CHAPTER-II

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ETHOS
AND THE STATE OF WOMEN IN
VICTORIAN ENGLAND
CHAPTER II

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ETHOS AND THE STATE OF WOMEN IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND.

The Victorian age is known as an age of social interest and practical ideals. Actually in this age democracy was keeping pace with the advancement of science. In this age there was a rapid development of commerce, finance and industry. Due to the development of science people began to believe in scientific progress and they were quite sure about their ideal state in future. It is only in this age that the people in this age could add much more things to their knowledge which was impossible for their forefathers. This scientific impingement on the Victorian society proved fruitful as, it not only added to material prosperity but also brought a radical change in the habits of thought and man's attitude to Christian faith. The publication of Darwin's 'Origin of Species' disenchanted the Victorians who had a deep faith in divinity. But in the Victorian period, i.e. in the late nineteenth century, their faith was broken by the startling discoveries made by men of science. People began to believe that the world was not
created in four thousand B.C. and man was not created in the Divine Image, but gradually evolved from ape-like ancestor. It resulted in people's bewilderment and doubt. In this age the church had long ceased to work miracles, the men of sciences were performing miracles which were beneficial. People began to believe in science not only as the supplier of their physical needs but also as the answer to all their fundamental questions.

The same development of science in the Victorian age also influenced literature both directly and indirectly. Even books which were published in this era were partly of literature and partly of science. Subsequently the advancement of science brought an excitement in thought, transformed means, and outlook on life and moved every course of intellectual activity. Naturally science could develop the reality in literature due to people's analytical and critical habit of thinking generated by science. Science could generate the liking of education among the Victorians that obliged them to be alive to the surrounding knowledge with the help of newspapers, magazines, books and various articles. In the beginning the knowledge which was confined to the experts due to their reading of various books and
magazines later on was passed on to the minor element of the society. In short scientific knowledge became pervasive. All ideas about man, nature and society became popular among the people before the Victorian age had closed. The whole society was revolutionary. This rapid development of science in the Victorian Age also produced scientific temper in many a Victorian writer. The writers like Tennyson, Carlyle, and Macaulay followed the scientific method of discovering, ascertaining and orientating accurate facts of history.

The Victorian age is also called as the most remarkable period in the history of England due to its material affluence, political consciousness, democratic reforms, industrial and mechanical progress, scientific advancement, social unrest, educational expansion, empire building and religious uncertainty. Everyone, along with the reputed thinkers was happy with the development which was going on in this era. The Victorian age was essentially a period of peace and prosperity of England. People were not affected by the colonial war which broke out in England. No doubt they were moved by the Crimean war, but their advancement in every field had made them so matured that
they could soon recover themselves from these repercussions of the war. In the earlier years of the age, the effect of the French Revolution was still felt but by the middle of the century it had almost completely dwindled and England felt safe from any revolutionary upsurge disturbing the placidity and peaceful reign when Englishmen, secure in their island base, could complete the transformation of all aspects of their industrial, commercial and social life without any risk of violent interruptions that gave quite a different quality to the history of continental nations. In short it was an era where people could heave a sigh of relief from any kind of danger and they felt secure on their island homes.

Despite the scientific and technological development it is also noted about the Victorians that in domestic life they preserved the authority of parents over children. In the Barrets of Wimpole Street we have a vivid picture of parental authority and the subjugation of children to the will of the head of the family. Emphasis was laid on authority and reverence for the elders. Women were assigned to a lower place. They were expected to perform household duties like rearing up children and looking after the home and 'the hearth'. Women's chastity was considered
their supreme asset by the Victorian conventions. Their proper place was considered only within the four walls of house. Their contact with the outside world was supposed as their big offense. In short their sole business was to look after the male members of her family. Briefly speaking women were regarded inferior to men and inferior in mental power as they are inferior in strength. Education was a closed book for most of the women and the idea of establishing women’s colleges was ridiculed by the national poet Tennyson in *The Princess* (1847). The early Victorian ideal of womanhood had centered on marriage and the home. ‘Man for the field and woman for the hearth, man for the sword and for the needle she, explains the Princess’ father in Tennyson’s *The Princess*. A woman’s role was to be passive and secondary to that of her husband, her chief task was reproduction. Her nature was frequently idealized. Rossetti, Tennyson and Browning all wrote in their separate ways of the perfect woman. Robert Browning in his poem *My Last Duchess* (1842) depicts how the duke explains to the neighbouring count’s messenger the kind of wife he expects and how he killed his former wife though he had given her many things like the name of nine hundred years and prosperity. The
line — "Then all smiles stopped together" clearly indicates the scornful views about women. Thackeray's parenthetical lecture in 'Vanity Fair' on the deceit necessarily involved in womanly submissiveness is a typical example of a male writer ruefully lamenting the results of an ideal encouraged by his sex:

