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CHANGING ATTITUDES: WOMEN IN BRITHISH LITERATURE FROM THE SEVENTEENTH TO THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The history of women's status in British Society is the "story of a quest" a long seemingly endless one. Women seeking a better, more acknowledged life have suffered, then gone forward (as in a gain), then retreated and so on. Women have sought "--- entry into the world, of education, and of growth, including growth in power ---". In this paper I propose to trace the history of the social status of British women from the seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century, as it was reflected in their literature as well as from historical social documents.

The seventeenth to late nineteenth centuries was a period characterised by accelerated changes in British society's attitudes towards women. And though formal milestones such as the right to vote were reached only in the next age, the literature of this period was especially aware of, and concerned with women.

Thus, the growing demand when, disguised as a man, through her clever arguments she is able to out-argue Shylock and so save Antonio's life: even Shylock in court, thinking she is a man, compliments "the most reverend doctor"-

"O wise young judge, how I do honour thee!

4.1.1224.

With the introduction of the concept of independence, especially financial, women finally began to realise that they had been exploited and kept down by men for their own purposes, when in reality, they could do very well for themselves in life, were *capable* of doing so. Records of the *Stationer's Company* show that there were successful women printers and booksellers. Some were admitted on an equal footing with men into various guilds, served as shop managers, or helped their husbands to conduct a variety of small businesses.

The *home* life of the middle class woman also changed. The reformed church had a less conservative attitude towards relations between the sexes. Married faithfulness was given more importance that virginity. There was a growing demand that woman be not treated as their husband's material property, but to share his trust and confidence.

Thus the growing demand of women in the sixteenth century for an education, the controversy and heated debate it stirred up about their role and capabilities etc., seemed to have "frightened" men. This scare took the form of stricter attempts at the suppression of women, encouraged by the old-fashioned Scot, James I, who preferred a women to know how to spin, than read, as the anecdote goes. Women were discouraged from taking an active part in public life, and were gradually

excluded from any crafts in which they had formerly played a regular part. e.g. weaving, baking etc. The excuse for this exclusion was that international and national trade and commerce was a complex business, and needed specialists – those who could devote themselves wholly to the job at hand. Thus the average woman became confined solely to the house and domestic matters. The result was that she became even more isolated and passive. She depended solely on her husband for news of the outside world.

Another important change in the attitude towards women, served to belittle them. Formerly, they were regarded as models of virtue and chastity – exemplars for mankind. Now they were being looked on as being flesh and blood creatures to be loved passionately, and sensually, often in debasing terms.

Suckling for example, cannot integrate a sexual and emotional relationship. A woman is a piece of flesh to be devoured by his sexual appetite.

" 'Tis not the meat, but 'tis the appetite
makes eating a delight,
and if I like one dish
more than another, that a Pheasant is:"

"Sonnet 11" 11.17-20.

But some of the other metaphysical poets such as Donne, Jonson, Herrick etc., did not look at women in sexually debasing terms. Donne for example, values a woman's intellect, as well as the sexual pleasure she can give him; But he was aware that love was to be cherished, because it gave meaning to one's life:

"And now good morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love all love of other sights controls
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown:
Let us possess one world – each hath one, and is one."

"The Good Morrow", from *"Songs And Sonets"*

Other poems with similar outlooks are *"The Extasie"*, *"The Sunne Rising"* etc.

But in general, the early seventeenth century poets continue to show women as models of virtue for all. Women's ability to thus influence mankind, and often Nature as well, is illustrated in Marvell's poem, *"upon Appleton House"*.

In this poem Mary Fairfax is said to reform Nature itself. Later in the poem however, Mary is compared to Oliver Cromwell when he went into "retirement". But the virtues he developed during this period could be turned to public use when they were needed – Mary Fairfax'z will not be.

But such propaganda could not deter the slow but steady awakening of women's consciousness. So much so that even dramatists began to satirise learned women in their plays – a change from Elizabeth's time!

