VICTORIAN FEMINISM

Introduction

It is crucial to understand the upsurge of women’s activities in the Victorian era as the revolutionary movement gave impetus to many artists, thinkers, and women novelists. A close scrutiny of the radical activities undertaken by the feminists of the era endeavors to enunciate the emergence of the feminist from the feminine in the late Victorian era. The study of the status of women consistently draws one's focus to several areas where marginalization and subjugation of women are commonly witnessed. The fight for women's emancipation has been there for centuries though dormant in the previous eras. But the sprouting of radical activity in the women's movement gathered impetus and reached its peak in the late Victorian era. The feminist agitation of the era was a noticeable feature which shook the Victorian conservative. It is not a mere record of the history of feminism that is undertaken but a careful analysis of the events which helps to understand the purpose of the novelists who use the medium to articulate their deeply felt thoughts. To understand the advent of feminism; it is necessary to understand the whole range of discussion in the Victorian era. The term was first used by French dramatist Alexandre Dumas, the younger in 1872. The Oxford Dictionary lists 1894 for the first appearance of 'feminist' and 1895 for 'feminism'. Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal; it is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural, familial, religious, political, economic, social, and legal domains. From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophy to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference - weak, docile, virile and sensual. To combat such definitions of women has been one of the crucial points of women's struggle. Study of Victorian feminists are a source of interest to
the extent modern feminism has accepted and been organized around the agendas which have dominated the societies from which they have come. The link between novelists and feminists can be discerned in their intention to bring in reforms.

**Victorian Era – a Source of Thought:**

The Victorian era was massively conservative very vividly and authentically. The most burning issues in the Victorian era were the religious controversies, the scientific innovations, liberation of women, and the invention of new forms of machines (The press and the railways) The Era brought in numerous challenge to Christianity, including the growing trends of materialism, rationalism and higher criticism of the Bible. Higher criticism is the study of past history, genesis, and historical settings of a work as distinguished from lower criticism, which concerns itself with the establishment of a correct text by such means as recompense and emendation. Higher criticism attempts to interpret a writer’s meaning and delineate the intellectual and historical climate of the historical period. Darwinism swept the Victorian world and was responsible for skepticism to creep in. At the same time theologians tried to infuse Christian values through plethora of writings. (Sermons by Charles Finnes) The role of women in the Victorian era was to give birth to children and to take care of the house, in contrast to men, who enjoyed the economic and political power. The ideology of women seen as their husband’s property was viewed by Victorian moralists as the perfect ideal wife. Throughout the Victorian period the perfect lady was an ideal of femininity. Women who deviated from the narrow definition were branded as virile and even sharp tongued. John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (1870) observes,
Women are brought from their earliest years in the belief that the ideal of character is the very opposite of that of men; not self-will and self government……but submission and yielding to the control, of others…
(qtd. Maier 9)

The predominant disposition of the early and mid Victorian era was intensely moralistic, rigid and puritanical. The domestic sphere, confined women to domestic servility barring her from education and participation in public activity. The material and social affluence, scientific advancement, which altered the religious and social beliefs of people, did less to empower women or absolve her from patriarchal dictates. Queen Victoria’s loyalty to her husband and commitment to her family made her the icon of 19th century middle class femininity and domesticity. She came to be seen as the apotheosis of marital immutability and domestic fortitude because of these notions women were kept far away from the public sphere. Britain was under Queen Victoria’s regime English society failed to reckon this ironical fact. Woman had the power to rule yet she was servile to the male will. Doesn’t this verity signify the emergence of the feminist from the feminine?

