

Limitations of Victorian Women through Charlotte Bronte's Three Novels: Jane Eyre, Shirley, and The Professor

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Abstract:

The present research probes to explore the limitations from which women suffered in their patriarchal society during the Victorian era. In her three major masterpieces, Charlotte Bronte tends to shed light on women hard circumstances during that time and their struggle for a better living conditions. This study questions the different restrictions that hindered Victorian women development. In order to answer the above mentioned question, the running study adopts a descriptive and analytical method that uses feminist approaches to describe various types of women presented in these novels. Though, women's protests and rational claims for a better life and fair rights of surviving, Victorian women failed to reach their freedom and realize their wishes of independence.

Key words: Jane Eyre, Patriarchal Society, Shirley, Social Limitations, The Professor Victorian Era.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It's very important to mention that the Victorian age is considered one of most gilded eras that literature passed through. It illustrates the true Victorian social image in its various features. Indeed, several literary figures did their utmost to portray real life aspects and demonstrate the pains of women in their continual struggle in order to benefit from their legal rights. Within the same context, it seems crucial to focus on Charlotte Bronte as one of the most distinguished Victorian novelist who strived for a long time to give a better impression of female novelists in particular and Victorian women in general. Thus, Charlotte believed in women's strength, abilities and intellectuality that deserved respect and esteem. Her three masterpieces: *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *The Professor* made Bronte an outstanding literary figure during that period. In fact, Charlotte did not solely excel in the thematic level, but also at the level of her classy style, which made her one of the magnificent female writers of her age. In her novels, Charlotte reflected her ideas, demonstrated her thoughts, and tried to convey her persuasions through the female characters that were present in her pieces of writing. Indeed, Victorian epoch was intensely characterized by a very observable gender inequality and the Victorian society was by excellence a patriarchal society. Consequently, Charlotte Bronte took the up-front to defend Victorian women and their rights. The true purpose behind that was to show how women's afflictions were so disappointing and how life conditions were so inequitable to those women (Merizig, 2013).

The suggested work aims to show the strong impact of society on its individuals and look for the restrictions that inflicted Victorian women during that period. According to the majority, Victorian era possessed a special set of ideals and traditions, which seemed to be reasonable and suitable for Victorians. But, the female writers representing the beating heart of the Victorian society at that epoch and who meditated deeply in their living circumstances were indeed

extremely dissatisfied with those unjust types of maltreatment that caused pain and frustration to Victorian women. Though, the important place of Great Britain in the world at that time, Victorian women were totally disdained and well thwarted to defend themselves, defend their rights, and request their natural desires to be respected, to be equal to men, and to benefit from a fair share of property like men.

The fundamental aims of the present study are; first, to explore literature aspects during the Victorian period and show the different stages of feminism approach under study. Second, go deeply to show the way feminist Victorian authors portrayed their female characters. Actually, the Victorian traditions created several limitations for women to go further in the achievements of their goals and end up all the injustices inflicted upon them.

This paper intends to find out some aspects of feminism that the author Charlotte expressed through her three novels *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *The Professor* that treated very critical topics in the Victorian era. Indeed, Bronte's works depicted women's miserable status. As a result, the present work will concentrate on Charlotte's three master pieces from the feminist angle and try to go profoundly to show how women's restrictions harmed them psychologically and deepened their wounds within a cruel Victorian society. This work will highlights the following questions:

- How did Bronte present Victorian women's limitations in her three novels?

- To what extent were Victorian women frustrated from their legal rights in such a patriarchal society?

In this paper, we will hypothesize that:

- Victorian Women are really victims of wrong beliefs requiring them to search for their identities through serving their fathers, husbands and children.

In order to achieve the above mentioned hypothesis of our work, the running study adopts a descriptive and analytical method that uses feminist approaches to describe various types of women presented in

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these novels. Also, we will depict the author's attitude vis a vis feminism, gender inequality, and how Victorian women were portrayed through Charlotte's works. Moreover, we relied on some collected primary sources in addition to secondary sources and articles which are related to the topic in order to make our study more consistent.