Jonson for example, made many satirical, though not cruel, attacks on women who knew the classics, astronomy and other "manly" subjects. In his *"Volpone"* for example, Lady would-be is a lady fond of learning, who has ready Petrarch, Tasso, Dante, Guarini, Ariosto, Aretine etc. (ACT 3, SCENE2). She tries to discuss these authors with the "ill" Volpone, trying to humour him, and divert his attention. She even knows a little medicine, and prescribes:

"Seed-pearl --- boil'd with syrup of apples,
Tincture of gold, and coral, citron-pills,
Your elicampane root, myrobalanes –"

For his feelings of

"--- I sweat, and suffer, at the mention
Of any dream; feel how I tremble yet."

ACT Three SCENE Two

Thus Jonson satirises her knowledge, by concocting fantastic potions for simple ill-health. And on top of it all, he calls her –

"My madam, with the everlasting voice:
[-Who has] such a hail of words --- let fall."

ACT Three SCENE Two

With such typical – and ever popular – attacks on women, condescending and arrogant, Jonson's plays became sought after. He passed it off as wit, but it was what many people of the time really believed: they were always trying to keep women in their traditional role, as innocent, but really ignorant, ideals. Evelyn's diaries testify to this.

However, both Evelyn and Pepys in their diaries, have revealed a bawdy London high society. (This goes with the debasing sexual attitude some of the popular poets, towards women.) They tell of the regular play going, the extravagant dresses, flirtation and casual affairs with other people's husbands or wives, which were "in", in high society.

An example of *ideal* upper class family life has been recorded in the *Verney Family letters*. G.M. Trevelyan comments that "their household --- represented all that was best in the Puritan and Cavalier way of life, ---."

Their country house was a centre of domestic industry, as well as estate management. There were hundreds of servants of both sexes, with their families, each with their part to play. "The inhabitants brewed and baked, they churned and ground their meal ---. Their horses were shod at home ---. [There was] the mill-house, the slaughter-house, the blacksmith's, carpenter's, and painter's shops [etc.]".

As for a lady's education, needlework and spinning were considered very necessary. The poorer female family members helped out in these departments, as well as in others such as "cooking, curing, preserving", distilling, preparing medicines from herbs at the prescription of the doctor, and making home-made wines and syrups etc.

So the very many skills possessed by these "mere" women can be seen – skills which have become specialised today, and which require training, certificates and

intelligence – from women and men. Also, the majority of the Verney men were ignorant of the ABC of such activities, which were so essential for their comfort, because they were concerned solely with politics, business and formal education. So, the "inferiority" of women can be clearly seen.

Milton can be called a catalyst for change in his age. In his *"Paradise Lost"* and his Divorce Tracts, he discuses *marriage* in terms of the personal gratification it brings to both men *and* women. In the Paradise before the Fall of *"Paradise Lost"*, Adam and Eve equally enjoy the pleasures of intimacy. They help each other in their labour in the Garden, and have "mutual" affection for each other. But this happy partnership is based on their complimentary abilities. Adam is superior in reason, Eve in appreciating beauty and in giving affection. Also, later, when Adam accuses Eve of leading him astray, blaming her for his eating of the apple, the Son rebukes him, saying that he has only himself to blame for the Fall:

> "Was shee thy God, that her thou didst obey
> Before his voice, or was she made thy guide,
> Superior, or but equal, that to her
> Thou didst resign thy Manhood, ---."

Book X, 1. 145 – 148.

But Milton still regards the relationship between the sexes as hierarchical, with man being the superior. In the lines immediately following the above, he says:

> "--- and the Place
> Wherein God set thee above her made of thee,
> And for thee, whose perfection far excell'd
> Hers in all real dignity: adorn'd
> She was indeed, and lovely to attract
> Thy love, not thy Subjection."

Book X, 1. 148 – 153.

And this paradoxical attitude aptly reflects the double mindedness of many educated people towards the close of the century. Often these views were held, but never expressed, because society as a whole frowned on them.

However, the various Christian sects which were so plentiful at that time, did not find the "non-hierarchical" views as contrary to their principles. Like the *Quakers*, the *Fifth Monarchists, Ranters, Independents, Baptists* etc. all agreed in this that women should have the freedom of taking a larger part in political and religious life. In fact, the Quakers believed that, "all are one in Christ."

