

Suppression and Subordination of Victorian Women in the light of 'David Copperfield' and 'Oliver Twist'

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ABSTRACT

"You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women"

-Jawaharlal Nehru

Gender disparity is an evil which still plagues the society. Women have been marked by patriarchal stereotypes as inferior to men. Here, the primary barrier to the growth and expansion of women is patriarchy. British women of Victorian era were extremely suppressed by male dominance. Victorians considered patriarchy as something mandatory. Here women were expected to be subservient to men and dedicated wives and mothers. They were supposed to be fit for home only. Women have often been regarded as the backbone of society, but sexism and intervention have all restricted their abilities and expertise. Throughout the ages, women have faced injustice and still encounter the same modes of disregard. The paper focuses on gender inequality and injustice at both micro and macro levels to increase the understanding of the severity of the problem. At the same time it throws light on Dickens' views towards women. Female subordination is not something very new but it is found in all ages.

KEYWORDS:-*Suppression, Victimization, Fallen women*

Charles Dickens is one of the renowned novelists of the Victorian age whose novels are characterized by social problems. Women victimization is one of the predominant themes of Dickens' novels. Even though Dickens is not considered as a feminist, yet his consideration for his society's women equates him to the great feminist of his age. In the Victorian era all the social and legal laws were against the conditions of women. The Victorian ethos and patriarchal inequality victimized women. When women rejected the old social structures and the principles these institution reflected, they were excluded by society. Men want to control over women and decline to grant authority and power. The battle between victims and victimizers starts with the birth of human beings. Socially, it is clearly seen that powerful always victimize the powerless. The victimizer can be anyone, either an institution, beliefs or society's rules and conditions and the powerless is suppressed and is forced to remain silent. Throughout the life, the so called inferiors of the society experienced lots of pain, distress and mental torture. Victorian era was that era when society was identified with the conceptualization of gender discrimination. A women's life was circled around the world of family, marriage and motherhood. On the other hand male, being superior, controlled both the spheres of the world. Alfred Lord Tennyson's most famous lines are the best example to demonstrate the actual criteria of women:

Man for the field and women for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;

(Quoted from wikiquote)

It unfolds the idea of women as the obedient, silent servants of man causing women to sustain subjugation, suppression and exploitation as their fait accompli.

Females were not preferred for the intellectual capabilities, they were only associated with the wifely and motherly virtues. It was believed that their minds were only capable in handling out such homely work. They were the angles of the house. Due to the restricted circumstances they were not self-independent. A variety of restrictive codes, protocols, value system of society became the obstacles in their peace. But with the huge emergence of industrialization, the great number of women from poverty class might have changed ideology. Mechanism and industries were rapidly growing up, specifically in the field of textile trade. It invited a variety of jobs. Lack of money was the root cause of poverty and due to this poverty, women begun to move out of the house for work. It was very sad that they were paid less than men. Apart from this some of the other occupations were formulated to earn a livelihood for unmarried middle-class women like governess and some minor jobs, for doing these jobs they were not paid sufficient wages and even faced isolation within home.

Improper working conditions, inappropriate wages and underemployment were the trigger points to drive the numerous women in prostitution. Prostitution was the second most specific sphere of women. The first one was the pure household-ship and motherhood. Those who were not satisfied with this sphere, indulge themselves into prostitutes, crime, corruption and theft.

During that period, women who were able to maintain domestic standard, morality and purity were characterized as the angel in the house or the perfect woman. Marriage was one of the essential obligations of the Victorian women who want to preserve their chastity. Purity was distinguishing trait of the ideal middle class woman. Sexual purity was also something valuable for both men and women in that century. Open talk about sexuality was not a good thing but during that era it was seen only as a way of reproduction. As marriage was the essential for women but after getting marriage their body was used as men's authority. Before the amendment of married women's Property Act, women ought to tolerate the abuse and humiliation at the hands of their husbands. They were treated as a part of property of their husband. Eventually, during Victorian times women's individualism and equality have no place at all. They were limited to the sphere of the men. Lawrence Stone elucidates the legalized law about a married woman in his work Road to Divorce:

A married woman was the nearest approximation in a free society to a slave. Her person, her property both real and personal, her earnings and her children all passed on marriage into absolute control of her husband. The latter could use her sexually as and when he wished, and beat her (within reason) or conflict her to disobedience to any orders (Stone 13)

Generally, any woman that opposes Victorian Societies' narrow limits has been classified as a fallen woman. But it is found opposite in the perception of the angelic woman; they became fallen woman, if they would lose their purity and chastity through sexual transgression. There was a high rate of prostitution in the early nineteenth-century deemed as the noteworthy social problem of urban society. Even prostitution changes into a means of survival.

