

Transforming Femininity: Women's Experiences in Romantic and Victorian Ages

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Abstract

This study conducts a comparative analysis of women's conditions in the Romantic (1780-1830) and Victorian (1830-1901) eras. In this paper, we examine the social, cultural and economic factors that affect women's conditions in both eras. Through the critical examination of literary works and feminist theories, this research investigates the similarities and major differences between the two eras. This study tells about the patriarchal norms, employment opportunities for women's in both eras, social conventions for women's and also the limited education that constrained women's lives in those eras. The major differences that emerged in the Victorian era were the increased access to women's education, expanding employment opportunities for women's by paying less wages in comparison to men and emerging feminist movements. In this era, women's writers found a way to express their struggle and their real life experiences which they faced in their daily life in their works. The female writer's shared their own condition and their pain through their works. It is the better way for women's share their experiences, challenge societal norms and give way to the future feminist movements.

Keywords: *Victorian era, Romantic era, Women's condition, patriarchal norms, gender roles, women's suffrage.*

Introduction:

The Romantic period and Victorian period are two major periods in English literature. The Romantic period was an artistic and literary movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century. Victorian period is the period during the reign of Queen Victoria.

The Romantic period began around 1798 and lasted till 1837. Most of the writers of that time wrote on the political and economic atmosphere at the time heavily influenced and writers take inspiration from the French Revolution. There was lots of social change in this period, abolition of slavery became popular at that time and writers wrote about their own experiences. After the Agricultural Revolution, people moved to cities because the Industrial Revolution provided jobs and technologies that would spread in the 19th century. Romanticism is a reaction against the increasing industrialisation, people criticised the social and political norms, and they want the government to pay more attention towards nature also. Major writers of the Romantic era are William Wordsworth, St. Coleridge, P.B. Shelley, William Blake, etc. Women's writers are Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft, etc. Major works of that time are Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen, Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman by Mary Wollstonecraft.

The Victorian period began around 1837 and lasted until 1901. It was a transformative era in British history known for social, cultural and economic changes during the reign of Queen Victoria. This period was characterised by rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and technological advancement. That period saw a rise of the British empire, the expansion of education, and the emergence of new social classes. Women during the Victorian period faced severe social economic and political restrictions, limiting their autonomy, opportunities and basic human rights. The Victorian period had rigid social norms and laws which affected women's lives and restricted their personal freedom and opportunities for growth and development. Major writers of the Victorian era are Charles Dickens, the Bronte sisters,

Thomas Hardy, Robert Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson, etc. Major famous works that depict women's life in the Victorian era are Jane Eyre, Great Expectations and North and South.

Review of the literature:

The Romantic and Victorian eras, are begins from 1780 to 1901. This period shows the social, economic and cultural changes that had a major impact on women's lives. In these eras, the women's condition showed gradual improvement but societal attitudes remained restrictive. Women's writers challenged societal norms through their works and they wrote about women's suffrage at that time and what was the public opinion on those things.

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1866), essay "The Claims of Women" advocates for women's equal rights and challenges societal norms that restrict women's education and employment. In this essay, Anderson argues that women's intellectual capabilities are equal to men's and demands equal access to education including in universities and professional training. Anderson argues that women get equal opportunities and employment and pay as men are paid for their wages. Anderson counters arguments against women's suffrage and emphasizing women's capacity for rational thought, contributions to society and right to participate in governance as well.

Millicent Fawcett (1912), essay "Women's Suffrage" advocates that women's taxation without representation is unjust and that their property ownership and education make them valid for qualifying them for voting rights. Fawcett challenges traditional notions of women's roles and claims that women's suffrage will improve society's morality and give benefits to society also women are capable of rational thought and public responsibility.

Mary Wollstonecraft's (1792) work "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" argues for the equality of women's education and social rights. Wollstonecraft critiques the traditional view that women are inferior to men and that women's are only made for domestic roles. She asserts that women should also have access to equal opportunities as men women also have the same moral capabilities. Wollstonecraft critiques the patriarchal system for equal education, economic development, social and political representation and moral and intellectual autonomy for women.

Elizabeth Gaskell's (1848)work "Mary Barton" author tells about the inequalities faced by women in society and emphasises the importance of social change to improve the conditions for all, especially for women.

Objectives:

- To examine the social, economic and cultural factors that influenced women's lives during the Romantic and Victorian eras.
- To investigate the impact of industrialisation on women's experiences and opportunities.
- To analyse the representation of women in literature during Romantic and Victorian era.
- To compare and contrast the women's experiences from different social classes and backgrounds.
- To analyse the role of women in the family and household, including their relationships with men and other women.

Research Questions:

- I. What are the similarities and differences that existed between women's experiences in the Romantic and Victorian eras?
- II. How did the women's writers represent the women's experiences and challenge the patriarchal norms in their writings?
- III. What were the main reasons influencing women's access to education and employment during these periods?
- IV. How did the rise of industrialisation and urbanisation impact women's lives during the Romantic and Victorian eras?
- V. How did the male authors of the era represent women and femininity in their works?

