

FEMININITY AND MISOGYNY IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY: ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Victorian females were subjugated, degraded and oppressed by the male and the contemporary society. They were to lead a materialistic life inside the four corners of their domicile. Only a few authors wrote on behalf of women in their literary works. To the end of the period, vociferous misogyny was still strong in both popular and intellectual writings- but as loudly as female inferiority was declared indisputable, women everywhere were representative otherwise. Rights and privileges of Victorian women were limited, and both single and married women had hardships and disadvantages they had to live with. Though aristocratic women could enjoy the opportunities, they surpassed the limit. Islam never supports any kind of deprivation or limitlessness. Victorian women had disadvantages both financially and sexually, enduring inequalities within their marriages and social standings, distinct differences in men and women's rights took place during this era providing men with more stable financial status and power over their homes and women. The purpose of the study is to show the picture of western femininity and misogyny in Victorian period in comparison to the Islamic ideals. The present study also reveals the righteousness of Victorian man and woman from the Islamic perspectives.

Keywords: *Victorian Misogyny, Spouse, Women's Rights, Justice, Al-Qur'an*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Victorian society was almost identical with the ideology of 'great men'- stupendous male personalities, whose features and life stories filled up all the important national places. Throughout the period, 'masculine' significances of audacity and endeavor shored up martial promotions and business growth. Women were allotted a secondary function, with endurance and altruism the prime womanly virtues. Motherhood was idealized, alongside virginal ingenuousness, but women were subject to pervasive defamation. Victorian Male were dominant and perverted mind. They just thought the women as the things to enjoy. They did not show proper respect to their family women even. Wives were not treated as respected and were not provided any privilege whether educational, familial or social. On the contrary Islam pays proper attention to women and reserves women's rights.

Malik ibn Huwayruth and a group of young men had come to live near Rasulallah sallallahu alayhi wa sallam to take knowledge from him. When they decided to return to their homes, Rasulallah sallallahu alayhi wa sallam told them "*Return home to your wives and children and stay with them. Teach them what you have learned and ask them to act upon it.*" [Sahih Al-Bukhari]

Marriages for Victorian women became contracts, one which was extremely difficult if not impossible to get out of during the Victorian era. Women's rights groups fought for equality and over time made strides to change rights and privileges, however, many Victorian women endured their husbands' control, cruelty targeted against their wives; including sexual aggression, verbal abuse and economic deprivation and were given no way out. While husbands participated in affairs with other women, wives endured infidelity as they had no right to divorce on these grounds and their divorce was considered to be a social taboo.

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2. OBJECTIVE

This work will reveal a comparative study among the presentations of women in Victorian literature and Islam. The principal objective is to bring out the place of Victorian women in the contemporary society in comparison to the Islamic viewpoints through this study.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research follows observation method with theoretical analysis. By using this method, different literary articles, critical compositions and journals, and websites information are gathered for related study materials, in order to be acknowledged in the related topics. The works of major Victorian poets are also dealt with to get the pictorial overview of the position of women in the Victorian society.

4. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Femininity means the quality of being female or womanliness. Femininity is a set of attributes, behaviors, and roles generally associated with girls and women. Misogyny is the hatred or dislike of women or girls. It can be manifested in copious ways, including sexual discrimination, belittling of women, violence against women, and sexual objectification of women. (wikipedia.org)

Abdul Hafeez Manraj (1998) says, tradition and culture are the fundamental parts of any society. None of the foremost world religions, including Islam, are free from cultural influences. In fact, our religion promotes the concept of unity in diversity. Allah says in the noble Qur'an that: "*He made us into nations and tribes, so that we may get to know one another, and not despise each other.*" [Al Quran 49:13, Sura Al-Hujurat]

The most common way to characterize a society at a given time is to divide it into social classes and evaluate the differences between each group. Victorian time witnessed such polarized gender roles that it can also be analyzed according to the different functions assigned to men and women, more commonly known as the ideology of separate spheres. According to Kent (1998), the separate spheres scaffold holds that "men possessed the capacity for reason, action, aggression, independence, and self-interest. Women inhabited a separate, private sphere, one suitable for the so called inherent qualities of femininity: emotion, passivity, submission, dependence, and selflessness, all derived, it was claimed persistently, from women's sexual and reproductive organization"

5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1. Struggle of Victorian Females According to Islamic Standpoints

Victorian women poets were engaged in processes of challenging, interrogating and reconstructing the Poetess Tradition. In doing so, these women asserted control over the construction of their identities as women writers. This contradicts the image unfortunately constructed by previous scholarship, where reclamation of Victorian women poets has depicted them as passive victims of culturally institutionalized oppression. Instead, many women poets devised and applied a complex amalgamation of poetic styles and methods to trouble the limitations placed upon them due to their gender. (Jenner, 2010) This is also the opposite view of Islam. Islam always gives emphasis on the equal rights to the women. But misogyny continued during the entire Victorian arena. The freedom granted by Islam for women carries a great responsibility. Women must educate themselves on their rights. Once they understand their rights, they must come together in order to obtain and reclaim their God-given rights and actively pursue the development of a fair and just community of believers.