2. Jane Eyre summary

Jane aged ten was an orphan girl. She lives with her uncle's family; her parents had died of typhus. Other than the nursemaid, the family despised Jane. Later on, she is sent to the austere called Lowood Institution, a charity school, where Jane and several other girls are mistreated cruelly; "Lowood," is the "low" point in Jane's young life. However, in such adversity, Jane gathers confidence and also strength.

In her early adulthood, after several years as a student and then as teacher at Lowood Institution, Jane succeeds in gathering the courage and the strength to abandon it. Finally, she finds a new job as a governess at Thornfield Hall, where she meets her gallant employer, the wealthy and reckless Edward Rochester. At Thornfield Jane is responsible to take care of the young Adèle who is the daughter of a French dancer with whom Rochester had a relationship when he lived in France. Jane became a friend with the kindly housekeeper Mrs. Alice Fairfax. Despite her profound feelings to Rochester, Jane seems ignorant about them because of some spreading rumours about Rochester's marriage to the pretentious and socially notable Blanche Ingram. Later, Rochester eventually reciprocates Jane's sentiments and suggest marriage to Jane. However, on the wedding day, Jane discovers that Rochester cannot legally marry her as he was already married to Bertha Mason. The latter has gone mad and is shut in from the third floor because of her aggressive behavior. She used to make the strange noises, which were heard from time to time in the mansion. Rochester wants to pursue his relationship with Jane. He asks her to

join him in France where they can live together despite the legal prohibitions. But, Jane rejects the idea on principle and takes the decision to flee Thornfield.

Jane is taken into charge by people that later discovers that they are her cousins. One of them is St. John, a principled clergyman. He offers her a job and soon proposes her marriage. Then, he suggests her to join him as a missionary in India. At the very beginning, Jane agrees to leave with him, but not as his wife. However, he tried to put pressure on her to reconsider his proposal. Just then, she hears a glamorous call from Rochester. Jane returns to Thornfield to find the whole estate in ashes; the fire was set by Rochester's crazy wife. The latter then jumped to her death. Rochester tried to save her, but he became blinded. Newly, reunited, Jane and Rochester get married. Rochester later on regains some of his sight after a surgery, which was made in London, and Jane gives birth to a baby boy (Reid, 2023).

3. Shirley Summary

Shirley that was thought to be an expansive novel commenting on social and economic affairs, highlights on the lives of Caroline and Shirley, their friendship, and their different thoughts.

At the beginning of the novel, Robert runs a cloth mill; the family business is not sufficient in making a profit and encounters difficulties to afford to keep all of its employees. In an attempt to increase factory productivity, Robert purchases new equipment. Caroline had a difficult childhood with her parents; so that, the uncle named Matthew Helstone takes care of her. Caroline takes French lessons from Robert's sister named, Hortense. Also, Louis, Robert's brother, works in the field of education. At the outset, Robert and Caroline feel a spark of attraction toward each other, but Robert tries to repress his sentiments within himself. Robert's new mill machinery is destroyed by people protesting innovations. It caused widespread unemployment and Robert is not able to buy more. Robert's focus was to sort out his mill business. Consequently, Caroline takes a decision

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that if Robert is not ready to get married with her, then she will refuse to marry all her life. Then, she decides to become a governess.

Shirley Keeldar arrives with Mrs. Pryor. Quickly, Shirley and Caroline become good friends. Caroline guesses that Shirley will marry Robert and tries to convince herself that she would be so happy if this occurred, despite her sadness, of course. Caroline falls sick she is cured by Mrs. Pryor who was no more than Caroline's long-lost mother. As a result, Caroline recovers from her illness. Louis, Robert's brother, who works as a tutor of the son of Shirley's aunt and uncle, accompanies members of Shirley's family. At first, Shirley seems indifferent somehow hostile to Louis' presence. Although it was noted that she was a student of his long time ago. Several people are interested in Shirley's marital status; however, Robert also makes a proposal to Shirley who rejects it. Shirley justify that because there was no love between them. Shirley was suspicious about Robert's motives to marry her. At least there is a financial part in order to save the business of his family. In fact, she considers her friendship with Robert and respect him enough when she tell him that his motives for marriage proposal disturbs her so much.

