



English society in the 19th century

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ASBTRACT:-Before studying a literary work, it is necessary to make an investigation about the period and society in which the writer lived as well as its people and their way of living, tradition and laws in order to understand the writer's world view and pave the way for a thorough study of his work. Then in this topic we review the historical, social and biographical backgrounds of the novel under study as to look at the ways in which these might have influenced the content and form of the novel. We shall deal with English society in the 19th century focusing on the social life, economy and the position of women in England, also, we shall review the writer's life and works and discuss the theory to be used for the research study which is Feminism.

KEY WORDS: Social life, Economy, women.

1. English society in the 19th century

The Victorian Period is the period that coincides with the reign of Queen Victoria in 1837. It is characterized by many changes that make the reign of Victoria the most progressive in English history (Fletcher, 2002). There were changes in politics, society, and economy and in the character of English nation, all of which affected the standard of life.

Furthermore, it was the period of the industrial revolution that made England known top nation thanks to the development in trade and industry. (Williams, 2004) It created a new world to the Victorians and the texture of their daily life. It marks the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of England and its people and women in. Victorians appear to be the British people whom tackle several difficulties which are found in British society. In fact, England had witnessed many innovations in different fields such as science, philosophy, and technology. For example railway lines that connected England's major cities as the Liverpool and Manchester Railway opened the first public railway line in the world. Although it may have been an era of achievement and progress; it also was a period of poverty and anxiety (Pollard, 1993).

It was a wide ranging and fundamental, the scientific and technical innovations of industrial revolution, also, far-reaching new. Thus, it was a period of reform that improves the position of certain classes as the middle class for example become more powerful and the working class more imposing. At the same time, it was a period of unemployment, poverty and the working conditions for women and children were terrible. For example: boys who were employed under machinery to retrieve cotton which is dangerous work, also children were employed to work in coal mines, crawling through tunnels which is a hard work for children in their age.

England developed thanks to free trade and the industries that become more competitive in exports in virtue of the growth of the materials; coal mining, iron and cotton industry. Also the methods of road building that facilitated transforming the commodities, minimized the distance between cities and increased the movement of population from country side into the town. Moreover, England is a great power and the world predominant economy that emerged from the War with France (1793-1815).³

That means in the 19th century England was the most powerful and self confident after the industrial revolution, also thanks to its empire in which England enjoyed a strong place after the defeat of Napoleon (McDowell, 1989).

The status as the first urban and industrialized society in the world resulted in many ramifications. The prominent social change in English society was the immigration of large masses of the population from the countryside to towns. Farmer then became industrial employers. For example: the working class, a large numbers of people had left their villages to become factory workers.

Also, changes in women's social role occurred as an important members, they had opened up for professions which were not accessible before. They assumed skilled jobs in society as writers, journalists, nurses and teachers. In addition to that, in industrial areas, they began to achieve their independence as workers in factories. Thus, the act of 1882 and 1892 which gave women their rights to retrieve their own property and allowed women from 30 and above to vote. (ibid). Women relocate their place in society in the political, economic and social aspects that regimented life.

1.1. Social life

English Society in the 19th century consisted of hierarchical structure containing the upper class, the middle class and the working class. This difference in social classes could be distinguished by inequalities in wealth, education, working and living conditions (Michell, 2009). Thus, The basic quality of daily life for people in Victorian England rested on an underlying structure determined by social class and shaped by traditional ways of life in country, town, and city. In addition to that, the classes lived in separate areas, Victorians believed that each class has its own standards and people were expected to conform to the roles of their class. Moreover, the Industrial revolution marks fundamental transition of human life depicted in papers. It had a great effect and impact on society including: emergence of working class, in which a mass of workers migrated from agricultural regions to industrial towns, where they lived in new urban slums (ibid).

Also, Population figures increased rapidly in Great Britain from 15.74 million in 1801 to 27.39 million in 1851.⁴ Creating a demand for factory jobs for women and children, who were employed to scramble under machinery, retrieve cotton bobbins, to work in mines and other manufacturing plants.

Working class is the lower rank of social classes, the largest number were agricultural labors, domestic servants and factory hands. They were found in unskilled and skilled jobs; mining, fishing, transportation, industry and other manual trade. In addition to that, their interest was just earning to stay alive and struggling the poverty and illness. Thus, skilled workers who made up 15 percent of working class were worked as printers, bookbinders and shoemakers (Mitchell, 2009).

During that time, many children never attend the school and half of them grew up unable to read and write, and ended up in a workhouse, which housed and fed people who had no power to support themselves, otherwise they were put to work. Boys and girls had to start work very young and they often helped in the work done by older member of the family (ibid).