Both men and women are equally encouraged to seek knowledge. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "*Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim.*" [Al-Bayhaqi and Ibn-Maja]

Also, great female Muslim Scholars existed at and around the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Some were from his family and others were his companions or their daughters. Prominent amongst them was Aisha radi Allahu anha, the wife of the Prophet (SM) through whom a quarter of the Islamic law has been transmitted. (iisna.com) Other females were great scholars of jurisprudence and had famous male scholars as their students.

‘A’isha radi Allahu anha used to praise women of the Ansar in the following words, “*How good were the women of the Ansar that they did not shy away from learning and understanding religious matters.*” [Muslim, Kitab al Hayd]

In terms of gender ideology, the succession of Victoria was something of a paradox. Conventionally, women were defined physically and intellectually as the ‘weaker’ sex, in all ways subordinate to male authority. (vam.ac.uk)

5.2. Victorian Misogyny Reflected in Contemporary Poetry

5.2.1. Viewpoints of Tennyson

Lord Alfred Tennyson is the most known Victorian poet who was orthodox and extremist to give the woman their proper rights. The relation between man and woman and the status of woman was a burning issue in the contemporary society of Victorian era. Though a group of people demanded women’s equality with men another group was in favor of traditional outlook that the spheres of activities of men were different from the spheres of activities of women. So there was no equality. Tennyson was a conservative in outlook. He was not in favor of any revolutionary change. He examined the matter in his long poem *The Princess*. In this poem he tried to show that the existing Victorian system should continue. He declared,

*“Man for the 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 confusion.” (Lines 427-431)*

5.2.2. Treatment of Women by Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold

The dramatic monologue form used by both Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold in their poems *My Last Duchess* and *The Forsaken Merman*, respectively, serves to remark upon the condition of a woman without physically introducing a female into the scene. Despite both poems taking place in domestic situations, inside a house and during childcare, no woman is physically present. This may represent a Victorian increase in male domesticity. (Lopez, 2014)

Browning’s dramatic monologue makes us understand the speaker’s character from what we can get a vivid picture of Victorian society. In “*Porphyria’s Lover*”, we find the psychology of the speaker. He is afraid that the blissful moment of love will pass away. So he kills his beloved. Yet he suffers no sense of guilt, as he says:

*“And all night long we have not stirred
And yet God has not said a word!”*

The murderer reminds us of the murder of the Duchess by the Duke in Browning’s “*My Last Duchess*” which is also a proof of male domination in the Victorian society. How viciously the Duke says:

*“I gave command
Then all smiles stopped together.”*

However, Porphyria’s lover is not as cruel as the Duke. He just wants to get his beloved permanently.

Arnold has imparted deep human feelings into the poem *The Forsaken Merman*. The theme suggests the emotions of love, disillusionment and frustration. The woman's desertion from the merman is like the desertion of faith. The Victorian man laments the disappearance of religious faith; the merman laments his wife's faithlessness. Eventually the woman is treated here as a betrayer.

5.3. Different Picture of the Aristocratic Ladies

In the aristocratic society, women supported the activities of male through household management and political entertaining. For women, there were rules about what kind of jewelry one should wear as well as when and where. Who to walk with, who to dance with, how and when to speak to a stranger, were all very critical knowledge. One of the major events in upper class society was the dance which was usually planned to correspond with the full moon. Every house had at least one servant. Dress materials were rich silks and velvets came into style, and a good deal of ornament such as feathers and jewelry was worn with such dresses. The most popular clothing in any period has always been of the type that distorts the figure the most. (Freeman, 1997)

5.4. Rights of Spouse

5.4.1. Islamic Viewpoints

The Prophet (peace be upon him) encouraged men to treat their spouses in the best way, "*The best among you is he who is best for his family. For my family, I am the best of all of you.*" [Ibn Majah, Sunan]

Again we find the directions to understand the dignity of women. The noble Quran [30:21] declares, "*And among His signs is that He created for you mates among yourselves that you may dwell in tranquility with them; and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts). Surely in that are Signs for those who reflect.*" [Sura Ar-Rum]

In the farewell pilgrimage Prophet Muhammad (sm) made a sermon where he gave his last advice to all Muslims, He said:

"O People, it is true that you have certain rights over your women, but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under God's trust and with His permission. If they abide by your right then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in kindness. Treat your women well and be kind to them, for they are your partners and committed helpers. It is your right and they do not make friends with anyone of whom you do not approve, as well as never to be unchaste."

From the marital standpoint, the Quran clearly indicates in Sura Ash-Shura [Al-Quran, 42:11] that marriage is not just an inevitable evil; marriage is not somebody getting married to his master or slave, but rather to his partner.

The Quran says,

"[He is] the Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves, And pairs among cattle: By his means does He multiply you: there is nothing whatever like unto him. And He is the one that Hears and sees."

In Islam, marriage is not just seen as a sacred covenant but as an equally advantageous contract between a man and a woman. The emphasis is given on, 'equally advantageous'. Men and women were created to provide solace for one another.

