WOMEN AND LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Although literature is commonly considered to reflect the culture from which it has emerged, it is also true that literature exercises a strong influence on the national character of a people, as it deals critically with its social problems. Literature, in general, and especially prose, has often given society a mental impetus in the absence of which the history of a people would have been different. The cataclysmic upheavals in the history of Europe after the seventeenth century may be traced back partly, though usually indirectly, to the writings of the then contemporary writers, which helped to awaken much public opinion and draw attention to certain social situations which deserved reforms.

In view of the important role and impact of literature in the life of a people, the main issue - the status of women - in the literature of mainly three countries England, America and Turkey is to be dealt with. Yet before that the next step would be to point out the actual position of women in these countries, especially in the nineteenth century as this period, in fact, forms one of the most interesting studies in the history of the emancipation of women in the three respective countries. A great many changes, political, religious and, above all, economic, affecting as they did every aspect of life in the period and, not least, the status of women makes this era particularly remarkable. There can be no serious doubt that these changes have their origin in the historical forces which began to operate at the beginning of the century and which one can venture to isolate.

Of integral importance is the French Revolution, which chiefly expressed its ideal in nineteenth century England by means of much "propagandist" literature and by the formation of many literary, political and philosophical societies and so on, remarkable for their energy and aggressiveness. Following the French Revolution came the conservative reaction in England-a movement which led to the imposition of censorship and to pressure over free opinion. Again, there was the religious movement, the Evangelical Revival,[1] and, not least, the Industrial Revolution, bringing mechanization of industry, more rapid means of communication and rapid enrichment to certain classes as well as poverty to others.

These forces, then, set up a "chain of reactions" which extend throughout English society in the nineteenth century. The first link in the chain, the first "reactor," is undoubtedly the triumph of the middle classes with their aim of

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1. C.S. Dudley, *An Analysis of the System of the Bible Society* (London: R. Watts, 1821).

"promotion" into a higher status and their firmly-held standards and ideals based on those of the upper classes, which provide the basic material for the preoccupation of the intellectuals of the age.

It is little wonder, therefore, that we find writers, economists, educationalists and sociologists absorbed by the problems attached to the status of women. Autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, journals and other books written on the subject give us revealing accounts of the unsatisfactory position then held by women. A few extracts from various impressions of the status of the "lady" of the time and from demands for a reform in that status may be illuminating.

In 1853, Margarette Gray writes in her diary:

> A lady, to be such, must be a mere lady, and nothing else. She must not work for profit, or engage in any occupation that money can command, lest she invade the rights of the working classes, who live by their labour. Men in want of employment have pressed their way into nearly all the shopping and retail business that in my early years were managed in whole, or part, by women. The conventional barrier that pronounces it ungenteel to be behind a counter, or serving the public in any mercantile capacity, is greatly extended. The same in household economy. Servants must be up to their offices, which is very well, but ladies, dismissed from the dairy, the confectionary, the store-room, the still-room, the poultry yard, the kitchen-garden and the orchard, have hardly yet found themselves a sphere equally useful and important in the pursuit of trade and art to which to apply their abundant leisure. [2]

John Stuart Mill, one of the advocates of women's suffrage, expresses his view on the subject thus:

> Hardly any decent educated occupation, save one, is open to them. They are either governesses or nothing. [3]

His book, *The Subjection of Women*, is entirely devoted to this subject. He says:

> The government of women over men, equality between the two and such mixed and divided modes of government as might be invented, it has been decided, on the testimony of experience, that the mode in which women are wholly concerned, and each in private being under the legal obligation of obedience to the man with whom she has associated her destiny, was the arrangement most conducive to the happiness and well-being of both.[4]

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2. J. E. Butler, Memoirs of John Grey (Edinburgh: Edmondston and Douglas, 1969), p. 326.
3. John Stuart Mill, Speech in the House of Commons, May 20, 1867.
4. John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Everyman's Library, J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1929), p. 222.

