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Victorian Women Writers and the First Wave of Feminism

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Pranjal Kumar Pathak

M.A. English, Department of English, English and Foreign Languages University,  
Lucknow, U.P. India

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**Abstract:** This paper is an account of a study about the Victorian women writers and the first wave of feminism. An attempt is made to trace the various ideas and passions of the Victorian age and its close association with first wave feminism. This will enrich our understanding about the various reasons and sentiments behind it. This will also describe the feminism at the beginning of a phase, which later reaches its peak in the form of a concrete accomplishment. Simultaneously, we will look into the works of various male writers like J.S. Mill who argued in favor of social and legal equality between men and women.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Contentment, Education, Freedom, Independence, Liberation, Livelihood, Reformation.

**Introduction:** The first wave of feminism refers to the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in the western world. The first phase involved gaining basic legal rights for women. Politics and business were managed by men. Women were confined to household chores. Women were treated as property of their men companions. They did not have the right to separate from marriage or be given custody of their children.

Women who did work held low positions in offices. They worked largely in factories managed by men. Women were not given the right to vote. The first wave aimed at social reformation and liberation from patriarchy. The first wave is demarcated as officially beginning with signing of the ‘Declaration of Sentiments’<sup>1</sup> at Seneca Falls Convention<sup>2</sup>. Actually, it was the first women’s rights convention. Many people associated with the abolitionist movement were also feminists and hence the anti-slavery movement fuelled the first wave of feminism.

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<sup>1</sup> A Document signed in 1848 at the first women’s rights convention organized by women

<sup>2</sup> The first women’s rights convention advertised as a convention to discuss social and civil rights of women

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The National Women Suffrage Association<sup>3</sup> was formed in 1869. It aimed at the overall progress of women in society on the national stage. Support for the movement came from the Woman's Christian Temperance Union<sup>4</sup> in 1876, and it advocated against the sale and consumption of alcohol. Members of this union believed that allowing women entry into the public sphere would allow them to exercise a positive influence on the world.

Such movements brought suffrage and other rights for women. But at the same time it also showed the exclusion of black and colored women from the movement. Black women were not given the right to vote. The first wave marginalized black women. The National Association of Colored Women was founded in 1896, and it fought for black suffrage and raised awareness among black people.

The first wave of feminism set the stage for the second one, and it extended the struggle for equality to other sections of society. It laid the groundwork for future feminists and played a significant role in giving women basic legal rights.

**Major Women Writers:** Feminism in Victorian literature emphasizes on people and organizations that foreground the advancement of social, political and economic rights of women. Throughout the era, it was challenging for women to find a place and success in a male-dominated marketplace. Women who chose writing career faced social censure. It was difficult for them to gain achievement in social and professional networks. By the end of the nineteenth century, opportunities for women improved in the literary market.

Victorian women writers began their writing careers by publishing a novel or poetry collection in book form. Elizabeth Browning began her career by writing a Homeric epic *The Battle of Marathon*, which was printed by her father three years later. Christina Rossetti wrote her collection, *Verses: Dedicated to her mother*, which was published by her grandfather. Entry of such women writers into the literary field was made possible by their talent, which was authorized by patriarchal authority.

Margaret Oliphant began writing by her first novel *Christian Melville* at the age of sixteen. She came into writing almost by accident because she had no liking for needlework and had to secure occupation and amusement while caring for her mother during illness. She published her first novel, *Passages in the Life of Margaret Maitland*. She sold a serial novel,

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<sup>3</sup> Formed in 1869 to work for women's suffrage

<sup>4</sup> An organization of women devoted to social reform and was formed in 1873

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*Katie Stewart*, to Blackwood's Magazine. This led to her influential role as a regular reviewer for the magazine.

In 1838, Elizabeth Gaskell sent a travel sketch, "Clopton Hall," to William Howitt, who accepted it for publication in *Visits to Remarkable Places*. Howitt published her first fiction "*Life in Manchester: Libby Marsh's Three Eras*" in his journal. William Howitt presented her manuscript of *Mary Barton* to John Forster for its publication. Such intermediaries played an important role for women writers, especially for those who lived outside of published networks. Eliza Linton persuaded her father to give her financial assistance to spend a year in London while writing her first novel. She wrote *Azeth, the Egyptian* in 1847 and arranged its publication by Thomas Newby. Such examples show that publication in periodicals and newspapers played an important role in the literary careers of many women writers.