Magazines and books propagated domesticity as a female domain. Women’s expertise was restricted to domestic province. The ideal woman was morally upright and inclined to serve others. Book of Household Management (1861) by Mrs. Isabella Beeton advised women on how to become the perfect house wife. Maintaining middle class household was no minute task or a prestigious issue; it only meant servility and drudgery. Women’s fashions were another issue; their dress was designed and prescribed by the society. Etiquette, domestic furnishings, and charitable activity, served to delineate a universe. No doubt women could exercise her power in this limited orb but this did not give her the
autonomy to transgress the patriarchal boundaries. The period between the 1840’s and 1860’s as a whole was marked by heated debates on the woman question. It was an operatic and a gyrated one in the domestic history of Brittan as it became the world’s powerful economy. Women’s movement passed through the same stages as the modern feminist movements, (defeats, affronts, oppositions, were the common impediments.) Contemporary reforms may tempt one to perceive the women’s movement in the 1840’s as obsolete but the era displays an array of intellectual female thinkers who began to state their case. The Quaker and the Unitarian traditions instilled progressive views on social and political concerns that provided momentum for British feminism. Sue Morgan states (2007)

The Quaker and Unitarian tradition, whose radical, progressive outlook on social and political issues provided an important intellectual impetus and leadership resource for British feminism. (3)

Her observation verifies the fact that Quakers and Unitarians gave a radical twist to shape the revolutionary project of the feminists. Quaker’s believed in the innate equality of women and men, believed that there is something of God in everybody; their awareness that servility and obedience in marriage was not required influenced the feminists. Like the Quakers, the Unitarians were known for their egalitarian ideas. It was a theological movement that rejected the conservative doctrines of the protestant; Unitarians believed and spread the doctrine of another. It takes reason, conscience and character as the criteria of belief and practice. Feminists like Barbara Bodichon, Harriet Martineau, advocated Unitarianism in their endeavors. A women’s place in society was ensured only through marriage and the patriarchal society knew how to enclose women in the family. Woman in addition to being a dedicated wife had to be a devoted mother as it gave her spiritual and
moral comfort. Thinkers like Jacques Rousseau supported the feminine notion idealized the role of the mother; Rousseau in his work *Emile* (1762) propounded that the duty of women is surveillance to man, and that woman should be taught how to be useful to man, to please and advise man. His view was accepted for a long time; it was shared by both men and women. The imperial ideologies entered the social political and economic spheres it forced women to follow the mother principle as it raised them to a significant standard of upholding British culture by raising children and making them worthy citizens. “Imperial discourse drew heavily on familial language that upheld Britain as mother country to her colonial children.” (Bush 83)

Single woman and childless woman’s position was ambiguous for they did not belong to any rightful status. Single woman was fated to suffer; her inability to give birth to children owing to her single status estranged her from the familiar notions of femininity. They became masculinized hags, they were seen as the transgressor of the Victorian norm, and were considered low. The fear of being marginalized made women embrace Marriage since sexual partnership was believed to make partners happy. In addition to its biological and social importance motherhood was represented as the powerful ideal in the 19th century domestic world. Mary Lyndon Shanley, quotes Frances Power Cobbe, who defends the unique quality of women’s domestic skill as “Right which no man can take ….from us …it is a woman who can turn a house into a home.” (192) Shanley also notes Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, who affirmed that “The father can offer no equivalent in kind” (192) these opinions by 19th century feminists confirm that motherhood was worshipped by both men and women. Feminist struggle was not about motherhood but was about subjugation
of women in the name of motherhood and feminine virtue. The subjugation of women extant in the biblical texts authorized men to subdue women

Wives should be subject to their husbands as to the Lord,…Christ is the head of the church and saves the whole body, so is a husband the head of his wife; and as the church is subject to Christ, so should wives be to their husbands, in everything. (Ephesians, 5: 22, 25.)

