

AUSTEN BRONTE AND ELIOT ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

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The eighteenth century was very important from the point of economic and political developments. The French Revolution with its emphasis on fraternity, freedom and equality; the independence of America, emphasizing liberty and justice and at the same time showing the bitter sides of the slave system, and finally colonization pointing the conditions of far away places were some of the main events preparing the background for women's emancipation movement.

The economic developments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries affecting England positively had enabled this country to establish industrial development more rapidly than the other countries. The fact that England had a small population, a good commercial fleet, a sound banking system and flexible custom laws were other contributing factors. All these positive conditions, plus the emigration of important scientists to England helped this country to become one of the most stable economically and hence consider its other social problems earlier than other European countries. Women's problems constituted one aspect of them. The importance of economic conditions in choosing a marriage partner, unequal educational opportunities for women, lack of jobs, double standart applied to morality, were some of the problems dealt by the eighteenth century authors like Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Smollet, and Sterne. These authors did not actually support women's interests, nor did they offer concrete solutions, but in dealing with various topics concerning women in their books, they started an arguement and hence helped in forming a public opinion about the acceptance that there was something wrong with the system.

When we come to the nineteenth century, we find that although a century had passed, there was still no concrete change in women's social conditions. However we mustn't forget the fact that in this century, though slow,

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there was a more positive awakening to women's problems and especially certain women authors fought for these in a more realistic way and tried to change various existing conditions. What was wrong with women's life? What did the women lack as far as job and educational opportunities? What was their place in family life? These were some of the topics dealt by the nineteenth century authors.

The controversy started by Jean Jacque Rousseau with the publication of *La Nouvelle Heloise* in 1761 and *Emile* in 1762 stating that the main function of women was to raise children and to form a comfortable family life for men and that their education should be according to these needs, Goethe in Germany expressing similar views in *Master Williams' Wonder Year*, were the beginning of long discussions in Europe. In France, Germaine de Stael and in England Macaulay Graham and Mary Wollstonecraft were against Rousseau's ideas. The debate continued on the nineteenth century with August Comte still stating that "economic progress has diminished the work of women outside the home so that she could do a better job at keeping the moral integrity of her home."⁽¹⁾

The women's movement was effecting the United States also. In 1848, in Seneca, a group of mostly Quakers published a statement with Elizabeth C. Stanton stating that for centuries women have been deprived of their most natural rights. John Stuart Mill in 1869 also drew attention to the fact that women have been deprived of their rights with various laws. On the other hand, at the end of the century, Charles Darwin was still expressing that there was a difference of intelligence between men and women being more emotional and less self-centered than men were more fit for home life and looking after children.

With the philosophers preparing the background, on the field of literature women authors like Austen, Bronte and George Eliot were setting the scene for the women's movement.

Jane Austen in her novels has shown us a limited world in a confined home of a small village. In her novels, the lack of a sound education for women has been shown as the reason behind many corruptions in society. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the author has tried to explain the difference between the characters of the Bennet girls with the variety in their education. Elizabeth Bennet, though raised in the same family, has been much better educated than her sisters and so can deal with life's problems more effectively. Similarly, in *Mansfield Park*, the defects in the characters of Julia and Maria has been shown as the result of their insufficient education. In her novel *Persuasion*, the heroine Anne Finch stresses the superiority of

(1) August Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of August Comte*, trans. by Harriet Martineau, London 1896, p. 286.

of male sex in the field of writing and explains that this is due to the inequality of educational opportunities.

In Bronte's novels, the importance of education or the problem that the lack of education causes is more openly analyzed. The men in these novels try to break down women's desire for knowledge and fulfilling jobs. Generally, the age considered reading, writing and needle work as sufficient education for women. John Rivers stressing the same point in *Jane Eyre* says to Jane: "You will be teaching only reading and writing in a primary school and what will you her talents above this?"⁽²⁾ Similarly in *Vilette* also Mr. Paul considers Lucy's desire to learn Greek a crime. Lucy tries to oppose this by saying she will be ashamed of none of the talents God has given her.

George Eliot in her books examined the subject of women with a thirst for knowledge but who because of the double standart applied to women cannot realize this. Maggie in the *The Mill On The Floss* does not want to lead a passive life and wants to have an education above what was considered as normal for women. When Maggie wants to learn Euclid, her brother's teacher answers her saying; "Girls cannot study enough to learn Euclid, their intelligence is superficial and limited."⁽³⁾ In *Felix Holt* also with Mrs. Transome the author reflects the life of a well educated, intelligent but unsatisfied woman. "Talking of Beck's and Chateaubriand's style was her favorite past time. She considered reading many of the French authors a crime but many of the books she found dangerous and bad were enjoyable and many that were good and a must were without meaning."⁽⁴⁾

It is interesting to note that a liberated woman like Mary Jane Evans, who held the position of the editorship of "Westminister Review" had to write her books under the pseudonym of "George Eliot". Once it was known that the author was female, her work would be devalued and she could not accept this. The age had a strong reaction to working women and it was very hard even for George Eliot to oppose this.

For women, without a proper education and job opportunities, marriage was the only choice available. Nineteenth century women authors tried to reflect the lives of these women who went into marriage for the wrong reasons; mainly economic independence, security and in order to be able to give a meaning to their lives. The result was disillusionment and unhappiness.

Austen, in her novels examines the problem of women in family life. At a time when it was very difficult for women to find jobs, if she wanted to

(2) Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, Book Inc., New York, p. 306.

(3) George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, Penguin Books Limited, Harmondsworth, England 1966, p. 221.

