OUSSOUR Al Jadida Revue- Classified C-Edited by History of Algeria Laboratory- Human Sciences and Islamic Sciences Faculty- Oran1 University- Vol .11 N°3 (November) 1442-1443/2021
EISSN 2600-6324 ISSN 2170-1636
DOI: 10.54240/2318-011-003
https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/178

(DOI): **10.54240/2318-011-003-021**

Queen Victoria: her Impact on Women's Rights and British Feminism

الملكة فيكتوريا: تأثيرها على حقوق المرأة والحركة النسوية في بريطانيا

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Reception date: 29/06/2021 Revision date: 07/07/2021 Acceptation date: 04/11/2021

Abstract: The Victorian era, the period corresponding to Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901), was characterized by important reforms and catalyst changes in gender relations. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the main social codes that kept the Victorian woman in a constant subordinate position. It explores the feminists' efforts to change women's status from a second- class citizen to a citizen with equal rights and mainly the right to vote. It suggests that Queen Victoria had an important impact on some feminists and that she played a remarkable role in improving women's status in Britain. In so doing, some interesting questions are raised: for example, how could the Queen, who was known for being very conservative, inspire some feminists in their struggle for women's social and political rights? Did she support or reject feminism? Finally, what did the Queen do to help improve the position of the women of her era?

Keywords: Britain, Queen Victoria, social reforms, gender relations, Victorian woman, second-class citizen, feminism, women's rights, conservative, anti-feminist.

الملخص: تميز العصر الفيكتوري، الفترة المقابلة لحكم الملكة فيكتوريا (1837-1901)، بإصلاحات مهمة وتغييرات بارزة في العلاقات بين الجنسين. الهدف من هذه البحث هو إلقاء الضوء على أهم الأسس الاجتماعية التي أبقت المرأة الفيكتورية في وضع التبعية المستمر.

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ويستكشف هذا العمل جهود أعضاء الحركة النسوية لتغيير وضع المرأة من مواطنة من الدرجة الثانية إلى مواطنة تتمتع بحقوق متساوية، وبشكل أساسي الحق في التصويت.

يشير هذا العمل إلى أن الملكة فيكتوريا كان لها تأثير مهم على بعض النساء في الحركة، وأنها قامت بدور كبير في تحسين وضع المرأة في بريطانيا. وعلى هذا الأساس يمكن طرح بعض الأسئلة المثيرة للاهتمام: على سبيل المثال، كيف يمكن للملكة، التي كانت معروفة بأنها محافظة للغاية، أن تلهم بعض النساء في نضالهن من أجل الحقوق الاجتماعية والسياسية للمرأة؟ هل دعمت أم رفضت الحركة النسوية؟ وأخيرًا، ماذا فعلت الملكة لتساعد على تحسين وضع المرأة في عصرها؟

الكلمات المفتاحية: بريطانيا- الملكة فكتوريا- تغييرات إجتماعية- العلاقات بين الجنسين- المرأة الفيكتورية- مواطنة من الدرجة الثانية- الحركة النسوية- حقوق المرأة- محافظة- ضد الحركة النسوية.

Introduction: This paper study seeks to explore the relation between Queen Victoria, a female sovereign governing a patriarchal male-dominated society, the feminist movement of that time, and the improvement of the life of the Victorian woman. It draws upon previous research and sheds light on the Victorian woman who was totally ignored, with no rights and no legal status. Her unfavourable situation gave rise to a number of feminists dedicated to defending her case, taking Queen Victoria as a role model. The paper, thus, reveals some aspects of queen Victoria's life and her very conservative personality- she never understood why the British woman needed change- The paper also examines the way she inspired some feminists in their struggle for women's social and political rights, since she combined between the successful monarch and the ordinary Victorian woman: a devoted wife and mother. Building upon this analysis, the paper focusses on Victoria's interest for women's education as a tool to change her status from a second-class citizen to an ordinary one. Finally, the paper studies Victoria's label as anti feminist and the reasons for this widespread reputation. The last stage of this paper raises the question whether Queen Victoria supported or not feminism since she never publically announced it. This paper seeks to encourage further research on this question.