The church overtly taught a lesson of submission and obedience proving its hierarchical and authoritarian stance. Victorian male ethos was built on strong foundation with the church, science, and philosophy sustaining the male supremacy. The ideal woman should exhibit revulsion for all things violent, was an idea that both women and men believed. The Strict hierarchical Victorian thought promoted so called sect of true womanhood which preached four prime virtues- piety, purity, submission and domesticity. Victorian Women activists had to negotiate the boundaries between religious beliefs and moral attitudes, and the new ideas of feminism, Marxism, socialism stirred and agitated the Victorians along with all else that happened. The arbitrary male laws and apotheosis of the male ego fostered by the patriarchal society were some of the key factors in subduing women. To question the Victorian beliefs in an era that was steeped in gender bias was arduous because prevalent conditions would assuage women’s zeal to state her views. Feminism is an anachronism as the term was not coined in the 19th century but history shows that feminism as a systematic ideology began in the 18th century. Feminist scholars regard Mary Wollstonecraft as the precursor of feminism; since Wollstonecraft laid the foundation for feminism it would be appropriate to apply the conceptual paraphernalia of the present to study the past. Mary Wollstonecraft affirmed that women’s terminal expectation was
largely based on the image dictated by the patriarchal gaze. The dawn of the French revolution in 1789 brought Wollstonecraft into the public eye. Liberty, fraternity and equality had tremendous impact on writers and social reformers. Wollstonecraft remonstrated, Rousseau and Talleyard in her work *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) the work was a celebration of the rationality of women; she called for the right of equality between sexes and right to parliamentary representation.

The women’s suffrage movement properly began; it is generally agreed in 1867, when John Stuart Mill’s women’s franchise amendment to the Second Reform Act was thrown out of parliament. Three social societies—in London, Manchester and Edinburgh—were formed and joined together to campaign for propertied women to be granted the vote. (Leneman 37, 38)

Women’s liberation is an issue that has made many liberal thinkers contemplate about it and this has made both men and women participate in the struggle. John Stuart Mill a revolutionary thinker is known for his significant contribution to social and political theory. His work *The Subjection of Women* shows his egalitarian views. He believed that three factors gender construction, education, and marriage were responsible for subjugation of women. Long before the feminist and suffragette movement there were signs of its advent. Activists discussed the position of women prior to feminist movement. History is ebullient with instances that boast of the dauntless articulation of many erudite women who disdained and condemned man’s repudiation of woman’s equality and education. Christine de Pizan’s (1364-1430) *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) a rejoinder to male writers attack on women, challenged the misogynist attitude prevalent during the medieval times, her book shows the importance of women’s past contributions to society. Sappho, the great
poet of the ancient Greek world and Murasaki Shikbu, the Japanese writer during the Heian period, are few examples of women who expressed their views on women. Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century spoke for absolute egalitarianism between sexes including the right to vote and women’s participation in the public sphere. Mary Astell in the 16th century stated the discrimination meted out to women and insisted that education was the prime factor accounting for gender differences. She further stated that women are maneuvered by men to submit to their will. Queen Elizabeth the I exhibited her creative skills and also encouraged men of letters, and Margaret Roper a translator and an editor, was the first non-royal woman to publish a book. Her achievements exhibited intellectual dexterity that unsettled the renaissance men. The writings of these women were condemned; stating that it was against the ethics of nature and God to excel man. History evidences women who demonstrated their adroit at writing. Women’s intelligence was not a widespread phenomenon but found recognition in some cases. History is also invested with instances where men have hinted at feminine dominance Geoffrey Chaucer, Shakespeare gave prominence to women in their works (Wife of Bath, Portia, Lady Macbeth, Rosalind) These women characters are taller than men, but the male characters are not marginalized and are not viewed as subordinate to men. Marquis de Condorcet in his essay the Admission of Women to Full Citizenship (1790) attempted at securing equal rights for women. Though his appeal was not accepted it nevertheless, suggests that men reacted to the subjugation of women. The Victorian era boasts of women’s artifice not only in the field of literature but in the medical field as well. Women’s duty as the nurse gave her an opportunity to serve mankind and also awaken women to the professional possibilities that are open to them. Florence Nightingale apprised that women had all the
potential of men but had fewer opportunities. She emerged as the most prominent women who formed the Victorian views of nursing, and health. Her presence in the hospitals during the Crimean war transformed the public view of the nursing profession, the image of the ‘Lady with the lamp’ came to dominate the Victorian culture the image showed the proper role of women in public life. Seventy years later Virginia Woolf asserts Nightingale’s contribution.

