



ISSN 2455-7544  
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

# Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 3 No.1, March, 2018

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English  
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.1, March, 2018

## **Revisiting Victorian Era: A Feminist panorama of the Age**

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**Abstract:** Victorian feminists maintained that women need to be educated in order to improve society. For women's emancipation it was emphasized that women need to be freed from home and require exposure to public life, so that they could 'do God's work in the world'. The paper gives a general idea of feminism and the position of women both as an ideology and a movement in Victorian age. The study also gives a comprehensive description of the contribution made by various women writers of that age to the Victorian literary corpus and the way paved by them for the later feminist writers. Besides this the various contemporary issues are the focal point of this study like the meekness, submissiveness and docility of women during Victorian era, the different kinds of struggles that women of that age faced and how they tried to surmount those obstacles.

**Key Words:** Victorian, Emancipation, Feminism, Literary corpus.

### **Introduction:**

Violence against women is a ubiquitous and universal phenomenon that persists in all countries of the world, and the perpetrators of that violence are often known to their victims. Domestic violence, in particular, continues to be frighteningly common and accepted as 'normal' within many societies. Men and women symbolically are the two sides of the same coin. Starting from the field of domestic responsibilities, socio-political, moral, economic, intellectual and spiritual aspect women have a significant role to play. Women of the present age would argue that they still have a long way to go to attain a high status and gender justice. Feminist campaigns are generally considered to be one of the main forces behind major historical societal changes for women's rights. These feminist campaigns imply public awareness seeking feminism and its relevance.



'Feminism' is a term that is interpreted in a variety of ways and these reflect the history of Feminist thought. This thought often occurs in the waves. The first wave is associated with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's (1759-1797) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal political philosophy in twin is concerned with feminism which earns equal political and economic opportunities for women. Hence women's situation improved. It led to women's suffrage in 1920's and liberal feminists also made efforts regarding property rights for women, more freedom and education and these paved way for their professional career. The Second Wave of feminism starts in 1949 with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's (1908-1986) *The Second Sex* (1949). This movement focused on the political and legal sources of women's equality. And the Second wave of feminists believes that political and legal equality is not enough to make women feel more comfortable. According to them it is sexiest oppression which is ingrained in every sphere of human life whether social, economic, political life and a variety of personal relationships. Moreover second wave of feminists were critical about the first ones for ignoring economic reforms. They were of the opinion that feminism should lay emphasis on economic equality for women rather than just economic survival. The Third Wave of feminism began in the late 1980's by feminists who looked forward to Women's diversity which was more essential than anything else. For example the white women believed that their experiences, interests and concerns were not looked after by the second wave of feminism partly because they represented middle class white women who were close to the common women and their experience of oppression was simply ignored. The feminists relating to color challenged the division into sexes and genders for they approved of feminism in all its diversity and multiplicity of feminist goals.

Feminism is also called 'Aphraism' named after Aphra Behn (1640-1689), a 17<sup>th</sup> century feminist, who was quite active in her aims and objectives. Feminism disapproves of male created ideologies regarding social equality of women because they are sexually colonized, historically neglected and biologically subordinated. Feminism also Challenges the age old belief that women are weak, whose place is in the Kitchen. It looks forward to the equality of the sexes and a role for women in society which gives them such equality. From Christine de Pisan (1364-1430) to Mary



Wollstonecraft, from Simone de Beauvoir to Jane Austen (1775-1817) and beyond, women demanded their rights in a male-dominated world. The term 'Feminism' was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas (1824-1895), the Younger, in 1872 to make prominent the emerging movement for women's rights. It gradually became a world-wide cultural movement to ensure complete equality to women in order to confer on them moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic and other rights. Feminist thought has a humanist bearing. To Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), feminism is the antonym of fascism. She proposes a society reflecting women's ethics that is positivistic, holistic, anti-materialistic and life-affirming. It is the basis for a new public morality for formation of a 'left-handed' world. The suppression of women's rights by men is condemned by women especially in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and therefore through feminist writing an exploration of the minds of women and their problems in a traditionally male dominated society is reflected. "The word 'Feminism'" says Herbert Marder in her *Feminism and Art: A study of Virginia Woolf* (1968), "must be understood in its broadest sense— as referring to Mrs. Woolf's intense awareness of her identity as a woman, her interest in feminine problems"(2). And her awareness has a bearing over the modern female writer's problems all over the world.