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During the reign of Queen Victoria, which lasted for 64 years, Britain was a powerful nation with a stable government, a growing economy, due to industrialization, and a rich culture. By 1900, it was ruling about a quarter of the world and thus, became the biggest empire the world had ever known: The British Empire. See figure 1.

fig 1:The British Empire[1]

However, the development of capitalism in Britain and the industrialisation process it underwent in the nineteenth century led to the rise of a distinct system of classes, which brought significant changes in the lives of both men and women. Women in the Victorian society belonged to four main social classes: the Nobility and Gentry, the Middle Class, the Upper and Lower Working Class and women belonging to the lower class. Any slight change from one class to another was considered as a serious offence. But in all these categories, women's role remained unchanged: they were supposed to live a highly restrictive life, centred on their husband and subsequently their children. It is only in late Victorian Britain that their social condition began to change, when wives and mothers wanted a revolution in the old order, arguing that women

[1]- ndla.no/subject:23/topic:1:184811/resource:1:97490?filters=urn:filter:06270029-7aa7-4a7a-b383-128b275ff150

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should have the same rights as men. This desire for change led to the rise of many feminist movements under the leadership of the suffragists and the suffragettes. Although these two organisations used different tactics and strategies, they both fought for women's economic as well as political rights. Queen Victoria, who symbolized femininity and domestic virtues, never understood why the British woman needed to vote. For her, a woman's place was at home with her husband and children. Ironically, Queen Victoria inspired many feminists in their cause and they used her image of a good mother and wife and at the same time as a successful monarch to argue for their claims. So the questions that can be raised are: Who was Queen Victoria? Knowing that she was very conservative, how could she inspire feminists in their struggle for gender equality? Was she for or against women's emancipation? Lastly, what role did she play in the improvement of the British women's status? These are the questions the following article proposes to answer.

1- **A General Overview of the Nineteenth Century British Woman**: During the era symbolised by the reign of the British monarch Queen Victoria, women's rights were in general extremely limited. Women were considered as no more than housewives, caregivers who should always be at their families' disposal. They used to be confined to the superiority of their husbands, being physically, mentally, and emotionally abused, belittled, and silenced. They had no personal opinion, no voice, and no freedom. Their respectable place was always behind the masculine frame of men.

In addition to their precarious place in society, women in the early nineteenth century were oppressed by laws that systematically and deliberately served the interests of men. A married woman, for example, could not own property of any kind and for the law, she had no independent legal identity. Husband and wife were doomed to be one person and that person was the husband,

> *By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband under*

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whose protection, she performs everything […][1]

Marriages in the Victorian era were contracts from which it was almost impossible for women to get out since divorce was considered as a social taboo. Wives had no other choice than to endure their husbands' control and cruelty including sexual violence, verbal abuse and financial dispossession. Deprived of their rights to vote, sue or own property, the married couple became an entity represented by the husband, placing him in control of all his wife's properties, which included her earnings and even her body.

Politically, women suffered from marginalization although they obtained, in 1896, the right to vote in local government elections[2]. It is clear that there were sharp distinctions between men's and women's rights since men were allotted more stability and power over their homes and over women. If this was the case of the common British woman, what about Queen Victoria? Who was she? and how did she succeed to rule its monarchy? This is the question I will try to answer in the following subtitle.

2- Queen Victoria, "The Mother of the Nation": Since ancient times the world knew many female sovereigns, but a few had such a great impact on their subjects, and were so popular, as Queen Victoria. Born on 24 May 1819, Queen Victoria, in full Alexandrina Victoria, became monarch of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland on 20 June 1837. She was also Empress of India from 1877 until her death in 1901.