Intellectual freedom depends upon material things…And women have always been poor…However thanks to the toil of those women in the past...thanks curiously to two wars, the Crimean which let Florence Nightingale out of her drawing room, and the European war, which opened the doors to the average woman… (108)

The daring adventures women undertook to change the attitude of the society towards women can be known if one is interested to know their achievements. Harriet Martineau was the first Victorian writer who introduced the women question into her polemical writings but her commendable work is not known to many, her libertine ideas did much to secure equal rights for women in patriarchal society. She argued that the complicated feminine genres could be redefined by the social and political issues in the domestic novel. She encouraged women activists to be objective, dispassionate, moralistic and at the same time to be political and objective to achieve their mission. Early 19th century witnessed conservative feminism which was informed by the evangelical movement. Woman’s biological difference justified the separate sphere doctrine this form of feminism was demonstrated by Queen Victoria herself. Evangelicalism and philanthropy served as an inspiration to empower women. The early 19th century witnessed conservative
feminism which was informed by the evangelical movement. Conservative feminism stressed on women’s biological difference which justified the separate sphere doctrine. In Britain evangelicalism inspired the formation of an extensive range of female associations; female charitable activity was informed by a sense of moral superiority. The female philanthropists through their charitable activities endeavored to serve the society and uplift the aggrieved woman. The first group of feminists was active in charitable activities and it is from this feminine public sphere that demands for advancement in the situation of women began to be made. The female philanthropists endeavored to uplift the conditions of aggrieved woman. Preaching women, transgressed religious and social boundaries in the name of God, they could even intervene in political sphere. “It is thus impossible to consider …the origins of modern feminism without considering the evangelical movement (Midgley 8) Women’s voluntary participation in charitable activity gave momentum to women’s movement in public sphere. Sue Morgan (2007) affirms “Evangelical religion was more important than feminism in enlarging women’s sphere of action during the nineteenth century.” (2) Historians have noted that women who engaged in charitable activity played a significant role in being vociferous advocates of women’s ethical education and welfare. It’s crucial to reckon the work of Hannah More who brought about reforms through evangelical movement. She worked to promote education by supporting the private venture of public school academy. Her affirmation that educated women are more religious and her insistence on women’s duties substantiates that her stance about social issues were entirely representative of her times. Hannah More established a Sunday school at cheddar which enabled her to involve herself in philanthropic deeds. The realization that reforms can be brought through power and dominance saw the sprouting of
feminist ideals. Women’s ethical mission had become a political mission by the mid 19th century. Women’s question was a heated debate in the early and late Victorian era. Power of men at home and in public affairs left women with no options of freedom or franchise and Women protested the unenfranchised state. Stereotyping women in the domestic role was accountable for depriving women’s education, these factors attenuated thoughts of transgression. “Separate sphere ideology constructed gender identity and organized people’s perceptions about men and women.” (Phillippa 12) Separate sphere a 19th century idea about the segregation of two spheres of life; the public and the private. Separate sphere is an ideology that assigns separate domains for men and women. Man owing to his makeup inhabits the public sphere that granted him voting rights and participation in civics. The woman’s proper sphere according to the ideology is to remain in the private sphere. To face the dominant Victorian morality and dislodge the firm and age old values that were enmeshed in the thoughts and actions of people was an onerous chore. Women could not aggrandize their motive by austere attack and such artless approach would not assuage the issue. So, women had to address the ideal of womanhood in order to be heard. This is a clear indication to evince the constraints and animus that bordered women. The dogma of liberation that evolved in the 19th century was to battle the oppressive social and economic practices that brought a divide between the nobles and peasants. Similarly liberal feminism was inclined towards the regeneration of patriarchy. Women had to voice those feminine traits of sensitivity, selflessness, purity in thought and deed that were no blessing, but a hindrance that was meant to confine women. All this justified the dual standards adopted by the patriarchal society that went unquestioned for years. The agenda of 19th century feminists was to question the arbitrary male laws.
**Subtle web of intricate feminisms:**

The 19th century saw the upsurge of women’s enterprise. The era saw many radical mutations one of them was rising consciousness in women, about their prerogatives and potentials. Biographies of leading feminist activists and recital of campaigns undertaken are lucid manifestations of accounts that serve to instill awareness in women. The prime function of the early feminists was to educate women about their bereavement. The manifestation of feminism is illustrated in the works of many women activists who worked to bring in reforms. The zealous accomplishments of Barbara Smith Bodichon, Elizabeth Garret Anderson, Francis Power Cobbe, Josephine Butler, Isabella Ford, Millicent Fawcett, Bessie Rayner Parkes and Henrietta Muller are some names too elusive to amenable for a full sketch and any attempt to do so would be far from complete.