Robert works hard to secure his mill's safety and ensure his financial future at the site of the mill itself; he pursues some leaders of the riots which creates a danger for him and his mill too. Robert is shot by someone responsible for the riots and is seriously wounded, but he fortunately survives. The novel ends with two weddings; Shirley who married Louis, and Caroline getting married Robert (Wasilewsky, 2022).

4. The Professor Summary

The novel is the story concerning a young man called William Crimsworth, who is a first-person narrative from his perspective. It portrays his maturation, his career as a teacher in Brussels school, and also his personal relationships.

The story starts with a letter sent by William to his friend Charles; In this letter he details his uncle's rejection proposal to become a clergyman; as well as his first meeting with his rich brother Edward. Seeking work as a tradesman, William benefits from the position of a clerk by Edward. However, Edward's jealousy of William's education and intelligence made him acts terribly with his bother. Mr. Hunsden is characterized by his sympathetic actions. William is removed of his post; however he soon starts a new job at a boys' boarding school in Belgium (Bronte, 1856).

The school is run by a friendly man called Monsieur Pelet who was very kind with William. Sooner after that, William's reputation as a "professor" reach the ears of the headmistress of neighboring girls' school. Mademoiselle Reuter gives him a position at her school; William accepts the new position of work. At first, William is attracted by Mademoiselle Reuter; he then starts acclaiming ideas of falling in love with her. But then he hears some news about the marriage of Monsieur Pelet with Mademoiselle Reuter. William, indeed, received a deceptive treatment from Monsieur Pellet and Mademoiselle Reuter.

Because of the dependent nature of Mademoiselle Reuter, William treats coldly. However, the lady continues to make him assure some benevolent deeds; so that she asks him to teach one of her young teachers named, Frances, who wants the improvement of her skill in languages. William observes the smartness of this young teacher; as a result, he begins to fall in love with her.

Mademoiselle Reuter becomes jealous of the good treatment of William to France. Then she detached Frances from her post and tried to hide her address from William. After a long time and a long search, William re-encounters Frances in a graveyard and they started a new relationship.

It is important to mention that Mademoiselle Reuter, who falls in love with William, tries to make herself sympathetic in his eyes. So that in an attempt to avoid conflicts with Monsieur Pellet, William abandons the institution.

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William gains a new position as a "professor" at a college. He then marry Frances and both of them open a new school together and have a child. After they succeeded in achieving financial security, William and his family travel around England and then settle in the countryside, near to Mr. Hunsden (The Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2023).

5. The Development of Feminism in the 19th Century

It's very crucial to state that Feminist criticism is reviewed as being a critical theory to evaluate literary works. In fact, it originated from women's struggle acclaiming for their rights. Feminism emerged in late of 18th century to foster women's desire to improve their social and societal conditions. Actually, feminism was regarded as a triggering factor. Throughout its long history, it has been seen as a provoking factor of the certitudes of the Victorian patriarchal society and culture; Indeed, the Feminist purpose was to affirm the belief in gender equality and express the contradictions in which the Victorian society suffered from. It was a leading force in expressing and demonstrating women's rights with a particular focus on social, political and economic reforms. It's crucial to state that Feminism movement was introduced in literature during the 1960s. At that time new approaches correlated to women writers and literature emerged (Merizig, 2013).

Several feminists who wrote about women such as Virginia Wolf whose pieces of writing were scrutinized by feminist critics from different perspectives. She was interested in women's cultural and economic miserable status in comparison to men in the Victorian society.