Then he proceeds to show the contemporary position of women:

Meanwhile, the wife is the actual bond servant of her husband; no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called. She vows a lifelong obedience to him at the altar, and is held to it all through her life by law. Causists may say that obligation of obedience stops short of participation in crime, but it certainly extends to everything else. She can do no act whatever but by his permission, at least tacit. She can acquire no property but for him. [5]

Even children belong to fathers only:

They are by law his children. He alone has any legal rights over them. Not one act can she do towards or in relation to them, except by delegation from him. Even after he is dead she is not their legal guardian, unless he by will has made her so. He could even send them away from her, and deprive her of the means of seeing or corresponding with them, until this power was in some degree restricted by Sergeant Talfourd's Act. This is her legal state. [6]

Therefore, J.S. Mill appeals for their freedom, trying to prove their abilities:

... women and not a few merely, but many women, have proved themselves capable of everything, perhaps without a single exception, which is done by men, and of doing it successfully and creditably. [7]

Later, one comes across J.W. Adamson who tells us that:

The demand for a great advance in the education of women, which was so marked in the 'seventies', and early 'eighties', was a phase of the question then known as 'Women's Rights.' This feminist movement began in the United States of America and spread to this country (England) about 1840, but it made little progress here until the extension of the Parliamentary franchise was mooted. In origin the English movement was economic. The disparity in the numbers of the two sexes and the instability of fortune experienced by many families during the first half of the century caused an increase in the number of women who were in whole or in part self-supporting. This state of things was in contradiction of middle-class traditions and sentiment: but economic facts could not be gainsayed. Out of a total population of eighteen millions in 1851 three and a half millions of women were working for a subsistance, of whom five-sevenths were unmarried Within the next ten years the the number of self-supporting women exceeded twenty percent of the total population, which numbered twenty millions. The middle-class prejudices against the paid employment of women, their inferior education and the disabilities under which they suffered before the law, all tended to lower the rate of renumeration for women's work. [8]

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5. Ibid., p. 247.
6. Ibid., p. 248.
7. Ibid., p. 267.
8. J.W. Adamson, *English Education 1789-1902* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 323 - 324.

The emphasis on education can be heard from Rosalie Glynn Grylls, who says:

> It was the restoration which lowered the standard and it was difficult to raise it again in spite of the protests of advanced thinkers like Defoe or Steele and Addison, and the pretensions of the 'blue-stockings,' though Mrs. Montagu must be given credit for having in 1775 proposed to found and endow a college for women but let the project drop when Mrs. Barbauld, a 'best-selling' novelist of reactionary opinions, refused the post of superintendent... [9]

Such was the status of women in the early nineteenth century in England and even in America. It is possible to select various dates for the true beginnings of the Women's Movement, but whatever date one may choose, as has already been pointed out, it is impossible to isolate it altogether from the events which preceded it. Like every other development of human society, it was the result of a multitude of causes and it might be both profitable and entertaining to search them out in even more detail. Yet for the present purpose, it would be proper to be confined to two Victorian novelists who, indeed, contributed immensely to the arousing public opinion for the cause of women: George Eliot and George Meredith. The first, born as Mary Ann Evans, had to have a pen-name so that her works would not face reaction from the community which considered in Blackstone's words that "The disabilities a women lies under are for the most part intended for her protection and benefit, so great a favourite is the female sex in the laws of England."[10] Yet the fact was that these laws and customs put her at a severe disadvantage. "By marriage," Blackstone goes on to say, "the very being or legal existance of a woman is suspended, or at least it is incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection, and cover she performs everything, and she is therefore called in our law a feme couvert." This in plainer language, meant that the property, the earnings, the liberty and even the conscience of a wife all belonged to her husband, as did also the children she might bear. The incorporation and consolidation were complete. "My wife and I are one, and I am he," was what a husband believed in; and since there was no divorce obtainable for a woman before 1857, there was no way of escape save death.[11]

Into such a society was born Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot), and when she loved and then started to live with the renown philosopher, thinker and writer George Henry Lewis, who was living in separation from his wife, society considered George Eliot an outcast. Even Queen Victoria would not accept her at court. Despite this sad experience, George Eliot throughout her works never scorns marriage. On the contrary, she praises it to the exalted position of the most sacred of all human relationship; a sacrament, not of the church but of sublime human fellowship. In

