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A Review of British Women Novelists

Dr. Khan S.A.
Dept. of English
Ankushrao Tope College,
Jalna.

According to Arthur Compton-Ricett: "partly through the exigencies of their historical development, partly because of their psychological characteristics, women….as poets, philosophers, historians,… have proved inferior to men; but in the art of fiction they can certainly claim equality, and they can do so….because by virtue of their femininity they bring into prose certain qualities in which they excel, and in which men are as a rule deficient."[1] This femininity lies the in subtlety rather than vigor of perception and intuitive insight into the delicate complexities.

The earliest Englishwoman to display these qualities was Aphra Behn. This spy-turned writer and the first female professional author of **The Forced Marriage** (1670) and **Oroonoco** (1688) was much glorified by Virginia Wolf. Wolf was of the opinion that all women should be grateful to Aphra Behn because it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. Other earlier women writers include Mrs. Manley (**New Atlantic**, 1709), Mrs. Hay wood (**Utopian Memoirs**), Miss Fielding (**David Simple** 1744), Frances Sheridan (**Memoirs of Miss Sidney Biddulph** 1761), Elizabeth Griffith (**The Delicate Distress** 1775), Sophia Lee (**The Recess** 1783), Clara Reeve (**The Old English Baron** 1777), and Mrs. Frances Brooke (**The Excursion** 1777, **Evelina** 1778, **Camilla** 1796, **The Wanderer** 1814).

Catherine Decker in her essay "Female Self-treatment: Preventive Medical Regimes, Piety, and the Novels of Elizabeth Hamilton, Frances Burney, and Elizabeth Helme" explains how certain eighteenth century women writers include the details of diet, exercise, and hygiene to suggest that the heroines attempt to acquire self-control and independence through them. Elizabeth Helme's heroine Louise in **Louise; or The Cottage on the Moor** (1787) kills a would-be rapist. She appears smeared with blood. How could she do it without being strong both in body and mind?

Ann Radcliffe's contribution in the development of the 'Gothic' fiction has been unanimously acknowledged. This writer of **The Castle of Athlin and Dunbayne** (1789) and

The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) has been praised by Scott for her 'natural description' and 'impressive narrative'. Emily of this novel has:

> …a capacity to act, a dangerous sensibility, an impulsive warm-heartedness and candor and a melancholy vein of nostalgic reflectiveness. She also has a true piety – but it is not based on a rigid sense of duty. This is an aspect of Mrs. Radcliff's 'Romanticism'. She sees dissipation and vice as often nothing more than the consequences of boredom from which a healthy interest in literature and arts can protect the sensitive soul.[2]

In Elizabeth Inchbald's novel **A Simple Story** (1791) a husband, Dorriforth, goes abroad to return only after three years. His long absence leads the wife to infidelity. He banishes the wife and the daughter, Matilda, permanently from his presence. The wife dies and the daughter is 'educated' and chastened properly according to the conventions. But Mrs. Inchbald is at pains to point out that Dorriforth's:

> repeated recourse to aloofness and outrage taciturnity as weapons of masculine domination, …make him at least as responsible as his ward for the failures of mutual understanding…. Mrs. Inchbald's study of the damage that rigidly insensitive masculinity can do is striking and discerning.[3]

Mary Hays' heroine in **Memories of Emma Courtney** (1796) falls in love with an unresponsive man. She openly confesses her love for him, breaking all the conventions of the time. To avoid legal consequences she even shows the readiness to be his mistress because she believes that:

> calamities flow from chastity having been considered as a sexual virtue…it is not nature but 'the barbarous and accursed laws of society' which deny women full independence and freedom of action.[4]

In Amelia Opie's novel **Adaline Mowbray** (1804) Adeline comes into contact with Fredric Glenmurrey who is a critique of marriage and propagates the pure union 'cemented by no ties but those of love and honor'. Adeline is attracted towards him and is proud of animating the noble ideals of her mentor. They have a mutual devotion but she realizes that:

> …in the eyes of respectable society, she is a fallen woman unfit for converse…new acquaintances drop them in horror when the truth

> reaches them. Adeline experiences the humiliation of discovering that she is assumed by men to be sexually available. …She is horrified to stumble upon a scene where an illegitimate child is mocked and shunned by other boys…her servant-maid ...regards her philosophy as a ticket to illicit liaisons.[5]

Mary Burton's novels **Self-control** (1811) and **Discipline** (1814) also deal with the lives of women, though in the conventional way. Ellen Perry's progress in **Discipline** is "….from a life of self-indulgence, in which personal enjoyment and especially satisfaction of her vanity take precedence over any duty or obligation to others, through bereavement, poverty, and experience of extreme brutality, to utter resignation of herself to God's will"[20] Nevertheless Mary Burton is no puritanical kill-joy. She writes:

> By some unto ward fate, the government of husbands generally falls into the hands of those who are not likely to bring the art into repute.[6]

Jane Austen is probably the most well-known of the early nineteenth century woman writers in England. Her novels **Sense and Sensibility** (1811), **Pride and Prejudice** (1813), **Mansfield Park** (1816), and **Emma** (1818) also deal with the lives of young women, their manners, motives, and marriages. The comments of Marion Shaw in this regard are worth noticing:

> essentially the substance of a young woman's writing in the pre-Victorian period was the story of a young woman's courtship, …(which in some cases, as in the novels of ….Jane Austen, was also an apprenticeship story in which the heroine's moral growth was a principal interest), and a woman's domestic behavior as maiden, wife or mother in respect of non-fiction….The significant development from this eighteenth century inheritance were the greater infusion into the love story of social commentary of a serious and more or less didactic nature, ….(thus) even when they remained content to write of the domestic sphere, or to endorse a traditional view of women's role, …this was done with a greater political awareness and sense of the potential alternatives.[7]

This can also be said, with equal justification, about Harriet Martineau. Her novel **Deerbrook** (1839) celebrates the traditional ideals of home, family, duty, submission, and

self-sacrifice. But it must be remembered that "when Harriet Martineau wrote, the case for women's moral dignity still had to be made and was one which she felt was historically necessary to their emancipation."[8]

Mrs. Gaskell's novel **Ruth** (1855) is also about the plight and long penance (leading to death) of a seduced girl and her illegitimate child. Here "modern reader will notice Mrs. Gaskell's implicit protest against the Victorian double standard of morality for men and women."[24] Frances Trollope's novel **Jessie Phillips** (1844) is a critique of the controversial Bastardy clause of the Poor Law, which placed no claim on the father of the illegitimate child. The Women's Movement became very prominent in England in 1850's due to the articles of women like Harriet Leigh and Barbara Leigh Smith. The tenor of the debates of these women is set by the novels like Charlotte Bronte's **Shirley** (1849) which:

> more than any previous novel …articulates male-female antagonisms, mistrust of marriage and yet also a fear of singleness…, The novel seems to be offering vindication of Harriet Taylor's statement that 'a numbers of women are wives and mothers only because there is no other occupation for their feelings or their activities'…[9]

Elizabeth Sewell's novel **The Experience of Life** (1843) seems to suggest that if one has financial independence, the single life may not necessarily be lonely and unblest. In George Eliot's novel **The Mill on the Floss** (1860) "The whole human background to Maggie's growth and development is one of seemingly impregnable solidity in defense of a limited system of values which Maggie's deepest urges would reject. But then she is a remarkable child, and …there is no one of her caliber in mind and spirit. Her two abortive love-affairs, scarcely offer the whole-hearted fulfillment which her emotionally starved nature craves."[10]

Olive Schreiner's **The Story of an African Farm** (1883) is a story of three children, Lyndall, Em, and Waldow. Lyndall (Schreiner) precedes the heroines and the writers like Mona Caird who believed that "dependence is the cruse of our marriages, our homes, and our children, who are born of women who are not free even to refuse to bear them."[28] Thus Lyndall heralds the era of the 'New Woman'. She is according to Elaine Showalter:

> is the first wholly serious feminist heroine in the English novel and her declaration in chapter 4 was as shocking and memorable in 1883 as the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft….. In her bitter analysis of

> the forces which make women frustrated devious, Lyndall (Schreiner) remained unequal until Simone de Beauvoir…..[11]

With the formal organization of women's suffrage movement the questions of vote and education for women and the fate of single women became more prominent social concerns during the 1860's.The varying responses to these issues are reflected in the attitudes of Frances power Cobbe, Margaret Oliphant, Mary E. Burton and Charllote M Young. However, Margaret Oliphant was critical of women's movement and even satirizes contemporary women novels as:

> about women driven wild with love for the men who leads them on to desperation …women who marry their grooms in fits of sexual passion; women who pray their lovers to carry them off from husbands and homes they hate; women…who give and receive burning kisses and frantic embraces, and live in a voluptuous dream….[12]

Lucilla, the heroine of the novel **Miss Marjoribanks** (1866) is a talented, learned girl. But she willingly accepts the life of conventional roles. Similarly, Mrs. Hampary Ward, like Eliza Lynn Linton, also believes that women should occupy their proper feminine sphere at home. The point is brought home by the life and career of Marcella Boyce in her novel **Marcella** (1894). She believes that the solution for the women's problems does not lie in remaining single or becoming political revolutionary. But at the same time she was "too acute a social observer and proselytizer not to realize that her novels must take account of women's changing life-styles and aspirations. Marriage must be shown as able to accommodate women's new ambitions, to be socially significant whilst still maintaining its traditional pattern."[13]

This can also be said of Margaret Oliphant. Although she upholds the conventional attitude of women's place, her later novel **Hester** (1883) implies that "the single woman is capable of a public life of dignity and power, marriage is not to be preferred above all other states, and women can look to each other for courage and affection."[14] Thus, although conventional women characters were still being created by women writers, and the restrained and sacrificial heroines still abound in their novels, a challenge, as Elaine Showalter points out, is found to the doctrine of renunciation and submission. Again the leaning towards conventional marriage and family, in some women writers, is itself symbolically a comment on the contemporary society which offered no other alternative for women's fulfillment and

development. Hence, there was growing realization that if the ideal marriage is not realizable:

> in its absence women must rely on their traditional strengths of patience, fortitude and sympathy for others, but also on the new strengths of interdependence and active service in the public world which Victorian feminism had encouraged them to develop.[15]

The important women novelists who carried the tradition of women's writing in England in the twentieth century include Virginia Wolf, Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Rebecca West, Storm Jameson, Elizabeth Bower, Rosamond Lehman, Edna O' Brine, Muriel Spark and others.

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