

Revisiting Women novelists of the Victorian Era

Dr.Riazul Hoque, Associate Professor, Department of English, Rupahi College,
P.O. Rupahi, District. Nagaon, Assam- 782125

Article Received: 10/10/2022,

Article Accepted: 19/11/2022,

Published Online: 20/11/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.11.08

Abstract:

A galaxy of women novelists emerged in Victorian period. Beginning of the genre of novel was initially dominated by the male authors. Legacy of women writing novels was begun by Fanny Vurney. In the 18th century there were already some outstanding women novelists such as Mrs. Radcliffe, Maria Edgeworth and Susan Ferrier. But more and more women took interest in writing fiction in the 19th century. Jane Austen perhaps is the best woman novelist in the 18th as well as the 19th century women novelists of England. The women novelists of the Victorian Era are Mrs. Trollope, Mrs.Gore, Mrs. Marsh, Mrs. Henry Wood, Charlott Yonge, Mrs. Oliphant and a number of others. But the most important women novelists of the period are Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot. With the emergence of Bronte Sisters, the novels in the Victorian period reached its extra-miles. The main features of the novels of Charlotte Bronte are the note of intimacy, the note of passion and the note of revolt. Bronte sisters were not interested in the portrayal of social life; rather they chose to study the feminine heart and presented the women's point of view in their fiction. George Eliot was a rationalist and a philosopher. Mrs Elizabeth Gaskell used the novel as an instrument of social reform.

Keywords: victorian, features, feminine, portrayal, rationalist

The three Bronte sisters- Anne, Charlotte, and Emily—collectively known as the “stromy sisterhood”, who took the England of their time by storm, were in actual life shy and isolated girls with rather uneventful lives. They were daughters of a strict Irish person who made them lead a life of ‘the sternest self-repression’. Charlotte Bronte wrote four novels- *The Professor*, *Villette*, *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. The first two novels were based on her personal experiences at a boarding house where she most probably fell in love with a Belgian scholar. Charlotte Bronte in her novels revolted against the traditions of Jane Austen, Dickens and Thackeray. Her novels were the novels not of manners but of passions and the naked souls. Her characters, mostly the effusions of her own souls-

were the elemental figures acting in the backdrop of elemental nature. Devid Cecil mentions:

“Gone is the busy prosaic urban world with its complicated structure and its trivial motives, silenced the accents of everyday chatter, vanished are newspapers, fashions, business houses, duchesses, footmen, and snobs. Instead the gale rages under the elemental sky, while indoors, their faces rugged in the fierce firelight, austere figures of no clearly defined class of period declare eternal love and hate to one another in phares of stilted eloquence and staggering candour” (Cecil 87).

The three main characteristics of the novels of Charlotte Bronte are the note of intimacy, the note of passion and the note of revolt. The note of intimacy is caused by the markedly autobiographic slant of her novels. The note of passion is struck by a lonely sensitive woman on behalf of women. Her point of view of is the point of view of a woman. She had the soul of a primitive woman, leashed in by a few Victorian conventions, and she is always straining against the leash while upbraiding at herself for doing so. Though she did not fully or even appreciably revolt against social conventions, she at least revolted against the conventions of the novel.

The Bronte sisters provided the romantic note of imagination and passion to the English novel. Instead of concentrating of the depiction of the manners and customs of social life in a remote countryside, as was done by Jane Austen, they turned their gaze to the soul of their characters and presented in their novels powerful studies of souls in deep anguish. They were not interested in the portrayal of social life; rather they chose to study the feminine heart and presented the woman’s point of view in their fiction. They inaugurated a new conception of the heroine in English fiction, as a woman of vital strength and passionate feelings. Jane Eyre, Shirley Agnes are fine studies of feminine life and soul providing glimpses into the tortured and sufferingsouls of their respective heroines.

They depicted their experienced life within a narrow confine, but their excellent achievement was not hindered by narrow and limited experiences. Rther, it was impregnated with intensity. It was generally accepted that their novels were stale because same scenes, sights and same themes were repeated again and again. This allegation was countered by the presentation of passion and emotion in intensified form.

They were not much credited with the plot-construction. Their plots were ambiguous and formless and in many cases their ends were loose. They made up this shortcoming by their characterisation. They portrayed elemental characters; no one could forget their male or female characters. They created immortal characters like Shirley, Rochester, Jane Eyre in literature. These characters were depicted honestly and sincerely. Their area of domain was characterisation and obviously not plot-construction.

George Eliot was another dominating figure in Victorian period. S. Diana Neil said George Eliot *“stands at the gateway between the old novel and the new, no unworthy*

heir of Thackeray and Dickens and no unworthy forerunner of Hardy and Henry James” (Neil 89). She was known for presenting intellectual life. Her psychological insight into human motives and springs of action was deep and profound. English novel was intellectualized and she imported to it a moral fervour and ethical bias. She immortalized herself by *Silas Marner*, *Adam Bede*, *Middlemarch*, *Mill on the Floss* and *Romola*.

Eliot was basically a psychological novelist. David Cecil observed: “*She tried to pierce behind the show of things and to reveal the forces by which they are controlled*” (Cecil 103). Eliot was proved to be a philosophical thinker and a rationalist. She did not project novel not only as a source of entertainment but also as source of moral values. She developed her characters gradually. Regarding George Eliot’s novels, David Cecil opined:

“Her imagination is not a distorting glass like Dickens, vitalising her figures by accentuating their personal idiosyncrasies, nor is, like, Charlotte Brontes, a painted window suffusing them with the colour of her own live temperament; it is an X-ray, bringing them to life by the clearness with which she penetrates to the secret main spring of their actions” (Cecil 98).

George Eliot viewed the world from the view point of woman. Her women characters were more convincingly and truthfully drawn than the male characters. She created realistic characters in her novels. She was a master in mingling humour with pathos. David Cecil mentioned:

“Even at its brightest her humour is not exuberent. But within its limitations it is both individual and delightful. Intelligence gives it edge, good humour gives it glow; it sparkles over the comedy of rustic provincial life, a satire at once cool and mellow. Incisive and genial” (Cecil 67).

Eliot’s style was simple and lucid. She achieved fine naturalness by her command of the idioms of ordinary speech. Abundant description of country side is found in *The Mill on the Floss*. She was known for her serious concern for human problems. She was brilliant in revealing inner consciousness of her characters. Crompton-Rickett rightly stated: “*She was the first novelist to lay the stress wholly upon character rather than incident; to make her stories spiritual rather than physical dramas*” (Crompton-Rickett 57).

Victorian period produced Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell as an outstanding novelist for bringing social reform. She had to her credits *Wives and Daughters*, *North and South*, *Mary Barton* and *Sylvia’s Lovers*. The traits of her novels were sense of humour, deep sympathy, social consciousness. She made her novels readable and valuable by her true observation of Victorian society.

English novels found its enrichment by the contributions of Wmone novelists of Victorian era. The novel of this era was the result of high imagination and minute observation of the psyche of the society. The women novelists of this age primarily raised the women issues ranging from identity crisis, struggle of women, marginalization so on

and so forth. Bronte sisters were not interested in the portrayal of social life; rather they chose to study the feminine heart and presented the women's point of view in their fiction. George Eliot was a rationalist and a philosopher. She presented intellectual life. Her psychological insight into human motives and springs of action was deep and profound. English novel was intellectualized and she imported to it a moral fervour and ethical bias. Mrs Elizabeth Gaskell used the novel as an instrument of social reform.

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