THE FORGE OF NEW IDENTITIES - A VICTORIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

During Victorian times, women started to abandon the confinement of their gynaecium, that cut them off from the world outside, and that would only allow mere, simple, projection of the silhouette of things, distorted as they were onto the walls of their 'cave'. Victorianism equals the leaving of the cave by women, who start to approach the fire and to perceive the light through all their pores. The first steps taken out of the darkness into the light cast blurry plays of light over their profile (which may account for women writers' male-pseudonyms) and step by step they start assuming their identity, wrapping themselves in the fabric of light, learning to be themselves, and most importantly, wanting to be themselves. Women start throwing their society imposed masks away, and go in search of the real light. The paper highlights the steps women had to take in order to come to affirm their personality, their real self, and it offers a double perspective upon this fragile social affirmation of womanhood in Victorian England.

Key words: Victorianism, womanhood, self, identity

In defining their identity and articulating their profile, the women of the XIXth century initiated their personal journey towards emancipation. Emancipation sought goals that were legal, educational, political and sexual. Because of their biological 'confinements' and social context women have been seen as less valuable than their male counterparts. Simone de Beauvoir explains that a woman 'was no fellow creature in man's eyes; it was beyond the human realm that her power was affirmed, and she was therefore outside of that realm. Society has always been male; political power has always been in the hands of men.' Patriarchal perceptions of women as beyond and outside the human overlook woman's humanity and essential role in the perpetuation of society. The idea of in-betweennness associated with women's destiny and their place within the patriarchal society tends to articulate itself in a dominant dimension of the time, when ladies were perceived as beyond and outside the human status. A clearly stated point of view in this respect is offered by Sherry Ortner who describes culture as a 'small clearing within the forest of the larger natural system. From this point of view, that which is intermediate between culture and nature is located on the continuous periphery of culture's clearing; and though it may thus appear to stand both above and below (and beside) culture, it is simply outside and around it.' (*fig. 1*).

Other illustrates women's in-between's, attempting to illustrate that women are trapped in intermediacy because, unlike men, patriarchal language and symbolization are alienating for them.

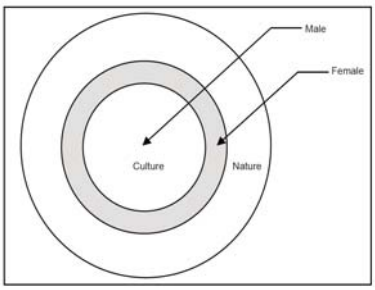

Figure 1 **Diagram illustrating Sherry B. Ortner's description of female intermediacy**

As she explains, woman's association with nature and the view that nature is 'seen as lower than culture and accounts for the assumption that woman is lower than man in the order of things. […] Women's ambiguous status between culture and nature [might] account for the fact that, woman can occasionally be aligned with culture, and in any event is often assigned polarized and contradictory meanings within a single symbolic system'. Excluded, considered less than a human being, denied any social and ontological role, women has to act, to do something, to mark their presence and gain acknowledgement first as humans and then as gnoseologically endowed beings. And most importantly, they had to make their voices heard by the 'audience', and that was of time when only strong, powerful voices could penetrate the sturdy walls of silence. In England,

the revolutionary platform of liberty, equality and fraternity was interpreted by a woman to include women, and the resonant voice was Mary Wollstonecraft's. 'Give us freedom', she wrote flamingly in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). 'Let us be direct', and then there would be no more female barnacles, and no more corroding of the feminine imagination.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In drafting this paper we have looked into the whole period of Victorianism, analysing it both from a synchronic and diachronic point of view, with a special accent of all the works that echo the philosophy of an age that changed the world, not only in what the technical and economic progress are concerned, but also with respect to the emergence of a new and valuable actor, the woman.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

That was the cry of a very young woman who thought that civilization could begin again. Mary Wollstonecraft supports the very same idea, for her main goal was to raise women's overall moral and intellectual stature to make them more aware of their status first as human beings, as second, as rational citizens. Although she accepted that most middle-class women would marry and remain at home, she did want girls' education to prepare them for the possibility of economic independence, that would give them freedom and dignity that marriage alone was far from bestowing upon them. Wollstonecraft's hope was that women might in future train as doctors, pursue business, or study politics; although she did not envisage access to any radical rights, such as the vote, Mary Wollstonecraft suggested that, 'women to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of the government'. Far from inspiring a feminist trend, mainly due to her husband's *Memoirs (*1798) that brought to the public's attention the details of her 'immoral' personal life, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Right of Women* was followed largely by a period of reaction, dominated by writers of advice manuals and conduct books, such as Hannah More's writings on female education, and Mrs. Sarah Elli's immensely successful *Women of England* (1839), followed by *The Mothers of England* (1842), and *The Daughters of England* (1843). Aimed at the middle-class, these books were designed to inspirit women with a sense of missionary attitude towards life, which combined patriotism with dedication to homeland and family.