Marilyn Wood Hill describes, "In a society where women's status was tied to that of the man or whom she was dependent and a woman with no connection to a man was almost invariably at that bottom of the social scale, class became a function of the gender system. Prostitution was taken up by a relatively broad group of women"(2)

Those were sinful women and had no good place in society but it was Charles Dickens who started talking about thieves, criminals and prostitutes and emerged as a social reformer. Prostitutes were one of the main characteristics of his novels.

Suppression and Victimization of Women in David Copperfield and Oliver Twist:

The very first novel we are going to discuss here is David Copperfield. It is an autobiographical novel about the truth of Dickens' own complicated life. David loved his mother very much but his stepfather was a very hard hearted man. So he has great enmity for his step father. Apart from this Dickens depicted two different kinds of female subordination: the woman who is married according to the Victorian code and the woman who is labeled a fallen woman because outside the marital institute, she lost her purity. Being a social reformer he criticized the so called institution of marriage because failed marriages were forced to continue and divorce was also not acceptable in society. He highlighted the impact of a broken marriage that leads to psychological, and painful physical death. We find three broken marriages in David Copperfield; Dora and David, Clara and Murd stone and Betsey Trotwood and her husband: these were three broken marriage cases. In all cases women were suppressed by the society and patriarchal system. Clara was a survivor in the institution of marriage. When she understood Murd stone's real face, she had felt highly disappointed by his loveless and autocratic manner in his second marriage. She was commanded like a child and bitterly treated by her husband and her sister-in-law. They begin to take everything at home under their influence, including the emotions of Clara and the future of Copperfield. In David Copperfield Clara defends herself by saying that: "it is very hard that in your own house I may not have a word to say about domestic matters. I am sure I managed very well before we were married "(Dickens32).

She was treated unfairly by Victorian society's patriarchal system and sacrifices herself in a way that justifies her mistaken marriage choice. The suppressive manners of Murdstone make the things bitter and kill her positive spirit. Therefore, Clara was very disturbed and died just after giving birth to her second child. Her sister-in-law Jane Murdstone was a stone hearted lady who hardly emphasis on firmness. She humiliates Clara and her child David to diminish her identity and to make her powerless. Dickens explained Jane Murdstone's in human behavior as follow:

Now, Clara, my dear, I am come here, you know, to relieve you of all the trouble I can. You are much too pretty and thoughtless'- my mother blushed but laughed, and seemed not to dislike this character - to have any duties imposed upon you that can be undertaken by me. If you will be so good as give me your keys, my dear, I will attend to all this sort of thing in future (Dickens 64).

David observed her mother's emotional alienation when she had to control herself and face the tyranny of Murdstones. David Copperfield observed:

I never knew my mother afterwards to give an opinion on any matter, without first appealing to Miss Murdstone's, or without having first ascertained by some sure means, what Miss Murdstone's, opinion was, and I never saw Miss Murdstone's, when out of Temper (she was inform that way), move her hand towards her bag as if she were going to take out the keys and offer the resign them to my mother, without seeing that my mother was in terrible fright (Dickens 66).

David and Dora was another married couple of failed marriage. Their marriage was also the example of female victimization. At first David loves Dora excessively. Earlier he adores her beauty and never criticizes her shortcomings. Later he starts to analysis her deficiency in simple domestic affairs and pinpoints her weakness just to pretend himself intellectually superior. David became changed and not ready to accept Dora as she was. David like his father Mr. Murdstone tried to change his wife, Dora to his ideal women. His authoritative and over powering behavior makes Dora's life critical and she became ill like his mother Clara. Dora understands her inability to be an ideal wife therefore, she announced herself as David's child wife. She felt disregarded due to the ignorance. She was not like an angel in the house.