"The best of women .......are hypocrites. We don't know how much they hide from us: how watchful they are when they seem most artless and confidential, how often those frank smiles, which they wear so easily, are traps to cajole or elude or disarm." (Thackeray, Ch.17)

"The Victorians underlined in great deal, the order, dignity and reputability. The Victorian women were expected as only bearing the responsibilities of matrimony and the sacredness of religious belief. Though the Victorians were poor, blind, and complacent people, they were torn by doubt. They were spiritually baffled and confounded in a troubled universe. They were cross 'materialists', wholly absorbed in the present, quite unconcerned 'with abstract verities and eternal values,' but they were also excessively religious, lamentably idealistic nostalgic for the past. In politics they were governed by narrow parochial prejudice but persuaded by dark imperialistic design. 'They believed only in intellectual and emotional progress, denied original sin, and
affirmed the death of the Devil, yet by temperament they were patently Manichaean to whom living was desperate struggle between the force of good and the power of darkness.' (Mundra p. 424) "While they professed 'manliness' they yielded to feminine standards, if they emancipated woman from the age old bondage they also robbed her of vital place in society. Though they were sexually inhibited and even failed to consider existence of physical love they begot incredibly large families and flaunted in their verse a morbidly overdeveloped erotic sensibility. Their art constitutes a shameless record of both hypocrisy and ingenuousness. And their literature remains too purposeful, didactive, and aesthetic with too palpable a design upon a reader."

(Ibid, p. 424)

In the Victorian age new truths were welcomed but in the field of sex, the Victorians had their compromise. The sex problem was the most blatant and persistent. In this field their object was to discover 'some middle course between the uncontrolled licentiousness of previous ages and the complete negation of the functions and purposes of nature. The Victorians permitted indulgence in sex but restricted its sphere to conjugal
felicity and happy married life. They disfavoured physical passion and illegal gratification of sex impulse. They could not contemplate the possibility of any relation between man and woman other than, the conjugal. In Tennyson's 'Lady of Shallot' we are introduced to 'two young lovers walking in the moonlight but we are at once reassured by the statement that these two lovers were 'lately wed'. The Victorian ideal was to achieve 'wedded bliss' rather than satisfaction of the sex urge by illegal and unauthorized methods.'*(Ibid p.384)*

It was this patriarchal ethos that was objectionable to many women. However most Victorians believed that women occupied a "separate sphere" of life and influence than did men and this was largely the area of the home. This implied her place in the development of tender emotions. It was said about women that love is their special crown. Many considered love and gentleness to be 'unmanly'. Even the poet laureate Alfred Tennyson took a quasi - feminist view in his poetry. For some, morality was the purview of women, while men ruled in matters of intellect.
In time the view of women as exalted, superior, almost divine, beings acquired the name of 'woman worship'. Nevertheless most Victorians adopted the conservative tradition that stated that women were morally and intellectually inferior. They presented them as servant. There was also a counter ideal, in which men were encouraged to cultivate the moral qualities associated with women. In the classic "Idylls of the king" the knights of King Arthur were encouraged to develop the qualities like, sweetness, gentleness, faithfulness and chastity. "It was largely believed by most in England that woman should have no sexual desire. Carried to a 'logical extremity', this concept gave rise to the idea that women were either 'Madonnas' of sexless virtue or 'whores' who knew and wanted nothing but sex. Thus sexual prudery and denial combined to produce a portrayal of women as oddly sexless, but child-bearing, 'machines'. However, the stereotype of the frigid, repressed, sexless woman of Victorian times was not really as common as it is usually inferred. Both the letters and literature of respectable women of the time testify without doubt to the existence of a very powerful and recurrent sexual drive among women. In fact England’s first female doctor,
Elizabeth Blackwell, stated bluntly that female sexuality was every bit as strong as that of males.