When Victoria became heiress of the throne, at the age of 18, she immediately asserted her independence from her mother, Victoria Saxe-Saalfield- Coburg, her uncle Leopold, king of Belgium and her governess, Louise Lehzen. Although the Victorians apprehended the idea of being ruled by a woman, her determination to make herself worthy of the high position and the unavoidable mission she would be called to fulfill were the keynote element of her whole life. In fact, when Queen Victoria knew for the first time that she would be the queen of the British

1- Griffin Ben, The Politics of Gender on Victorian Britain, Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights, Cambridge University Press, 2012, P.9.
2- Marwick Arthur, British Society Since 1945, Pelican Books, England, 1982.

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Empire. She said to her governess, who announced her the news, *"I will be good, dear Lehnzen; I will be good"* [1]

Although her inexperience and youthful impulsiveness created her great difficulties at some moments, her devoted friend and councillor, Lord Melbourne, was always there to help her with an utmost wisdom and discretion.

Queen Victoria was educated in a quiet and unostentatious way, but being on the throne never disturbed her. Everyone was amazed at the calm dignity of her manner and the remarkable ease with which she endorsed her new role. Everyone was in awe to her capacity to do a work of which she had no experience. She attended the state business with strict regularity and never allowed pleasures and relaxations to interfere. Even her mother, the Duchess of Kent, who found herself in a subordinate position, was not allowed to interfere in state affairs. On every position, she showed a strong position, determination and self reliance and all that proved that no ordinary queen would be developed from the young princess.[2] After her coronation in 1837, she wrote to her uncle King Leopold of Belgium, portraying her new role,

> *I have seen almost all my other Ministers, and done regular, hard but to me delightful, work with them. It is to me the greatest pleasure to do my duty for my country and my people, and no fatigue, however great, will be burdensome to me if it is for the welfare of the nation*[3]

The queen's strong character in the early days of her reign grew up as her experience and knowledge of affairs increased, showing a great power of will in political affairs. Actually, during her reign, Queen Victoria showed a great sense of responsibility and wisdom and had acquired much experience and knowledge, what made her a unique sovereign. In fact, The Victorian era is known for being the most glorious

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1- Jeune Lady, Victoria and her Reign, *the North American Review*, Vol. 172, N°. 531, published by University of Northern Iowa, Feb.,1901, p.323.
2- Ibid. p.324.
3- Arildsen Emilie, Challenging or Conforming to the Norms of Victorian Society: Queen Victoria's Stance on Women's Social Status, *Interdisciplinary Journal in English*, N03,18-29, The Journal Editors 2018. p.19.

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period in the history of England. The British empire knew an economic prosperity and an industrial development that made it a dominant global player for many decades. Characterizing this age, Cenicola and Aumann wrote in 2008,

> *It was a very exciting period with many artistic styles, literary schools as well as political and social movements. Furthermore, the era was characterizes by rapid change and developments in nearly every sphere, from advances in medical scientific and technological knowledge to changes in population growth and location.*[1]

Although the Queen established a strong relation between England and Europe, she continued to isolate England, determined to make her the first modern industrial country. Her people knew that their welfare and their interests were the queen's priority and many of them owed her their prosperity and to her they showed their gratitude. Moreover, the domestic virtues of the queen and her family symbolized what was mostly important in English life. In the last years of her reign, she became more popular and her personal qualities more appreciated. She became known as 'The Mother of the Nation'.

3- Victoria, the Conservative Queen: The Queen's popularity started to grow and to have more impact when the media started comparing her to the queen of Madagascar, Ranavalona. The former was presented as being civilised and displaying sympathy, morality and self-sacrifice while "savage queens"[2] represented heathenism, coarseness of manners and a lack of sensibility for others. Queen Victoria represented a kind of femininity, which was centred on the family, motherhood and respectability. With her beloved husband Prince Albert and surrounded by their many children, they represented the ideal of marital harmony. See figure 2.