As towns grew rapidly, living conditions become bad. The new industrial towns were populated, dirty and unhealthy and housing conditions for working class were terrible.⁵

Furthermore, the conditions of women's work that were created by the industrial revolution, were hard. They were to work in farms, in digging, in picking cotton and with the industrial revolution, the need for labour increased thus, they moved to work in mines, In addition to that, the fortunate women become a maids for upper class families. If married could be a servant and if unmarried a teacher or a governess (Mitchells, 2009).

Moreover, growing of middle class, it was the new emerging class, which consisted of bankers, large shopkeepers, businessmen, doctors, lawyers and the clergy, which was separated from the working class. Thus with the change of commercial and industrial society, the middle class grew larger with the rise of Industrialists and factory owners. It becomes more important politically following the Reform Bill 1832 that extended the right to vote to all males owning property (Mitchells, 2009). They became central to the Bourgeois identity of the nineteenth century (Williams, 2004), absorbed by government policy-makers and social commentators that means The middle classes had become more important politically after 1832. Their political representation and the limitation of aristocratic power. They depended very heavily on family property to secure not only their own material comfort but also their social standing.⁶

In addition to that, Middle-class women who might act as housekeepers or general servants in the households of their kin. It was a strategy for middle-class families to maintain adult women outside commercial or professional activities (Williams, 2004).

Thus, the upper class, which was wealthy and dominant, the aristocracy and the gentry were affected by all of these changes; they hold the most of the political power. And with the rise of industrialization, the British aristocracy became strongly involved in the development of mining, canals and railways. As a landowners, who controlled most of the country's agriculture.⁷ Moreover, their lives were comfortable; country house with a lot of servants and whose income derived from landed estate. The eldest son inherited the estate and he expected to do something useful as taking part in parliament, local affairs. (Ibid).

Also, it is known by the fact that the upper class women did not work (Mitchell, 2009). A person said that —Victorian women led idle and luxurious lives! (ibid.P. 45). In which they took drives in the afternoon made calls with their friends and shopped, also, they traveled and returned to their estate in autumn and winter. They stood at home and dictate the servants. In addition to that, they pretend. Sometimes they visit the poor and provide them with necessities.

1.2. Economy

The nineteenth century was an era marked by a period of economic expansion, rapid change in industrial technique and production and new technologies (Carter, McRae, 1997); a period of significant prosperity for the British economy, because the country was the instigator of the industrial revolution and consequently become the workshop of the world. For example: extracting raw materials and transformed them to commodities then sold it back to the other European nations (Mc Dowell, 1989). In fact, industry was replacing agriculture as the basis of the British economy, also, new inventions and machines were partly replacing manual work. In virtue of Industrial Revolution and its great empire in which Britain had become a leading world power (Mitchell, 2009).

Industrial Revolution was at its height, a period of economic and technological change (website Victorian period) by the use of iron and steel, new energy source and the factories system that emerged machines and increased production. Also, communication field (railway lines, telegraph), and the train which supported the growth of the commerce (Mitchell, 2009), and minimized the distance between cities. Thus for Britain, it was the most beneficial event that the country dreamt about, it changed England from a traditional society to an industrial one, so, it was the wealth's gate; England rose to a position of global influence and power as a great empire. It was the workshop of the world by its massive exporter and importer, by its imperialist and for that reason its economic power.

1-3 The position of women

The status of women in the 19th century is often seen as a discrepancy between England's national power and wealth; consider its appalling social conditions. Women faced many difficulties, because of the vision of the ideal women shared by society.⁸ During the era that symbolized by the reign of Victoria, women did not have rights, abused and oppressed as a result of policy in which discriminatory laws were existed.

Women could not vote, could not become property owners and they could not hold professional jobs apart from teachers or a domestic servant, factory workers or agricultural labors (Mitchell, 2009).

Society did not consider that women needed formal education and consequently it was generally reserved only for men. As a result, it was rare to find women in skilled jobs that required higher or intermediate education. Women then were generally expected to be housekeepers or housewives. The role of women did not generally go beyond that of a wife or mother who took care of her children and maintained her house of her husband in proper order.

Furthermore, the status of women their rights and duties can not be generalized since they varied according to the social class a woman came from. That means social class determines the traditional of women's life in which they live and work depending on. They have distinct position related to the class that women come from.

2. Charlotte Bronte's life and works

Charlotte Bronte was born on 1816 at Thorton, in Yorkshire, England, the third daughter of Patrick Bronte a clergyman of Irish descent and Maria Branwell. In 1820 they moved to Haworth where Patrick was appointed perpetual curate. After the death of Charlotte's mother in 1821, her mother's sister, Elizabeth, come to take care of the five daughters and one son who were left with a solitary father.