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9. Rosalie Glynn Grylls, *Existing Education for Women, Queen's College 1848-1943* (London: George Rutherford & Sons, 1948), p. 11.
10. Sir William Blackstone, *Commentary on the Laws of England* (London, 1765).
11. There was a theoretical possibility of divorce by Act of Parliment, but only in two cases was this ever obtained at the instance of a wife; moreover, one would require a fortune to apply for this Act.

almost all her novels it is reflected as a holy, pure, binding tie and sacred obligation. Her life with Lewis was an example of this ideal; she was true and faithful to him, to their bond, to the end, and was an affectionate mother to his children from his first wife.

However, with these experiences, both sad and otherwise, lying in her background, she found it only natural to build around the characters of her heroes and heroines, stories reflecting her own family life. She derived almost all the major characters and situations of her novels from real life. Her views of 'promotion' in the social classes are interwoven around acquaintances and members of her family. Her own aunts' advancement had left its traces in her mind, but their experiences serve as a basis for event. Her novel *The Mill on the Floss* is considered to be her own biography. The tragic life of the poetic, sensitive, independent-minded and intelligent Maggie Tulliver is based on that of her creator. Maggie defies the rigid, strict social laws which would impede her from behaving naturally. She thinks independently and acts independently. Yet the Victorian society with its utmost adherence to the notions of "decorum," "ladylike" conventions and customs tries to crush Maggie's liberal social behavior, just as it tried with George Eliot herself. The heroines of *Adam Bede* and *The Middlemarch*, the Methodist preacher Dinah Morris and the intelligent Dorathea Brooke, are also female characters through whom George Eliot explores the disadvantageous status of women then and thus inculcates to the reading public her own teachings.

Just like George Eliot, England's other major Victorian novelists, such as Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and George Meredith, dedicated their enormous talents to an exploration of Victorianism which by the sheer fact of assuming its inescapability, complicated and enriched it It was their *treatment* of their subject, not their subject, that distinguished them from other less talented English writers. Even today they restore for us the context and possible seriousness of what are now more or less abondoned literary themes: feminine purity; feminine innocence; the sancity of the childish heart; and, above all, the meaning of religious conformity. Emily, Dora and Agnes of Dickens' *David Copperfield* are but true and concrete examples for feminine purity and innocence. His other novel, *Great Expectations*, or Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, are but reflections of various social issues of the time, and, not least of which, is the position of women. George Meredith, who is generally considered to be an obscure writer, is another Victorian advocate for the cause of women. All his heroines and some of the minor female characters in his novels *The Egoist*, *Diana of the Crossways*, *Evan Harrington*, and *Sandra Belloni* are but his mouthpieces for the emancipation of women. As a general rule, novelists usually base their fiction on their own experiences. The interest lies in what experiences they select to present in their fiction and how these experiences are moulded. In the instance of George Meredith, for example, even the casual reader is struck by his treatment of women characters, their importance in his fiction, and the attitude of their author toward them. Another point about Meredith, just as it is with George Eliot, is that incidents in his novels are almost all psychological actions, described not as they would strike on observer, but from the viewpoint of

the actor. He seldom states a fact or incident simple; he sees the subtle complexity of life too clearly; hence, he tries to present everything in the full context of its surroundings.

Another point which is again found both in George Eliot and Meredith, is that their standard of values is largely different from that of the ordinary man. They see life as a complex of emotions, with passion as its thrust and highest reality. Their thoughts move on a higher plane than that of everyday life. To understand them, the reader has to climb or to be lifted up to their altitude, for only then their view becomes intelligible, since matters which, looked at from the dead-level of everyday life, appear to be mountains, are then seen to be only hills with the true peaks revealed above and behind them. This is, in fact, what makes Meredith in particular more obscure, which is also his originality.