1- Stagel Aimée and Fahrnberger Gunter, Queen Victoria- Icon of the Victorian Age and Feminism, University of Vienna, Austria and of Hayen, Germany, November, 2016, p.1

2- Emilie Arildsen, op.cit., p.24.

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Fig.2: Queen Victoria and Her Nine Children[1]

With her marriage with Prince Albert, she did not conform to the social traditions stating that a woman ought to be subject to men. She insisted that the word "obey" should not be deleted from her marriage vows. In the census of 1851, in which the household of the royal family were included, Albert was listed as the head of the household and Victoria as the wife of the head of the household. This depicts the royal family as belonging to the traditional social norms and stresses Queen Victoria's role as a devoted wife. Therefore, private domestic life was equated with femininity; public life being more in accordance with a masculine domain. It is clear that the Queen was caught in a dilemma between her perceptions of womanliness and her duty as a political sovereign. In a letter to King Leopold she wrote,

[1]- www.google.com/search?q=queen+victoria+AND+HER+FAMILY&rlz=1C1SQJL_frDZ875DZ875&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwinwcStKvvAhX3XhUIHUiTBcYQ_AUoAXoECA4QAw&biw=1234&bih=524#imgrc=Hcggrb6YTL_OQM&imgdii=sCgEjH87zEEG3M

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> *Albert grows daily fonder and fonder of politics and business, and is so wonderfully fit for both- such perspicacity and such courage- and I grow daily to dislike them both more and more. We women are not made for governing- and if we are good women, we must dislike these masculine occupations […].*[1]

Victoria considered a strange anomaly that in a country where men had such particular power over their wives, the husband of a queen had not such rights whilst she was engaged in marriage just like any other woman. Once again, the queen referred to the traditional gender roles of her contemporary time. She became an icon of late 19th century middle-class femininity and domesticity.

After divorce, it was natural that husbands had the right to custody of their children. But thanks to the efforts of the feminist Caroline Norton, the Infants and Child Custody Bill was passed in 1873. The bill prevented men from, unjustly, depriving their wives of their children. Absurdly, Queen Victoria expressed her apathy to this legislation and considered it an aversion. For her, as it was the tradition, children belonged to the father.

For the researchers Gilbert and Guba, the Victorian period witnessed unprecedented changes in women's conditions of life. At this stage, women voted for the right to vote, to own property and to custody. They studied physics and wrote best sellers. Women both inside and outside Britain had gained such success that the issue of the Women's Question- the social questioning about what women's place ought to be in society- began to be at the centre of research of many thinkers.

Gilbert and Gubar think that for nearly a century, only one woman had played such an extraordinary international role and had added to the intensity of discussions around this issue as Queen Victoria. She became thus a kind of inspiration for women in general and for feminists in particular.

4- Queen Victoria's Impact on Feminism: Queen Victoria has for a long time represented a personality split between her role as a submissive

1- Ibid, p.22.

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contemporary woman, with a very conservative view of women's place in society, and her role as a powerful political monarch. She is known for contributing to better women's social status by influencing the mindset of her contemporary women.

Many feminists have used Queen's Victoria's position as a tool to enhance their feminist movements arguing that the queen's life and political activism represented what an ordinary British woman could do. One of these feminists is the prominent figure and leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), Millicent Garrett Fawcett. Taking the Queen as an example of femininity she stated, "Politics and political responsibilities of the weightiest kind have not unsexed the Queen"[1]. She added, "If it were true that home duties and political duties were incompatible, the Royal children would have a sadly neglected childhood"[2]. She also added that it was exactly Victoria's natural feminine characteristics that made her a particular British sovereign.