Thus, towards the end of the seventeenth century, though the frivolisation of women continued, there were many advocates amongst women and men, who believed that women were capable of taking an active part in public life, and so should be encouraged to do so. And this is hoe the growing consciousness of the "real" abilities of women got a further push.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The Eighteenth Century in England, is an important period in the history of Women's Liberation. A direction had been given by Congrev's *"The Way of the*

World" (1700), and its explicit feminist debate between Mirabell and Millamant. Many important developments were to unfold in the next hundred years. Most important in the literary world was the *Rise of the Novel.* This new genre was very important for the representation of women in literature.

Samuel Richardson's *"Pamela"* (1740), is often called the first novel in English literature. Though it does not abandon the traditional portrayal of women, the reader is able to look at issues from a feminine viewpoint. The plot of *"Pamela"* itself, is evidence of this. The heroine, Pamela, from being a poor helpless girl, threatened by male dominance and sexuality, becomes, because of her virtues, a reforming respectable wife.

Pamela, middle class, Protestant, and having qualities deemed heroic by both sexes, is a respectable version of Defoe's Moll flanders and roxana. They, i.e. The two latter, are seduced, forced into crime, and prostitution. But it is because of their bold attacks on men that these two characters are attractive, yet less plausible than Pamela who is more like the ceal woman of the time. Thus this novel demonstrates to readers that by suppressing a women's sexuality and making dominant her virtues – i.e. patience, chastity, sympathy, understanding and faith in God etc., she can triumph over even the greatest of odds.

In *"Tom Jones"* (1749), by Fielding, the "lovely Sophia" is also an idealised woman. She is caught in the cruel practice of marrying for property. Also, if she marries without her bullying father's consent, she is liable to be disinherited. Eventually, after many hurdles, Sophia does marry Tom, the man she loves. And in the meantime, the novel is able to put across the injustice of the feminine position in society, and Sophia expresses rebellion against male authority.

The astonishing popularity of these and other similar novels of the eighteenth century, show that readers, mostly middle class women, were able to identify themselves in many ways with the heroines. It also shows that the majority of women then, were still second class citizens – way behind men.

In fact the impetus and encouragement given to women's education during Elizabeth I's reign had now faded. G.M. Trevelyan in Volume III of his "Illustrated *English Social History*" , comments that "women's education was sadly to seek." The daughters of rich families had much less education than their brothers. Gone were the days of an enthusiastic classical education for women such as given to Lady Jane Grey, Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth I and many other aristocratic women – surprising in that neo-classical age. The practice was defended either as being necessary to keep wives under control, or by "ascribing the frivolity and the gambling habits of ladies of fashion to an upbringing, which debarred them from more serious interests."

But letters of the period show that despite the lack of education, women were often very intelligent and dependable advisors to their manfolk. They also reveal that arranged marriages, though increasingly with the girl's approval, were still normal practice.

As the Eighteenth Century wore on, the angelic characteristic of empiricism, the development of a large middle class, which in turn created a female leisure class that read books and for whom books were written, plus the rise of individualism etc., helped women to carve a place for themselves in life and literature. This trend reached a high point in women's history with the publication in 1792 of "*Vindication of the Rights of Women*" by Mary Wollstonecraft.

This talented woman did whatever work was available to a woman at that time, to earn a living. This included sewing, teaching, being a governess etc. And it was her difficult personal history that gave her the realisation that women's "rights" needed a new interpretation. Of her fiery *"Vindication"*, she said, "I might have expressed this conviction in a lower key, but I am afraid it would have been the whine of affectation, and not the faithful expression of my feelings."

Her work shook both men and women of the period. It was so true, rational and "unwomanly", that people were forced to take notice. She writes, "--- I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and consequently more useless members of society." And – "I love man as my fellow, but his sceptre, real or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage."

Mary Wollstonecraft also attacked the system whereby women are "systematically degraded" by receiving trivial attentions, which men think it manly to pay the "weaker sex". She cites examples of a man rushing to pick a fallen handkerchief, when the "lady" could have done it herself, shutting the door for her etc. Because women have very little serious work to do, she writes, their interests naturally focus on silly, vain trivialities.