Coming back to the main issue again, one can see that the impact of these novelists on the public as far as the emancipation of women is concerned, is indeed, no less than that of Mary Wollstonecraft, who was inspired by thoughts of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity," and wrote and published her great book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. On the surface things were unaltered; but across the apparently immutable state of society there flowed the searchlight of the philanthropic movement, and this illumination left behind it not only movements to improve the social and material conditions of the people,but also a great awakening of conscience. The young women who lived under its influence saw that the world was unsatisfactory in a great many ways; they saw that old people were poor and hungry, that children were wild and ragged, and that rain came in through the cottage roofs; and then they realized that themselves, being "only women," were powerless to do any substantial good. And from that illumination, the Women's Movement sprang.

Yet, as far as the ordinary women was concerned, the state of affairs was not grievous. By law women were heavily handicapped, and none of the grievous disabilities which had been fastened upon them in the ancient past had yet been removed. But the ordinary women thought nothing of their legal status, and cared not at all for their "rights." Life, as they knew it, was a mixture of pleasures and pains, and the proportions were not controllable by law. They adjusted themselves to the world in which they found themselves; and if they were fortunate in their family surroundings, as well as being intelligent, or beautiful, their lives passed pleasantly enough. But their prosperity was built on precarious foundations, and serious dangers lurked beneath it. If their fathers, or their husbands, were ill-disposed, the whole course of their lives might be shattered through no fault of their own. For women were relative to men, and had no real standing of their own.

These were indeed the stark facts concerning the position of women in the middle of the nineteenth century, and public opinion fully supported them. It was generally agreed to be one of the self-evident laws of nature that men were superior to women - mentally, physically, and morally. Education, therefore, as already has been explained at the outset, would be wasted upon them; responsibility would

overwhelm them, and work would make them ill. They must be sheltered, protected, and indulged - so the theory ran. They were the wives, or the mothers, or the daughters of some man; that was their description and the real justification of their existence. And the virtues and attainments which it was right and proper for them to cultivate were those which would be useful in these capacities. Men differed as to what they wanted from women: some were content with good cooking and wholesome stupidity, others hoped for intelligent companionship and a dash of sympathy; but all were united in feeling that ambition, achievement, and independence were unfeminine attributes, and that obedience, humility and unselfishness were what was really required.

The women who were brought up on this convention grew accustomed to it, and loved it. They sheltered under the irresponsibility it gave them, and they hugged the "chains" which seemed so protective; and in their turn they brought up their daughters in the good old way, so that all seemed fair and smooth. In the middle and upper classes, women who were exceptionally energetic might carve out for themselves a round of "duties," but the others would sink back into a soft idleness; and men despised them, and women did not mind.

Among the working population conditions were not the same, but the belief in the inferiority of women was equally firmly established. Although women toiled with their hands as hard, and even more incessantly than men, they had less reward for what they did. If they went out to work their rates of pay were pitifully low, and if they did not go out to work, there were no rates of pay at all. It was generally believed that if a man was displeased with the way his wife worked for him - or with any other aspect of her conduct - he had a perfect right to beat her with a stick, provided it was not thicker than his own thumb. This was all "natural." It was woven into the very fabric of the universe, which it would be ridiculous as well as impious to change.

Such was the general belief and the general situation of female inhabitants of the country when the English authors were contributing to the emancipation of women through their portrayals of the lifelike pictures of contemporary women.

Turning to the U.S.A. at the very same time, one is overwhelmed by the almost identical picture of the female inhabitants to that of their sisters in England. One need not therefore explore further all the social and economic handicaps set around the American woman then. What is worth mentioning here is the *difference in the treatment* of the subject by American authors of the Victorian era such as James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman, who turned their sights principally on values and scenes that operated as alternatives to cultural norms. Their subjects, as well as their styles, differed even from those of their American contemporaries. They wrote dramas of the forest, the city, the sea. They sought to bring their readers into direct confrontation with the more brutal facts of America's explosive development. Thoreau, Cooper, Melville and Whitman wrote principally about men, not girls and

children, and they wrote about men engaged in economically and ecologically significant activities.