In this age most people, no matter what their class, subscribed to a common moral code and most women seemed quite content and satisfied with their roles of wives and mothers. They did not feel exploited. This was seen on the 'natural' or even 'divine' arrangement. They saw marriage as emotionally satisfying and even emancipating although increased freedom was rare. Home life seemed to grow even more stable as economics became increasingly uncertain. In this matter it was considered normal for a man to allot his entire pay-check to his wife one of whose jobs it was to determine to spend for the family. But marriage was seen as a life - long working partnership, not an experiment. It was a sacred band, a holy mutual commitment, in which women served often as matriarchs. Even the women preferred whenever possible not to work outside the home. They almost never sought 'self fulfillment' at the expense of the family. Instead, they saw any family- success as a kind of personal success.

Very few considered that these women are worthy of respect. They could never think that equality did not require
simple equal education, but required the right to public life. Some indeed supported women's education because they actually saw woman as inferior, thus doing the right thing for the wrong reason. The arguments of the people like John Stuart Mill suggest that women of the time were generally less passive and inactive than is often supposed. In fact, one of the common parodies that originated from this time was that of the 'hen-pecked' husband.

Paradoxically many liberals, suspecting that women would vote conservatively, opposed women's rights. Union leaders often resisted them too, fearing that woman would enter the work force and lower wages. Some women did not fight for the right to vote, because they felt that other issues were far more important. In fact many women emerged as anti-suffragist. Many women felt that the political activism would harden women to the point where they would give up their cherished roles as wives and mothers. They would lose their tenderness and mercy, compassion and kindness which they saw as special gifts of women. As these women indicate the era was not nearly as repressive as it is 'often portrayed. It witnessed the first serious, concerted effort for women's rights. And while women became more assertive, men
had two reactions. They became either more repressive or more permissive. Many women worked in volunteer jobs, a kind of borderline between home and workplace. They also played a crucial role in the anti-slave movement. Many were also writers, in fact, during the century more novels were published by women than by men.

Women of the mid nineteenth century England had no choices. Most lived in a state little better than slavery. They had little choice but to obey men, because in most cases men held all the resources and women had no independent means of subsistence. A wealthy widow or spinster was a lucky exception. A woman announcing her intention to remain single would attract social disapproval and pity. She could not have children or cohabit with a man, the social penalties were simply too high. Nor could she follow a profession since they were all closed to women. Girls received less education than boys, were barred from universities, and could obtain only low-paid jobs. Women's sole purpose was to marry and reproduce. At mid-century, women outnumbered men by 3,60,000 and by thirty per cent of women over twenty were unmarried. In the colonies men were in the majority, and
spinsters were encouraged to emigrate. Most women had little choice but to marry and upon doing so everything they owned, inherited and earned automatically belonged to their husband. This meant that if an offense or felony was committed against her only her husband could prosecute. Furthermore, rights to the woman personally— that is, access to her body were his. Not only was this assured by law, but the woman herself agreed to it verbally: written in to the marriage ceremony was a vow to obey her husband, which every woman had to swear before God as well as earthly witnesses. Not until the late twentieth century did women obtain the right to omit that promise from their wedding vows.

"In 1890, Florence Fenwick Miller (1854-1935), one of the first women to qualify in medicine, described woman’s position succinctly:

“Under exclusive man made laws women have been reduced to the most abject condition of legal slavery in which it is possible for human beings to be held — under the arbitrary domination of another will, and dependent for decent treatment exclusively on the goodness of heart of individual master."
Every man had the right to force his wife into sex and childbirth. He could take her children without reason and send them to be raised elsewhere. He could spend his wife’s inheritance on a mistress or on prostitutes. Sometime, somewhere, all these things and a great many more – happened. To give but one example, Susannah Palmer escaped from her adulterous husband in 1869 after suffering many years of brutal beating and made a new life. She worked, saved and created a new home for her children. Her husband found her, stripped her of all her possession and left her destitute, with the blessing of the law. In a fury she stabbed him and was immediately prosecuted.” (Women’s status in the mid 19th century England, Online)

If a woman was unhappy with her situation there was, almost without exception, nothing she could do about it. Except in extremely rare cases, a woman could not obtain a divorce and until 1891, if she ran away from an intolerable marriage the police could capture and return her and her husband could imprison her. All this was sanctioned by church, law, custom, history, and approved by society in general. Nor was it the result of ancient outdated laws: the new divorce act (1857) restated the moral inequality.
Mere adultery was not ground for a woman to divorce a man; however it was sufficient ground for man to divorce his wife.