Another evidence of Queen Victoria's impact on the social condition of contemporary women can be seen when considering the lives of her daughters, the Princesses, who for Millicent Fawcett had shown their sympathy to the women's movement in Britain,

> *Their interest in empowering their fellow women legally, educationally and financially must have been fastened by the naturalness of female power and self- determination as modelled by their mother.*[3]

Queen Victoria represented a divided set of values. On one hand, she symbolised the traditional marriage and domesticity, and on the other hand, she was considered a successful political sovereign. For her contemporary women, she was seen as an example of the devoted wife and mother capable of assuring successfully her role as queen of nation.

Although she did not express any clear opinion about feminism, it is clear that the Queen had influenced, at least indirectly, the suffrage movement in Britain. She was the complete opposite of the typical Victorian woman but had played a great role model for all feminists. Her

1- Ibid.p.24
2- Ibid.p.25
3- Ibid.

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position was enviable since she had not to be submitted to the law of coverture. Her status as queen made her superior to her husband Prince Albert and thus, he did not dispossess her of her property and she was not obliged to adopt his name after marriage. In a period when men could obtain all rights, the queen succeeded to assert herself, giving women the hope and strength to pursue higher educational as well as political goals. Unfortunately, she did not much bother about feminist movements.

To political affairs, Queen Victoria showed a deep interest. She was very intelligent. She knew from the beginning that she had to appear publically in order to prove that she was capable of ruling the kingdom. However, her political presence began to vanish after her marriage with Prince Albert who was eager to take more responsibility. After his death, she took a relatively long time to return on the scene and to take again her role as head of Great Britain. Although Albert's death caused a great pain to the queen, she expressed her desire to have a male companion, who would assist and advise her, and she chose John Brown to play this role, and next to whom she found again her way back to life. This marriage tarnished her image as an independent monarch and gave the impression that the queen could not live without the overprotection of a man. That much disappointed some feminists who were considering the queen as their role model since her ascension on the throne.

John Brown died in 1883. Although Queen Victoria lost two important men in her life, she managed to fulfill her role as a remarkable monarch, under whose reign; England became a powerful nation in terms of technology and industry. Social conditions improved and life expectancy increased. Her special position gave feminists hopes for a future life where men and women would be equal. Women's suffrage in Victorian era achieved great success as far as the question of equal treatment is concerned. However, according to Aimée Stagel and Gunter Fahrnberger, Victoria is not considered as a feminist since she never understood women's need to be independent. She had never experienced the life of an average woman.[1]

5- The Queen's Interest for Women's Education: The nineteenth century represents the period in English history with the greatest

1- Stagel Aimée and Fahrnberger Gunter ,op.cit.,p.9

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educational reforms the country had ever witnessed. Actually, prior to this period, women's education was constrained to the nobility and limited to drawing, needle -work, music, dancing and learning some French or Italian[1]. Their status is accurately summed up in the following quotation,

> *The ideal of womanhood through the ages has been a modest, docile, clinging creature, trained in home-keeping arts, with physical charms sufficient to compensate for an empty mind, and with unlimited capacity of self-immolation. It followed that education of an intellectual sort played but a small part in the woman's life*[2]

At the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign, it was very common that only rich children could be educated. Boys and girls were educated at home by a governess or a tutor until the age of 10. The boys could join school whereas girls continued to get their education at home. It was not until 1870 that schools became accessible to both poor and rich children on equal terms[3].

As mentioned previously, the Queen was hostile to the feminists' revolutionary demands for gender equality. Nevertheless, she did not ignore their claims for the necessity to provide a better education for women. In 1848, the Queen's college in London was open to women who desired higher educational qualification or sought a teaching career. In 1849, Bredford College, which was intended only for women, was founded and many other public schools for girls followed. The Education Act, which gave women the right to serve on board schools, was passed in 1870[4]. This constituted a significant advance in women's educational opportunities, which led to a decline in women's illiteracy. See figure 3.