Yet between 1820 and 1875, in the midst of the transformation of the American economy into the most powerfully aggressive capitalist system in the world, American culture seemed bent on establishing a perpetual Mother's Day. This period, in fact, includes the initial commercialization of culture, most notable the revolution in printing and the rise of nationally circulated magazines such as the *Ladies' Magazine*, which had an enormous impact on the advancement of the women's movement. It was in this period, too, when Hawthorne wrote and when centuries-old traditions and beliefs concerning women, which had until then been unconditionally accepted as part of the cultural heritage, were being examined and questioned. The force behind this new awareness was, it seems, the attack on the system launched by the femininists. Hawthorne's phrasings and rhetoric make it clear that he was familiar with and influenced by their ideas. Almost all his women in greater or less degree are victims of the injustices of which the feminists complained, and of deeper psychological injustices which did not figure in their statements. The demands of the feminists, if achieved, were perfectly obvious to him; Hawthorne's four novels show a hatred of the existing system as intense as that of any feminist, so he could scarcely fault them for their radicalism. But one should remember that sharp differences in focus and emphasis existed. (One must be careful, however, not to confuse Hawthorne's personal animosity toward Margaret Fuller, whom he did not take seriously as a feminist, with substantive disagreement). Thoroughly alienated as he was from the commerical ethic, Hawthorne could hardly be concerned with problems since he saw society as so devastatingly repressive of the best in man - since, in fact, the unending struggle between repression and selfhood is his major theme - he could see no deep remedy to woman's ills in giving her access to society's opportunities in equal measure with men. Work, in his view, was a prison for man, just as man was a prison for woman. He did not, however, use this conviction to rationalize prohibiting women from entering traditionally masculine fields; he explicity states in *The Blithedale Romance* that society should, for itself and for women, open all avenues to her. In *The Scarlet Letter* one can perceive in Hester's story, abstracted from the fine symmetries of the novel, a case study in radicalization and the limits of women's freedom. *The Blithedale Romance* is the novel most explicitly concerned with the women question, and the one whose rhetoric and ideas show the most extensive feminist influence. In Priscilla, the overworked and underpaid proletarian who also incarnates maidenly purity, Hawthorne combines the polar extremes of cultural misogyny. The working girl is society's most exploited and degraded creature, the product and victim of a ruthless economic ethic. The ethereal female is society's most dearly held ideal, whose impossible demands on women put them as effectively behind a veil as the custom of purdah. To combine these two extremes in a single figure is to expose the culture's hypocrisy. While real women are abused, an ideal of woman is exalted; the ideal conceals the abuse, and its unnaturalness further abuses women. Xenobia's legend of the silvery veil shows the fears that have led men to place women behind the veil, and thus exposes another level of hypocricy.

While playing this metaphor on the veil, perhaps it is a ripe time to turn to Turkey, where this "sign" (the veil) of feminine purity, innocence, and mobility of status was in its most influential phase in the history of that nation in the nineteenth century.

Strangely enough, the early written history of Anatolia goes back to 3000 B.C. and all written documents prove the lofty status and equality women had with men. There was a strict practice of monogamy and adultery was forbidden. Yet women's wages were less than men's wages for the same work. The practice of 'Başlık' was first introduced then. Shamanism was the Turk's first official religion before Islam. In this the Mother goddess was given the first place among the Shamanistic gods and goddesses. It is also interesting that in Shamanism everything that was pleasant, such as birth, love, the good, the right was associated with a goddess and everything that was unpleasant such as death, disease, and war was associated with a god. Shamanism was based on egalitarian concepts. The woman was strong, influential and powerful and stood beside her husband.

Later the Turks accepted Islam, almost two centuries after it had appeared. The ultimate goal of Islam is paradise, and Muhammed teaches that those who serve their mothers well can achieve their goals. To a large extent this explains why importance is given to women and mothers in Islam. But as Islam appeared in different regions, certain moral tenets could be recognized. The practice of murdering daughters was prohibited; moreover, laws for marriage and divorce were introduced. Women, for the first time, could win and inherit properties in Islam. Women had to obey their husbands, and, in return, husbands had to treat their wives well. The Koran considers wife and husband, mother and father equal.

