

Masculinity in the Victorian Era

Ahmed Taher Abdu Nagi
(International Research Scholar, Yemen)
S.R.T.M. University, Nanded –Maharashtra,
India

Dr. M. B. Karajgi
Head of English Department,
Smt. Sushiladevi Deshmukh Senior
College,
Latur – Maharashtra – India

Abstract:

The present paper sheds the lights on Masculinity as a concept and as a perception during the Victorian period. Many debates and controversies were done on the rights of women. However, Masculinity got little interest among critics and scholars till the beginning of 1970s. The last three decades had witnessed the evolution of the science of Masculinity. Men's movements started to take an equal place similar to that of women's movements. The literary heritage of nineteenth century reflects the roots of Masculinity. Before the Victorian period, Masculinity was conceived as a matter of chivalry same as that of the fourteenth century perception of masculinity. This paper focuses on the roots of Masculinity and the concept of Masculinity during the Victorian era with reference to gender roles that both men and women attained especially after the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. The present paper also aims to portray the public sphere and private sphere during the Victorian period focusing on the patriarchy of men not only over women but also on other men because of class distinction or other reasons. Such distinction is termed the hegemonic masculinity. Novelists of this era portrayed a new form of Masculinity different from that which was known to the Victorians. The new masculinity is based on performance rather than the origin of birth.

Key Words: Masculinity, Gender roles, Victorian, Public Sphere, Private Sphere.

Introduction:

The area of literary masculinity studies in general - and Victorian masculinity studies in particular - has come into its own zenith in the past twenty to thirty years. While it would not be accurate to say that masculinity studies have gained equal footing in studies on gender issues, the inclusion of examinations of masculinity in international conferences does bode well for its eventual acceptance as a full component of what is called —gender studies. However, masculinity is still a controversial concept. This is because there is no one pattern of masculinity that is found everywhere. Different cultures, and different periods of history, construct

masculinity differently. What can be viewed as masculine might not be seen as masculine by others.

Masculinity:

The term masculinity refers to men's traditional manners, habits and attitudes, which constitute the patriarchal system of order in society. The literary critic Judith Kegan Gardiner argues that it governs the relationship between men as well as between men and women in society, where women in general are subordinated to men. (147) Till the second half of the twentieth century, masculinity was defined as the socially accepted way of being a man. All writers in the late 25 years agree that masculinity is socially and historically not biologically constructed. Some writers like Morgan (1992) assert that masculinity is about what men and women do or behave. Morgan (1992) finds that masculinity is a "cultural space". He argues that "the masculine and feminine" signify a range of culturally defined characteristics assignable to both men and women. Masculinity and femininity, as characteristic of men and women, exist only as socio-cultural constructions and not as the property of persons. Indeed, they are no more than a set of assumptions which people hold about each other and themselves in certain contexts.

Masculinity is not a static concept but an ongoing process that is constructed in interaction and it is more accurate to speak of a plurality of masculinities (Connell, 1987). According to Connell (1995), gender can be defined as the ways in which the "reproductive arena", which includes "bodily structures and processes of human reproduction", organizes practice at all levels of social organization from identities, to symbolic rituals, to large-scale institutions (p.71).

As a central feature of gender relations, Connell defines masculinity as:

"... simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices on bodily experience, personality and culture" (p. 71).

This definition offered by Connell (1995: 71), though complex, is suggestive. It warns us that masculinity is not the property of men, and reminds us to be wary of using the terms 'men', 'male' and 'masculinity' interchangeably.

John Tosh (1994) argues on the concept of masculinity of nineteenth-century Britain that "manliness was only secondarily about men's relations with women." "The dominant code of Victorian manliness", he adds "with its emphasis on self-control, hard work and independence,

was that of the professional and business classes and manly behaviour was what (among other things) established a man's class credentials vis-à-vis his peers and his subordinates”.

Masculinity versus its opposite, femininity refers to the distribution of roles between the genders which is another fundamental issue for any society to which a range of solutions are found. Connell and others who theorize and research masculinities acknowledge that masculinity is always defined through its difference from femininity. The clash between the supporters of femininity and the supporters of masculinity makes it easy to the nature of both concepts. However, the studies on femininity precede the studies of masculinity. In turn, it became a must to study the masculine behaviour of men. Literature, like any other field, shows interest in masculinities. The Victorian literature put the seeds for such studies. Many novelists like Dickens, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen portrayed a new picture of the Victorian man in their novels.