Women's Experiences in Romantic and Victorian era:

The Romantic era was a time of great, cultural and economic change, but for women, it was a period of limited rights and restricted education. Women in The Romantic era have no right to vote and she doesn't have any rights on property and property rights are given to their husbands and father. And they have limited education rights. The ideal woman was seen as a devoted wife, mother, and homemaker. women relied on their husbands, fathers, or brothers for financial support. Mary Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen and Emily Bronte are notable woman writers of the Romantic era. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft seminal feminist text about women's education, equality, and human rights. This book is a perfect powerful critique of the social, cultural, and economic injustices faced by women in the late 18th century. In this work Wollstonecraft argues about equality and human rights she also challenges patriarchal society. She argues that women's virtue and mortality are essential for their own development and for the well-being of society. In Mary Shelley's Frankenstein women's lives are totally controlled by men and women are expected to prioritize domestic work. Shelley challenged societal norms in this work and also the injustice that happens to women shown in this work is that women get lower wages in comparison to men and already women faced health issues they had a risk of death at the time of childbirth. For example, Elizabeth Lavenza, Victor's adopted sister and later fiancé, has no say in her own marriage or future. Also, Caroline and Victor's mother is depicted as a devoted wife and mother but her life is short due to childbirth complications. In Jane Austen's work Pride and Prejudice, in this work Austen challenges societal expectations and limited options for women. Austen promotes women's independence, education and autonomy through the characters like Elizabeth. Austen shows social restrictions for women in her work, she wrote about the women needed to marry for financial stability and social status and women's financial security relied on their husbands or fathers. Like, Elizabeth Bennet, faces pressure to get married for financial security, but resists societal expectations and also, Charlotte Lucas, marries Mr. Collins for financial stability, despite lacking love or respect.

In Victorian era named after Queen Victoria, was a time of significant social, economic, and cultural change in Britain. For women, this period was known for several restrictions, limited opportunities, and challenges to patriarchal norms. Women's social status was determined by their marital status, family background, and class. Women's access to education was limited, and women who worked outside the home were only allowed to do domestic service, teaching, or textile manufacturing. Marriage was seen as a woman's primary goal and they were pressured to marry for financial security. Women in the Victorian era faced significant social, cultural, and economic challenges. Women like Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Emmeline Pankhurst fought for women's rights, education, and equality, laying the groundwork for future feminist movements. Like, Florence Nightingale's Cassandra, it was written in 1852 but not until 1928 "Cassandra" is a personal and philosophical essay that was written during a period of frustration with societal expectations placed upon her. Nightingale challenges traditional notions of women's roles, arguing that they should be free to pursue their own interests and ambitions. In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh, in this work, Elizabeth Barrett Browning portrays the societal constraints faced by women in the Victorian era. The novel highlights the limited education and career opportunities, societal pressures to conform to traditional feminine roles, and economic dependence on men. This novel criticised the restrictive societal norms that stifle women's potential, emphasizing the need for women's rights, education, and equality.

Impact of Industrialization and Urbanization on Women's Lives during the Romantic and Victorian Eras:

The Romantic (1780-1830) and Victorian (1837-1901) eras witnessed many transformations in women's lives due to the rise of industrialisation and urbanization. Women moved from rural to cities, seeking employment in textile mills, factories and domestic services. Women faced long working hours, low wages and poor working conditions which exhausted them mentally and physically. Urbanization led to changes in social roles, with women taking on new responsibilities, such as managing households and caring for families in urban environments. Urbanization and Industrialization altered family structures, with women taking on new roles and responsibilities. Women's participation in the workforce led to increased economic independence but also exposed them to poverty. The social and economic changes brought about by industrialization and urbanization contributed to the emergence of feminist movements, which sought to address women's rights and equality. Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, and Elizabeth Gaskell wrote about the challenges and opportunities faced by women during this period highlighting the need for social reform and women's empowerment.

Representation of Women and Femininity by Male Authors in the Romantic and Victorian Eras:

Male authors of the Romantic and Victorian eras represented women and femininity in complex and multifaceted ways, reflecting the societal norms and biases of their time. In the Romantic era (1780-1830) William Wordsworth's "The Prelude" (1805), Wordsworth portrays women as gentle, nurturing, and domestic, emphasizing their roles in shaping the poet's own identity. In Lord Byron's "Don Juan" (1819-1824) Byron's female characters are often depicted as beautiful, passionate, and morally ambiguous, reflecting the societal double standards of the time. In the Victorian era (1837-1901) Charles Dickens "Oliver Twist" Dickens female characters, such as Nancy and Rose Maylie, are often depicted as vulnerable, virtuous, and self-sacrificing, reflecting the societal expectations of women during this period. In Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" (1891), Hardy's depiction of Tess Durbeyfield critiques the societal double standards and moral hypocrisy that constrained women's lives during the Victorian era.

CONCLUSION:

The Romantic and Victorian eras, spanning from the late 18th to the early 20th century, were known for social, economic, and cultural changes that profoundly impacted women's lives. Women's lives were dictated by patriarchal expectations, limiting their education, employment, and personal autonomy. Women writers and activists challenged societal norms, advocating for women's rights, education, and equality. Male authors' portrayals of women and femininity were complex and often contradictory, reflecting both idealized and restrictive views of women's roles. Romantic and Victorian era are the founders of the feminist movement held at that time, and the major difference in both eras women's lives was the in Romantic era women's conditions were worse than in the comparison of the Victorian era. In the Victorian era, women's lives were a little bit better than Romantic era.

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