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The Role Of Women In The Victorian Era

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Abstract

The Victorian era (1837–1901) represents a crucial phase in the social and cultural history of Britain, particularly with regard to the position and role of women. Characterized by rigid moral codes, patriarchal family structures, and clearly demarcated gender roles, Victorian society largely confined women to the domestic sphere. Women were expected to embody ideals of purity, submission, and self-sacrifice, while legal, educational, and economic systems reinforced their dependence on men. At the same time, the period witnessed profound social changes brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and intellectual movements, which gradually challenged traditional norms. Victorian literature emerged as a powerful medium for examining women's lived experiences, revealing both their oppression and their resistance. Novelists and poets such as Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Charles Dickens portrayed female characters struggling against restrictive conventions and seeking autonomy, education, and self-worth. This paper explores the multifaceted role of women in the Victorian era by examining social expectations, domestic responsibilities, legal and economic limitations, educational opportunities, and literary representations. It also traces the gradual emergence of female consciousness and early feminist thought, culminating in the figure of the 'New Woman' toward the end of the century. Through a socio-literary analysis, the paper argues that while Victorian women were constrained by patriarchy, the era laid the foundation for women's emancipation and modern feminist discourse. The era was characterized by the doctrine of separate spheres, which dictated that men belonged to the public world of business and politics, while women were relegated to the private world of home and family. The "Angel In the House": Based on Coventry Patmore's poem, this ideal portrayed women as selfless, submissive, and pure. The Household General: In more affluent homes, women acted as "commanders" of their

households, responsible for managing servants, budgeting, and organizing social events to benefit their husband's careers.

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Women's lives during the Victorian era were shaped by class, marital status, and social expectations. Middle- and upper-class women were expected to remain within the domestic domain, while working-class women often labored under harsh conditions to support their families. The legal system, education policies, and cultural norms reinforced women's subordinate position. Yet, beneath this apparent stability, tensions were brewing. Women increasingly questioned their restricted roles, and writers began to challenge traditional ideals through literature. This paper seeks to analyze the role of women in the Victorian era by exploring their social status, domestic responsibilities, education, employment, legal rights, and representation in literature. It also examines how Victorian women gradually moved toward self-awareness and empowerment. Victorian English literature for women featured pioneering female authors like the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, who challenged societal norms by writing novels (e.g., Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Middlemarch) that explored female autonomy, class, gender roles, and social reform, often using male pseudonyms to be published, establishing a powerful tradition of women's voices in challenging patriarchy and shaping feminist literature.

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So, whilst women had no rights to sue, vote or own property, they were able to work. But for the upper-middle class, many women never worked outside the home. Women were expected to live up to the image of 'the angel in the house.' In other words, be the perfect wife and mother. Despite the strict stereotypes set in Victorian society, the first signs of a feminist political movement began in this era. By the 1850s, this first feminist movement focused on equality in education, work and having electoral rights, like the right to vote. However, Queen Victoria did not support the feminist movement – despite being a powerful monarch in her own right. She called feminism a 'wicked folly,' suggesting that 'God created men and women differently- then let them remain each in their own position. 'This movement did not make significant legal gains for women, but things had heated up by the first decades of the 20th century. But we must not forget that stereotypes established in the Victorian era lasted longer than the era itself – and many are still visible within some aspects of modern society. Victorian age is regarded as a very important period of English Literature. In this age all forms of literature developed like poetry, novel, essay etc. Many writers gave their unique contribution in making this age important. In this age, the long struggle of the Anglo- Saxons for personal liberty was settled and democracy was established.

'The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure war, and for conquest.. but the woman's power is for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is not

for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision… she must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise, wise not for self development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she man never fail from his side.'(John Ruskin, Sesame and Lilies, 1865, part II).In this quote, John Ruskin, an art critic and prominent social thinker, highlights how men and women were situated within society during the 19th century. The Victorian era can be attributed to the forming of strict gender ideals and stereotypes. Men and women were allocated specific roles which led men to hold more power over women, and therefore significantly disadvantaged during this era. Historians call this 'separate spheres,' and it means that a man's place was in the world of economics and business while a woman was a trophy of the home. Separate spheres worked alongside Darwin's theory, the 'Survival of the Fittest' which placed men higher on the evolutionary ladder. These constructions on gender meant that all aspects of society became gendered, including the world of work. In 1830, wives often assisted husbands in small businesses, but by the 1890s work and home were commonly separated. Men left domestic service, largely down to the shift from agricultural to heavy industrial work. It is calculated that whilst most men worked, only one third of all women were in employment at any time in the 19th century. Compare this with 1978 when two-thirds of women were in employment.

