



## THE PORTRAIT OF THE SPINSTER IN VICTORIAN NOVELS: A SOCIO – FEMINIST STUDY

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### Abstract

Social Feminism is a branch of feminism which highlights the meaning of class struggle in dealing with social inequalities. It considers closely how the domination of patriarchal figures create gender inequalities. It is based on Marx's class oppression theory mentioned in his communist Manifesto which argues that Capitalism is cause of oppressive structures. The paper applies this theory on some Victorian novels that deal with the image of spinsters, and their sufferings. The unmarried women suffer due to the patriarchal view of the society during that era. The need for the financial support, and to prove that they are wanted, makes the idea of gaining a husband a huge issue for them. The Victorian novelists often depict those spinsters as psychologically ill, mad or as mere objects. Some of those novelists suffered from spinsterhood or raised by a spinster which makes their novels semi-autobiographical. The paper sheds light on the works of William Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte, and Charles Dickens'. Those novelists show how women are mistreated in a patriarchal when they try to shape their identity which seems to be incomplete without the existence of a man. Nevertheless; society does not give them any other option.

### Keywords:

humiliation,  
patriarchal,  
social feminism,  
spinster,  
victorian women

“An old maid's life must doubtless be void and vapid, her heart strained and Empty”

(Frances)

### Introduction

Feminist sociological theory is a study that deals with gender and power within a society. The theory considers that society is based on inequalities between men and women, and defines gender in its relation to power. In general, the theory's concern is with race, sexuality, economic status and race. (Conley, 2017)

The ideology of the Victorian society regards that the perfect place for a woman is home and family. And the best who managed to describe that situation is Alfred lord Tennyson in his poem The Princess (1847) he says:

Man for field and woman 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;  
All else confused. (lines 437-441)

So her main role before marriage is to learn how to be a good housewife; through cleaning, knitting, washing, & cooking. After marriage they are expected to take part in their husband's interests and business (Copenhaver, 2002). The best choice for Victorian women was to get married in a better social position; otherwise their life is considered incomplete without that marriage. They were projected to be good wives and mothers. The biggest responsibility for a woman is to be skilful and rich to afford the expenses of dowry, otherwise gaining a proper husband would be a difficult issue. Who did not have the luck to be married, she was going to be called a 'spinster' a term intended to despise her. Victorian authors presented those women through the eyes of her people, as Komar (2018) states in her article "A women alone in public was taboo, and then came Macy's" states:

.....The departure of woman from her natural sphere to an artificial one involves a brain struggle which is deleterious to the virility of the race... it has very direct bearings upon the increase of nervous instability (p. 10).

### **Literature Review**

Spinsters as tragic figures were not given a due attention most of the previous studies that have dealt with the question of women in Victorian literature.

Anne Stiles in her article "The Contribution of Freud's theories to the Literary analysis of two Victorian Novels: Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre", Giuseppe Giordane, discusses the three parts of the structure of the human mind (Id, Ego, Super-ego) and also the concept of the Oedipus Complex to analyse the motives of the main characters of the novels. There is also the reference to the analysis of dreams and sexuality. The writer adopts a psycho analytic approach to discuss Freud's ideas (Academic Journals, 2020).

Similarly, in her article "The Psychology of Reading and the Victorian novel", Debra Gettelman sheds lights on the psychology of the Victorian reader and how they used the text introspectively to probe the inner workings of their minds in relation of the social practices of their time (Literature Compass, 2012).

In an article entitled "Victorian psychology and the Novel", Anne Stiles sheds light on the neurochemical impulses that began shaping the human behaviour due to the materialistic shift which began increasingly felt following the 1870.

In her book *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel*, (2010) Deborah Wynne sheds light on the property acts concerning married women during the patriarchal control and how they were designed to protect men's interests.

In *Medical women and Victorian Fiction*, (2005) Kristine Swenson, speaks about the new role the Victorian women began taking represented by the characters of the doctors and nurses and the reception of the Victorian People.

There is an also an M.A thesis entitled *Victorian Women and Their Working Roles* submitted by Kara L. Barrett to the State University of Buffalo State College (2013) the thesis shows how Victorian Women were forced to work in Places outside the household.