English women’s movement was concerned primarily even exclusively, with gaining access for women to the public sphere, has given way to an ever increasing recognition of the extent of Victorian feminist concern with oppression of women in domestic life, in marriage, and in all forms of sexual relations.  
(Caine 2)

The foundation for feminism was laid by prominent women activists who struggled vigorously to correct the gigantic gender power of their time. The presumption that women are physically and mentally inferior to men was supported by religion, philosophy and science; hence Science was considered predominantly a male domain. Evolutionary anthropologist’s findings showed the inferior capacity of women, due to the difference in the cranial shape facilitated men to enter the university.
Florence Nightingale School was not found until 1861. Oxford and Cambridge were still closed to women. John Stuart mill’s ‘On the Subjection of Women,’ was not yet written, and middle class families had not begun to imagine that they might educate their daughters for careers. (Tomalin 59)

This view became controversial when the position of male education was put under careful scrutiny and Feminists contested this view. Emily Davies has left an indelible mark in the annals of women’s history, her ceaseless effort to fight the arbitrary male laws, her adept at making the goals of each campaign intelligible and turn liabilities to assets brought her success and recognition. Denial of education due to gender bias practiced at home was one of the prime factors that enforced Emily to persuade the authorities to enroll women in London University. Feminist assessment of their personal lives and the lives led by women in the Victorian household made them authenticate their trauma which gave them the momentum to ask for their rights. This rational sense of justice cannot be called insane though the moralists dampened the zealous task of the feminists by calling them ‘shrieking mad woman.’ Davies believed that women’s oppression in domestic and public life was due to the dual standards adopted by rigid society. The reforms she undertook were part of the cultural and political context. As a founder of the first Cambridge College for women she helped to illuminate women and make her competent. This draws attention to the many barriers that women had to cross to earn their place in society. England had four universities in 1830’s but none was open to women by 1912 there were twelve universities and all were open to women. Thanks to Emily who created a niche in shaping the institutional ideological strength and weaknesses that characterized the suffrage movement.
Her edifying interaction with Barbara Bodichon, Elizabeth Garret, and Bessie Rayner Parkes was helpful in bringing about reforms.

Apart from campaigns the power of pen served to confront the abrasive and ubiquitous male order which was largely responsible for augmenting women’s trauma. Most women writers in the century wrote prose as poetry was man’s domain because it required intellect and wit, suggesting that women lacked the grey cells. Emily Dickenson’s poem, *They Shut Me Up In Prose*, expresses her anger at male politics, the poem expresses her urge to break the shackles of restriction and irrational ideas nurtured by the patriarchal society. But the era witnessed very few women writing in verse; because women accepted to write in the popular genre prescribed, because their sole concern was to be heard and to unmask the bitter truths and perverse notions of society. Illuminating the conditions of women through articles in journals, through pamphlets and essays served to reach people. Francis Cobbe was the only Victorian woman who earned her living through writing she advocated a popular cultural narrative to bring to light the tortures inflicted on women in the domestic sphere. Her article *Wife Torture in England* (1878) published in contemporary review cited several instances, mentioning men’s names and their acts. The article accounted the atrocity of a butcher who killed his wife for asking him wages, a drunkard who kicked and assaulted his wife in the streets for refusing to give him money. These are few cases out of the 28 cases she listed; her article exposed the domestic severity sustained by women. The violated and abused women’s bodies appraise the place of beaten woman and the place of the wife beater, who was left without legal redressal. Patriarchal society masked this hidden violence, concealed the risk of marriage by propounding that marriage gives women identity, dignity, freedom and pride. Despite the much lauded matrimonial act
of 1857, Divorce Laws continued to uphold the archaic principle of one law for the rich and
one law for the poor and women (A sexually harassed woman had no right to petition.)
Hence women did not venture to move out of marriage. The article subtly suggested that
women’s freedom was a much desired issue and enlightened women about it. The self
centeredness of men is well stated by Rosemarie Morgan (1984)