Another female character of David Copperfield is Betsey Trotwood, David's aunt. She was depicted as an independent woman having strong will to handle the difficulties of life. She was a very generous and kind hearted woman and always ready to help others. While in her character she was a strong sense of integrity and morality, in the institution of marriage she suffered immensely because divorce was taboo in those days. Betsey was a victim of restricted Victorian social taboos in the institution of marriage. Therefore, this is the only way to free herself. She chooses self-divorce as she suffered domestic violence in her marital life. She was mistreated by her husband and constantly beaten by him. Although they were separated by their mutual consent, she sends money to her husband. It made her confused, depressed, aggressive and hostile to the outer world. She was forced to pay money to him on account of legal right. It is remarked by Davidoff and Hall in their book, Family Fortunes:

At that period a separated wife was in an even more unfavorable position like the women starting a business to keep both her house and income intact and whose husband returns demanding funds from his wife, money which was his legal right (277).

Here we can see the extreme level of patriarchal attitudes in male centered Victorian society in England. These three women were the victims of male dominated society.

On the other hand we are going to analysis another novel Oliver Twist. In Oliver Twist gender discrimination is also prevalent. The story of the novel moves around an orphan boy named Oliver Twist. His mother died soon after giving birth to him and nobody knows about his father. But later it was revealed that he was the illegitimate child of Edwin Leeford and Agnes Fleming. The first nine years of his life were spent in workhouse where his life was full of hardship. After many years he travelled to London, without knowing what he would do. There he was confined by Fagin and taught him stealing the purse. Skies was the another criminal in that group. They both treated the children in a very derogatory way but there was a girl named Nancy was benevolent to Oliver. Meanwhile Nancy's own life was unhappy even she got merciless death by Skies. From this novel

we have two female characters who were extremely exploited by the male dominance. Agnes and Nancy were victimized as fallen women. In the Victorian society, women's social reputation is something very important. If women made sexual relationship outside of their marital status they were not acceptable. If they did such kind of activity, they became highlighted as fallen women and did not get any help from any one in their plightful situations. In this novel Agnes Fleming, was a daughter of a retired naval officer. She was victimized on account of her pregnancy without wedlock. Victorian society disregarded sexually active females. Agnes was symbolically represented nameless and having no identity at the very beginning of the novel. She was counted in prostitutes. Therefore she has no other way to continue her life as a good woman in that shameful life and she dies in loneliness as there was no resurrection for her action.

Mr. Leeford was forced to marry a woman ten years older than him, solely because of his economical standing and social ambition, so finally it was loveless union changed into disaster. Due to his inability to divorce legally, he started his adulterous affair with Agnes. Dickens strongly attacks divorce hysteria in the Victorian era and the effects of continuing loveless marriage. Loveless marriages changed into failure marriages which was one of the loudest components of women victimization. Until 1857 people had to carry their failed marriages because it was highly expensive to obtain the divorce and it was also against their reputation. Consequently females had to suffer alot. In the Victorian era, it was only female who could be vulnerable and errant. Men were not deemed vulnerable when they had adultery outside of marriage. We might claim Agnes victimization in male dominated culture that did not treat women and men fairly. It was Oliver's father who did wrong in the life of Agnes. Being married, he should not start affair with Agnes. Just because he was a man and unhappy in his marital life, should not start extra marital affairs.

After Agnes, Nancy is a second female character. She is a working class, parentless girl. She is Skies' mistress and works as a prostitute also. By nature she is very kind and take care Oliver as a surrogate mother, protects him from Fagin's gang. Though Nancy is described as a fallen woman, Dickens perfectly breaks the typical image of the fallen women by her description as a moral character:

“Society values gold and underrates brass, but brass has much more strength and practical use than does gold house, but a woman like Nancy is much stronger of character and provides more practical service” (Gold 53).

The above lines illustrate Nancy's vigorous and organized character. She is represented as a brass that is more practical than gold and more solid. Rose is another woman character in the novel. The meeting episode of Rose and Nancy clearly presents that both the girls hold the same purity and compassion. Both have the same feeling to save Oliver from a criminal life. Only the difference is their fortunes affected by different circumstances and environments. Nancy is a fallen women living in a world of poverty, suffering and misery but Rose is an angelic woman living in a world of prosperity, love and happiness. Though both were parentless, Nancy's life was full of misfortunes. She was brought up in a criminal world in the hands of Fagin and later Sikes. She has the brutal feelings of despair and frustration due the past year memories of physical and mental abuse in the hands of Fagin and Sikes. Nancy has been violated even in his illness; as she nurses and supports him sit down in the bed, “he muttered various curses on her awkwardness and struck her” (Dickens 331).

