

## Women Novelists of Victorian Age and Thematic Concerns in their Works

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### ABSTRACT

The present study is an interpretation of women novelists of the Victorian age and their significant works. In the history of English literature, the Victorian era is regarded as the hub of female novelists. It was an Age of scientific discoveries, material affluence, mechanical and industrial advancement, political awakening among people, democratic changes, industrial development, social conflicts, pessimism and idealism. The literature of this period reflects the true spirit of the era. The writers and the works selected for the study are some famous novels written by George Eliot, Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, Eliza Lynn Linton, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Marie Corelli. The study aims to throw some light on different themes and perspectives, which these writers have concentrated upon in their significant works. These women novelists have adopted peculiar ways of looking at life and the same is reflected in their respective novels. Unhappy marriages, identity issues, gender biasness, inner conflicts, alienation are the major concerns in the works of these women novelists. In their novels we find poetic justice, which was absent in the tragic plays of Shakespeare. It means at the end of the novel, hard work, good hearted people and good deeds are rewarded and wrongdoers can be seen punished for their wrongdoings. So, their novels can be regarded as full of moral values but mixed with a lot of sentiments. They created their own place in Victorian literature. Their work has been highly appreciated. It was said by many critics that due to their work, years of mid nineteenth century can be considered as the richest in the whole history of the novel.

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The 'Victorian Age', equally famous as the 'Age of Tennyson' in English literature, saw a tremendous change and progress in all walks of life. This particular period of literature somehow forms a link as well as a transition between the writers of the Romantic Age and the twentieth century. Victorian literature includes all the fiction and non-fiction works, poetry, essays and letters which were produced during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837 – 1901). It looks like it was the nineteenth century when the novel became the most striking form of English literature. In this time, Victorian Novelists produced a lot of great work in this form which got significant importance in English literature. They deemed novel as a perfect medium to explore and define the principal aspect of experiences and beliefs of Victorian Era.

'A Glossary of Literary Terms' by M.H. Abrams, defines *Novel* as, "The term 'Novel' is now applied to a great variety of writings that have in common only the attribute narrative, the novel is distinguished from the short story and from the work of middle length called the novelette; its magnitude permits a greater variety of characters, greater complication of plot (or plots), ampler development of milieu, and more sustained exploration of character. The term of novel in most European languages is roman, which is derived from the medieval term, the romance. The English name for the form, on the other hand, is derived from the Italian novella (literally, "a little new thing") which was a short tale in prose." (190)

Great French statesmen and historian Guizot was a great admirer of the women novelists of Victorian Literature. He was so much fascinated by their works that he considered their works far superior to the works of his own countrywomen. We can find a remarkable tribute of appreciation in these words

from him, "I am a great novel reader," he says, "but I seldom read of German and French novels. The characters are too artificial. There are too many forced situations, and the morality is generally detestable. My delight is to read English novels, particularly those written by women. Miss Austin, Miss Ferrier, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, and many others almost as remarkable, form a school which in the excellence, the profusion, and the contemporaneousness of its productions, resembles the crowd of dramatic poets of the great Athenian age." And we will find these words quite justified if we closely examine the works accomplished by the women novelists in this field of literature. It is this field in which they have excelled everyone. In no other form of literature do they reach to such a great level.

Since centuries, critics have a tendency to label women novelists either feminist or sometimes even as antifeminist according to their perceptions. Victorian women's novels are also criticised either as radical or conservative. If we take an instance of the domestic novel written by writers such as Charlotte Yonge. These novels are often labeled as conservative and sometimes even antifeminist. On the other hand, the sensation novel written by writers such as Mrs. Henry Wood and Merry Elizabeth Braddon is regarded as explosively radical. In her famous novel '*The Clever Woman of the Family*' (1865) Charlotte Yonge clearly shows sympathy for the principal character, Rachel who is desperate for an outlet for her intelligence and high energies. Rachel's all attempts at independent actions meet with a tragedy, however a child's death under her surveillance makes her altogether a different person. At the end of the novel, Rachel's reformation can be seen clearly as she gets engaged to a man who is in military. This man promises Rachel to make her "wife and mother." And

this is the man to whom she confesses that she was never a clever woman. At this he replies to her, "I never thought you one."

Among all the famous Victorian women novelists, the three Bronte sisters have a unique place in the field of literature. They are Charlotte Bronte (1816 – 1855), Emily Bronte (1818-1848) and Anne Bronte (1820 – 1849). Charlotte Bronte only wrote four novels. Charlotte Bronte's famous novel '*Jane Eyre*' has an important place in the history of English literature. In her novel '*Jane Eyre*,' her genius can be seen in her depiction of miseries of "Lowood" School. Tragic story of her sister Maria is depicted through the character of Helen Burns. She has given a heartrending account of the consumptive girl Helen Burns and her miserable situation in this novel. Another famous character of this novel is Rochester who is also based upon a story which she heard during her school days. This story was about a man living with a mad wife but eventually feels himself morally free in leaving her and marrying again to another girl. Jane Eyre, the heroine of the novel is a governess who is a simple and homely girl. But she is equally fascinating. The hero of the novel is an unpleasant and gloomy person. The scene of the novel is laid in a terrible and mysterious house where the upper side of the house is used as an asylum. The other incidents include a country walk, a dinner party and a fire. Under such unromantic material Charlotte Bronte made a story which fascinated men like Thackeray, Lockhart and G. H. Lewis. At one time, she became the "daughter of debate." She was talked about by everyone and everywhere. The best part of her book is which has taken from her school experiences. Her another novel '*Shirley*' is also embodied in the second period of school life of these three Bronte sisters. Her last two novels '*Villette*' and '*The Professor*' took their material from their third and last educational experience in Brussels. Her famous novel '*The Professor*' was written earlier compared to her other plays but it was not published till after her death. In all the writings of Bronte sisters, all good things can be traced back to incidents in their personal lives. Their personal lives were tough, full of sacrifices and negligence. There was no joy and happiness in their lives, and in their books everyone notices the want of mirth, a defect, which is a direct outcome of their gloomy and cheerless lives. Emily especially was full of gloom and harsh reserve.