Women contributed their work anonymously or pseudonymously to many quarterlies and monthlies like Blackwood's Magazine, Quarterly Review and Westminster Review. Here, women could write on society, politics and other topics. It shows the extension of their scope beyond the traditional domain of women writing.

George Eliot's first published her prose writings in a local newspaper *The Coventry Herald and Observer*. Writing anonymously allowed women to get a comfortable entry into the publication world. There, such writers could experiment with various narrative styles and can persuade their audience.

Though women writers used pseudonyms as a means of avoiding stereotypes associated with women authorship, some did it with playfulness. The Brontë sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë, assumed gender-neutral names – Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell – so that they could persuade the publishers.

Harriet Martineau in her *Autobiography*, which was published in 1877, recounts a similar moment when she revealed her authorial identity to her brother. Her brother appreciated her writings and advised her to devote herself to it.

**Major Feminist Texts:** Sarah Grimké wrote *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* and the *Condition of Woman*. She argued that God had made all sexes equal. Men created women's inferior condition by denying them rights and opportunities. She insisted that female had the same rights as male, and they should be able to participate fully in education, work and politics.

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Traditionally, woman has been made a means to promote the welfare of man, without regard to her own happiness. By flattery, a man appeals to passions of women, he seeks access to her heart and when he has gained her affections, uses her as the instrument of his pleasure. He goes abroad, and his wife is condemned to engage in domestic duties which are necessary for the comfort of her lord and master. She further argued that men, in the exercise of their usurped dominion over women, have made women slaves of the creatures whom God designed to be their companions in every moral and intellectual improvement. Men use women as toys to amuse their hours of recreation. Men and women are equal. If women had not been depressed and degraded, history would have exhibited as many politicians and statesmen among women as among men. Man has asserted and assumed authority over woman. She entreats every woman to arise and plant on the platform of human rights with the man to whom they were designed to be equals, companions and helpers in every good work. If women felt their responsibility, it would add strength to their characters. The distinction insisted between male and female is absurd. Women should take their stand on the same platform with men and feel that they have same rights as men do.

Harriet Martineau published *On Marriage* in 1838. In this work she has exposed the inferior condition of women who were not protected by birth and wealth to the profligacy of men. People should mark that whether the wife is treated as an equal party in the agreement or not. In a country where women are brought up to be indulged wives, there is no hope or prospect for those who do not have wealth. In any society where the objects of life are as various and as freely open to women as to men, we may be sure of finding the greatest amount of domestic peace and purity. Society where there are means of independent occupation and responsible employment for women, domestic fidelity and enjoyment can be promised.

“*The Enfranchisement of Women*” was published by Harriet Taylor in 1851. She argues that women have always been denied common rights of citizenship and never had the opportunity to live according to their desires or nature. Due to the lack of liberty, women are mothers and wives only because there is no other option open to them. By alerting readers to such inconsistencies, she discloses the patriarchal organization of English society. Men like the existence of women ancillary to them. Current social orders mirror only the vested interests of men. She holds that only the individual is capable of deciding what is best for him or her. This is especially true of women who have been denied liberty of choices. Women are conditioned to meet cultural expectations about feminine behaviour. So men can pursue their interests at the expense of women. Women have been conditioned into self-denial and submission. She attacked the mystic and naturalistic justifications for the misery of women and

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slaves. She invited attention to the material causes of the subordination of women. She proved a progressive thinker whose observations like psychological effects of domestic violence on children and her proposed changes to British law were recognized later.

**Major Fiction Writings:** *Cassandra* was originally written as a short story by Florence Nightingale. Actually, it is like a protest against the restrictive life of women in Victorian English society. She writes about the emptiness of the lives of women. She describes that women were not allowed to enter professional careers or use their minds. Young Victorian women were oppressed by their families to the extent that such frustrations often cost the lives of women. She describes her own frustrations and struggles with depression in her teenage years.

