

## **WOMEN DEPICTED IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY MAINSTREAM LITERATURE AND CULTURE**

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### **Preliminaries**

Right from the beginning of the human civilization, 'woman' has never been considered and treated as a full-fledged human-being. She has always been marginalized, exploited and subjugated. Though, like 'man', she too is rational and intellectual, yet considered as secondary and supporting to man. From the times immemorial, woman has been taught and molded in such a way that without any complaint or protest she has been playing the roles assigned to her, just as a puppet in the hands of patriarchal society. As Rita Felski rightly puts:

The internalization of ... female identity as supplementary to and supporting of a male figure by women themselves is registered as the most disturbing indication of the deep-seated influence of patriarchal ideology... [1989: 129].

The contemporary feminist Adrienne Rich has expressed the same view while defining patriarchy:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial- social, ideological, political system in which men-by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male [1986:57].

The woman has to play some stereo-type roles--daughter, sister, wife and mother. In each phase of her life, man is her master. The tragedy is that her birth in the family has been considered as a bad luck or unhappy occasion. From the childhood, the lessons of the patriarchy start to take place in her life. She is taught that how to endure mutely all types of discrimination and injustice, and how to remain silent particularly in the presence of her master. Gradually, the girl masters these and all the essential lessons very cleverly and becomes fit in the society. In daily life, she witnesses how she is discriminated at every stage of her life – the great or the extra share of everything is given to her brother, the opportunity of taking good education by going to district place, is whole-heartedly given to her brother. She is denied and confined in the four walls of the house.

And when such a girl becomes marriageable, the searching of another suitable master for her takes place in the family. The new boss has his own expectations from her; to gratify his sexual desires whenever he asks, and to take care of his house and his parents. The patriarchal lessons continuously remind her to make her husband happy as well as her in-laws at any cost. This will ultimately make her own parents happy. In her married life, the new master whether loves or tortures her, it completely depends upon his mental set-up or her lot. If he is Othello, every time

he doubts her character, occasionally beats her, sometimes kills too. In daily busy schedule of life, no proper medical treatment is given to her. In isolation, she cries and blames God for making her a woman. One thing is more important in her married life, if she fails to produce minimum one male-child, or proves to be barren; she then gets thrown out of the house or divorced.

In her third phase of life, when she gives birth to her new master, that is when she becomes mother. Her son decides whatever he wants to decide about his mother. Adrienne Rich rightly throws light at motherhood in which the woman takes pride:

The one aspect in which most women have felt their own power in the patriarchal sense—authority over and control of another—has been motherhood; and even this aspect, as we shall see, has been wrenched and manipulated to male control [Ibid:67].

In short, the life of a woman is thoroughly powerless, helpless and depending. Tillie Olsen very aptly captures the status of woman in the following words:

Isolated. Cabin'd, cribb'd, confined; the private sphere. Bound feet: corseted, bedecked; denied one's body. Powerlessness. Fear of rape, male strength. Fear of aging. Subject to. Fear of expressing capacities. Soft attractive ... For twentieth century woman; roles, discontinuities, part-self, part-time; conflict; imposed guilt; a man can give full energy to his profession, a woman cannot [Quoted in Sengupta 2006:05].

### **Women Depicted in Nineteenth Century**

Up to nineteenth century, there was no great development in the status of women. No doubt, the girls were allowed to take education. "Qualified, to be sure, by class and (in the United States and the British colonies) by race, the female situation in England and America continued to be as problematic as ever for most of the century" [Gilbert and Gubar 1985a:417]. Gilbert and Gubar further quote the view of Blackstone in the context of marriage:

By Marriage, the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended, or at least it is incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection, and cover she performs everything, and she is therefore called in our law a *femes covert*[Ibid].

Such was the condition of married woman. She could not own property, even what she herself might have brought to the marriage or inherited after she was wed. In short, her whole married life was completely dependent on her husband's whims. The woman if wanted to separate from her husband, it was hardly possible to get divorce. Not only that, she could not claim on her own children. And if she became a widow and if her husband fortunately made his will, then she could get only the minimal part of the estate. The report of a historian Eleanor Flexner provides the details:

.... a widow was allowed nothing but family Bible and a few other books, some cattle and household goods, and no matter how many children she had, one table, six chairs, six knives and forks, six tea-spoons.[Ibid: 418].