Men imagine that a woman has no existence, and that she ought always to
be with them: and yet they love no woman deeply, unless she elevates herself, by
her character, above the weakness and inertia of her sex (42)

Social consecration of the home as a place of serenity gave comfort to the Patriarchal rule
of the male head of the household to control his domain. His autocratic ways went
unquestioned and the trauma of women went unheard. Thinkers like John Locke
summoned that justice was a public realm, since family was a private domain it should be
exempted from the rules of justice. Cobbe, through her puissant and belligerent essays
exposed the falsity of the idealization of marriage and conveyed to non feminist audience
how murder, marriage and divorce are viewed by feminists. The uniqueness of Cobbe was
that she worked within the existing structures, to reformulate the Victorian ideology.
“Feminist writings in the 19th century tend to be seen as part of feminist campaigns, rather
than to fit within the broader framework of women’s writing.” (Caine 99)

The belligerent claim of such feminists worked in favor of women’s release from the
patriarchal tyranny. In the legal code of 18th and 19th century England, husband and wife
were considered as one person. Woman had no independent existence or individual identity;
her life was monitored by her husband, giving full powers to man to control her. The issue of
women’s exoneration was addressed not only by feminists but by novelists as well. Late Victorian writers used their characters to ridicule the legal system. Sue Bridehead in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895) scorns legalized marriage which fails to guarantee physical and mental compatibility. Sue desires divorce from Phillotson but is unable to file a suit against him. Hardy presents the dual standards adopted by the legal system, by making Phillotson file a suit and obtain the divorce. Sue’s comment “Are you and I just as free now as if we had never married at all? … my freedom has been obtained under false pretences.” (306) Sue finds the circumstance of the decree artificial which is substantiated in her comment that most women enter into marriage as it gives dignity but fails to satisfy the emotional requests of women. This is applicable not just to the Victorian context and time but to contemporary times as well. Rosemarie Morgan perceives (1984)

Sue’s campaign against the institution of marriage is rigorous, radical and militant, ideologically ahead of times as far as the feminist movement of the early 1890’s goes and more in line with the 20th century suffragettes, she argues not only with a foresight but also with hindsight wisdom available to a few educated women. (11)

In Sarah Grand’s *Ideala*, Ideala calls marriage, “A mere commercial treaty” (50) These views mark them as intellectual rebels, questioning the arbitrary marriage codes. This gives an insight into the rebellious spirit of the age.

**Awareness through Media:**

The woman’s suffrage journal was used by few activists to awaken the Victorian public about the discontents of women in the educational, legal, and domestic realms. Henrietta
Muller the founder of Women’s Penny Paper (1830) gave vent to women’s issue, and progressive policy in her journal. The paper welcomed to elucidate the views, and opinions of working and educated women. Such attempts served to abate the dominant notion that women are incapable of expression or estimation. The paper addressed the advancement of women. Paper Shafts (1892) and The Woman’s Herald (1893) focused on the process to advance the cause of women. Its insistence on authentic illustration of women’s agency was decisive in the expansion of individual proclamation. Lydia Becker the editor of English Woman’s Journal (1858) used the journal to provide an insight into the caustic condition of domesticity. Her rhetoric differed from the discourse which other feminists like Emily Davies carried out.

Shafts and Women’s Herald articulated a ‘feminist realist’ aesthetic that not only advanced a cause but also helped to transform the novel from Victorian to modern. (Youngkin 7)

The purpose of Woman’s Journal was contrary to Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management, ‘The Christian Miscellany and Family Visitor’ (1888) (a religious magazine) which embellished domesticity and advised woman to become the perfect house wife. Work and Leisure (1880) Women and Work (1874) were popular journals that gave suitable guidance about women’s employment. Job Advertisement, information on trends and business were the prime focus of the journal. Women did not fall back in creating a sense of awareness about women’s priorities and desired economic independence as it would give them identity. In spite of these reforms women found it difficult to gain entry in all spheres, medicine and law; hence the century saw teaching and nursing as women’s profession. Victorian women were torn between the do’s and don’ts, between the old
values, and the new ideology of the feminists but all these had made women astute enough to gauge her stance. Reading was not only a recreation but a window to perceive the outer world; it enabled women to be eclectic and rational about their aims and endeavors. All this forewarned the rigid society that women desired a better society.