One of the most influential concepts shaping women's roles in the Victorian era was the ideal of womanhood often summarized by the phrase "Angel in the House," derived from Coventry Patmore's poem of the same name. This ideal presented women as morally pure, gentle, submissive, and devoted entirely to their families. A woman's primary duty was to create a peaceful and morally upright home, serving as a source of comfort for her husband and children. This idealization, however, masked the realities of women's limited agency. Women were praised for self-sacrifice and obedience, qualities that justified their exclusion from public life and decision-making. Intellectual ambition or assertiveness was often viewed as unfeminine and threatening to social order. The image of the ideal woman thus functioned as a tool of social control, reinforcing patriarchal values while appearing to elevate women morally.

The domestic sphere was considered the natural and proper domain for women. Marriage was central to a woman's identity, and remaining unmarried was often seen as a failure or misfortune. Wives were responsible for managing household affairs, supervising servants, raising children, and maintaining moral discipline within the family. Emotional labor was a crucial but

unacknowledged aspect of women's domestic role. Motherhood was particularly idealized, with women portrayed as natural caregivers responsible for shaping the character of future citizens. However, this ideal often placed immense pressure on women, who were expected to fulfill their duties without complaint. For many women, domestic life could be isolating and restrictive, especially when intellectual or creative aspirations were suppressed. Working-class women experienced a different reality. Economic necessity forced them to work in factories, mines, or as domestic servants, often under dangerous and exploitative conditions. Despite contributing significantly to the household income, these women still bore primary responsibility for domestic chores and childcare, resulting in a double burden of labor.

This movement did not make significant legal gains for women, but things had heated up by the first decades of the 20th century. But we must not forget that stereotypes established in the Victorian era lasted longer than the era itself – and many are still visible within some aspects of modern Class was both economic and cultural and encompassed income, occupation, education, family structure, sexual behavior, politics, and leisure activities. The working class, about 70 to 80 percent of the population, got its income from wages, with family incomes usually under £100 per annum. Many middle-class observers thought that working-class people imitated middle-class people as much as they could, but they were mistaken; working-class cultures (which varied by locality and other factors) were strong, specific, and premised on their own values. The middle class, which got its income (of £100 to £1,000 per annum) from salaries and profit, grew rapidly during the 19th century, from 15 to over 25 percent of the population. During the 19th century, members of the middle class were the moral leaders of society (they also achieved some political power). The very small and very wealthy upper class got its income (of £1,000 per annum or often much more) from property, rent, and interest. The upper class had titles, wealth, land, or all three; owned most of the land in Britain; and controlled local, national, and imperial politics.

Education for women in the Victorian era was limited and unequal. Middle- and upper-class girls were typically educated at home or in finishing schools, where the focus was on accomplishments such as music, drawing, needlework, and social etiquette. These skills were intended to make women attractive wives rather than independent thinkers. Access to higher education was extremely restricted. Universities largely excluded women until the latter half of the nineteenth century, when institutions such as Gorton crc College, Cambridge, and Lady

Margaret Hall, Oxford, began admitting female students. Even then, women faced resistance and were often denied degrees. Despite these barriers, many women pursued self-education through reading and writing. Female authors used literature as a means of intellectual expression and social critique. The gradual expansion of educational opportunities played a crucial role in raising women's consciousness and challenging traditional gender roles. Famous Victorian women included pioneers like Florence Nightingale (nursing), Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (medicine), and Ada Lovelace (computing), alongside influential writers such as the Bronte sisters, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and activists like Emmeline Pankhurst, who fought for women's suffrage, demonstrating significant advancements in healthcare, literature, science, and social reform despite era challenges.