Emily Bronte's only novel is '*Wuthering Heights*' which is also regarded as her masterpiece. This novel is considered as an example of gothic romanticism. Along with this, this novel is an examination of class, myth and gender written from a woman's point of view. Main theme of this novel is about the destructive effect of jealousy, hatred and of revengeful nature on people. *Wuthering Heights* is full of unchecked passion, violence, supernatural elements, high emotions and emotional disbalance. Ghosts create a key image throughout the novel. In chapter third of this novel Lockwood experiences for the first time troubling dreams in Catherine's bed who is the heroine of the play and then Catherine first appears to Lockwood as well as to the readers as a written word- her name, scratched into the paint, "This writing, however, was nothing but a name repeated in all kinds of characters, large and small- Catherine Earnshaw," Of '*Wuthering Heights*' Dante Rossetti said that "the

action is laid in hell, only it seems places and people have English names there." Of the three Bronte sisters it was only Emily Bronte who possessed the gift of poetry. She has written a few pieces in verse which are considered to be of rare excellence.

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell is another important novelist among women novelists of the Victorian literature. Her famous novels include '*Mary Barton*', '*Wives and Daughters*', '*North and South*', '*Cranford*'. For her, novel was an instrument of social reform. Besides being a great novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell is also one of the very small group of writers who have enriched literature with biographies of utmost value. She has written a biography of her friend, Charlotte Bronte. In this beautiful biography '*The life of Charlotte Bronte*' a description of last moments of last minutes of Charlotte Bronte is given. Gaskell's first novel '*Mary Barton*' (1848) presents a sociological study of laboring class. The incidents and concerns which are present in this novel are based on her own experiences of the miserable conditions of the laboring classes in the new cities of the industrial North. Through this novel, she tried to show the evils that were prevalent in a factory system and to some extent, she became successful in arousing sympathy on behalf of the workers. One of the important characters in the novel is Carson who is shown as a brutal employer. The picture of this character aroused much angry feeling among the masters. Her next work '*North and South*' (1855) is also concerned with the same issue. But in this novel, somehow, she tried to pacify the matters through the character of Thornton, who, unlike cruel Carson was more sympathetic towards his employees. She came to conclusion that these problems or evils of the factory system were not the result of wickedness of employers. But the real problem was the absence of kindly human relations between employed and the employers. Gaskell's next novel '*Sylvia's Lovers*' is a moralistic love story. But Mrs. Gaskell's work of greatest merit is '*Cranford*' (1853).

Another famous novelist Mary Ann Evans, who wrote under the pen name of George Eliot, was the most celebrated among all the women novelists. Her great novels like '*Adam Bede*', '*The Mill on the Floss*', and '*Silas Marner*' raised her to a position among the foremost living writers. George Eliot always tried to draw her characters from the people around her. But in some of her works, her setting and characters are different from her usual choice. As her play '*Romola*', depicts the great religious conflict of the fifteenth century in Florence. In her next work '*Felix Holt*', we as readers watch the struggle between the conservative upper class and the radical reformer Felix in England. Her work '*Daniel Deronda*' talks about the Hebrews and the problems related to heredity and to the social difficulty of the English. In her books, George Eliot makes marriage the source of nearly all tragedies as well as of the deepest happiness in life. Her first novel *Adam Bede* depicts a fine picture of English country life among the humbler classes. It contains well delineated characters Hetty, Adam Bede and Mrs. Poyser. In this novel Eliot contrasts between inner and outer beauty to express the idea that external and internal realities are not always related to each other. As in the novel, Hetty is shown more physically beautiful than Dinah, but she is very ugly inside. Her another important novel is '*Middlemarch*'. Virginia Woolf in her series of essays '*The*

*Common Reader* called 'Middlemarch', "one of the few English novels written for grown up people." Central theme of this novel is marriage and pursuit of it, marriage is not considered the ultimate source of happiness. George Eliot here gives two examples of failed marriages through Dorothea and Lydgate. Both have different reasons for their failure of marriage. Dorothea's marriage falls because of her youth and of her false assumptions about marrying a much older man, while Lydgate's marriage breaks because of irreconcilable personalities. As at the end of chapter 81, when Dorothea believes that Rosamond is having an affair with Ladislaw, she says to Rosamond, "I mean, marriage drinks up all of our power of giving or getting any blessedness in that sort of love. I know it may be very dear – but it murders our marriage – and then the marriage stays with us like a murder – and everything else is gone." Through Dorothea's quote Eliot presents the idea that marriage is not always a guarantee of happiness. George Eliot has also written a novel which is partially autobiographical. That novel is 'Mill on the floss,' a highly moving tragedy. It has its setting in authentic rural background.

In the first half of the novel, it is concerned about education and types of knowledge. Both characters and places in this novel seem to be the current products of multi-generational gestation. Love is shown as something with healing power. This novel is basically about the relation of two siblings Maggie and Tom. As these lines from chapter V of Book First, introduces an important element in Maggie's character – her extreme need for love and affection. "It is a wonderful subduer, this need of love – this hunger of the heart – as peremptory as that other hunger by which nature forces us to submit to the yoke and change the face of the world."

In this paper, I have concentrated upon these women novelists of Victorian Age with respect of their literary works as well as the impact of both their personal life and the worlds that they inhabit. The paper affirms that some of these novelists had a profound influence in the field of novel and that their literary works have had an impact in the field of the development of novel.

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