The emerging trends of feminism were activated with the dynamic participation of leaders like Emmeline Pankhurst, Christabel Pankhurst, Lydia Becker, Josephine Butler and Bessie Rayner Parkes. Fawcett’s liberal policy added a new dimension to the history of feminism. Her laissez-faire policy was largely due to her upbringing. The encouragement at home allowed them to pursue higher studies. Her sister Elizabeth Garret was the first female doctor in Britain. Diverse interests helped the sisters to bring in reforms. Fawcett espoused pacifist methods to persuade the government to advance the conditions of women. She rallied for changes through conventional means; her concern was to force the government to provide educational opportunities for women. Political reform was the chief aim of liberal feminists of the era. Men irrespective of their class and work had the privilege to vote. Parliament by denying voting rights to women corroborated its discriminatory policy. The 19th century suffrage movement’s sole concern was to persuade the parliament to grant voting powers. Fawcett’s campaigns speak volumes about her radical verve, and energy. Her non violent methods were instrumental in gaining the votes for women. If today’s women enjoy the powers of franchise it is due to the struggle and strife of many feminists. The endeavors of transitional feminists like Emmeline Pankhurst, Sylvia Pankhurst, and Anderson, evidence how and when Victorian feminism was supplanted. Emmeline Pankhurst’s approach was varied not similar to the mid Victorian feminists; she abandoned the Emily Davies tactics (conservative approach). Disillusioned with the slow
progress that had been made through constitutional, pacifist avenues she resorted to violent tactics to urge the parliament to grant voting powers but activists who used such methods were less in number.

The struggle did it involve only women? Richard Pankhurst and John Stuart Mill were firm believers in the social and political emancipation of women. While writers like George Moore, Thomas Hardy, and Thackeray, thought and wrote about woman’s deprivation and the need for her exoneration from the stringent male order. John Stuart mill worked to empower women while Richard Pankhurst drafted pioneering legislation granting women independent control of their finances. His active support and revolutionary views did much to bolster the beliefs of the organization, Women’s Franchise League (1889) and Women’s Social and Political Union (1903) founded by Emmeline Pankhurst these organizations were devoted to deeds and not action. Victorian feminism signified varied strategies employed by feminists of the era; Fawcett and Lydia Becker were committed to old rules while Emmeline aligned herself with new rules; she is known for her militant and violent attacks, Emmeline’s (W.S.P.U.) was born out of anger and frustration. The autocratic attitude and nonchalance of the government urged the feminist to adopt violent methods. “They employed arson and other means of destruction of the property for which the suffragettes are now remembered,” (Wingerden xxiv) their violent attacks were the product of government’s procrastination, broken pledges and passivity. Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst were criticized for their militant strategies. The female rebellion confounded Britain, her dauntless spirit, tireless public oratory, her vigorous move to bring in political reforms and bring in the issue of votes for women to national attention, substantiates her statement that women were ‘law makers’.
The militant tactics also resulted in criminal charges being brought against them. The presence of women activists in court posed a problem for the magistrates who were unaccustomed to dealing with this type of criminals—women who broke with social convention, and education, did not fit easily into the category of ‘female criminals’. (Wingerden xxiv)