Victorian Masculinity:

Victorian masculinity is based on the premise that the construction of male realization must be seen as historically specific. The concept of Victorian masculinity is a different one since it was influenced by various factors such as domesticity and gender roles. Some of these factors seem to be interrelated to one another. Males show a vast amount of pride, protectiveness over their wives. Victorian men either in the public sphere or private sphere felt superior over the women's subordination. This is a dominant feature of the Victorian society. Despite the fact that England's monarch was female, Victorian society was very much a patriarchy, and the cultural norms only allowed men to establish moral roles. As it often happens with literature, the social dilemmas of the Victorian period became manifest in the literature. The instability of masculine power came to be a fundamental theme in many notable pieces of Victorian literature as in the nineteenth century novels. Victorian masculinity can be realized from two points of view; from men's point of view and from women's point of view. Women's point of view can be estimated as the Victorian man should be gentle in his behaviour and to deal with women with equality. Women's position in society should be taken into the consideration of the Victorian man. Masculinity is performative as Judith Butler proclaims. The masculine behaviour should not neglect the feminine nature of women in the Victorian era.

The concept of Victorian masculinity is a topic of interest in the field of Social studies with an emphasis on Gender studies as well as the literary studies in order to mirror the human and

social changes all over the years. All these fields dovetail the concept of Victorian masculinity. Historically, it is tied to the Victorian period in the United Kingdom. The concept of Victorian masculinity is of much current interest in the areas of history, literary criticism, religious studies, and sociology. Those virtues that survived until today are of special interest to the scholars: the dominant behaviour of the Western male over the western female. The concept of Victorian masculinity nurtured during the nineteenth century which witnessed huge changes in both the behaviour and the thought of the Victorian men and women.

John Tosh, in *A Man's Place*, argued that education and society values instilled by the educators were important in the construction of the late Victorian masculinity. A decision to send a middle-class father's son to a public school might be influenced by the hope that the boy would acquire the patina of a gentleman. Learning to stand on one's own feet, to rub shoulders with all sorts, to have the guts to stand out against the crowd - these qualities were integral to manliness and they were not acquired at home" (John Tosh:58).

Tosh further suggests that "domesticity and masculinity were not opposed as our received image of the Victorian period would suggest and that the domestic or the private sphere is integral to masculinity. Besides work was a key tool of self-discipline for Victorian men. A poor man may be a true gentleman in spirit and in daily life, if he does his work honestly, is upright, polite, temperate and courageous. Self-respect and self-helping is characteristic to a gentleman. A poor man who honestly is engaged in work duties with rich spirit is always superior to the rich man with a poor spirit." (J. Tosh 33).

John Tosh attempts to redefine the Victorian masculinity. He explains the gender roles of man as a father, a husband, or a boy in the family headed by the man during the Victorian era. Tosh explains the relationship between masculinity and the domestic is far more intricate than the early concept of separate spheres. He asserts that "home was central to masculinity, as the place where the boy was disciplined by dependence and where the man attained full adult status as a householder."

John Tosh argues that the masculine gender identity of the Victorian man can be rehabilitated only at the domestic realm. He adds:

The place of the home in bourgeois culture could be summed up by the proposition that only at home could a man be truly and authentically himself. While the work place and the city crippled his moral sense and distorted his human relationship, home gave play to feelings of nurture, love and companionship, as well as natural forms of authority and deference; it nourished the whole man. (p.33)

Thus, John Tosh focuses on the interrelationship between the masculine identity and the role of the domestic to enhance such masculine identity. There is no separation between of the domestic and the man's role in the society. However, domesticity is the domain of women, man finds his masculinity there.

In *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* Elaine Showalter discusses what the Victorian masculinity was. Showalter argues that "the nineteenth century had a cherished belief in the separate spheres of femininity and masculinity that were amounted almost too religious faith". Kelly Hurley states that during the Victorian period, "emotional tenderness and sentiment, seen as compatible with masculine activity and resolution in the earlier nineteenth century, were considered somewhat effeminate qualities by the century's end, when physical grace, courage, pluck, and toughness [were] among the highest qualities of manhood". Accordingly, Victorian masculinity entailed having certain rights that Victorian femininity was not granted. Men can work in a reputable occupation, travel through the city alone, and join 'men-only' clubs. Women faced one of the Victorian dictums, 'no girls allowed'.

Gender Roles in the Victorian Period:

Connell (1999) defines Gender as "the structure of social relations that centers on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes." She adds : "gender concerns the way human society deals with human bodies and their continuity, and the many consequences of that 'dealing' in our personal lives and our collective fate." *Judith Butler* argues that "gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today." For Judith Butler gender is a doing; a performative. In other words, gender behaviour is a performance.

Gender roles are the socially determined tasks, behaviour and responsibilities for women and men. Gender roles based on socially perceived expectations of how women and men should act

in the society. These roles may differ from place to place and over time. Although, women are usually expected to take care of the home and children while men function in the public place. Failure to conform to these roles is seen as deviance.

Gender roles are learned through gender socialization that begins shortly after birth and transmits culturally-shared benefits and values associated with masculinity and femininity. Throughout lifetime, there is a great deal of social pressure to conform to learned gender roles. Individuals who do not behave to traditional gender stereotypes are judged as less likeable and attractive than individuals who display gender appropriate trait and behaviour.