5.4.2. Victorian Standpoints

During the Victorian period, men and women searched for an ideal relationship based on the expectations of a demanding society. If a man or woman did not possess the qualities desired by the Victorian society, the opposite sex may have dismissed the person as an unsuitable mate. Oscar

Wilde examines the impact of Victorian society's unrealistic expectations on the individual in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, showing how rejection, whether from a potential partner or society as a whole, can lead to deceit and engaging in a double life in order to satisfy conventions. (Petrie, 2000)

The women of the Victorian society were supposed to have only one major function in life that was to get married and take part in their husbands' concerns and dealing. Before marriage, they would learn housewife skills such as weaving, cooking, washing, and cleaning, unless they were of a wealthy family. If they were wealthy, they did not always learn these tasks because their maids primarily took care of the household chores. Typically, women were also not allowed to be educated or gain knowledge outside of the home because it was a man's world. The famous critic, Richard D. Altick (1973) affirms, "a woman was inferior to a man in all ways except the unique one that counted most [to a man]: her femininity. Her place was in the home, on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs" (Altick, 54). Patriarchal society did not allow women to have the same privileges as men. Therefore, women were ascribed the more feminine duties of caring for the home and pursuing the outlets of feminine creativity.

5.5. Women's Inadequacy of Thoughts in Victorian Society

The anticipations of Victorian men had for women caused women to get ready for matrimony and gave women hardly any sovereignty. The men's prospects forced women to be the idyllic Victorian woman what society expected them to be. The women had to prepare themselves for what was to come of their lives and it determined their future. If a woman did not convene the hopes of the Victorian male, she would end up spouseless. So this is the limitation of thoughts of the Victorian woman. Petrie's (2000) article, "Victorian Women Expected to Be Idle and Ignorant," utters, "From infancy all girls who were born above the level of poverty had the dream of a successful marriage before their eyes, for by that alone was it possible for a woman to rise in the world" (Petrie 180). Because women were shorn of the opportunity to work or take part in a man's world, they spent their determining years in preparation for marriage. They expected the men to take care of them and provide for them since they were unable to provide for themselves.

5.6. Women's Rights in Islam

Allah says: "*And for women are rights over men, similar to those of men over women.* [Al-Quran 2:228, Sura Al-Baqara']

Men and women all descended from a single person - the Prophet Adam (A). Islam does not acknowledge for either of them anything but justice and kind treatment. The Almighty never separates man and woman. The following verses prove that reward is dependent upon one's actions and not one's gender. Gender does not play any part in how a person is rewarded and judged. He declares in the holy Quran [3:195] that, "*Never will I allow the loss of the work of any worker amongst you, male or female; you are of one another.*"

Mother is expected to have the utmost respect in Islam as the Prophet (sm) says, "*Be at your mother's feet and there is the Paradise.*" [Ibn Majah, Sunan]

That means the feet of mother is the heaven of her children. How beautifully Islam approves women as the superior in the role of an affectionate mom! But Victorian society treated women as the products to be consumed. If we compare Islamic viewpoints to Victorian society, we see that Islam offers justice between the sexes but Victorian society could not ensure the woman's rights. For example, Islam dismisses the idea that Eve is more to blame than Adam for eating from the forbidden tree. According to Islam, Adam and Eve both sinned, they both repented and God forgave them both. Victorian Society does not allow women to give their consent about marriage. Contrariwise, the approval and consent of the girl to marriage is a prerequisite for the validity

of marriage in Islam. She has the right to say yes or no. Husbands' and wives' duties are mutual responsibilities. The Quran says:

"Women have the same rights (in relation to their husbands) as are expected in all decency from them, while men stand a step above them." [Al Quran 2:228; Sura Al-Baqarah]

5.7. Ultimate Justice for Men and Women in Al-Quran

"Surely the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obedient men and the obedient women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women, and the humble men and the humble women; Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward." [Al Quran 33:35]

Abdullah bin Zam'a narrated [Sahih Bukhari, 132] that the Prophet said, *"None of you should flog his wife as he flogs a slave and then have sexual intercourse with her in the last part of the day."* Victorian men expected women to possess feminine qualities as well as virtuousness and innocence; otherwise, they would not be of marriage budding. (Petrie, 2000) Yet, the Victorian society women were the product to fulfill the lust of male individuals in most cases. They were just the entertaining subjects for the men of Victorian society! So, where the Creator Himself and His messenger give the righteousness of women with the men then it can be undoubtedly said that the Victorian society could not render the proper justice to all women.

6. CONCLUSION

Before Islam, women were considered shameful, female children were buried alive, prostitution was rampant, divorce was only in the hands of the husband, bequest was only for the strong, and oppression was widespread. Islam abolished these practices. In the Victorian era, aristocratic women enjoyed all the entertainments and common women were deprived of all privileges and opportunities. Islam does not second the openness of women or the restricted locked up condition of them. Islam always pays heed to the equal rights for the women as men usually get. In Victorian era, women were not granted respect, dignity and honor, let alone equal pay for equal work. Islam, however, regards women as precious and valuable, not to be disrespected or disgraced but to be honored.

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