As a result, like many other feminist, Virginia was implicated in women's cultural and economic lamentable circumstances once making comparison to men during the Victorian patriarchal society. Thus, Feminists intended to promote women's identity and champion women's pieces of writing in the purpose to highlight women's life

experiences at that time. Actually, this was pictured in various types of literature particularly the novel. Feminism targeted to free women from the oppression of male patriarchy. It examined the different paths of literature focusing on social, political, economic, and psychological injustices and oppressions imposed on women and the prevailing ideology stating that women should be subdued to men. Feminism, also affronted male notions of interpretations in literature. It challenged the traditional male thoughts concerned with the profound nature of women; their feelings, actions, thoughts and writings. Feminism dealt with women authors and the representation of their experience; in addition to thematic studies of various writings whether by women or about women. As a result, Feminism theory tried to comprehend those representations depicted from a woman's point of view and then dissect women's writings strategies within the context of the lamentable social circumstances. Moreover, it highlighted women's existence in literary texts as a women author, character, and ideas that were dominant in their works (Goulimari, 2022).

6. Limitations of Women during the Victorian Age

The status of women was lamentable during the 19th Century in the English autocratic society. Women were extremely mistreated; they suffered from many injustices and were neglected in all fields. Though England was a powerful and wealthy nation at that time, the status of women was extremely sorrowful. Actually, this mistreatment touched the following fields:

6.1 Economic Status

Victorian society disrespect women who were worthless in their society. "Whatever their social rank, in the eyes of the law women were second-class citizens". Because of the Victorian laws which were considered discriminatory, women were devoid from their rights and identities. The issued laws were discouraging for Victorian women and did not permit them to improve themselves. As a consequence, they were despised and abused whatever is the women's familial status as a daughter, a wife, or a mother. Both sexes, men and woman,

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were put in separate spheres. They only came together either at breakfast or dinner. The ideology of separate spheres was according to the characteristics of women and men. This means that females belonged to the domestic sphere because they were seen as being weak and morally subordinate to men. Their main jobs ticked to only to preparing the next generation. However, men were put within the public sphere. In Anglo Saxon period, women gained a set of rights, but they lost all of them in the Victorian era. Anglo-Saxon women had rights to property, a share of domestic bargain, children, and a legal separation; they could also take with them their children and half of the material goods. According to Victorian conventions, a woman was considered as an inferior sex, weak physically and mentally. She should be under her husband's or father's control. It was believed that men were superior that women in most areas of life (Merizig, 2013).

6.2 Conventional Status

According to Victorian traditions, women possessed very conservative views related to their way of dressing. They wore long dresses which go all to the floor with sleeves. No pants nor casual clothes and no leggings. Actually, women were very respectable in their dressing; they never show their legs in public.

Based on English traditional customs, women were suggested to stay at home and be obedient to their fathers or husbands. From one hand, the majority of women ensured the position of housewives and engaged in their domestic values. From the other hand men did occupy extreme important positions and profit from very crucial privileges because of their sex. They were, in fact, the driving force of the Victorian society. Men worked and gained money. However, the industrialization created slight changes in Victorian beliefs as it made women feel some security and were provided with opportunities to work and get a wage. Indeed, women had the opportunity to occupy some jobs like: nurses, laundresses, maids, teachers, governesses or social workers. Also, other housewives earned money through selling

some products such as milk, butter, and other agricultural products. According to Victorian customs, woman never traveled alone; they had to be accompanied by their families or husbands (Abdessattar & Boukhenza, 2019).

6.3 Educational Status

According to Victorian norms, education was neither important nor mandatory to women. For them a wife had to appear less intelligent than her husband and woman could live without education. Despite the smartness of women, Victorians did not admit that wives should appear more intelligent than their husbands

Although, some aristocrats and middle class daughters benefited from a very limited education. They received some education concerning singing or painting at home. However, later on, Cambridge and Oxford opened the doors to women to receive some education. Nevertheless, several families rejected the idea to send those smart and intelligent daughters to those schools. Victorian families feared the idea of unmarried women. According to Victorian traditions, a woman, who consecrated herself utterly to intellectual pursuits, was called "blue-stocking". Victorians were convinced that women shouldn't receive any aspect of education, knowledge, work, and sex. According to Victorian traditions, a respectable girl should be completely ignorant about sex and sexuality until the day of her wedding while initiated by her husband. However, it's important to stress that all what is sex and sexuality were prevented topics at that time. This subject was taboo. People were not allowed to talk about it nor do sexual behaviors. Actually, women were prevented to read about sexual issues. They should remain naïve and innocent about it. Women had to stay pious until their marriage. They were prohibited even to speak to a man unless with the presence of a married woman as a companion (Demir, 2015).