"Signs of rebellion were swiftly crushed by fathers, husbands, even brothers. Judge William Blackstone had announced that husbands could administer "moderate correction" to disobedient wives and there were other means: as late as 1895, Edith Lanchester's father had her kidnapped and committed to a lunatic asylum for cohability with a man. As a Marxist feminist, she was morally and politically opposed to marriage. Among the rich, family wealth automatically passed down the male line, if a daughter got anything it was a small percentage. Only if she had no brothers, came from a very wealthy family, and remained unmarried, could a woman become independent. A very wealthy woman might make a premarital agreement for her wealth to be held in a trust fund, but in the majority of cases marriage stripped a woman of all her assets and handed them to her husband. Fitting in rather uncomfortably even hypocritically, with this state of affairs was the concept of woman as a goddess placed on a pedestal and worshipped. This contradiction has been described admirably by R.J.Cruikshank. From reading Victorian novels and
watching television costume dramas it isn't easy to forget that the vast majority of women were working class. Born without penny, they began to work between the ages of about eight to twelve and continued until marriage. A woman’s fate thereafter depended on her husband. If he earned enough to support her she would usually cease work, otherwise she worked all her life, taking short breaks to give birth. Anything she earned belonged to him. Barred from all well-paid work women were forced into a very small range of occupations. Half were in domestic service and most of the rest were unskilled factory hands or agricultural labourers. Almost the only skilled work for women was in the clothing trade but even that was ill-paid and low-status. Seamstresses became a cause celebre in the 1840s.” (Ibid)

Prostitution was rife in Victorian England the majority being “casual” resorted to only when there was no alternative. Without the safety net of a welfare system and with all wealth in the hands of men it was to individual men that women were forced to turn and to sell themselves when desperate for subsistence. Women’s clothing symbolized their constricted lives. Tight lacing into corsets and cumbersome multiple layers of skirts which dragged
on the ground impeded women’s freedom of movement. Between 1856 and 1878, among the wealthy, the cage crinoline was popular as it replaced the many layers of petticoats, but it was cumbersome and humiliating. Sitting down the cage rode up embarrassingly at the front. The skirts were so wide that many women died engulfed in flame after the material caught fire from an open grate or candle. As Manjit Kaur writes “the middle class women in the Victorian England were forced to be at home all the time to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining her home a likable place where tired man could come to relieve himself of the burden of his struggle in the outside world. The ideal of home and family became popular with Ruskin’s essay “Of Queen’s Garden” where he glorified womanhood consisting in the limited role of woman as wife and mother. The home is haven presided over by woman. A woman being morally and spiritually faultless guards the home against all the evils of the corrupt world. Jenni Calder notes the double policy of the society in attributing moral qualities to women and at the same time not trusting them in the outside world. This makes them both ‘supporting pillars’ and the ‘helpless parasites’ of the society.” (Kaur Manjit, p.15.)
The family had formed the code of conducts only for women and stressed on the angel like qualities in them. It was assumed that the sexual appetites in man were natural and acceptable. Their sexual promiscuity was generally ignored by the society; while as, a woman falling prey to sexual passions was condemned as a whore or a fallen woman. The Victorians believed that only the prostitutes not the ladies could display their sexual desires.

'The ideology based upon the double standards placed enormous pressure on women who repressed their natural instinct and felt guilty about them. The society imposed various restrictions on women regarding the slightest hint of their sexual knowledge. The books dealing with sexual topics were banned and censored. The novel found its readership chiefly among the women for its domestic themes and a direct appeal through an easy medium as compared to other genres as poetry and drama. Since the price of the books was high for the middle class public, the novels were published in the serialized form in the periodicals and magazines or were brought by the private lending libraries. The writers were always apprehensive of their books beings
banned or censored by the libraries or the editors of the magazines. Any mention of sexual contact or the presentation of morally dubious character was highly objected to. Thus judgments were based upon the assumption that women being weak and vulnerable members of the society were more likely to be affected or contaminated by the sexual knowledge. (*Ibid, p. 16*)

The mid-Victorian writers' portrayal of their woman characters is almost consistent and stereotyped. Women's main concerns remain love; home and family. They still stick to the conventional standards of respectability. Any deviation from the set standards of morality would cause a permanent scar on the honour of the women. Even the most resourceful and independent heroines fail to challenge the basic assumptions of the society and live well within the limits of moral and social conventions. However, this does not diminish the importance of their work.