There is a dissertation entitled, *The Fallen Women and the British Empire in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2015) submitted to Georgia State University Ellen Stockstill, sheds light on the idea of sexuality and patriarchy and the empire.

### **Methodology**

Social feminism as a feminist movement, tries to activate social rights and housings for women. At the beginning, the movement used to deal with social problems concerning children beside women and they believe that voting is mainly a way to accomplish their

reformation aims rather than a prime aim in itself. After women achieved their voting right, social feminism sustained in the form of labour feminists who asked for protective law and special regulation for women. The term is commonly used, though some of the historians have suspect its reliability. Social feminists accept the challenge of changing the previous existing of political, economic and cultural structures and to give a second thought for more fair and equal societies (Meer, 2013).

Socio-Feminist theory is a primary division of sociology that presents the struggle between men and women. Clearly, women are plagued by various social traditions. To adapt this theory, it means to highlight these social problems that women have experienced. Some of those social problems include, sex, gender role, inequality, stereotypes & discrimination. By applying this theory one can see how, authors illustrate the suffering of those women during the Victorian age and how men put them in a certain frame of domination, oppression and exploitation (Bates, 2016).

## Findings & Discussion

### Spinsters or (old Maids) in Victorian England

Women were frowned upon to work or find a job during the Victorian age, since she needed to be supported financially or someone should take care of her. Marriage in this case would be the suitable choice for her. The best image for a woman during the Victorian period is to be a "... submissive wife, whose reason for being [was] to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household" (Casas, 2016, p.4). If a woman reached a certain age without marriage the term 'spinster' was applied to her, which was a derogatory means something wrong with a lady for not getting married (Fekih, 2016). During that time 'spinsterhood' was considered a curse for women. The prime purpose of any Victorian woman in any class she belonged to, was to have a suitable marriage. As for the marriage it was not necessary to be happy, for the idea of being married was, the crown of joy for any women's life, it is why they were born for. A woman who could not marry became a 'spinster' or, an old maid (maiden aunt), a figure of scorn and pity (Neubauer, 2015).

The Victorians had a large number of unmarried women, after the 1851 a Survey showed that there were about 1.5 million spinsters, aged between (Twenty and Forty years old), and 350.000 old maids over Forty years old. Although, more males were born than females, yet, males were more expected to die than females in early childhood (Barak, 2014).

Men emigrated to the old and new commonwealth, America, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, India, and other places of the British Empire (Harper, 2022). The rate of one woman to three men emigrate, which effects the ration of population besides men also served abroad either a soldiers or colonial administrators, furthermore, middle class men would prefer not to marry at early age. Actually, the middle and upper class men average of marriage was thirty between 1840 and 1870. However, at the age of thirty, a woman was definitely at the verge of spinsterhood (Blake, 2015).

The best decent form of service for a Victorian spinster of the middle or upper class would be a teacher, a governess, or a companion. For some huge families, they prefer to keep their daughters unmarried at home to care for them in their old age (Nora, Sellei & June Waudby, 2011). Though sometimes those women have no choice to get married, they stay single at home was considered incomplete because she failed to be a wife and a mother which is considered her primary duty. During the Victorian age in England, Women who do not get

married, they live in their parents' house first, and when their parents die they go to their nephew's or siblings' house. Those spinsters really do their best in acting as a second mother taking care of their siblings or her sibling's kids and being unpaid housekeeper, yet, they were underestimated (Wallace, 2018).

A wife had no independent legal status from her husband prior to the Married Woman's Property Act of 1868, and she could only own property if her husband gave her permission to do so. However, a married woman had social standing and respect that her unmarried sister would inevitably find difficult to obtain. One could feel pity and contempt for a particular spinster or old maid. Spinsters were perceived as redundant and harmful to society as a whole. There was in fact a widespread belief that women should not be celibate, despite the fact that it was rarely brought up. Of course, by social standards, an old maid or a spinster was a virgin (Thomas, 2022). In addition to financial instability and reliance on male family members, being a spinster meant that a woman was unable to arrange for her own marriage (Shafiq, 2021).