Assimilation of women's entire lives into economic bargains at the cost of their inclinations is a condition that John Stuart Mill associates with a rule of force, not law that simply turns the house into a jail, and not a home. Mill explicitly associates the domestic situation with slavery. 'People are not aware', he wrote, 'that less than forty years ago, Englishmen might still by law hold human beings in bondage as saleable property.' While such power has been regulated everywhere else, it still remains true of the power of men over women. With Mill and Ruskin one marks one of the most significant stages of debate about women's rights in the late decades of the nineteenth century. 'In Mill one encounters the realism of sexual politics, in Ruskin its romance and the benign aspect of its myth.'

In fact, both men approached the 'woman question' from distinctly and peculiar standpoints, their totally opposed attitudes emphasising the profound lack of a coherent vision in what women's rights were concerned. John Ruskin (1819-1900) saw the man as 'the doer, the creator, and the discoverer'; while the profile of a woman is not to enter any contest, but to 'infallibly' adjudge 'the crown of contest'. After an unhappy marriage to Euphemia Gray, annulled in 1854 on grounds of non-consummation, and after falling in love with a nine-year-old girl, whom he was teaching to draw, Rose la Touche, John Ruskin urged parents to educate their daughters thoroughly, assuming that the majority would be helpmeets to their husbands, 'All such knowledge should be given her as may enable her to understand, and even to aid, the work of men.' Ruskin perceived this special relationship man-woman as a chivalrous medieval dance in which man had to defend the colours of the damsel, and the latter was to reach a sense of self-assertion though his shinny armour. Mill's treatise, *The Subjection of Women* (1869) brings another tonality to the same 'woman question', for Ruskin's writing is emotional where Mill's is wholly rational. He concentrates on the way society has traditionally oppressed women and treated them as slaves. For this the blames what Ruskin seems to put into equation, namely the 'legal subordination of one sex to the other', which he sees as being wrong in itself and 'one of the chief hindrances to human improvement.' The legal subordination, he argues, is based on nothing more than the fact that men are physically stronger, which Mill proves to be an absurd reason for wanting to give one group of people power over the other. Much more than that, Mill believed that the true nature of women is stifled by the artificial conditions of their social confinement, for he

clearly stated that 'what is now called the nature of women in an eminently artificial thing'. He is of the opinion that the legal relations of the sexes have corrupted their nature, and the only way in which this can be corrected is though the equality of rights, 'the only school of genuine moral sentiment is society between equals.' There is, however, a common point that brings Ruskin and Mill together, namely the lack of a radical point of view, arguing for dramatic changes and not simple, mere alterations of the common status-quo of the time, since both of them would assume that women's major role is that of spouse. Some women tried to partially escape this 'slavery', as marriage was considered by many ladies of the time, through work, although it was but a tiny pace towards self-assertion. It was not much, it was not only for their own support and benefit, but it was something. Women also acquired a radically different view of the world to the one from their front rooms. They could foresee new horizons. The first steps were painful, and required personal sacrifices and overcoming of fears and prejudices, while raising their social consciousness.

A large and growing number of single, middle-class women were looking for economic independence as an alternative to marriage. This led to further action and a more politicised role for some, such as campaigns for work opportunities for middle-class women, better education, better working conditions for the poor, and the women's movement and suffrage. Within such constraints, many women strove to create their own meaning out of work, and, most importantly, a sense of identity. Instrumental in effecting the change of attitude was the so-called 'Langham Place' circle, a group of middle-class women who discussed and published their views on women and who met at 19 Langham Place in London. The pre-eminent figures of the group were Barbara Leigh-Smith Bodichon, author of the Women and Work (1856) and Bessie Rayner Parkes, who signed the Remarks on the Education of Girls (1854). Together, they established their own publication, The English Woman's Journal (1858-1864), later renamed *The Englishwoman's Review*, and a Society for the Promoting of the Employment of Women (1859). Most of their work was geared towards providing women with alternatives to marriage and motherhood. Their greatest challenge was to oppose the notion that a 'lady', by definition, was not supposed to work, and that marriage was the true vocation of women. Surprisingly enough, if during the Victorian age there were voices rebelling against the idea that was narrowing up to almost annihilating the very idea of being for women, if social movements and gatherings such as the Guild initiated campaigns for voicing women's rights, the trend has been far from being continuous, let alone ascendant. At a distinct Guild conference in Blackpool, 1951, Mrs. Charlton observed that, 'we in the guild appreciate that the duty of the young mother is in her home. Her family takes up most of her time and she cannot neglect her domestic responsibilities to attend Guild meetings', almost echoing the ideas of Mrs. Ben Jones in the 1880s that Guild work should not lead to 'the neglect of their household duties'. Thus, the Guild was transmitting the values it had contested almost a century before. Initially, women's employment opportunities developed as extension areas of their 'natural' sphere as 'mothers' and 'carers', teaching (mention has to be made that women's education prepared them badly even for teaching, and not at all for anything else), nursing, work-house visiting, and work on school boards. Teaching became more professionalised as more girls started to be educated at school rather than by governesses at home. Furthermore, the invention of machinery for spinning and weaving removed women from their traditional occupations within the house and took them into the factories.