In 1824, Charlotte and her sisters (Emily, Maria, and Elizabeth) were sent to Clergy Daughter's School at Cowan Bridge (Bronte, 1994), which Charlotte recreated as Lowood in Jane Eyre. The time, she spent at the school was very difficult. Its poor conditions affected health and the death, and hastened the death of her two elder sisters, Maria and Elizabeth who died in 1825 soon after they were removed from the school (ibid)

She spent as a pupil at the two other schools, her education was conducted for the most part at home. She later as a young woman served as a teacher at a girls school, and as a governess for various families in Yorkshire, a career she pursued until 1841. She failed to open her own school for girls at Haworth.⁹

To acquire further qualifications, the two sisters traveled to Brussels to enroll in a Pansionnat governed by Constantin Heger and his wife (Bront, 1994). Looking for tuition, Charlotte taught English and Emily taught music. Their time at the Pansionnat was cut when their aunt, who joined the family after the death of their mother, died in October 1842. In January 1843, Charlotte returned to Brussels to take a teaching post at the Pansionnat. She was not happy, lonely, and homesick, then after a year, she returned to Haworth (Gaskell, 2005).

In 1846, the sisters, Charlotte Emily and Anne dedicated themselves to writing and published a volume of poetry under the pseudonyms, Cureer, Ellis and Acton Bell. They decided to continue writing for publication and work on their first novels. Charlotte continued to write under the name Acton Bell. (Ibid)

After Charlotte's siblings had died (Brawell, September 1848, Emily, December 1848 and Anne May 1849), she and her father were left alone. In view of the success of Jane Eyre, Charlotte was persuaded by her publisher to visit London, where she revealed her original name and the true identity, becoming friend with Elizabeth Gaskell, William Makepeace and she continued writing and never left Haworth (Ibid).

In 1854, Charlotte married the curate of Haworth, Arthur Nicholls, but their marriage lasted for nine months later. After a few weeks of her pregnancy, she became ill with pneumonia. She died about weeks later in March 31, 1855.¹⁰

Charlotte Bronte's works

Charlotte Bronte is regarded as one of the most outstanding English novelists, whose creative power made her prominent and popular author of Victorian age. She derived materials from her own life to write famous novels in the history of literature.

Jane Eyre (1847) is novel based on Bronte autobiography. It examines many sides of the circumstances of women show a new move towards freedom and equality.

Shirley (1849) is the least successful her novels. It depicts the struggle between master and workers in the Yorkshire wearing industry. It deals with a woman, who was shaken off all jealously. Also, it concerned with the wool industry with riots, and with the Napoleonic Wars.

Villette (1853) depicts a woman's longing for her love to be fulfilled. And The Professor, written before Jane Eyre and rejected by many publishing houses, was published in (1857) (Gaskell, 2005)

3- The Development of Feminism in the 19th century

Feminist criticism is a critical theory and a movement in the evaluation of literature. It has its origins in the struggle of women's rights which emerged in the late of 18th century (Cuddon, 1998). Throughout its long history, feminism has looked for disturb the certainties of such a patriarchal culture, to affirm a belief in the gender equality. It developed as an important force to shape and determine women's rights with the emphasis on social, political and economic reform. It found its approach to literature in the 1960s, when were clear signs of new approaches in relation to women writers and literature. This was clear in many feminists working and writing of women as Virginia Wolf who feminist critics have analyzed her novels from different perspective. Thus, like other feminist, she concerned with women's economic and cultural disadvantages compared to men. (Seldon, 2005).

So, it aims at championing the identity of women and promote women's writing as a representation of women's experience (Culler, 1997) as depicted in various types of literature especially the novel. Feminism undertakes to release women from male patriarchy that means, it examines the ways in which literature reinforces the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women and the patriarchal ideology that women were to be subservient to men. It attacks male notions of interpretations in literature, also, it challenges traditional male ideas about the nature of women and how they feel, act think and write (Cuddon, 1998).

It concerned with the thematic studies of writing by and about women that means women authors and representation of their experience. It concerned also with the theory of the role of women in writing and her language focusing on language, analyzing the way in which meaning is produced (ibid). Thus, It attempts to understand representation from a woman's point of view and analyze women's writing strategies in the context of their social conditions. It pursue the existence of women in literary texts as a women authors, and features and makes women characters and ideas dominant in their work (Balogun, 2001).

Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter has been concerned with the characteristics of Victorian period in different phases as well as the general conditions of life. It has examined the economy and the position of women in society. last, it has provided a short overview of Bronte's life and works. I found out that Charlotte Bronte as a novelist was influenced by her incidents, ideas and society of her age that were as aspiration to achieve her literary work.

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