The married women were also denied good education of Law and Science. They were prohibited to participate in social functions. The great feminist Florence Nightingale very bitterly describes the meaningless life of married women:

A married woman's life consists in superintending what she does not know to do ... (she) is to direct the servants, who are to provide conveniences and luxuries not thought of formerly. She has never learnt, and does not know how, but she must take care to provide them. She must superintend the nurse, and the governess of her children, though she knows nothing and has learnt nothing of the nurse's work. And the governess ... what is she to do? She must direct the characters of her pupils. How is she fit for it? ... Over her, so little prepared, the mother so little prepared is to preside. [Quoted in Gilbert and Gubar 1985a: 419].

If the life of upper and middle class married women was so hard, then what hope remained for the working and lower-class women. The money or the income earned by the wife directly became the income of her husband. On the contrary, Ray Strachey writes of a provision in the Law that if the husband "... displeased with the way his wife worked for him- or with any other aspect of her conduct --- he had a perfect right to beat her with a stick, provided it was not thicker than his own thumb" [Ibid: 422].

Margaret Fuller has written a book *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), and in one of the chapters entitled 'Prejudice Against Women', she talks about the same prejudices against women such as women have very little power of reason and if anybody wants to tell anything just to fool them . Fuller, first of all, justifies the importance of woman in the life of man:

All men are privately influenced by women; each has his wife, sister, or female friends, and is too much biased by these relations to fail of representing their interests; and, if this is not enough, let them propose and enforce their wishes with the pen [Ibid : 560].

In the chapter, she provides the example of her friend named Miranda, who fortunately has been brought up by her father not as a daughter but as a son. Fuller wishes such fortunate treatment should be given to all women. In the chapter 'The Future of Women' of the same book, she advises women to become self-reliant and independent, and further writes:

I wish Woman to live, *first* for God's sake. Then she will not make an imperfect man her god, and thus sink to idolatry. Then she will not take what is not fit for her from a sense of weakness and poverty. Then, if she finds what she needs in Man embodied, she will know how to love, and be worthy of being loved [Ibid: 571].

But, throughout the nineteenth century, the 'question of woman' was widely discussed. "Historians have speculated that the egalitarian ideologies with which the era began, along with the impulses towards political reform that accompanied such ideologies, were essential to the battle for women's rights and votes that marked this century" [Ibid:423]. Both the co-editors Gilbert and Gubar write that by the early 1830s, French socialist and utopian thinkers had started to convert people from one religious faith to another (to proselytize) in England for the emancipation of women. Even the middle-class people followed the same path and in 1831, the *Westminster Review*

published articles dealing with women's emancipation. In 1832, a petition was filed in House of Commons, asking that every unmarried female possessing the necessary pecuniary qualification will be allowed to vote. There was a woman named Lady Caroline Norton, who was divorced by her husband and was denied the claims on her children. She bluntly fought against this injustice, started to write letters describing her agony as a woman and as a mother. It was her struggle that brought in Parliament passage of the Infants' Custody Act of 1939. As already pointed out, in America, the feminist Margaret Fuller also published the book *Women in the Nineteenth Century*. The other feminists namely Eleanor Flexner, Susan B. Anthony, Frances E.W. Harper and others started to write eloquent articles, poems asking the emancipation of woman, particularly, for slave-women. In short, such movements started in England and America for both white and black women.

As a result, married woman got the right of controlling property and claiming the custody of children. Gilbert and Gubar summarize the divorce laws to show the misogyny:

Divorce laws, however, continued to treat the two sexes differently. In England, the husband could sue solely by reason of his wife's adultery, but the wife had to prove cruelty or desertion as well as adultery. In the United States, too, the laws were inequitable: in the state of Minnesota, for instance, a woman who was divorced by reason of her adultery had to forfeit real estate that had been her own property, while a man divorced did not. Still, changes in property, divorce and custody laws did imply that wives were no longer assumed to be the possessions of their husbands [Ibid: 1170].

Elementary Education Act 1870, though, gave a guarantee for compulsory elementary education to all the boys and girls in England, yet there was much controversy on the girls' higher education. In 1913, M. Carey Thomas, the President of Bryn Mawr College, started the subjects like domestic science and home-economics in his college for the higher education of women. In this way, in both the countries, the girls started to take higher education with free will. But, fighting for right of vote continued to the middle of the twentieth-century.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are of the opinion that there was a great impact of the philosophical views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau not only on the various political movements but also on the ideology of femininity. Whatever picture of model woman – a pure, submissive, decorative and even angelic creature carved in his *Emily* (1762), became the standard model of woman for both male and female writers of the nineteenth century. Rousseau's ideal woman in *Emily* is thus described:

The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, and to make life sweet and agreeable to them- these are the duties of women at all times, and what should be taught them for their infancy [Ibid: 414].