*Villette* novel was published in 1853. It was written by Charlotte Bronte. It is noted for its acute tracing of protagonist Lucy's state of mind. This novel has a gothic setting. It explores the theme of isolation, displacement and subversion and their impact on the psyche of Lucy. It is marked as an exploration of gender roles and repression. The protagonist flees the unhappy life of England and starts afresh in cosmopolitan Villette. The jealousy and love that she finds there give Bronte's novel a psychological incisiveness that prompted Virginia Woolf, George Eliot and others to call it her finest work. This superb romantic novel is an exceptional example of the transformation of ordinary events into vivid art. The writer gives us a masterful portrait of Lucy Snowe who is a great literary heroine of the nineteenth century and appeal to modern readers.

*Jane Eyre* is another novel by Charlotte Bronte. It was published in 1847 under pen name "Currer Bell". It is a Bildungsroman<sup>5</sup> novel which depicts the heroine's growth to adulthood. It focuses on the protagonist's spiritual and moral development through the first-person narrative. Events and actions are coloured by a psychological intensity. This novel approaches the topics of sexuality, feminism and religion. Jane's actions are deeply rooted in her ethical and moral beliefs. The ability to make conscious lifestyle choices and plan for herself is feminist. Despite her moral character, she fails to free herself from oppressive and marriage-obsessed culture. In Victorian England, a woman's social position was closely related to her romantic relationships.

*The Tenant Of Wildfell Hall* is the final novel written by Anne Bronte. It was published under the pseudonym Acton Bell in 1848. The portrayal of Helen as courageous and independent

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<sup>5</sup> A novel which deals with a person's formative years or moral development

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emphasizes her capacity for seeking autonomy rather than submitting to male power. It defines the corrective role of women in relation to men. Helen escapes from her abusive husband for her son's welfare. Later she marries Gilbert of her own choice. Though she has not freed herself from the bondage of marriage, but escaping from an abusive husband and later marrying a person of her own choice shows the spirit of feminism. It can be accepted as a feminist text if we accept feminism as simply the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of equality of sexes. The writer has illustrated a range of female responses concluding that a woman has the moral right to leave an unsuitable husband. Throughout the text, the writer has appealed for equal educational opportunities for women. She spoke for women's rights on the ground of equality of sexes. She revered the institution of marriage as a union of equals rather than submission of one partner to the tyranny of the other.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is autobiographical work by Harriet Jacobs. She was a slave. In this book she addresses women who fail to comprehend the evils of slavery. She appeals to their humanity to expand their knowledge and thoughts about slavery as an institution. Jacobs struggles to build a home for herself and her children. The inclusion of domestic values makes this book a woman's fiction. The heroine overcomes hardships by finding the necessary resources. This book is an attempt to move women to political action. The writer discusses the personal painful experiences of her sexual history. She wants to include the forbidden topic of sexual abuse of slave women in public discussions.

Emily Bronte wrote *Wuthering Heights*. It was published in 1847. It was published under her pseudonym Ellis Bell. This book is seen by some feminist critics as a prime example of female gothic. It explores the theme of domestic entrapment and subjection of women to patriarchal authority and efforts to escape such bondage and restriction. Catherine is seen by many as a feminist role model, and her independence and free views excludes her from female norms of the Victorian period. Bronte can be seen as starting a new female tradition with a female empowering novel. This novel explores the inner conflict of Catherine. It was expected that her marriage to Edgar should have resolved her issues and fulfilled her social ambition. But it deepens her problems. She is entrapped between her real nature and expectations from society. The social restrictions prevent her from getting contentment that she so desperately sought. The truthfulness of the struggles of Catherine makes *Wuthering Heights* open to feminist criticism.