It is only in the late Victorian novels that the new women were presented who were educated, well read and had a shocking frankness about sex. They were against marriage as an institution for its constraining the human freedom. But the journey for these women seeking individual happiness in society yet to
awaken fully to their need, was extremely difficult and daring. Mental breakdowns, madness and suicides were the common penalties these women had to pay for their attempts at emancipation. The novelists spoke for the feminist cause but at the same time showed how difficult it was for women to free themselves completely from the creeds and conventions, which have conditioned them for generations together. After arriving at ideals of freedom and equality these heroines are made to suffer from a sense of weary disillusionment leading to their final surrender to the conventions in a broken way. But unlike the early Victorian writers, these novelists never endorsed their heroines' surrender. They rather depict the hollowness of the social systems that fails to adopt the freedom -loving beings. Women, who had given in to seduction, living a life in sin, received the name "fallen woman" during the Victorian period. Even in Art the woman had been painted as fallen woman. Despite the recognizable and ample segment of the female population, it took some time before the fallen woman could be accepted as an allowable subject in art.

Women were statistically over represented among the mentally ill, primarily because in Victorian England they were
more often confined to 'homes' for the insane and were more easily countable than were men. They were generally thought to be mere vulnerable to madness. The reasoning for linking women and suicide went something like this: 'more women are confined for insanity than men and suicide is a result of insanity; therefore more women should commit suicide than men' or else it went like this: 'woman is a lesser man weaker being both physically and mentally. Resisting suicides takes willpower and courage, therefore women should fall victim to suicidal impulses for more readily than should men. Unless the weaker sex were to be credited with unwanted strength, the fact that women killed themselves less frequently than men required considerable explaining. Such was the price of retaining the displacement of self-destruction to women in a patriarchal society that was dedicated to championing male mental and physical superiority and to rationalize sexual differences. In the Victorian age even the positive aspects of the woman's nature was presented with the negative approach. "It is found that in the Victorian age there was the less suicidal rate of women than the men. But it was supposed that as woman is timid by nature she cannot accept the death as
courageously as man can. In 1857, writing for the Westminster Review, George Henry Lewes attributed the cause for the lower suicide rate among women to women’s greater timidity and to "their greater power of passive endurance" both of bodily and mental pain. Lewes was echoed in 1880 by a writer for Blackwood’s who asserted that women were "habitually better behaved and quieter they have more obedience, more resignation and a stronger directing sentiment of duty....."They possess precisely dispositions of temperament and teaching which best withhold from voluntary death. Female analysts of suicide rates were less likely to make naive pronouncements about female character, but they too felt called upon to explain away the statistics. After observing that nearly three men commit suicide to one woman, Harriet Martineau concluded that "as there is no such disproportion in the subjects of what we may call natural insanity, we may attribute the majority of male suicides to the habit of men to incur the artificial insanity caused by intemperance.

At century’s end, men like S.A.K. Strahan and Havlock Ellis made less generous conjectures about the female temperament and suicide than had Lewes. Strahan believed that women were
weaker contenders in the struggle for existence and therefore less prone to its aftereffects — like suicide. For him, their lower suicide rate depended upon woman's lack of courage and her natural repugnance to personal violence and disfigurement. Female ignobility not nobility marked his supposition. Ellis's similar judgments hinged less on the rate than on the means of suicide. Referring to what he called the "passive methods" of suicide (drowning, for example), Ellis found women temperamentally irresolute in opting for means that required both less preparation and less gore. More violent forms of suicide offended "against women's sense of propriety and their intense horror of making a mess" and reflected their fear of public scrutiny after they were dead. If it were possible to find an easy method of suicide by which the body could be entirely disposed of "said Ellis" there would probably be a considerable increase of suicidal among women." (Suicidal woman, Online, p.4)