Later, however, Turkish women's rights as practised in Islam came to be completely changed, especially under Persian and Byzantine influences. Along with changes in social structure came changes in religious beliefs, and the social status of women was downgraded with the introduction into Turkish society of the Persian patriarchal system and the mischievous woman image of Zarathustra. In the fifteenth century, the "Harem" was institutionalized in accordance with Byzantine and Persian styles. In the 18th century which is also the period of the Ottoman states regression, the Turkish woman lost many of her rights: her rights in marriage and divorce, inheritance and ownership, and also her right to bear testimony in a court of law. She was shut up in the house, and her life was reduced to a kind of imprisonment.

Up to the time of the Ottoman political reformation of 1839, a number of decrees which limited women's rights were issued one after the other. For example, during the reign of Osman III, a decree allowing women to go out only four days a week was issued. Later in this period, women had to obey such sad orders of the sultans as forbade them to walk along the same street as their fathers and sons. However, it is a fact that these decrees regulated a woman's conduct only in certain places and at certain times. The Turkish women in the rural parts of the country lived much more freely than did women in Istanbul.

But in 1839, with the Reformation Act, innovations and Westernization in the country began. Women in this atmosphere were granted new rights and privileges. Also certain laws, like those concerning the land-owning inheritance and marriage taxes were restored to the advantage of the woman. Concubinage disappeared and schools for girls opened. Even the idea of a woman's working was advocated. Thus, the women who always had a share in the fighting in time of war would not be shut in the house in time of peace. A new epoch for woman's emancipation was opening.

In 1859 Şinasi wrote his famous play *Marriage of a Poet* in which he supported the idea that, in the arrangement of a marriage, it was necessary for both sides to see and love each other. He also ridiculed and reproved the custom of "görücü" (visiting the proposed bride's house for bride-seeing). In 1868 the journal *Terakki* (Progress) brought forward the subjects of women's rights and elections for the first time. In 1872, the poet, prose writer and journalist Namık Kemal's writings in *İbret* gave wide publicity to the question of woman's emancipation and her social status. Another poet of the same era, Abdulhak Hamit, stated that "the measure of a country's progress was the women's legal, social and professional position in relation to that of the man."

In 1859, a high school for girls was opened; in 1869 it became compulsory for girls between 6-11 years old to attend primary schools. In 1870, a teachers' training school for girls was opened in Istanbul. In 1959, a group of women poplished the *Ladies' Journal*. Many other activities, social, literary and political, supported women's rights. But an important issue here is that in Turkey, in any period of history, there were never Movements of Emancipation in the Western sense of the word. We had never had militant methods, as was the case in England, for example, to obtain our rights fully. Throughout history Turkish women were famous for their contributions to philanthropic and educational works. However, it was the foundation of the new Republic of Turkey in 1923, when the Civil Law replaced the religious code and a statement concerning women was issued which can be summarized thus:

- The custom of polygamy which had lasted for fourteen centuries came to an end within Civil Law which allowed a man to marry one woman through a civil marriage - religious ceremonies would not be recognized by law.

- The mother was equally liable for the guardianship of children as the father.

- For both women and men, it was illegal to marry under a certain age (18).

- In marriage neither the man nor the woman could be represented by someone else. A marriage could only be legalized when both sides gave agreement before an authorized person.

- A married woman could own property without her husband's consent.
- Men and women were equal before the law with regard to the rights of inheritance.
- Before the Civil Law, two women witnesses could refute a man's testimony. Civil Law did not discriminate between the sexes and considered everybody's witness equal. It also did not discriminate between race, religion or color.

In conclusion it might be pointed out that the political and literary attempts for the emancipation of women both in England and America on the one hand, and in Turkey on the other began in the later nineteenth century; however, unlike in Turkey where, this process was realized peacefully, and Turkish women were given their full rights through the parliament of the Republic, in the other two countries it involved a great deal of militancy and public reaction. Furthermore in view of the women's liberation movements in the sixties and seventies, one tends to suggest that the process in these two countries has not yet been completed and the reaction to this movement in their literature has periodically been reflected.