**Major Male Writers:** *The Subjection of Women* is written by English philosopher John Stuart Mill. It was published in 1869. He developed the ideas jointly with his wife, Harriet

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Taylor Mill. The essay argues for equality between the sexes. It was an affront to traditional European norms regarding the position and status of men and women. He was convinced of the moral and intellectual progress of humankind. It would result in greater happiness for everyone. Human beings are morally and intellectually capable of being educated and civilised. He believed everyone should have the right to vote to defend their own rights and progress morally and intellectually. Mill argues that inequality of women was a relic from the past, but it had no place in the modern world. Mill attacks the belief that women are inferior. He echoes *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*,<sup>6</sup> written by Mary Wollstonecraft and published in 1792. He argues for equality so that there are benefits for individual women. The ideas and potential of women should be liberated. It will produce a great effect on human development. He felt that freedom and education of women would have positive benefits for men too. With the emancipation of women, they would be better able to connect on an intellectual level with their husbands. It would improve relationships. He argues for the need for reforms of marriage laws. Marriage should place no restrictions at either party. He proposes laws to allow women to keep their property and allow women to work outside the home. They will be financially independent. Women make half of the population. So they should have the right to vote because political policies affect them too. Women must be allowed to protect their own interests.

*Women and Politics* was written by Charles Kingsley and was published in 1869. The writer argues that every citizen has the right to share in choosing those who make the laws. He supported the views of J.S. Mill. He demands voting rights for women. An equally educated woman who can independently earn her own livelihood and owns property must have the right to vote. Women are as capable as men of managing vast wealth and property. Female teachers in England work for others. Many employed women are supporting their aged parents, broken-down relatives and brothers. It is time that she should exercise her right as a member of state.

Thomas Hardy highlighted economic injustice with women in male-dominated Victorian society. Women were deprived of economic rights and employment opportunities. He wrote several novels in which he depicted the condition of women. He advocated the right of women. His novels depicted a scenario where readers could see miserable and downtrodden lives of innocent women. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* he presented the sufferings and conflicts of a poor girl, Tess, who suffered because of ignorance and prejudices of her parents. It is a brilliant tale of seduction, sufferings, love and betrayal. This novel centres around a young girl

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<sup>6</sup> One of the earliest works of feminist philosophy, in it the author argues for gender equality and demands fundamental and educational rights to women

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who struggles to find a place in society. Her mother sends her daughter to get money from relations with the hidden desire that she would marry the rich Mr. Alec D'Urbervilles. This wealthy man abuses the poor girl. She was seduced by him. She leaves his house, returning home to have their child, who subsequently dies. Tess is tormented by guilt at the thought of her impurity. She vows to never marry. Later she falls in love with Angel. After days of pleading, she gives in to Angel and agrees to marry him. Angel deserts Tess when he finds that Tess is not pure. Later he regretted his decision and returns to see her to find that she is engaged to Mr. Urbervilles. Tess advised him to leave her. She blamed Alec for the separation between her and Angel. She kills Alec. Later she is thrown into prison for execution. Angel marries her sister.

Hardy has portrayed Tess so splendidly that it gives readers a vivid picture of miseries and hardships that the women of the Victorian age were going through. He has presented Tess to expose the social, emotional and political injustice of that time.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* he dramatizes the theme of female subjugation. The auction of Henchard's wife Susan depicts that women were treated as property. Eighteen years later when she returns and remarries Michael, it seems like business like determination. She is depended on authority of man for identity and survival. Women were regarded as status symbols. People were mystified at his choice since Susan is a humble woman. Lucetta's existence in the novel is a subject of ridicule. Her intimacy with Michael is revealed, and she suffers her social downfall, miscarriage and death. Henchard takes to see that Elizabeth conforms to the manners and fashions of a Mayor's daughter. He assumes that she will take his name without objection. It depicts that she depends on her father for her name and identity. In this novel he attempted to make Victorian society more conscious of its treatment of women.

Hence, Hardy realized the severity of women's issues and addressed it through his literary works. He urged the readers to know about Victorian society and become voices of these women.

To conclude, we studied various thinkers and writers and their views about women issues. Such thinkers help us in tracing the various reasons, thoughts and passions of the Victorian age. They advocated women's rights on the grounds of social, political and economic equality with men. They gave their views on feminism, which was emerged by ideas about the reform of democracy based on equalitarian norms. These thinkers helped feminism to get its proper accomplishment in later centuries.



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