mores, literary analysis.

Introduction

It is apparent that narratives of Victorian feminism served as a linchpin in carving early feminist sensibilities by subverting the patriarchal hegemony, embracing ideals of women's equality and re-evaluating societal expectations. Authors such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte constructed narratives that confronted the tribulations faced by women who served as both as reflection of societal issues and a platform for advocacy. Authors created strong female protagonists who disregarded cultural conventions. These characters cultivated their intellect, yearned for emancipation thereby challenging the

traditional roles assigned to women. This article asserts that Victorian feminist discourse served as a pivotal catalyst in the formation of contemporary feminism by subverting gendered expectations, championing women's reforms and financial autonomy and critiquing the institution of marriage. However, it simultaneously imposed limitations by predominantly concentrating on the lived realms of white-middle class women, thus ignoring the heterogeneous experiences of women from different backgrounds.

Scholars such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in "*The Madwoman in the Attic*" ((1979) proclaim that Victorian novels mostly comprise of rebellious feminist counter-narratives by presenting strong female characters who do not submit to societal limitations. They scrutinize how authors like Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot use motifs to condemn male-centric power structures. The 'madwoman' figure such as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, epitomizes the suppressed defiant women whose appearance unveils the tyranny of Victorian conservative traditions.

They assert that women were compelled to write within the canon of literary tradition built by men, which they referred to as 'patriarchal literary canon'. Many female authors launched a counter-narrative strategy by presenting subversive narratives. The rebellion's success hinged on several key cornerstones including:

Contradiction in Female Characters: Many narratives include both an 'angel' (docile woman) and a 'madwoman' (defiant woman), emblematic of the maelstrom female writers encountered. For example, Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is perceived as the 'madwoman', and her ire is easily provoked. Jane, on the other hand, endeavors to master herself and acquire rectitude. Bertha incarnates the wilder, unbridled self of Jane's psyche.

Bertha Mason, the sequestered madwoman, is perceived not as a mere impediment or Gothic figure but a symbol of caged fury. She possesses the freedom that Jane's constraints preclude- vehement and unbound. Thus, Bronte exacerbates a deep-seated struggle between female submission and the urge for individual manifestation.

Gilbert and Gubar explicate Bronte's literary act itself as a form of vocal empowerment in a society that quashed female expression. They intertwine Bronte's biography with her fiction: Charlotte like Jane, resisted the predetermined path, declining the imposed destiny of a passive existence.

Jane's final union with Rochester is often seen as symbolic- a relationship built on mutual respect and autonomy, which only becomes possible after Jane embraced her self-determined and Rochester is no more dictatorial.

Bronte's writing illuminates the intricacies of the female inner world, disrupting the domestic ideal.

Gilbert and Gubar also praise Eliot's profound grasp of human psyche but also criticize her for episodically restating male-dominated values by rewarding benevolent heroines instead of defiant heroines.

George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) exhibited a more subdued approach in her feminist expression but utilized her narrative voice to expose the limitations placed upon women.

The Madwoman in the Attic has left an enduring imprint on feminist literary criticism and neo feminism. The book validates justified uprising and women's emancipation. It provokes a surge of scholarly inquiry focused on rediscovering previously overlooked female writers and re-examining their legacy.

Gilbert and Gubar put forth the concept 'anxiety of authorship', a feminist counterpart to Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence'. This concept foregrounds how women lack female role models which results in internal conflict when they endeavor to become writers.

Contemporary gender studies researchers further their observations to examine the complex choreography of identity in literary narratives and interrogate the sociopolitical tapestry.

Victorian feminist narratives and their influence on contemporary feminism

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) introduces us to the eponymous protagonist who asserts the necessity of equality in love and the sovereignty for her own self. Jane, a bereaved governess with low social ranking repudiates to be enslaved by men around her and remains resolute to be treated with decorum and reverence. Jane falls in love with Edward Rochester but refuses to become a paramour upon the revelation of his existing marriage to Bertha Mason. She refuses to compromise with her moral principles and personal integrity over love.

Her famous declaration- "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will"-

Jane Eyre proclaims this during a vigorous argument with Mr. Rochester when he persuades her to stay with him even after the unveiling of the truth that he is married. The above statement itself affirms her immediate rejection of restrictions. The metaphor of bird in a net connotes the limitations affixed upon women in Victorian society where women were obliged to succumb to the patriarchal standards. By affirming that she is free, Jane proclaims her free will and self-determination, declining to adhere to the social traditions. She emerges as a liberated and sovereign heroine who prioritizes self-esteem over ardent love. Victorian feminists were also deeply involved in fostering the rights for women's education and financial independence through literature, advocacy and structural transformation by subverting the unyielding standards of patriarchal society. Prominent writers like Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot portrayed heroines who challenged the status quo.

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) is an in-depth examination of the structural impediments that prohibit women from chasing their intellectual fruition. The central female character Dorothea Brooke, yearns for a future of intellectual engagement however the social mores forbid her from achieving her aspirations. She originally held the belief that her marriage to Edward Casaubon, an older scholar would facilitate her in attaining intellectual fervor. Yet her husband perceives her as a subservient aide to his own work. She was refused to take a leading role in his research. This marriage turns into an emblem of strictures levied upon women who strive for intellectual attainment.

The novel illustrates the exasperation of bright women whose capabilities remain unfulfilled due to gendered inflexibility. Eventually, Dorothea finds solace by choosing partnership with Will Ladislav. Through *Middlemarch*, Eliot proposed that actual progress demands a paradigm shift- women must be liberated from social restrictions and intellectually invigorated to pursue their aspirations.