6.4 Marriage

According to the Victorians law, a man and his wife were one person. This means that a woman had no legal existence. Women

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suffered from inequality whether in their marriage or even in their society. Women in fact, belonged to the domestic sphere. So that they lost the ownership of wages and did not have the right to land possession. It's crucial to state that before their marriage, single widow women were permitted to own possessions. However, after the marriage, all women's rights and properties should be transferred to their husband as women were frustrated from their rights and were seen as inferior in comparison to men.

According to Victorian traditions, the wife and also her children belonged to the husband's property. The woman's actions were put under the husband's direction. He controlled her money, wage, property and also even her body. The husband had the complete control over all what her body can produce like her sex, children, and domestic labor. Indeed, the Victorian laws allowed violence against women like their beating ; in addition to the situation of marital rape.

Women were obliged to obey the desires of their husbands. According to Victorian norms, a married woman had to assume the following functions among which obeying her husbands, producing heirs, running the house hold, and being like noble lady such as ambassadress of grace.

Victorian traditions regarded women as being emotional, weak, inferior, and more. Indeed, they were like slaves. They should only satisfy their family, their fathers, and their husbands. Women had to devote themselves completely for their families. In fact, some Victorian views said that a woman was considered as an evil in case she thought to improve herself. As a general convention, women were, of course, expected to get and ensure their roles as wives or mothers rather than to focus on their achievements as educated females. In addition, it was preferable for single women to remain uneducated. As a result, they took positions in childcare as a supporter to other members of their families, or as governesses (Barrett, 2013).

6.4.1 Married Women

As stated by the Victorian norms marriage constituted a crucial step in Victorian women's lives and a primary goal in Women's existence. According to their traditions a married woman was more respectful than an unmarried one. As a consequence, the main goal of women was to find appropriate husbands. It was believed that solely through marriage, woman could rise in the world. Indeed, the Victorians upper class saw marriage as a bargain for the father of woman and also for the husband who tried to profit as much as they could. Nevertheless, this type of customs differed from one social class to another. From one side and for the upper class, marriage had nothing to do with love, but of a bargain and a sale. Actually it could be compared to a legally sanctioned species of prostitution. From the other side, females of the middle class played both roles; from one part they were housewives in ordinary occasions and they appeared as fine ladies in some special situations. However, ladies from the poor class were completely neglected because of their deplorable conditions. So that, their situation stayed stagnant waiting for the improvement of their circumstances (Abdessattar & Boukhenza, 2019).

Women from all social ranks were considered as slaves. The woman was seen as an agreeable and well-taught slave for the rich person; but for the poor man, she ensured the position of an efficient working slave. However, she endeavored a combination of both positions for a middle class man (McDonnell, 2018).

6.4.2 Unmarried Women

According to the Victorian traditions, unmarried women were called spinsters. Many saw those women as being less respected and less feminine than the domesticated ones. In fact, celibacy was viewed as a curse and people did believe that something wrong went with those unmarried females. Within the traditions a woman needed to be protected by someone who should take care about her. Indeed, unmarried women benefited from a certain freedom. However, they

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were rejected by their society. But used as a source of entertainment for man who exploited them at the extreme.

However, women of twenty years old were not considered spinsters. It's crucial to state that those spinsters were not well welcomed in their society; They suffered from marginalization and were each time criticized as they failed to build a family, but they could protect their own properties. They were despised and did not benefit from the least respect. In addition, those unmarried women belonging to the lower class choose to work as servants or worked in factories. Women who belonged to noble and middle classes used to take care of their relatives. It's very important to state that Victorian women lost their properties after getting married. This unfair behavior, in fact, increased women's suffering and shed light on women's melancholic psychological side during the Victorian period.