### **Spinsterhood in Victorian Novel**

Generally speaking, in Victorian novels, spinsters are usually portrayed as queer and sinister. Spinsters are depicted as disgraced and seen as desperate, withered up and failures. In those novels we have a lot of spinster characters who have these qualities; William Makepeace Thackeray's character 'Jane Osborne', in *Vanity Fair* is one of the best examples. Her sister, Maria Osborne, who has been successful in marriage, corrects her sister; even though she serves as her father's unpaid housekeeper, he is unpleasant to Jane directly.

Bronte's sisters often wrote about unmarried women in their books. None of the three novelists got married, and they were raised by unmarried spinster aunt, after their mother's death who died early and left them young. Charlotte Bronte refused four proposals for she refused to marry anyone who do not regard her intellectually equal. Thackeray describes Charlotte Bronte as, "noble hearted longing to mate itself and destined to wither away into old maidenhood" (Miller, 2005, p. 45).

In Charlotte Bronte's second book *Shirley*, illustrate a clear example of the difficulties and suffering that women face during the Victorian age in England. Caroine Helstone, one of the main characters, in that book, is the daughter of a missing mother and an abusive father. She lives with her clergyman. Caroline wastes away and is deprived emotionally. Caroline lacks the resources to locate a husband or a respectable means of support. Caroline, however, has the good fortune to wed her cousin Robert Moore at the book's conclusion and thus is able to leave her oppressed and burdened status behind. Shirley pins the idea that a spinster without a private home, makes her life an extraordinary tough one. Caroline, suffered a lot when being a spinster in her uncle's household (Miller, 2005).

From a Victorian perspective spinster women had to be obedient to men, dependent on them accept their inferior social state. Charlotte Bronte, for example, in *Shirley* says: "A Lover masculine so disappointed can speak and urge explanation: a lover feminine can say nothing; if she did the result would be shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery" (Miller, 2005, p. 48). Jane Eyre; the heroine, holds a sense of pride and self-respect, a pledge to honesty and norms, a trust in God and a passionate nature. Jane have to learn to balance the regularly incompatible aspects of her in order to find satisfaction. She is undeniably a mask to Charlotte Bronte, or part of her. The autobiographical quality is intensified by the first person narrative, and by the close investigation of Jane's motives and states of mind (Bernard, 2009). Jane since childhood is an orphan, she feels expatriate at the opening of the story, and receives bad behaviour from her aunt Reed and her cousins whom intensifies her sense of

alienation. She fears that she will never find a real home or a sense of accepting, Jane wants desperately to fit somewhere. This desire, intensifies her need for autonomy and freedom. "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free Human being with an independent will" (Jane Eyre, 2014, p. 268).

Seeking freedom, sacrificing dignity is never a choice for her over her feelings. She realizes that such freedom is actually an enslavement by being a mistress in Mr. Rochester's house:

.... They spoke almost as loud as feeling: And that clamored wildly. "oh, comply!" it said. "Think of his misery; think of his danger... soothe him; save him; love him; tell him you love him. And will be his. Who in the world cares for you? Or will be injured by what you do? Still indomitable was the reply: "I care for myself. The more solitary the more friendless, the more un-sustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times When there is no temptation: they are for such Moments as this, when body and should rise in mutiny against their rigor...They have a worth so I have always believed. (Jane Eyre, p.322)

Charlotte Bronte may have formed the story of Jane Eyre as an autobiography. Bronte just like her protagonist struggles to find equality between love and freedom and seeks who can appreciate her. Jane voices the author's reformist ideas on religion, social classes and gender. "I Care for myself. The more solitary the more friendless, the more un-sustained, I am, the more I will respect myself" (Jane Eyre, 2014, p.35).

In her novel, Charlotte Bronte then presents a different type of unmarried women. Despite the fact that people look down upon her, yet she imposes herself upon them. She gains respect and recognition. She has an independent and free character. Accordingly, her good qualities are recognized and therefore she is rewarded by marriage at the end of the story.

In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, the very title has different meaning from that of Bunyan's *Vanity Fair*. The Former, presents the world's activities as vanity because they lead to damnation. With Thackeray the word vanity and the whole concept of vanity undergoes a change in meaning. It is no longer hollow and valueless, it is merely the need to be thought well of the world. For such an idea, Thackeray, has become the cause of human behaviour (Jumeau, 2009).