Since one can undoubtedly label the period 1780-1840 as being definitely an era of domestic manufacture, women were given few opportunities to work, and, among these very few given, one was what we may call a traditional one, like spinning. Women remained the hand-spinners of Europe, to such an extent, that in Belgium, they turned into a key element to the local economy that a popular proverb warned, 'cut off the thumbs of the linen spinsters and Flanders will starve'. The women who worked divided into three groups. The first third were employed in industry as workers in mechanized factories, especially textile factories, or in small workshops. The second third were domestic servants, a feminine occupation above all others (nine out of ten servants were women – a fact which is also to be explained by the fact that the tax per woman servant was far less reduced compared with the one paid for a man servant), whose greatest numerical strength was reached in 1880-1900. Finally, the third category occupied a position halfway between the subordinate position of wage earner and the slave position of the servant. These were the home-workers, particularly those engaged in the garment trade.

Still, regardless of the working place, the picture was an equally sombre one – low wages (always half below men's salaries), harsh conditions and poor qualifications. At every level of work, in town as well as country, the economic exploitation of women aggravated the social

inferiority of their sex. Women's production is for the most part excluded from the realm of value, something that continues two centuries later to be justified by the same pre-industrial legend in the form of wage discrimination in the modern workplace, where women's wages are depressed below by some unscrupulous employer policies. Since women were accustomed to a patriarchal world in which male authority ruled, it is not surprising that they behaved in an obedient way. If a woman needed work, she was unlikely to risk losing it, especially if there were no obvious alternatives; hence, she was forced into accepting whatever she was offered. Female self-exploitation suggests that a woman with few alternatives would take whatever payment and conditions offered in order to feed herself and her children. Elisabeth Gaskell explained that the master, 'finding that the child or woman was a more obedient servant to himself and an equally efficient slave to his machinery— was disposed to displace the male adult labourer' The combination of cheapness, docility and 'special skills' made them desirable employees, especially in areas of work where they had been for generations, in agriculture, service, needlework and textiles. The economic construction of corporate order became a major factor in nineteenth-century social debate, and in the narratives that explore new social perspectives. The full effects of the Industrial Revolution were only beginning to be felt in the 1840s when its supporting economic system began to centralize. The reconstruction of the social order associated with such massive changes occurred very gradually. Even then, two economies co-existed, one belonging to fledgling modern technologies for producing things like cotton, iron and paper, and the engineering and railroads to design and transport them. Helped by the lack of governmental interference, and by such blows to the agrarian economy as the 1846 Repeal of the Protectionist Corn Laws of 1815 and 1828, the smaller and developing industrial segment of the economy 'began to expand and spread at an unprecedented rate, and eventually supplanted the traditional economy altogether'. Yet it was the Industrial Revolution much more than the liberal ideas and their diffusion, which brought about the transformation of the feminine condition. It was the Industrial Revolution that in the long run set up the foundations of emancipation by breaking the patriarchal pattern of work in the home. It undermined the traditional idea of the woman confined to a most secluded and restricted territory, limited as it was to the family group, by simply drawing her into the larger world outside. It also coincided with a change of opinion in the country. New ideas on the capacities, rights and roles of women were making themselves felt. The struggle for emancipation started, and it grew stronger with each year. Its strength derived from the fact that it combined from that moment onwards economic factors and intellectual pressures resulting from the growing success of feminist theories and feelings.

Male pre-eminence was the rule, without argument but also without pretence, as there was no recourse to bourgeois sublimations. Marriage and maternity was the natural destiny of woman. The aim of all the heroines of the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell and, to some extent those of George Eliot, was marriage. Even someone as open-minded and enlightened as Henry Fawcett, the husband of Dame Millicent Fawcett a most distinguished pioneer of women's rights regarded marriage as the aim of even educated women,

'I venture to assert, with no little confidence, that the more a woman's mind is trained, the more her reasoning faculties are developed, the more certainly does she become a suitable companion for her husband; she is better able to manage his house with tact and skill and to obtain the best, the most tender and the most enduring influence over her children.'

CONCLUSIONS

The writers, either fictional or political, we have analysed have managed to forge and claim the legitimate right to female identity, against this overwhelming social, ideological and political background split between public and private, domestic and political, male and female, logic and irrationality. Thus, it is but obvious that these terms played a significant part in shaping the ways in which women's experience in the Victorian period was understood.

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