The Victorian period witnessed such polarized gender roles that it can be investigated according to the different roles assigned to men and women, more commonly known as the ideology of separate spheres. The separate spheres ideology holds that men were capable for reason, action, aggression, independence, and self-interest. This is related to the public sphere. Women were capable of having such qualities of femininity: emotion, obedience, submission, reliance, and selflessness. All derived, as it was claimed insistently, from women's sexual and reproductive organization. Such ideology allowed men, to control mentally and intellectually, to dominate society, to be the dominating gender. They were viewed as rational, brave, and independent. Women, however, were dominated by their sexuality. They were expected to fall silently into the social mould crafted by men, since they were regarded as irrational, sensitive, and dutiful during the Victorian period.

The women of the Victorian society had one main role in life. This role was to marry and take part in their husbands' business and interests. Before marriage, they were learning housewife skills like weaving, cooking, washing, and cleaning, unless they were of a wealthy family. Wealthy families did not always learn these tasks because their maids primarily took care of the household tasks. Typically, women were also not allowed to get education or get knowledge outside of the home because it was a man's sphere. Richard D. Altick, a critic, has stated that "a woman was inferior to a man in all ways except the unique one that counted most her femininity. Woman's place was in the home. This was on an absolute pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs" (Altick 54). The patriarchal society of the Victorian period did not permit women to behave and do as men. Accordingly, women were given the more feminine duties of caring for the home and pursuing the outlets of feminine creativity.

Victorian men also anticipated that women had to possess feminine qualities as well as innocence; otherwise, they would not be potential for marriage. In his article, “*Victorian Women Expected to be Idle and Ignorant*,” Charles Petrie has explained what the Victorian man was looking for:

Innocence was what he demanded from the girls of his class. They must not only be innocent but also give the outward impression of being innocent. The White muslin that was typical of virginal purity, clothes many a heroine, with slight shades of blue and pink next in popularity. The masculine approval stamp was placed upon ignorance of the world, humbleness, lack of opinions, general defenselessness and weakness. In short, there was recognition of female inferiority to the male. (p.184).

The expectations, those men had for women, caused women to prepare for marriage and gave women hardly any kind of liberty. The men’s expectations pressured women to be the ideal Victorian woman whom society estimated them to be. The women had to arrange themselves for what was to come of their lives and it determined their future. If women did not meet the Victorian male’s expectations, they would end up spouseless. In the article, “*Victorian Women Expected to Be Idle and Ignorant*,” the critic Petrie has argued,

From babyhood all girls who were born above the level of poverty had the dream of a flourishing marriage before their eyes, for by that alone was it possible for a woman to rise in the world. (p. 180).

The officially permitted rights of married women were similar to those of children. Women could not vote, sue, or own property. Also, they were seen as chaste and clean. Because of this view, women’s bodies were seen as temples that should not be adorned with cosmetics nor used for such pleasing things as sex. They could not get a job unless it was that of a teacher or a governess. Unfortunately, the Victorian period stands for an inequality between men and women.

During the Victorian period the notion of separate spheres reoccurred and changed totally the gender roles. These spheres were the private sphere or the domestic sphere, and the public sphere. Women were given the private and men were given the public sphere. It was thought that men were powerful and inventive and should thus be out in the work place – the public sphere. However, women held a vital role as a domestic controller keeping the home as a haven and rearing well-educated and socially aware children. The idea that women were to stay was a traditional concept in society. The concept of the separate spheres had its bad consequences on the field of the patriarchal relation between the masculine and the feminine. This separation had

widened the gulf between men and women. Women were thought only as ‘an architect of the home’- the private sphere. This separation in the gender roles led to the subordination of the wives to their husbands and women were thought only as possessions of men. In fact, the idea of separate spheres led to women’s agitation for changes of their social subordination. Women began to make known their dissatisfaction with the social constraints in the public sphere. The ideology of separate spheres made women incapable of work in the public realm. Women were classified as physically weaker, yet morally superior to men. Women’s moral superiority was the best quality to make them suited to the domestic / private sphere. The Victorian women started to struggle against the patriarchal behaviour of men. They struggled politically, socially, and intellectually against the male dominance till they gained more rights such as to vote and participate work with men in the public sphere.

Conclusion:

The term masculinity refers to men’s traditional manners, habits and attitudes, which constitute the patriarchal system of order in society. The roots of masculinity started at the late time of eighteenth century and the beginning of nineteenth century. The Victorian people had a perception of masculinity as something upraising the gender roles of men over the gender roles of women. They gave the public sphere for men and the private sphere for women. However, many factors intervene to make changes over these spheres. Men started to share the women’s private sphere and vice versa. Literature as a mirror of society portrays these issues in the works of novelists and writers but with another view to have gender equality in the roles of both men and women.

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