1- Fields Beeler Mary F., Female Education as Reflected in Victorian Fiction, Graduate Thesis Collection, Buttler University, Indianapolis, 1940, p.7
2- Ibid, p.6
3- Stagel Aimée and Fahrnberger Gunter,op.cit.,p.6
4- Nsaidzedze Ignatius, An Overview of feminism in the Victorian Period (1832-1901), *American Research Journal of English Literature*, Vol.3, Issue 1, 18 pages, ISSN-2378-9026, p.3.

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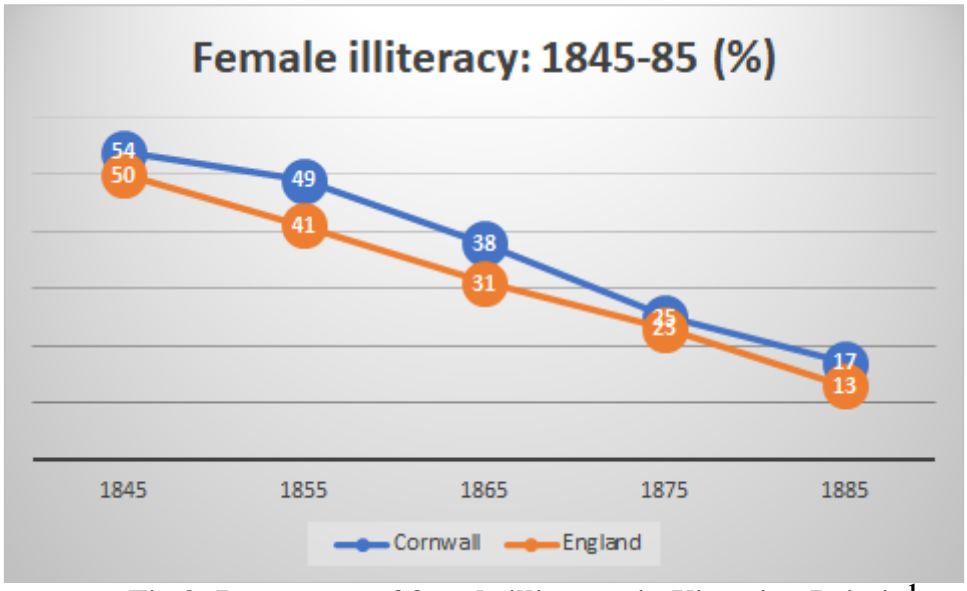

Fig.3: Percentage of female illiteracy in Victorian Britain[1]

Obviously, the improvements in women's education came as a result of the feminists' efforts to make education available to women of all classes.

Several events, legislation and publications tackled the importance of women's education during the Victorian era. For example, in 1856 Bessie Parks wrote *The Remarks on the Education of Girls* and Emily Shirreff *Intellectual Education and its Influence on the Character and Happiness of Women*. In 1866, Emily Davies published *The Higher Education of Women* and in 1868, Josephine Butler wrote *The Education and Employment of Women.* The first women's college at Cambridge, Girton College, was founded in 1869. But, why was women's education so important during the Victorian period?

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[1]- www.google.com/search?sa=X&rlz=1C1SQJL_frDZ875DZ875&sxsrf=ALeKk00OmQx4G9-V-7hum3kWF332aySQvQ:1615644581728&source=univ&tbm=isch&q=LITERACY+RATE+OF+WOMEN+IN+VICTORIAN+BRITAIN&hl=fr&ved=2ahUKEwin2YGLua3vAhWvShUIHYZuC8EQ7Al6BAgWEAs&biw=1238&bih=587#imgrc=jHdldqZyvOPykM

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Stickney Ellis who believed that women had a great moral responsibility, was the spokeswoman by excellence for better educational opportunities for women. In her work *The Women of England* she wrote,

> *I cannot rest without attempting to prove that the present education of the women of England does not fit them for faithfully performing the duties which devolve upon them immediately after their leaving school, and throughout the whole of their after lives- does not convert them from helpless children, into such characters as all women must be, in order to be either esteemed or admired*[1]

It is clear that through this call, Sarah Stickney Ellis stresses the necessity to consider women as whole human beings and argues that an improved education allows women to wonder how they could do to live happier, for education allows women to escape their economic dependence over men.