Simon de Beauvoir in "Introduction" from *The Second Sex* thinks that the relation between man and woman is always a complex one:

In actuality the relation of the two Sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (28)

Hence it is man who defines the human, not woman who is considered as an autonomous being and is given a relative position. Woman is defined physically and intellectually as the 'weaker' sex, in all ways subordinate to male authority. Julian Benda (1867-1956) in his *Rapport d' Uriel* (1946) writes:



The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself . . . Man can think of himself without woman. And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex' by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute . . . she is the Other. (qtd. in Selden 534)

Thus one can understand the increased marginalization of women at the hands of men.

The building up of society mostly depends on the involvement of women in decision making. Women empowerment is one of the important tools in the upliftment of economic, social and political status of women in society. It helps to make them confident to claim their rights like live their life with dignity, make their own decisions, and get their voices heard and much more. Women empowerment is a means to increase the participation of women in the national development process and make the nation proud of their outstanding performances in every sphere including medical science, social service, engineering etc. Thus Women have to be empowered in all spheres of life. Gender inequality is a major barrier in the development of humanity. Inequalities between men and women, discrimination, patriarchy etc are some of the factors which lead to exploitation and suppression of women and are the main cause of the downfall of society. G. Sai Sravanthi is of the opinion:

Breaking of glass by women is possible only by means of breaking the stereotypes, preconceived notions and by promoting unbiased, indiscriminative family, society and organization, which paves a path for women development and which subsequently, leads to a country's development. (167)

In the Victorian Age the 'Woman Question' was relevant for both male and female writers and Queen Victoria's views reflect different aspects of feminism. She favored the education of women, and permitted the opening of colleges but did not approve of the concept of votes for women which she called 'mad folly'. Her comments on women and marriage are worthwhile. She



enjoyed married life until the death of Princess Albert in 1861. She knew the sacrifices involved in marriage. In 1858 she expressed her views on the occasion of the marriage of her daughter:

There is great happiness . . . in devoting oneself to another who is worthy of one's affection: still, men are very selfish and the women's devotion is always one of submission which makes our poor sex so very unenviable. This you will feel hereafter—I know; though it cannot be otherwise as God has willed it so. (qtd. in Christ and Robson 1581)

The women in Victorian era experienced boredom but in the Mid-Victorian period, one quarter of England's female population got Jobs. But they got low wages. And many women earned their living by indulging in prostitution. Many more women were employed as domestics, seamstresses, factory workers, farm laborers or prostitutes and had to face many problems. The women belonging to upper and middle class homes, experienced idleness and yet they were treasured as a symbol of status. The position of Victorian domestic women was miserable. She could neither own property nor make a will; neither keeps her own savings nor claims any of her husband's. After marriage she lost her identity and had no power over her children and no right for divorce. The transfer of work from the house to the factory increased working hours with small pay and heavy drudgery. It was men who dominated in every sphere of life while women made little contribution. Man's position was nuclear, since he was the head of the family. The women depended either on parents or husbands or their own children. This apparently made them look peaceful but they were enslaved by men. They were forced to abide age-old traditions and customs like clearing up the mess with her bare hands, after each meal eating in the same dirty plate her husband had left, getting married and bearing children, for a woman could not live by herself. George Eliot (1819-1880) in 1870 had summed up the position of women in a letter to Mrs. Lytton:

We women are always in danger of living too exclusively in the affections; and though our affections are perhaps the best gifts we have, we ought also to have our share of the more independent life— some joy in things for their own sake. It is piteous to see the helplessness of some sweet women when their affections are disappointed— because all their teaching has



been, that they can only delight in study of any kind for the sake of a personal love. They have never contemplated an independent delight in ideas as an experience which they could confess without being laughed at. Yet surely women need this sort of defense against passionate affliction even more than men. (qtd. in Thomson 66)

Although Victorian era may have seen a tremendous industrial development and may have been an age of achievement and progress; it also was a period of poverty and anxiety. Thus it improved the condition of middle and lower class people but at the same time it was a period of unemployment, poverty and the working conditions for women and children were terrible as they had to deal with highly detrimental jobs. The condition of working women was miserable on account of their low wages. They worked hard and yet earned very little. They were overworked by contractors who employed new workers in place of those who became blind or died suddenly. They had no financial support. This spoilt the good reputation of the Victorian age. Women were employed in pin making, in screw-making, in the manufacture of steel pins, in button-making, in glass-polishing, in various processes of pottery manufacture and in match-making— a very dangerous trade, as the phosphorus badly affected the health of the workers. In 1832, a cholera epidemic swept through Britain, killing thousands of people. Fever, cholera, diphtheria and tuberculosis spread at an alarming rate. Large women were also employed in the textile-mills on low wages. Women worked for fourteen to sixteen hours and got less than ten shillings a week. Sometimes they worked at night to earn some extra amount. Their working conditions were inhuman. Women went back to work within a fortnight of the birth of a baby, who was left with other small children. They had no time for cooking. The condition of women working in the coal-mines was equally miserable. They carried loads of coal on their backs, pulling loading wagons with coal. A working woman had a belt round her waist and a chain passing between her legs, she moved on hands and feet holding on to a rope. In Mrs. Gaskell's (1810-1865) novel *Mary Barton* (1848), the major characters being mill-workers complain thus:

. . . It's prince Albert as ought to be asked how he'd like his missis to be from home when he comes in, tired and worn, and wanting someone to cheer him; and may be, her to come in



by-and-bye, just as tired and down in th' mouth, and how he'd like for her never to be at home to see to th' cleaning of his house, or to keep a bright fire in his grate. Let alone his meals being all hugger-mugger and comfortless. I'd be bound, prince as he is, if his missis served him so, he'd be off to a gin-palace or summut o' that Kind. So why can't he make a law again poorfolks' wives working in factories? (140)

No sports in leisure hours were made available for girls during the Victorian age. However most of the girls liked riding as Queen Victoria herself was a good horsewoman and during her early and middle years rode in Windsor Park or at Balmoral.

A governess had security during the Victorian age. If one had many daughters, employing a governess for them was cheaper than sending them to boarding schools. The image of the Victorian governess is reflected very well in *Jane Eyre*: an intelligent, sensible and sensitive woman who became a victim of frustration due to poverty. It was a real picture of life but also women who were less intelligent also desired to become governesses though they might have become or taken up domestic posts. The novelists often wrote about the complex social position held by the governesses. The pathetic condition of governesses emotionally moved the readers. Thirty or forty guineas a year was an average salary for a governess. The character of the governess first appeared in the literature of the Victorian Age in *The Governess* (1840) by Lady Blessington (1789-1849)– a novel written by an authoress who reflected the miserable lives of governesses. It was in the elite class that the children were left in charge of nurses and governesses, whereas in the middle-class home the mother looked after all domestic duties including those relating to the education of children. The girls during their childhood were not allowed to cultivate their domestic habits in their own way. Simon de Beauvoir remarks, “I looked and it was a revelation: this world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men and I hadn't reacted to them in at all the same way I should have done if I had been a boy” (qtd. in Moi 87).

A number of women of the Victorian age earned their living by working as prostitutes. Prostitution is also one of the main themes of Victorian Novels for example the figures of *Mary Burtons' Aunt Esther*, Nancy in *Oliver Twist*(1837), Alice Marwood in *Dombey and Son*(1848), the





fate of Martha Endelland Little Em'ly in *David Copperfield* (1850) etc. Charles Dickens (1812-1870) tried to take up the cause of prostitutes, supporting the plan made by Angela Burdett Coult (1814-1906) in 1846 for a *Home for Homeless women*. The aim was to train them into domesticated women, so that they could act as suitable wives for the colonial workers.