(4) George Eliot, *Felix Holt*, The Nottingham Society, vol. II, p. 30.

achieve a certain status in life the only option was marriage for economic reasons, when it is their turn, they do just the same mistake. In **Sense and Sensibility** although Marianne condemns Elinor for considering money above everything else in the end she herself decides that she cannot be happy with a man with an income of less than two thousand pounds and marries Colonel Brandon. Similarly in **Pride and Prejudice** Charlotte at seventy-seven accepts marriage with a man with whom there is no possibility that she will be happy just because she believes by not marrying she will be a big financial burden on her family. Fanny's turning down a rich suitor like Mr. Crawford seems incredible to Sir Thomas in **Mansfield Park**. However, Mary Crawford can marry whom she pleases because she is rich and for a woman with ample means marriage is not the only choice. It is with Elizabeth Bennet in **Pride and Prejudice** that one sees an example of a woman with limited means who refuses Mr. Collins because she does not love him and tries to lead her independent life.

Austen in her novels describes the patriarchal family where one was either under the husband's or the father's authority. Female characters' marrying elderly paternal figures seemed essential in a patriarchal society for the marriage to be stable. The fact that in her novels the characters like Mr. Darcy, Mr. Knightly and Edmund are represented as weak figures, unable to support the family can be taken as a sign pointing to the weakness and corruption of this family system.

Bronte believed that the equality of soul and mind in marriage was more important than economic equality. For this reason Jane's marrying the rich Rochester in **Jane Eyre** is related as a normal affair. Jane tells Rochester that she has a soul and that they are equal before God. In Bronte's novels, similar to Austen's, the equality between the sexes in no more than an ideal. Although the women want equality and freedom in marriage usually they end up marrying father figures. This idea is emphasized in the relation of Jane and Rochester in **Jane Eyre** and Francis and Crimsworth in the **Professor**. Jane's returning to Rochester and their passing their life away from everyone shows their loneliness and points to the unusualness and the difficulty of establishing such a family in the real world.

Although Eliot had been very happy in her relationship with Lewis, in her novels marriage is related as a situation that does not last happily ever after, but it is a small community where people try to bear each other. In these novels, the couples try to continue a difficult situation till the end. In **Middlemarch** Dorothea and Causobon. Rosemund and Lydgate and in **Adam Bede** Elizabeth and Thias are examples of such couples. Usually once married, women had to accept husband's authority. Lydgate and Causobon are examples to husbands who want their wives to obey all their demands.

The nineteenth century women authors have been more successful in trying to find out what was lacking in women's lives and what one could do about this. Austen, Bronte and Eliot tried to show the double standart applied to women in every field and showed effort to change this. Barbara Hardy in her **A Reading of Jane Austen** drew attention to the fact that "women are never shown doing any work which is paid, and seldom which is useful."⁽⁵⁾

In Bronte's novels on the other hand, much more than in Austen's novels, one meets female characters who have their own jobs. Although the men in their lives try to break their spirits the women insist in keeping their work. John Rivers in **Jane Eyre** works at destroying Jane's enthusiasm for her job but she is determined to go on. In the **Professor** although Crimsworth seems to support Jane's studies, he is not happy when she progresses too much. She tries to break her spirit saying: "This work is full of faults. In order for you to write without mistakes, you have to work conscientiously a few years."⁽⁶⁾ Francis believing in keeping her job answers: "I like a contemplative life but I like an active life better. I must work, I must work with you, I have noticed Monsieur that people who are together at having fun do not respect each other, nor like each other as much as people who work together and suffer together." In her novel **Shirley** again work is shown as giving a meaning to life. Caroline says: "I want to have a job at least fifty times a day. I ask myself why I came into the world. I want something to occupy my hands and head". Miss Keader asks: "Can work make one happy?" "No," answers Caroline, "but it can give us different types of pain and prevent our head from beating with one type of pain. A good job has many compensations, an empty life has none."⁽⁷⁾

Of the three authors it was George Eliot who had been most closely linked with the women's movement. In her early years her unconventional way of life with Lewis and the scandal it produced had done more damage than good to the movement and in her later, more successful years she had been accused of not giving enough money to feminist activities. However, one must not forget that it was with her ideas and work that Eliot supported the movement. She believed in developing a person's capacity, talents to the full without sex discrimination and this was what she understood from women's emancipation.

George Eliot, like Bronte, described in her novels the lives of unsatisfied women who seek to find a meaning in their lives through work. Usually, the men in Eliot's novels are drawn as egoistic people who do not understand anything from women's happiness or fulfillment. The female cha-

(5) Barbara Hardy, **A Reading of Jane Austen**, Peter Owen, London 1975.

(6) Charlotte Bronte, **The Professor**, Dent&Sons Ltd., New York 1887, p. 200.

(7) Charlotte Bronte, **Shirley**, Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, New York, p. 225.

acters are intelligent people who are not satisfied with the confined borders of a woman's dependent life. The author tried to show that it was time for women to take part in active life and not just watch the world to go by behind closed doors. Maggie in **The Mill On the Floss** and Dorothea in **Middlemarch** are examples of women characters who want a lot from life. Dorothea tries to find a meaning in life by helping Causobon with his research and the result is disillusionment. In the end she can see clearly that nothing will come out of Causobon's studies.

As we have seen, the nineteenth century authors had contributed a lot in making the women realize what was lacking in their lives and what one could do about it. The seeds were sown in the 19th century but one had to wait to the 20th or maybe even to the 21st century to see the results.

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