In these observations there is nothing but an inherent and an absurd prejudice in favour of bloodier suicide as being braver and therefore more manly. Ellis makes means of suicide so much a point of honour that he begins to glorify self-destruction and loses
sight of his real argument about suicide as "morbid psychic phenomenon." There is also an inherent prejudice against women and woman's bodies, a male supposition that women must wish to dwindle away to nothing. This is a confirmation of the Victorian Ideal of the female self that dissolves into others. In this age woman was supposed to be the new woman one who possessed "not only the velvet, but the claws of the tiger." She was no longer the Angel, but the Devil in the house. With her in mind, the writers of this age reframed an old proverb about woman to read "man proposes and woman disposes." This sentiment was virtually paraphrased by the painter Edward Burne Jones, who said of woman "Once she gets the upper hand and flaunts, she is the devil ----- there is no other word for it, she is the devil .......as soon as you have taken pity on her she's no longer to be pitied. You are the one to be pitied then. And so she-wolves grew in place of pet dogs." (Ibid, p.4)

As Gail Marshall writes, "in this age the group whose lives were perhaps most radically transfigured during the course of the nineteenth century was woman, most notably middle-class women, it is true, but their efforts secured a number of reforms which benefitted all. At the start of this period all women were
subject to the legal practice of 'Covertures' which upon marriage entailed their absorption into the legal and financial standing of their husbands. A married woman had no rights over her own property or her own person, and should the marriage end in separation; she would have no right to her children. In 1854, Barbara Bodichon published a pamphlet 'A Brief Summary of the most Important Laws Concerning Women' together with a few observations thereon. It spelt out in great detail the legal vulnerability of women's position and the essential fact that 'the good feeling of men [is] all that a woman can look to for simple justice'. Bodichon was the illegitimate daughter of the radical MP Benjamin Smith, and wrote with some personal knowledge of the disabling nature of current legal practices. Bodichon was also one of the closest of George Eliot's female friends, and notably sympathized with the latter in the 'illegitimacy of her position as the unmarried partner of George Henry Lewes.' (Marshall, p.14)

"Bodichon's political activism was concentrated on the key reforms of the century, on women's education, on the reform of property laws, and on women's suffrage. Advances were seen in all but the last of these areas as the century went on, but, despite
the oratorical skills of women campaigners such as Bodichon, Millicent Fawcett, and Josephine Butler progress was slow and won with only the greatest effect. Women lacked direct representation in parliament and could only work indirectly through a handful of male supporters such as John Stuart Mill, who presented Bodichon’s petition for women’s suffrage to parliament in 1866. It is of course ironic that the greatest argument against women being confined to a separate domestic sphere, and to a life solely consumed by children, was the figure of woman who gave her name to the age we are looking at. As Barbara Bodichon wryly notes:- “The church and nearly all officer under government are closed to women.” The post office affords some little employment to them but there is no important office which they can hold, with the single exception of that sovereign.” (Ibid, p.14-15)

“In the 19th Century Britain women were expected to marry and have children. However, there was in fact a shortage of available men. Census figures for the period reveal, there were far more women than men. There were three main reasons why women outnumbered men. The mortality rate for boys was far higher than for girls, a large number of males served in armed
forces abroad and men were more likely to emigrate than women.

"By 1861 there were 10380,285 women living in England and Wales but only 9,825,246 men. The laws in Britain were based on the idea that women would get married and that their husbands would take care of them. Before the passing of the 1882 Married Property Act, when a woman got married her wealth was passed to her husband. If a woman worked after marriage, her earnings also belonged to her husband. The idea was that upper and middle class women had to stay dependent on a man: first as a daughter and later as a wife. Once married, it was extremely difficult for a woman to obtain a divorce. The matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 gave men the right to divorce their wives on the grounds of adultery. However, married women were not able to obtain a divorce if they discovered that their husbands had been unfaithful. Once divorced, the children became the man’s property and the mother could be prevented from seeing her children." (Marriage in the 19th Century, Online, p.1)

In 1852 Florence Nightingale wrote Cassandra but on the advice of friends she never published her book ----
"Women are never supposed to have any occupation of sufficient importance not to be interrupted, except "Suckling their fools" and women themselves have accepted this, have written books to support it, and have trained themselves so as to consider whatever they do as not of such value to the world as others, but that they can throw it up at the first "claim of social life". They have accustomed themselves to consider intellectual occupation as a merely selfish amusement which it is their "duty" to give up for every trifler more selfish than themselves. Women never have an half-hour in all their lives (except before and after anybody is up in the house) that they can call their own, without fear of offending or of hurting someone. Why do people sit up late, or, more rarely, get up so early? Not because the day is not long enough but because they have 'not time in the day to themselves.