In the Victorian age there was a question about women's education and their freedom to earn their living. Society did not consider that women required formal education and it was the right reserved for men. As a result, it was rare to find women in skilled jobs that required higher or intermediate education. Women then were generally expected to be housekeepers or house wives and believed to be 'the angel in the house'. In the early Victorian period the women had real protection when they were married. It ensured their future existence. Marriage was a blessing but it also had its bleak side. A woman's children, her property and earnings were all in the custody of her husband by law. It was a period when women had various frustrations. Hence wives began to question authority, both at home and outside. Spinsters decided that they must use their talent to acquire education and thus get a chance to take up different professions. Women were increasing their knowledge and using their intelligence outside domestic confinement. The married woman no doubt had a prominent position in society. She was the mistress of a household and she could give orders to servants and tradesmen and could take decision for herself instead of obeying her parents. The young married woman was the owner of an established Victorian home. Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) was an exception who refused an offer of marriage and preferred to observe the conditions in hospitals. The majority of young women of Victorian age hoped to marry either a man of their own or their parent's choice. This was the fate of the girls of middle class. There must have been many young Victorian women who followed *Punch's* advice in this regard which says:

Between ourselves, my dear, almost every young woman is either married or intends to be. It is what we have to look to, poor things! Now, in order to get married, my love, you must learn to manage yourself; and after you get married, you must learn to manage your husband; and both together is what I call the whole duty of woman. (qtd. in Dunbar 19)



The working-class girl had the same status and marriage usually brought little change in her. If she married a factory-hand, she continued to work in order to add more to her husband's low wages. Hence she spent twelve to sixteen hours in a mill or other factory and thus neglected her home. She hardly knew anything about cooking or running a house, since she had been engaged in labor since childhood.

The women's Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century began with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which brought bad name to its author in her lifetime, but which helped women and raised their status in future. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* by Mary Wollstonecraft occupies a central position in the history of feminist theory and to date it continues to be an important text for understanding feminist thought and activism. Mary Wollstonecraft opposed restrictions imposed on women's freedom for self-expression and self-development. She wrote against the exclusion of women from the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. In her book she demanded equal education for women to give them the opportunity to contribute to society. Besides the right of married woman to own property and to share the custody of the children in case of separation, she also wanted equal opportunities for women to enter professions and work side by side with their male counter parts. She wished divorce to be made less difficult for women and to make men legally responsible for their illegitimate children. Wollstonecraft insists that unless there is more equality in society, there will never be morality and it is impossible to expect virtue from women until they achieve some sort of independence from men. Mary Wollstonecraft remarks in her essay "Of the Pernicious Effects which Arise from the Unnatural Distinctions Established in Society" as follows:

Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful Wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens. We should then love them with true affection, because we should learn to respect ourselves; and the peace of mind of a worthy man would not be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife, nor



the babes sent to nestle in a strange bosom, having never found a home in their mother's.  
(154)

Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women should be allowed to enter the world of medicine and politics, women's interest in dressing up and looking pretty is also relevant and they must be given freedom in matters of sex relationship like men. She believed that the history of female education was a virtual conspiracy to render women weaker and less rational than men as she says in her essay "The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character Discussed", ". . . women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue" (18). Despite her sexual indiscretions, which included giving birth to an illegitimate child, Mary Wollstonecraft remained a seminal influence on feminist thinking throughout the nineteenth century.