By comparing her to his dog, he treats her as less than human being. The death of Nancy is torturous and horribly traumatic, like the years of violence she spent with Sikes. Even in death, he dehumanizes her, washing out her facial features so that every sign of dignity is lost. Nancy asks him for mercy, but her appeal is refused by Sikes. Sikes used violently a cudgel rather than shooting her with the pistol, assaulting her till her facial expressions are distorted.

The housebreaker freed one arm and grasped his pistol. The certainty of immediate detection if he freed, flashed across his mind even in the midst of his fury, and he beat it twice with all the force he could summon, upon the upturned face that almost touched his own. She staggered and fell; nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead; (Dickens 398).

Nancy's childhood spent on the street with Sikes' suppression but she could not leave him because she had no family and no place to live. Sikes murdered Nancy and did not understand her feelings and emotions. According to the prevailing ideology of the 19th century, such woman couldn't ever regain their respectability, so death was the only option for her. In David Copperfield, we find Maratha and Little Emily in contrast to Nancy, as fallen women. Emily, an orphaned child was adopted by Mr. Peggotty, her uncle. She was a pure hearted and charming girl. She was inclined to materialistic and industrial society of Great Britain, which was the real cause of her fall. She was unhappy with her social status and wants to become a rich lady instead of the wife of fisherman. Due to her craving for better life and high social advancement makes her convinced to accept the false promises of James Steerforth, David's school friend. She left her family for him and seduced by him. She started to live with upper class boy James Street forth, but never accepted by his family because of her lower status. She was ambitious to be a wife of high level rank, but Mrs. Street forth hated her and told to Mr. Peggotty that:

“You cannot fail to know that she is far below him.... it is impossible such a marriage irretrievably blight my son's carrier and ruin his prospects. Nothing is more certain than that it never can take place and never will (Dickens 325).

Like Emily, Martha is a working class girl from Yarmouth and a fisherman's orphan daughter. Martha was a prostitute, hiding and living quietly, socially removed from society. Therefore, as she feels ashamed of living in the city, she decided to leave for London. Circumstances plays very crucial role in the subjugation. She wants to escape from these unfavorable circumstances but understood that she could not run away from this restricted Victorian society where she was never sanctioned for her sin. She has great depth of pain which expresses on the bank of Thames when she decided to commit suicide.

‘Oh, the river!’ she cried passionately. ‘Oh, the river!’... ‘I know it's like me!’ she exclaimed. ‘I know that I belong to it. I know that it's natural company of such as I am! It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it-and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable-and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled- and I feel that I must go with it’ I have never known what despair was, except in the tone of those words. I can't keep away from it. I can't forget it. It haunts me day and night. It's the only thing in all the world that I am fit for, or that's fit for me. Oh, the dreadful river!’ (Dickens643).

Though this is the description of river, it co-relates with the life of women. Allen concludes this by saying, “Dickens uses the filth of the river to define the moral corruption of the miserable woman. Dickens sets up an exact equation between Martha's tainted moral condition and the river's defiled

physical condition. In the passage, the figures of the sexually suspectswomen andthe river are used reflexively to describes and define each other’s degeneracy” (64).

Form the above passage, it is found that Martha was very much depressed and compared herself with the dreadful river. society would not accept the sex outside of marriage and women have to accept complete isolation and exclusion from their family and society. They could not start their pure new life due to the agony of restricted Victorian society. Her victimization tends to lead to her being exiled from the general populace, driving her into isolation, slum dwelling in poverty, and suicide. No one was empathized with fallen women in their worse situations.

Finally we can conclude that Dickens has elaborated all the female characters and their sufferings and situations according to the 19th century Victorian society. Through his writings he wanted to support the prostitutes and tried to change their conditions. They were in plightful situation that could not be empathized against the social norms of his society. His female characters are the true victims of society and circumstances. As a result, the goal of Dickens was to lift Victorian leader consciousness of the social ills as well as the moral decay of his time in the hope of change and reform. Women were repressed by both society and men. Even after their humiliation and suppression, they treat others with kindness and goodness. These were the prostitutes by profession but acquired high morality in their characters. Life made them fallen women but they did not forget to give love, care and support to others. They lead shameful life with a lot of suffering and pain but did not get emotional or economical support from a single one. It was their misfortune that they were the victims of society and forced to bear the pain. Dickens is a social reformer and being reformer it was his moral duty to support all kinds of people who were in pain.

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