Mary Wollstonecraft attacked Rousseau in her second version of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). She responds to Rousseau's educational work *Emily*, in which he proposes that a girl's education should aim at making her useful to and supportive of a rational man, "one that

would train her to be submissive and malleable". [Wollstonecraft quoted in Jain and Singh 2005:53]. The model of Rousseau was picked up by Coventry Patmore in her long poem *The Angel in the House* (1854):

Man must be pleased; but him to please  
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf  
Of his condoled necessities  
She casts her best, she flings herself  
[Quoted in Gilbert and Gubar 1985a:414].

Gilbert and Gubar further state that the nineteenth century ideologists of femininity have divided Rousseau's model women into two parts--subordinate working-class women and insubordinate middle or upper-class ladies. According to them, the ideologists did not say much about the first group of women, just made the distinction between 'woman' and 'lady'. But the moralists of this period expressed their fear about the single woman in the following way: "were she single, however, her situation was far more perilous, for whether she worked on a farm or in a factory, as a kitchen helper ... she was constantly in danger of becoming a "fallen woman", a prostitute" [Ibid:416]. The co-editors provide the example of D.G.Rossetti's poem *Jenny* (1870), in which the middle-class speaker articulates his fear at the "poor flower" of, "lazy laughing, languid Jenny/Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea" [Ibid]. The nineteenth century American and English writers have specially warned against such female insubordination in portraying the demonic mad-women and murderesses.

Robert Browning also painted the contrasting images of women in his poetry. In his *To My Last Duchess* (1842) he describes the idiotic-innocence of his first wife, whom he himself murders: "she had/A heart-how shall I say? – too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed, she lik'd whate'er/ she looked on, and her looks went everywhere" [Quoted in Hayward 1984:335]. In *The Last Ride Together* (1842), he portrays the beloved in whose company he feels that he is in heaven and more successful than anybody in the world. In *Porphyria's Lover* (1842) he again presents a woman, who very happily submits her life to her lover, even if her lover kills her, she has no pain:

Three times her little throat around,  
And strangled her. No pain felt she;  
I am quite sure she felt no pain  
[[http://www.victorianweb.org\(3.3.2011\)](http://www.victorianweb.org(3.3.2011))]

The same poet also depicts the fallen woman with loose character in *A Light Woman*(1855):

When I saw him (the poet's friend) in her toils,  
A shame, said I, if she adds just him  
To her nine-and-ninety other spoils,  
The hundredth for a whim!  
[[http://classcit.about.com/rbrowning\(3.3.2011\)](http://classcit.about.com/rbrowning(3.3.2011))].

His another heroine of *The Inn Album* ( 1875) declares:

Womanliness means only motherhood:  
All love begins and ends there, -- roams enough,  
But, having run the circle, rests at home  
[[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The-Inn-Album\(3.3.2011\)](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The-Inn-Album(3.3.2011))].

Browning's contemporary poet Lord Alfred Tennyson clearly states the confinement of woman to hearth and children in *The Princess* (1847):

Man for the field and woman for the hearth,  
Man for the sword and for the needle she,  
Man with the head and woman with the heart  
Man to command and woman to obey,  
All else confusion.  
[Quoted in Gilbert and Gubar 1985a: 419].

In his widely read poem *Ulysses* (1842), his old hero Ulysses rejects the company of his old wife. The heroine of *The Lady of Shalott* (1833), is a cursed mysterious lady, and is not allowed even to see the men directly with her open eyes. This symbolizes the woman who is not allowed to go out of the house, if she does; she too gets punished as Shalott is punished with death-penalty. In another poem *Locksley Hall* (1842), the poet is very much frustrated at the faithlessness of Amy, his beloved. He, with deep indignation burning in his heart calls woman 'the lesser man', with weaker passions, guided more by irrational impulse than by reason.

The female characters of Charles Dickens have been regarded as feeble and artificial. He has badly painted the eccentric women characters like Betsy Trotwood and Miss. Pross. His women characters are flat caricatures. Dora of *David Copperfield* (1850) is silly and childish.

## Conclusion

If one studies the history of human civilization and the history of mainstream literature, one definitely realizes that the attitude of men towards women was highly misogynistic. One does not find hopeful development in the status and position of women right from middle ages to twentieth century. It is in this present century, women have been trying to escape from the clutches of patriarchy. One more battle they have to fight for full freedom and for getting equal status in male dominated society.

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