"The family? It is narrow field for the development of an immortal spirit, be that spirit male or female. The family uses people, not for what they are, not for what they are intended to be, but for what it wants for - its own uses. It thinks of them not as what God has made them, but as the something which it has
arranged that they shall be. This system dooms some mind to incurable infancy others to silent misery.” (Ibid, p.3)

“Louisa Garrett Anderson, the daughter of Elizabeth Garret Anderson, wrote about attitudes towards marriage when her mother was a young woman in the 1860s. “To remain single was thought a disgrace and at thirty an unmarried woman was called an old maid. After their parents died what could they do, where could they go? If they had a brother, as unwanted and permanent guests, they might live in his house. Some had to maintain themselves and then indeed, difficulty arose. The only paid occupation open to them was to become a governess under despised conditions and a miserable salary. None of the professions were open to women, there were no women in Government offices, and no secretarial work was done by them. Even nursing was disorganized and disreputable until Florence Nightingale recreated it as a profession by founding the Nightingale school of Nursing in 1860.” (Ibid, p. 5)

In the 19th century upper class and middle class women were not expected to earn their own living. Women rarely had careers and most professions refused entry to women. In the
middle of the 19th century it was virtually impossible for women to become doctors, engineers, architects, accountants or bankers. After a long struggle the medical profession allowed women to become doctors. Even so, by 1900 there were only 200 women doctors. It was not until 1910 that women were allowed to become accountants and bankers. However, there were still no women diplomats, barristers or judges. Women were allowed to become teachers. In 1861 over 72% of teachers were women, but teaching was a low status job and was also very badly paid. (Career and Women, Online, p.1) 'One argument usually advanced against the practice of medicine by women is that there is no demand for it, that women, as a rule, have little confidence in their own sex, and had rather to be attended by a man.

'Queen Victoria was opposed to equal rights for women. Louise Garrett Anderson explained what happened in 1881 when it was decided that women doctors could attend the international medical congress about to be held in London. The idea of women practicing medicine in Great Britain distressed Queen Victoria. Indeed in 1881 the Queen's private physician announced that the royal patronage would be withdrawn from an international
medical congress held in London if medical women were admitted, and so the women were shut out. (*Ibid, p. 7*)

“In the midnineteenth century novel sexual misdemeanours were more usually treated as hideous aberrations and were approached with uniform gravity and a stern moral frown. The fallen woman was a stain on society and had to be punished, either by the intolerable pangs of conscience or by death - preferably both. Even the novelist who took the rather advanced line that many such women were victims, that they did not jump but were pushed to their fall by some callous profligate could not dispense with final retribution. The woman who found herself miserable in her marriage in an early or mid-Victorian novel had little prospect of a second chance unless death conveniently stepped in to remove her husband. (*Cunningham, p.21*)

At the beginning of the 20th century, it was very difficult for women to obtain a university education. In 1870 Emily Davis and Barbara Bodichon helped to set up Girton College, the first university college for women, but it was not recognized by the university authorities. In 1880 Newnham College was established, at Cambridge University. By 1910 there were just over a thousand
women students at Oxford and Cambridge. However, they had to obtain permission to attend lectures and were not allowed to take degrees. Without a university degree it was very difficult for women to enter the professions. After a long struggle the medical profession had allowed women to become doctors. Even so, by 1900 there were only 200 women doctors. It was not until 1910 that women were allowed to become accountants and bankers. *(Women and University Education, Online, p.1)*

'In many different ways women were regarded as second class, even though Queen Victoria had been on the throne for fourteen years and few people would have dared to argue with her. No woman could vote and this could not change until 1918. There were no important female political figures, apart from the Queen herself and almost all the major reforms during the nineteenth century were carried out by men. Queen Victoria was also a determined opponent of 'votes' for women which she described a mad, wicked folly. At work women had few opportunities. Work in textile factories was one of the few that women had, the other main one was domestic service, which became even more important in the second half of the nineteenth
century. Women's legal rights were also restricted. In 1851 a woman could not even be the legal guardian of her own children and could not retain her own property after marriage. This led to unscrupulous men trying to run away with rich heiresses and take their fortunes. Middle class women usually did not work. Their role in the family was to supervise the household and support their husband. The great majority of women seem to have accepted this role. (The National Archives, Online, p.1-2)