Another example would be Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which provides a dismantling of established paradigm of conjugal subjugation, championing marital equality. The protagonist, Helen Huntingdon subverts Victorian expectations by deserting her cruel husband, Arthur Huntingdon to shield herself and her son. Thereby, disrupting the accepted wisdom that women must bear the brunt of marital distress. Her decision to maintain her own independence by working as an artist was revolutionary as Victorian legal and customary practices prescribed a wife to serve her husband irrespective of his way of behaving. Helen's difficulties illuminate the stark truth that many women confronted. She emulates an aura of recalcitrance. Her tenacity and autonomy distinguish her from conventional heroines as she vindicates her claim to choose her own path, deviating from the prevailing standards of conduct. The theme of indispensable pursuit of economic self-sufficiency as highlighted in the novel, continues to be pivotal in contemporary feminist discussions about equal remuneration and financial liberation.

Beyond literature, activists like Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Emily Davies strived to promote female scholastic empowerment. Girton College, Cambridge was the first residential college for women founded by Bodichon. Also, monetary liberty was another pivotal matter. The campaign for the Married Women's Property Acts guaranteed their property rights.

Victorian feminist literature, while groundbreaking had several limitations. Most of the Victorian feminists' novels immersed in scrutinizing the circumstances of white middle-and upper-class white women, overlooking the tribulations of working class and non-European women. The character Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, is depicted as a member of a marginalized racial group. As a Creole woman from Jamaica, Bertha is characterized by the colonial discourse of 'otherness'. She was silenced, denied a voice and imprisoned within the garret, symbolizing how Victorian society and literature undervalued women of diverse backgrounds. Also, Victorian feminist literature proposed the idea that women's liberation should be indissolubly linked to virtue, a restraint which contemporary endeavors to dispute. Victorian feminist novels participated in the ongoing contemporary intellectual exchanges about domestic abuse, marriage and partnership equality. Novels like *Middlemarch* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, build economic autonomy as crucial to female independence by depicting women who try to dismantle hegemonic structures. Furthermore, Victorian women were expected to uphold the moral rectitude. Women who drifted away from these established practices such as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* or Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* were frequently depicted as ill-fated. These ethical constraints impacted contemporary feminism by influencing the discourse surrounding on women's self-determination, sexual emancipation and the dualistic application of principles embracing femininity. Contemporary feminism transcends these limitations supporting sexual liberation, reproductive rights, dismissing binaries.

Therefore, Victorian feminist literature while pioneering also put limitations on contemporary feminism by reinforcing Western-centric perspectives of femininity. It gave paramount importance to the hardships of middle-and upper-class white women, disregarding intersectionality. Victorian heroines such as Jane Eyre and Dorothea Brooke achieved self-actualization through marriage, conveying that equality could be attained within the hegemonic social order instead of deconstructing them. Consequently, contemporary feminism has had to surpass these preliminary structures to cultivate a paradigm of inclusivity.

It is pertinent to observe that Victorian feminism was structured by conventional values and neglected the diverse realities of marginalized women. Some feminist writers like Brontes, Elizabeth Barrett Browning highlighted gendered subjugation but refrained from dealing about how race and class intersected with gender. Working class feminism confronted difficult financial constraints such as manual labor, household tasks and illiteracy. Also, the absence of gender fluid identities leaves gaps that contemporary feminism endeavors to tackle. Contemporary feminism expands on their legacy by addressing intersectionality and inclusive gender identities, allowing for a broader and more justified understanding of oppression and liberation.

Conclusion

Women's literary contributions of the Victorian period constitute a fundamental and contradictory element in the evolution of feminist discourse. It dramatically challenged the stultifying influence of conventional gendered power structures of the 19th century and ushered in an era of multifaceted female characters who challenged social norms. For example, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, endures as a foundational text in the annals of feminist thought in its compelling depiction of a heroine's defiant reclamation of agency. Jane's assertion that she is "a free human being with an independent will" remains unassailable, an unwavering assertion of feminist power demanding equal standing in a relationship. Similarly, Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* presented the character of Helen Huntington, a woman who bravely flees from an abusive marriage rejecting the Victorian ideal of a compliant wife. Her act of leaving her husband and achieving self-sufficiency was a paradigm shift within the social structure of the time.

However, the same literature that fostered feminist growth simultaneously harbored a propensity for censoring. This is most strikingly manifested in the figure of Bertha Mason, the Creole woman trapped in the garret in *Jane Eyre*. Bertha served as a living representation of unchecked fury functioning as both a narrative obstacle and a symbolic Other. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert that, Bertha serves as a mirror to Jane's suppressed emotions that was ignored by the prevailing Victorian sensibility. There is a hierarchy of privilege and subjugation as Jane is given growth and recognition but Bertha's tale met its end in the quietude of the grave. She was excluded from the mainstream not just because of ideological hegemony embedded in the Victorian era. Early feminist discourse gave prominence to the struggles of white, middle-class women thereby overlooking the unique challenges faced by women of color and other marginalized groups.

Therefore, Victorian feminist literature incubated the nascent aspirations of feminist awareness through the exploration of women's inner realms, their struggle for emancipation and their defiance against the patriarchal norms. It profoundly molded current feminist sphere by disrupting the foundations of male dominance and defending women's autonomy. Despite itself, the system continued to exacerbate disparities based on racial, socioeconomic and mental health status-that contemporary feminist theory must grapple with. It's structural constraints and the prison of moral absolutism have curtailed feminist thought. By critically engaging with these texts today, contemporary feminism possesses a nuanced understanding of the historical trajectory and inherent biases within it.

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