Ms. Wollstonecraft's criticisms are aimed at men's attitudes mainly to ladies. Poor women she says, have often to maintain their children by the sweat of their brow, keeping pace with their husbands at the same time. Thus she, like Bernard Shaw in later years, also attacks the imprisonment of women from well-to-do "respectable" families.

With this reasoned and brave work, Mary Wollstonecraft fired the first shot in the battle for women's rights. Though she was widely criticised and ridiculed, her message and arguments stuck in the mind of many. In the next century, the nineteenth, can be seen the first faltering, yet brave attempts by other women to gather forces and launch an even stronger attack on established traditions, laws, and ways of thought.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Nineteenth Century in England is often called the age of a Woman – Victoria. She also happened to be the queen reigning for sixty-four long years (1837-1901). Slowly, it became "an age of Women".

Machines, industrialisation, the Napoleonic Wars, Darwin's Bible-contradicting utterances about evolution etc., all joined to weaken people's faith in religion and social traditions. To adjust to industrial change itself, was very difficult, especially for women.

Under the old system, women took an active part in "keeping" the family – farming, producing goods for sale in small cottage industries, weaving etc. But big business, the demand for specialists, and high farming, forced women from these activities into becoming "ladies" of no occupation, others into field-labourers or factory hands, other into wives entirely devoted to caring for the house."

But for the majority of women (middle class), the *home* became their exclusive concern. As for education, girls and boys studied together until the time boys had to start Latin. Classical education was denied to girls, one of the reasons being that it would limit her chances of marriage. Private education, where it could be afforded, consisted mainly of music, drawing, art, Italian, French, English, morals, and religion. It is evident that such an education could only equip women for trivial amusement, and "being good", especially when they were not allowed to earn a living.

On top of these isolating changes, there was great pressure from all sides on women, to conform to her traditional ideal and role. In later years, women's rights activities were dubbed "the shrieking sisterhood". Even Queen Victoria wanted to check "this mad, wicked folly of "Women's Rights" with all its attendant horrors".

It seemed as though traditionalists were trying to make a last – ditch attempt to stem a consciousness which would "ruin society". Doctors, lawyers, philosophers, essayists, poets, many novelists etc., put forward religious arguments, scientific reasoning, and moralising, to try and keep women submissive, dependent, and – at home. Among the most prominent, was Auguste Comete, who was very popular in the eighteen thirties. He saw women as the moral guides who rear children, renounce all property and have no work away from the home. Havelock Ellis's *"Man and Woman"* (1894), and *"Studies in the Psychology of Sex"* ( ), influenced many. Among other criticisms, he attacked women's intellect by saying, "Women dislike the essentially intellectual process of analysis; they have the instinctive feeling that analysis may possibly destroy the emotional complex by which they are largely moved, and by which appeals to them." Ruskin and Carlyle, those giants of the nineteenth century, spoke of all women as queens, willing or unwilling, with "the stainless sceptre of womanhood." Coventry Patmore, extremely popular in his time, wrote *"The Angel in the House"* (1854-56). This long poem became a best-seller. It depicted a common, mundane, middle class marriage, and was about ideal womanhood and domestic bliss. Its heroine, Honoria, was saintly, submissive – the ideal woman. Many Victorian ladies tried to be like her.

Tennyson's attitude towards women however, was unsure. He was greatly influenced by Queen Victoria's anti-feminist views, especially during his years of

poet-laureateship. In his poem, *"The Princess"* (1877), Tennyson tried to come to terms with the contemporary problem of lack of formal education, and the resultant destiny of intelligent women, in a society which admired silence more than intellect in its women. The heroine of this poem, founds a college for women after marriage. But its early sections are a clear mockery of the feminist position.

Tennyson's *"In Memorium"* (18), Section 97, tells us of the Victorian married woman.

> "She knows but matters in the house,
> And he, he knows a thousand things.
> He faith is fixed and cannot move,
> She darkly feels him great and wise,
> She dwells on him with faithful eyes,
> I cannot understand I love."
>
> *"In Memorium"* Section 97.

But side by side with such views, were men and women who disagreed, often vociferously.