In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, whom he called it a "novel without a hero" (Thackeray, 2013, p.ii). He illustrates characters who do not satisfy the features of a hero. One of the characters of the novel is a spinster called: Miss Matilda Crawley; the elderly favourite, wealthy aunt. She is Sir Pitt's unmarried half - sister who has a large fortune that she inherited from her mother. She sends her favourite, Rawdon, to Cambridge, and intends to prepare him as her heir. She hates Pitt, the milksop virtuous brother. Matilda is an old troublemaker, she likes to eat and drink a lot. All her eager relatives care about her wealth and health, they act as if they love her and like it when she visits them. Thackeray describes her, "no lady of fashion in London who would desert her friends more complacently as soon as she was tired of their society, and though few tired of them sooner, yet as long as her engagement lasted her attachment was prodigious" (*Vanity Fair*, 2013, p.160). Rawdon that time he marries Rebecca; he spoils his chances of inheritance. Mrs. Bute domineers and fools the old lady. Eventually, and through Lady Jane sweet behaviour, and the diplomacy Pitt's behaviour, they manage to inherit the majority of Miss Crawley's wealth. Rawdon is her beloved nephew and only heir until he decides to marry Becky. Miss Crawley likes Becky and keeps her around to entertain her with disgrace stories concerning unwise marriage of the family. A significant

part of the story deals with the determinations of the Crawleys to receive her heritage (Wang, 2017).

During the Victorian age, the gap between the rich and the poor increased significantly and the need for materialism and marketable success started to flourish that the society's moral issues started to decay. At that time, the poor were exploited for their labour, openly looked down upon. Such issues became harsher for women; women's role was narrowed and limited to domestic borders. Hence they were financially reliant on their fathers and husbands, accordingly, this led to "a commercialization of the institution of marriage" (Wang, 2017, p.454). Miss Crawley in *Vanity Fair* is an example of this. She is important not as a decent woman respected by the other members of her family. They look at her from a purely commercial point of view.

In Charles' Dickens panorama of characters, spinsters have also an important place. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, 'Fanny Squeers' is a 23 ugly girl; fears being socially outcast. There is also Miss Sarah Brass, who runs her brother's company which is referred to her in the story as the 'dragon', she keeps on rejecting Daniel Quilp's proposal to her. Another fascinating character is Miss Dartle who is so thin, with a scar on her lip, she is mostly argumentative and unfriendly (Hoffer, 2009).

Miss Havisham in *Great Expectation* (1861), is the best example of this sort. Charles Dickens usually depicts in his novels, spinsters and old maids as furious, dry, tedious or isolated. (Bloom, 2006). 'Miss Havisham' in *Great Expectations*, is a bride who experiences a love loss and rejection on her wedding day. The clock stops at the exact moment she was dumped, and she continues to live her life in her wedding dress, with one shoe on and the wedding cake left unfinished. Miss Havisham resides in a decaying castle, entitled 'Satis House', with her stays Estella, sharing her the miserable conditions and uses her to revenge from all men presenting in the character of the young protagonist Pip (Bloom, 2006).

Surely, the furious, merciless Miss Havisham, and the 'wealthy dowager' who lives in a decaying castle and wears a withered wedding dress everyday of her life, is not a convincing personality. She is surely one of the most unforgettable grotesque characters in the story: "...Yellow, trembling if I open the wardrobe the slewed mirror, full – length, her, myself who did this to me?" (*Great Expectation*, 2015, p. 6-9).

Miss Havisham is depicted as wearing her wedding dress for decades. It is yellowed and disgusting, her life evolves round one catastrophic day: her jilting by 'Compeyson' on her supposed to be the best day which is her wedding day. From that day and on, she insists never to excel beyond her heartbreak. She halts all the clocks in 'Satis House' at the time of being jilted which is twenty minutes to nine. When Pip first meets Miss Havisham he terrified by this experience. He observes every detail

It was when I stood before her avoiding her eyes, that I took note to  
The surrounding objects in detail, and saw that her watch had stopped at  
Twenty minutes to nine, and that a clock in the room has stopped at  
Twenty minutes to nine.

(*Great Expectation*, 2015, p.109)

Everything stops, from the moment when she learns that 'Compeyson' is gone. "When she was dressing for her marriage? At twenty minutes to nine? / At the hour and minute, at which she afterwards stopped all the clocks" (*Great Expectation*, 2015, p.148). She only has one shoe on because she hasn't yet put the other one on since learning of her fiancé's betrayal.