In 1843 Marion Kirkland Reid (1817-1920) published *A Plea for Women* (1843), a book which had a large sale. It contained very valid arguments regarding the emancipation of woman as an individual and education of women was emphasized which had been ignored. The book was bitterly criticized by the public. Many questions were asked about the book. One of the newspapers questioned, of what use is education to the weaker sex? There were no job opportunities given to women. The best option for women was to teach young ladies, religion and drawing. The right to vote and representation in parliament was favored by Marion Kirkland Reid for that was needed to change the laws passed against women. She rejected men's fear of female domination and many other objections like women losing their gentleness and modesty if exposed to public life. In March 1848 Queen's College in Harley Street was opened with an inaugural lecture by F.D Maurice (1805-1872), who reflected on its aims. Maurice himself taught Theology, Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) English literature and Sterndale Bennet (1816-1875) taught music. It was the first real school for women which produced excellent students. The year 1849 was important in the history of women's education during the Victorian age for the 'Ladies' College was established in Bedford Square presently known as Bedford College. It was the first college for women in the University of London. It was founded through the efforts of Elizabeth Jesser Reid (1789-1866). She was a social reformer. She supported the anti-slavery movement and everything relating to philanthropic



character that she noticed. This college aimed at giving liberal education at a moderate rate. At least two of the champions of women's political rights were men: John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), whose famous *The Subjection of Women* (1869) was published in the sixties and William Thompson (1775-1833) who had written a book in 1825 called *Appeal of one Half of the Human Race, Women, against the Pretensions of the Other half, Men*. They believed that no progress is possible until women were given equal opportunities regarding education and equal political rights with men. They earnestly believed that women could work as doctors, managers of hospitals, workhouses, prisons and charitable institutions, and could also go into farming or business. Among women the desire for education increased to the extent that they realized that knowledge is the only way to earn one's living. In 1878, London became the first university to admit women to its degrees (excluding medicine), and by 1897 the university at Manchester also permitted women to study and get degrees in all subjects.

There were a number of magazines with emphasis on religion like *The Christian Lady's Magazine* (1839), edited by Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, (1790-1846) one of the most enthusiastic feminists. She also wrote numerous articles urging women to seek information about national interest, and tried to move public by reflecting on the miserable state of women and children in the factories. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna was not only a writer, who wrote about the country and its people but she was also an activist. Being patriotic she tried to enlighten English readers about a country for which she felt great affection. Eliza Cook's (1818-1889) *Journal* (1849), published in monthly installments supported every movement for social and political reform and every new inquiry into science and philosophy. It is said to have achieved a good circulation. The editorials and articles dealt with the contemporary problems which stimulated the reformers of the day regarding the state of housing, the pathetic condition of industries, children's factory labor, ragged schools, public health and hygiene. There were book reviews and accounts of foreign travel and customs, but the main object of the *Journal* was to awaken a Victorian woman and make her independent and self-reliant.



From the beginning of the Nineteenth century, novel was a good medium for the portrayal of women. Hence female writers like Mrs. Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot were the major authors in this regard, who, idealized women on all occasions. They did not create ordinary women confined to their homes and society but showed resentment regarding conventions that subdued them. In the placid dovecotes of Victorian Womanhood they were like eagles. Despite the fact that writing books was a respectable profession for women, yet they could not compete the male authors and therefore the three Bronte Sisters adopted masculine names in order to receive the same recognition regarding their literary works as the male authors. When the family life of the Brontes was described in Elizabeth Gaskell's acclaimed biography *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857), it became known to some that the only male Bronte sibling, the beloved Branwell, must have played an important role in the lives of his sisters, and in particular in the composition of Emily's masterpiece *Wuthering Heights* (1847). The Novelists during this period dare not speak openly about the man-woman relationship. And yet female writers made a good deal of money from their work to earn a living. Miss Mitford (1787-1855) supported a feckless father for many years, Felcia Hemans (1793-1835) educated five sons on her earnings, and Francis Trollope (1779-1863) saved her family from misery by beginning to write at the age of fifty and continued to do so for a long time. There was another female writer named Catherine Frances Gore (1799-1861), who enjoyed popularity. She published her first novel in 1824, when she was in her Twenties. She wrote about seventy novels and many volumes of plays and poems. In her works she ridiculed the world of fashions and thus amused both the cynics and the middle-class readers, who had never thought of it. Gore's 1861 obituary in *The Times* concluded that Gore was the best novel writer of her class and the wittiest woman of her age. Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901) was another known authoress of that age. She wrote stories for a magazine that published works based on religious themes. She died at the age of seventy six and was the author of more than 100 books. A reviewer remarked, "Miss Yonge's work can, with perfect propriety, be left open on the drawing-room table" (qtd. in Dunbar 121). The Victorian Novelists wished to please that great middle class which was the predominating force in England. David Cecil (1902-1986) expresses his views thus:



The great Victorian novels are all pictures. Sometimes they are fanciful and romantic, connected with reality only by a frail thread: more often they, too, stick close to the facts of actual existence. But these facts are never merely reproduced; they are always fired and colored by a new and electric individuality. The act of creation is always performed. A Street in London described by Dickens is very like a street in London; but it is still more like a street in Dickens. For Dickens has used the real world to create his own world, to add a country to the geography of the imagination. And so have Trollope and Thackeray and Charlotte Bronte and the rest of them. To read a paragraph of any of their books is to feel blowing into one's mental lungs unmistakably and invigoratingly a new and living air, the air of Dickensland, Thackerayland, Bronteland. For these authors possess in a supreme degree the quality of creative imagination. (20)

Dinah Maria Mulock (1826-1887) in 1857 published her well-known novel, *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856). This work is followed by *A Woman's Thoughts about Women* (1858) and also by other feminist, novels. Her works often appear under the name Dinah Maria Craik. Her works reflect women's ability to transform their own lives, enjoy professional success, financial independence, as well as a blissful marriage. Florence Nightingale, known as 'The Lady with the Lamp' became famous for organizing a contingent of nurses to look after the sick and wounded soldiers during the Crimean War, an event that gave her an opportunity to change the condition of hospitals for the treatment of patients. Nightingale's dream came true after many years of struggle and she remained unmarried for completing her mission. Her family members opposed her ambitions for they wanted her to stay at home instead of studying mathematics with a private tutor and didn't allow her to become a nurse for nurses were generally drawn from the ranks of the poor and unskilled women. In 1852 she was so fed up with her family and social life that she thought to end her life and then she wrote *Cassandra* (1852), a 'family manuscript'. It reflects her frustration and then she entered into a professional world to achieve her ends.

Mona Caird (1854-1932) one of the famous feminist writers explored the position of women in Victorian society. She wrote several novels and many essays. *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894)



has a heroine whose desire to pursue a musical career was disliked by her family members. Caird's article *Marriage*, which appeared in the *Westminster Review* in 1888, inspired a lot of discussion in the Journals of the 1890's. Her essays on the subject of marriage were later collected and published as *The Morality of Marriage, and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman* (1897). For her marriage was a 'vexatious failure', and the man who marries finds that his liberty has gone, and the woman exchanges one set of restrictions for another.

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell was another Victorian woman writer. She was the author of six successful novels, over three dozen novellas and short stories – usually published in the thriving periodical press of mid-nineteenth-century Britain – and one of the most celebrated biographies of the century, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857). Her books described the world of hard labor reflecting its bitterness. She described the life lived around her. Through her books she minutely observed characters. Her first book *Mary Barton* reflected on the insecurity of mill-hands, dependent on the whims of their masters and the state of trade.

George Eliot like Browning (1812-1889) was soaked in religion and closely observed life and sought perfection. Though her female characters are intellectual giants yet are unconsciously dependent on men. The problems relating to love, marriage and education are dealt by George Eliot but the female characters are often passive. They do not properly use their potential. Her death in 1880 marked the emergence of an interesting late Victorian literary paradox. Eliot expresses no objection to marriage at an institutional level and for her marriage was to be respected in social and cultural terms as well as having value at a personal level for human beings. A line of eminent female novelists, beginning with Jane Austen and continuing with the Brontes, Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot, was succeeded in the 1880s and 1890s by a group of no less distinguished male authors just when the feminist movement was increasing in strength and influence.

Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855) deeply influenced her contemporaries. It took George Eliot many years to establish her reputation, but Charlotte Bronte attracted her readers with her first book. She wrote to her friend, "I always through my whole life liked to penetrate to the real truth"



(qtd. in Dunbar 129). And added further that, “I like seeing the goddess in her temple and handling the veil, and daring the dread glance” (129). The hero or more often the heroine of Charlotte Bronte is domineering and is presented in her own way. Charlotte Bronte’s imagination reflects on certain aspects of man’s inner life as Charles Dickens or William Thackeray (1811-1863) presents certain aspects of their external life. Thackeray was the first English writer to make the novel a vehicle of conscious criticism of life. Charlotte made it a vehicle of personal revelation. She is subjective novelist. *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Villete* (1853), *The Professor* (1857), the best parts of *Shirley* (1849) are very moving for these are based on self-revelation. The world she creates is her own inner life. Her novels reflect vitality. Out of her own experiences, she creates a vision of life.

Like Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte (1818-1848) and Anne Bronte (1820-1849) had a feminist vision. In Emily Bronte’s single novel entitled *Wuthering Heights*, the female characters have the power to curb the perverted nature and tame it. They are physically and mentally alert but do not indulge in any falsehood. They are both feminine and masculine in their assertion and their firm hold on love does not allow men to humiliate them. Anne Bronte also a feminist, urges women to demand their rights and privileges. She emphasizes the need of love and marriage for women. The group of writers writing in the 1840’s knew that it was a recognizable profession for women and Charlotte and her sisters who were trapped in men’s houses made use of these experiences in their novels. Charlotte Bronte’s novels reveal her bitterness towards men. She feels that women do not enjoy a secure social position and she expresses her resentment. When Charlotte Bronte wrote to the poet laureate Robert Southey (1774-1843) to seek his advice about her decision to become a writer he warned her thus, “Literature can’t be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be” (qtd. in Christ and Robson 995). Charlotte Bronte put this letter, with another one from Southey, in an envelope, with the inscription, “Southey’s advice to be kept forever. My twenty first birthday” (995).

The feminist writers of Victorian age were concerned with the atrocities women underwent. And yet male writers too were sympathetic in their attitude to women. Thackeray has special regard





Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English  
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.1, March, 2018

for women on account of his painful experience of living with a mentally deranged wife who could not survive long. He urges women to adopt a courageous attitude towards life and condemns those who deprive themselves of enjoying privileges given to them by God. Thomas Hardy's (1840-1928) works deal with problems of marriage, gender, sex, motherhood, love, chastity and divorce which presents a very bleak picture of life. His heroines are ambitious, energetic and powerful and yet the unjust social norms do not allow them to lead a better life. Hardy tries to protect women like an adventurer in his imaginative world of fiction. Thomas Hardy is an eye witness to the history of England. He depicts the conflicts between the individuals and society and is concerned about the problems of the Victorians and the representation of women who took an active part in Victorian works as oppressed member in society. Charles Dickens presented the fallen women influenced by Victorian ideology and forced to endure exploitation and oppression in their quest for survival in an industrial society. He also wrote about the social problems of young boys of the poor and working class and the children in cities where poor people had no chance to prosper. His novels depict true picture of the Victorian society.

To conclude during the Victorian era the feminist Victorian writers females in particular and males in general tried their utmost to reflect on the social, political and economic problems of women and also aimed to re-examine the representation of women in men's text. They tried to dismantle the earlier representation of women who were regarded as submissive and docile. They concluded that the wretched condition of Victorian women was mainly due to the patriarchal society and the real progress is impossible without them for they are the backbone of society. They laid emphasis on the fact that woman has just as much right to use her imagination as men and thus paved the way for Victorian female writers to display their talents. This inspired the feminist writers of the modern age.



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English  
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.1, March, 2018

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