Economic dependence was a defining feature of women's lives in the Victorian era. Middle- and upper-class women were discouraged from seeking paid employment, as work was seen as incompatible with femininity. Acceptable professions were limited to teaching, governess, nursing, and later clerical work, all of which were poorly paid and offered little security. Working-class women had greater participation in the labor force but faced exploitation, long hours, and low wages. Employment in factories and workshops exposed women to physical hardship and social stigma. Regardless of class, women's labor was undervalued, and economic independence remained elusive for most. Legally, women occupied a subordinate position in Victorian society. The doctrine of coverture dictated that a married woman's legal identity was absorbed into that of her husband. As a result, married women could not own property, control their earnings, or enter contracts independently. Divorce laws heavily favored men, and women had limited rights regarding child custody. Reforms such as the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 marked significant progress by granting married women control over their property and earnings. These legal changes reflected growing awareness of women's rights and laid the groundwork for future reforms. Victorian literature provides valuable insight into the condition of women and the social constraints they faced. Female characters often embody the tensions between duty and desire, conformity and rebellion. Writers such as Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell created complex female protagonists who challenged traditional norms. In*Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte presents a heroine who asserts her moral and emotional independence, demanding equality in love and marriage. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* explores the frustration of intelligent women like Dorothea Brooke, whose aspirations are

constrained by societal expectations. Elizabeth Gaskell's novels highlight the struggles of women within industrial and domestic settings. Male authors such as Charles Dickens also depicted women's suffering, though often within conventional moral frameworks. Literature thus became a site of both reinforcement and critique of gender role. By the late Victorian period, social and intellectual changes gave rise to the figure of the 'New Woman.' She was educated, independent, and increasingly vocal about her rights. The New Woman challenged traditional ideas of marriage, sexuality, and domesticity .Charlotte Bronte (Jane Eyre) and George Eliot used their writing to challenge social expectations and voice the desire for intellectual and personal autonomy.

English literature during the Victorian era is characterized by a shift from the imaginative idealism of Romanticism toward a more empirical and socially-conscious realism. This period is widely regarded as the "Golden Age of the Novel," driven by increased literacy and cheaper printing methods like serialization. Dominant as the most popular form, often published in three volumes ("three-deckers") or as serialized installments in magazines. Dramatic Monologue was a major poetic innovation popularized by Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson, where a fictional character addresses a silent audience. Genres like the sensation novel (e.g., The Woman in White) and continued Gothic traditions (e.g., Jane Eyre) explored mysteries and social taboos. The era "invented childhood" as a distinct life stage, producing classics like Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Treasure Island. Victorian era works on women explored rigid domestic ideals ("Angel in the House"), challenged them through "New Woman" fiction, and reflected social realities, featuring key texts like Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (moral strength), George Eliot's Middlemarch (complex female lives), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry (love and womanhood), and John Ruskin's "Of Queens' Gardens" (separate spheres doctrine). These works depict women confined by law and custom, yet also showcase emerging voices questioning marriage, property rights, and societal expectations. Queen Victoria: The monarch whose long reign defined the era, embodying duty and family. Florence Nightingale: Transformed nursing with hygiene standards, earning the "Lady with the Lamp" nickname. Emmeline Pankhurst: A leader in the fight for women's suffrage (the right to vote).Elizabeth Garrett Anderson: Britain's first woman doctor, overcoming significant opposition. Harriet Tubman: An abolitionist who led enslaved people to freedom via the Underground Railroad.

The Victorian Era can also be named as the era of “Paradox of Progress and Restriction”.The Victorian Era is defined by a striking discrepancy between the United Kingdom's rising global power and the restricted social conditions of its women. While often remembered for the domestic “Angel in the House” ideal, it was actually an era of profound transition where foundational changes began to take shape. The ideology of “separate spheres”—the public for men and the private for women—deeply molded the status of Victorian women through legal disabilities and double sexual standards. This domestic confinement was seen as a woman’s natural and divine duty, yet it created a restrictive environment that many women found burdensome.Despite these constraints, women exercised significant agency. They slowly increased their “scope of action” through collective movements and individual achievements in higher education and new professions. The latter half of the century saw the gradual dismantling of discriminatory laws, notably through the Married Women’s Property Acts (1870 and 1882), which began to recognize wives as separate legal entities rather than the property of their husbands.The era’s literature—produced by authors like the Brontë sisters and George Eliot—served as a crucial platform for questioning unfair traditions and paving the way for 20th-century feminist thought. By 1901, the emergence of the "New Woman" and the organized suffrage movement signaled that the foundation for modern women’s rights had been firmly established. “Ultimately, the Victorian Era’s complicated legacy for women is one of harsh structural limitations paired with the beginnings of radical change. By the end of the century, women had secured key legal rights, entered higher education in increasing numbers, and established the political momentum that would eventually win them the vote in the early 20th century. To understand this era is to see both the cage of Victorian domesticity and the individual and collective efforts that began to break it.”

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