The marriage day was fixed, the wedding dresses were bought, the  
Wedding tour was planned out, the wedding guests were invited. The day  
Came, but not the bridegroom. He wrote her a letter...”

(Great Expectation, 2015, p.142)

Dickens delineates his spinster and her atmosphere in memorable clear prose. She is defined as ‘withered’ and of ‘skin and bone’; her clothing, although of fancy materials, has now turned pale. Pip compares the woman to a waxwork figure that he once seen at a fair, and sometimes see her as a skeleton which had been dug out of a dome: “now, wax –work and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me” (Great Expectation, 2015, p.57).

Though Miss. Havisham, the rich solitary is the adopted mother’ of Molly’s child ‘Estella’, she can be anything except for being a mother. She can hardly look after herself how about to raise a kid a lone by herself. She adopts ‘Estella’ and raises her in a way to avenge men. Miss. Havisham plays a significant role in Great Expectations, she expects Estella to follow blindly all her instructions and to progress a firm heart, not pathetic and fragile, so that she would not have to experience the same painful feelings. “so” said Estella, “I must be taken as I have been made the success is not mine, / The failure is not mine, but the two together make me.” (Great Expectation, 2015, p.356).

She is a sample of a shallow and revengeful women. Those who surrounds her really agonize a lot because of her vengeance. Estella is raised in away leading men to fall in love with her beauty and then she scorns them. Miss Havisham advises her, “Break their hearts, my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!” (Great Expectation, 2015, p.54). The consequences of Miss Havisham’s suppositions are long-running. Estella marries Bentley Drummle, causing an unhappy marriage, she learns how to be in love and give affection in the hard way.

Pip is also swayed by Miss Havisham’s prospects. His yearning for Estella, tortures for a long period of time. In fact, the highest reason Pip wants to become a ‘gentleman’ in the first place because he admires Estella, and dreadfully wants to transform the ‘coarse, common labouring boy’ into a polished well-to-do gentleman. Miss Havisham is unable to see how harsh she was to Pip and Estella, so she changes her mind at the conclusion of the story when she realizes how much pain she had caused Pip, which reminded her of her own heart: “Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand / What your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but I hope into a better shape. (Great Expectation, 2015, p. 243)

Instead of achieving avenge, she has only caused continuous agony. Miss Havisham directly pleads Pip for forgiveness, supporting the story’s theme that behaviour can be converted by regret and understanding. In Great Expectation, Dickens is not satirizing Miss Havisham but he attacks a whole community in all its complication and create a healthy atmosphere among the different components of the society (Bloom, 2006). Dickens is significant in his ability to sum up in a sentence every character, and yet, there is this wonderful feeling of human depth.

## Conclusion

The Victorian age, is characterised as the domestically conservative era, and Victorian novelists such as Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, and Thackeray, succeeded in portraying facts of life as they are. Perhaps one of the most significant themes of the literary trend is women's status as being a step lower on the scale created by patriarchal society. Those writers present an analysis of women's status realistically. Thus, it became a tendency for women to write under a man's penname called pseudonym, such as Mary Ann Evans under the pseudonym George Eliot. As women were under the 'reign' of men and their principles and estimations were not regarded as vital, there were instances in which women try to make a position for themselves to leave their prints in a challenge to be in the place which men occupied. Because of the low economic conditions of the English society, people of the middle class suffered a lot. Women were mostly affected by such bad condition. They could not find a respectable employment nor guarantee a good marriage. That is why the number of unmarried women was great during the Victorian time. Some of those spinsters were financially well but they suffered in their old age to be taken care of. Such situations happened in everyday life and novelists tried to reflect the suffering of their age by presenting such characters.

In short, being an old maid or a spinster in Victorian England was a terrible nightmare. There were for sure exclusions, but mostly spinsters were considered failures. According to the society, as a result of their inability to find love, they were pitied, perceived as a social threat, and labelled as odd as a group. Being a married woman could almost seem like a good bet when compared to this position. It is through the Feminist Social theory that the issue of gender inequality is illustrated as a result of capitalism and patriarchy in which men dominate. Matters such as power, the economic status of women, and the social structure of the community are the core of this theory.

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