On of the causes of the rise of the "Women's Movement", was the intense sexual repression and isolation of the feminine sex, and the resultant barely understood psychological problems. Sympathy however, was not so easily found in the philosophers of the time. Schopenhauer and J.S. Mill can be cited as leading philosophers of the day, and yet both have decidedly separate views regarding women.

In 1850, Schopenhauer published an essay, *"On Women"*, and in it, he wrote that women were much inferior to men in mental power. Her function was only to bear and look after children, and to submit to her husband. A young woman's "natural duty" was to attract a man, in order that he may hurried into caring for her for the rest of her life. Men show their superior reasoning powers by their ability to live in the past, and the future, as well as in the present. But women can live only for the moment. Because of this, and because they cannot use strength as a weapon, they develop a sense of cunning and deceit. Schopenhauer shows up his deep prejudice against women, when he writes that they are "unlovely", and so cannot appreciate beauty themselves! He also was of the opinion that polygamy would take care of the problem of surplus women and prostitutes! It is surprising to learn that many Victorian men and women thought like Schopenhauer. Queen Victoria is the most outstanding example.

J.S. Mill however, was a leading proponent of women's rights. *His "The Subjection of Women"*, written in 1861, but published in 1969, put forward excellent arguments against women being kept in bondage,

He started his essay by claiming that the case against women's emancipation "rests solely on feelings," and so cannot be easily touched on by argument. Men against the liberation of women, always withdraw to using emotion as a defence when their arguments have holes picked in them, he wrote.

Mill was of the view that a state of affairs is not necessarily just, because it is legal. Primitive societies, he writes, relied for their survival on the "law of superior Strength" because they were unaware that cruelty was wrong. It was a hard task for Christians to persuade men to give up their tyranny of weaker people. Today, subjection of women is a residue of such primitive societies. Though we no longer believe in such communities, we still make slaves of the physically weaker, female sex.

J.S. Mill then puts forward the view, that "if a principle is true, we ought to act as if we believed in it." (He means "liberty" as an accepted – by – all, positive principle.) Circumstances make women what they are, he writes. Their capabilities cannot be properly knows unless they are tried. They are "only" wives and mothers because of lack of alternative choice. He warns that unless "better terms" are not offered to them, future women may refuse to follow the traditional vocation.

Chapter Two of Mill's *"The Subjection of Women"*, deals with *the condition of marriage*. At present, he writes, a wife is a husband's bondservant. She cannot acquire any property, but for him – it becomes his, even if she got it by inheritance, But "the parallel inference is never drawn that whatever is his, is hers." Mill continues with *the family*, calling it a "bad training school", because of the unéven distribution of power. As to women in careers, Mill was of the view that rapid exhaustion is to be expected from women of the upper classes, especially "when they are reared as a kind of hot-house plant ---." c.f. the argument of *"The Misalliance"* by Shaw, which is partly a criticism of society.

In his final chapters, he argued for the good to be got from women's emancipation. The greatest direct benefit being the greater happiness through liberty, of one half of the human race. As Member of Parliament in 1856, Mill was the political voice of the then recently organised *"British Women's Suffrage Movement"*. His amendment to the *1867 Reform Bill*, provoked the first parliamentary debate on votes for women. He later went on to argue the case for women's social equality. The result of all this, *was "The Married Women's Property Acts"* of 1870 and 1874. These Acts loosened the husband's grip on his wife's person and property, which he had prior to 1857, by granting to the wife, the right of "property in any personal gain made since marriage, investments made with produce of her work, and all bequests." A later Act, 1882, allowed her to keep the entire property acquired before or after marriage. These and many other Parliamentary Acts passed over the years, helped to improve the general condition of women. But the granting of suffrage to women was still disallowed. And this became a symbol of equality. Serious efforts to obtain this right began in London in 1867, with the founding of the *"National Society for Women's Suffrage"*, which evolved by 1900, into *the "National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies"*. From 1870 onwards, Women's Suffrage Bill became an annual feature till the right to vote was won in the next century.

CONCLUSION

Thus it can be seen that society's attitudes towards women and their status, was profoundly affected by the writers of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. This important section of society was very influential in bringing shout awareness and then change. It was left to the writers of the new century such as Ibsen, Pinero, Shaw, Woolf etc. to carry on and complete women's quest.

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