Although Queen Victoria gave a similar importance to women's education, whether she supported or not the feminists of her age spilled a lot of ink.

6- Queen Victoria, an 'anti-feminist'?: Ignatius Nsaidzedze thinks that labelling Queen Victoria as an 'anti-feminist' leads systematically to the question: "Why was the queen considered an 'anti- feminist'? This is probably due, in part, to a letter that she wrote to Mrs Theodore Martin in which she described feminism as this, *'Mad wicked folly of women's rights?'*[2] .This claim raises another question: 'Why did the queen see feminism as a mad wicked folly?' One of the possible answers, according to Ignatius Nsaidzedze is that feminists' claims for the rights of women, especially the radical wing, was something new for the traditional British society and the queen was conservative. Notwithstanding this circulating reputation, Arianne Chernock, in her book *The Right to Rule and the Rights of Women: Queen Victoria and the Women's Movement* affirms that Victoria's remarks about women and their claims were not circulated until after her death. She simply did not align herself directly with the

1- Arildsen Emilie, op.cit. p.26
2- Nsaidzedze Ignatius, op.cit. p.6

OUSSOUR Al Jadida Revue- Classified C-Edited by History of Algeria Laboratory- Human Sciences and Islamic Sciences Faculty- Oran1 University- Vol .11 N°3 (November) 1442-1443/2021
EISSN 2600-6324 ISSN 2170-1636
DOI: 10.54240/2318-011-003
https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/178

feminist movement[1]. On the other hand, for Nsaidzedze, the researchers Gilbert and Gubar see Victoria as a conservative feminist since she fought for women's education and therefore, cannot be labelled as 'anti-feminist'. She supported women but was against revolutionary changes that would trouble her monarchy. For her, it was crucial for women to be educated but she thought that the place of women was in the domestic sphere. However, she did not hesitate to encourage distinguished women of her age, like Florence Nightingale. Expressing her satisfaction about their successful achievements she said, "To make the acquaintance of one who has set so bright an example to our sex" [2]

In her work previously mentioned, Arianne Chernock also expresses how she was impressed by Victoria's great impact on 19th century feminist campaigning, especially to obtain the right to vote. The campaigners' argument was that it was absurd that a female ruled a nation whose female subjects were not allowed to choose their representatives. Therefore, whether Queen Victoria was feminist or not, this has not changed the reality. She enhanced the women's movement at that time.

Conclusion: Women in Victorian era had a complex position in society and were expected to be the symbol of morality, peace and care for their husbands and children. Charity and social work were the only acceptable and respectable ways for them to enter public life. Nineteenth century feminists' struggle to improve British women's condition reflected their substantial attempts to liberate women from the stereotype of the passive, submissive and pure creature of popular ideals, without being completely distinct from it because, although some middle-class women were seeking more economic and personal independence, others were satisfied with their status and happy in their proper sphere.

Queen Victoria, who was at the head of the powerful British Empire for 64 years, and who was for her people, a model of respectability and domestic virtues, became a role model for British feminists. She inspired them in their struggle for women's rights, arguing that if the queen was able to perform her

1- Chernock Arianne, The Right to Rule and the Rights of Women: Queen Victoria and the Women's Movement, www.cambridgeblog.org/2019/08/the-right-to-rule-and-the-rights-of-women-queen-victoria-and-the-womens-movement/

2- Nsaidzedze Ignatius, op.cit. p.7.

political duties, and at the same time be a good mother and wife, so could do, then, any other educated British woman.

This paper sought to examine the impact of Queen Victoria on British feminists and on women's rights. Although the Queen did not explicitly express her opinion about feminism, it is uncertain how much she had influenced women's movement for suffrage. What is evident, however, is that by opening educational opportunities to women, she had contributed to better their social status largely.

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