Some conditions made the number of spinsters increased; Special circumstances like wars obliged a huge number of men to join the fronts for fighting. Also, the mortality rate for boys in comparison to girls; In addition, a large number of males chose migration. In literature, those women were described as being eccentric old ladies (Rathborne, 1862).

6.5 Divorce

For Victorians, divorce wasn't only quite expensive, but also very hard to deal with it. Women and men were obliged to stay in unhappy marriages for several reasons. In fact, Victorian women preferred to remain away from divorce because of the stigma that was related to those divorced women at that period. Also divorce was also seen by Victorians as a societal taboo. Before the year 1857, England was the solely Protestant country in Europe that did not possess provisions for civil divorce. Actually, divorce could only be gained through private Acts of Parliament. Divorces were very difficult to obtain because there was no civil divorce at that time. Indeed, Private Acts were inconvenient and very costly. So that the poor had no way

to ask for divorce under those circumstances. Before passing the 1857 Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act, only three hundred and twenty two divorces were approved. Following this Act passing, divorce rates arose to exceed five hundred cases in 1900 (Women and Divorce in the Victorian Era, n.d).

Divorce laws focused on the unfair status of women to men through the unbalanced conditions in which the divorce was favored. Actually, a man could divorce a woman merely based on the grounds of adultery without any justifications. However, a woman had to provide proofs of her husband 's guilt of adultery combined with other forms of cruelty, bigamy, incest, or bestiality. The abusive status of women to men was also obvious and could be observed through the way the courts classified married and single females at that time. Indeed, after the marriage of the Victorian couple, all the rights of the woman were legally offered to her spouse. Indeed, the suspension of the married woman's legal personality was called as "coverture". Added to that an unmarried woman was named in the law as a *femesole*(Women and Divorce in the Victorian Era, n.d).

6.6Prostitution

It's very crucial to mention that prostitution in the Victorian epoch obtained a new scale of importance and attention from both the British society and the government. Though prostitution matters were and are often, until nowadays seen in black and white. In fact there were several cases where prostitution was considered either a supplementary activity or even the solely obtainable opportunity of employment during Victorian era. It was an unpleasant way to gain life, but was often considered an indispensable evil. However, it was an activity highly disapproved, especially, by the upper class women in society. Those same women were the first to gather to the main cause of those "fallen women" who were, cruelly, exploited by the government. Indeed, the popularity of issues concerning prostitution eventually decreased over time. However, the resulting influences which were sparked by those feminist movements concerned with

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prostitute's rights engendered a twofold effect which can be seen even today (Clarke, n.d)

7. CONCLUSION

During the reign of Queen Victoria, women's role was limited only to the private realm especially their home. They led a continual suffering from their patriarchal society which considered them as being inferior to men. Indeed, many harsh traditions prevented females gender from their legal rights such as: education, freedom, voting, taking important jobs, even choosing their husbands. Victorian society did marginalize women at the extreme. They were obliged to survive weak, contemptible. According to their norms at that period, men were the true masters; they held power and control over everything. At that time, women's role was limited solely to obey men's orders and serve them utterly.

Such inequality between both genders made the Victorian women like slaves. In fact, they were not permitted to express their ideas or think about themselves. They were seen as an evil if they think so. Since their childhood, women learnt through their families how to be obedient and submissive wives; they were only created to satisfy men's desire and fulfill their demands. In addition, Victorian women were forced to bear their husbands cruelty and harsh treatment. However, female writers rejected all those established norms. Women writers used their writings to argue their suffrage and impose their points of views as a position of strength in such a cruel society. As well as, they were against the idea of stereotyped woman. They started to express their ideas about the new type of woman they need to see in their unfair society.

After that a new trend towards "women are free" began to appear as a philosophy of characters in the Victorian novels. Actually, one stereotype of these best novelists is the beautiful Charlotte Bronte. In her three best masterpieces: Jane Eyre, Shirley and The Professor. Charlotte fought vigorously for women's rights. She used to select a

more independent, smart, powerful, and well educated female characters, as Jane Eyre, Shirley Keeldar, Zoraide Reuter and Frances Henri who were totally contrasted to the real Victorian women.

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