Before 1850, political and individual rights were allowed only to men from the wealthier sections of society. The basis of these rights was male claims to have 'realism' while women were thought to be incapable of rational thought. Before 1850 women, especially if married had few legal rights. Under the common law, a married woman had no identity apart from that of her husband. A husband assumed legal possession or control of all property that belonged to his wife on marriage and of any property that might come to her during marriage. The law distinguished between real property (mainly freehold land) that the husband could not dispose of without his wife's permission (though he could control it and its income) and personal property that passed into his
absolute possession and which he could dispose of in any way he chose. It was not just property that men gained on marriage. Under the law they also gained considerable control over their wives. Husbands had the right to decide where to live and how to live. They were legally entitled to beat their wives and could, and sometimes did, lock them up. Once divorced, husbands gained custody of all children. In legal terms, the position of women was defined by the doctrine of coverture: the legal existence of a woman is suspended during marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of her husband, under whose wing, protection and coverage she performs everything.

The Victorian upper and middle class male's ideal of womanhood was that of the 'Angel in the House'. Men and women were seen to occupy separate spheres of activity: public for men and domestic for women. Married women were not entirely confined to their homes. They were allowed to take on unpaid work with charitable or religious organizations. Nevertheless, the basic role of women was seen as a domestic one. How far women accepted the notion of the separate spheres is difficult to assess. Some women clearly did accept their role and by the 1850s there
appears to have been a remarkable degree of acceptance of the separate sphere ideology among all strata of the upper and middle classes at least until the appearance in the last decades of the century of the 'new women'.

"By the 1850s there was a rapid growth of the numbers of 'single' woman, especially in the middle classes. The number of single woman between the ages of 15 and 45 rose by 72 percent - from 2.76 million to 3.29 million - in the twenty years between 1851 and 1871. There were three main reasons for this.

- First, more males died at birth or in childhood than women.
- Secondly more men emigrated than women: in 1861 for example, over 100,000 men compared 40,000 women.
- Thirdly, men married later than they had in the past.

The surplus women problem was a particular problem for middle class women because, in middle class eyes, a single woman was a woman who had not fulfilled her proper role in life as wife and mother. Very few jobs were seen as 'respectable' for middle class women. Teaching was one possibility and many women worked as teachers or governesses and some even set up their own schools. Most teaching posts were poorly
paid and work as a governess meant a loss in social status."(Into Local Government, online, p.1)

Working class women had to serve both as homemakers and contribute to the family budget. Historians did not agree about the extent to which the ideology of separate spheres applied to working class women. Even if working women worked, their role as wage earners was seen as subsidiary to those of men (the bread winners). Employers argued that women in the workplace had stepped outside their 'proper sphere' and were therefore temporary workers in their way to fulfill their true destinies as wives and mothers. As such, it was perfectly legitimate to pay women less than men were and they were excluded from certain jobs for which they were considered unfit. 'The Municipal Franchise Act 1869 gave women ratepayers the vote 'in the election of councilors auditors and assessors 'from which they had been excluded since 1835 on the same terms as men. Despite the Married women's property Act 1870, the courts ruled in 1872 that this vote should be confined to single and widowed women. It was not until 1894 that the local Government Act extended these
rights to councilors. In the Education Act 1870, (that established school boards to set up and manage state board school) these women became similarly eligible to vote for and stand in elections to the new School Boards. Similar provisions applied to Scottish women from 1872 onwards but it was not until 1882, following feminist pressure and representation from Glasgow's MP, that they enjoyed the municipal franchise and the right to vote in burgh (town) elections.

After studying the social and political ethos and the state of women in Victorian England, it is conspicuous that women were not having favourable conditions in those days. They had to fight for every right and they had been deprived of their fundamental rights. But Thomas Hardy unaffected by the social conditions brought forward his lady characters with ample courage and showed their potentials to the world. He did not care for the existing rules and regulations but portrayed his lady characters with great skill and showing their ability for each and every work for which men always boast. Though the women in Victorian England lived suppressed life but he did not prefer to show the same in his novels on the contrary he
found in them certain virtues and tried to bring them before the
people with the help of his novels like *The Mayor Casterbridge,*
*Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*,
*Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. 
References


2) Careers and women,

   www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/wcareerhtm


4) Into Local Government, www.manshead.beds.sch.uk.history


9) Suicidal Woman, www.victorianweb.org/books/suicide

11) The National Archives, 
   www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/divided/default.htm

12) Women and University education, 
   www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/divided/default.htm

13) Women's status in Mid 19th Century · England, 
   www.hastingspres.co.uk