Varied strategies of women, indeed posed fresh problems and the government was made to rethink about the age old ideals and beliefs which feminists challenged and contested. Individual experiences of women help to illuminate the complexity of Victorian feminism. Emmeline’s revolutionary devices were essential to win the vote; her suffragist thinking shook the British complacency. Emmeline, through their oratory skills aroused the people to the existing social and political conditions. Lydia Becker an eminent Manchester figure; is known for her commitment to the women’s suffrage. She believed that vote would elevate the status of women and alerted women to their political rights, through her articles and speeches. She differed from early feminists in her challenge of essentialised femininity and asserted that women were intellectually competent with men, her belief brought in some reforms in education. As an elected member to Manchester School Board she strongly opposed domestic education at school and demanded that boys should undergo training to learn domestic tasks. Becker’s approach was radical; she believed in sensitizing boys to the arduous task that women underwent and such training would help to eschew the bias that is nurtured at a very young age. She strongly affirmed that the arbitrary line followed by the institution deprives women from seeking the benefits of education. She found such institutions narrow and irrational in their perspective. Such agitated thinking saw the formation of the Manchester Ladies literary Society,
launched on 30th January 1869. But one cannot ignore that Manchester provided less opportunity for women to partake in literary and scientific activities because the belief that women are incapable of handling analytical subjects. The determination to break into male sphere was channelized. Lydia’s task in the improvement of women and poor demonstrates the social mission of the feminist to alleviate the misery of the deprived. One of the contentious lineaments of the mid Victorian era was the initiation of women articulating in public on political issues. It disputed the perception of separate spheres. The display of women’s oratory was possible due to the Becker’s intrepid efforts.

**Sexual double standards were central to women’s movement:**

To assay the question of prostitution in an era which was steeped in gender bias was disconcerting and demeaning. Josephine Butler a revolutionary feminist triumphed in changing the legislation throughout the western world in order to protect children and women. The passing of the Contagious Disease Act in 1864, called for vulnerable woman in the hospital for medical test and a refusal would penalize her. Josephine Butler, Christianity and libertinism went together to oppose the Contagious Disease Act. Repeal of The Contagious Act brought solace and relieved woman from mental and physical trauma and also served to expose the social ills of society. Such ills resulted due to the indulgence of both men and women. In some cases it was forced while in others, it was to earn their livelihood. She opposed the sexual double standard adopted by the patriarchal society this according to her was the major obstacle that hampered the progress of women. Victorian era saw the flowering of such rebellion, the fervor and efficacy of feminists to subvert the dogmatic doctrines shook the complacency of Victorian society. Butler’s contribution to feminism is of lasting value for the interest she showed to bring on moral and social
transformation and the attainment of such transformation through moral and spiritual
courage. Butler’s remarkable oratory skills helped to expose the hypocrisy of male morality
on women through contagious diseases act. Her ceaseless endeavor forced the parliament to
repeal the act in 1886 and this was considered a major feminist triumph. It cautioned the
authorities, thinkers and political leaders that women are capable of evaluation and
analysis. The task of reforming the inferior status of women was shouldered by the
Victorian feminists. Bessie Rayner Parkes and Barbara Bodichon strived to alter the
restrictive property law that applied to married women. Marriage served as a connecting
link between man, woman and children it enabled man to accumulate property and power.
Christianity considered marriage a sacrament and did not recommend disruption of the
contract, by giving man the right to own woman, her individuality, freedom, property,
marriage. The notions of women’s right to property and the changes that occurred in
England are crucial milestones for study of women’s right to property. Divorce was not
recognized in European countries. Marriage was respected as it gave wealth and status to
women and many Victorians believed.

By marriage, the husband and wife are one 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 whose wing,
protection and cover, she performs everything and is therefore called in our law, a
femme covert… (Bromley 107)

This belief made women underprivileged economically, socially and politically and it was
difficult to break this ideology. It is strange to notice that even women, who could
articulate, who were rational did not object. Their acceptance of the arbitrary laws only
shows women’s lack of support to question the discriminatory laws. Bessie Rayner added an international dimension to her protests by interacting with women in other European countries. Bodichon, formed a committee whose sole purpose was to reform the marriage laws and give women married rights to own their property. These feminists joined hands to caution the woman that by accepting such laws meekly they were only strengthening the irrational man made laws. The parliament by rejecting the petition proved male supremacy ordinary and eminent women signed petition to evidence the unfair treatment meted out (Elizabeth Barret Browning, George Elliot, were few notable names) Bodichon’s incessant struggle earned her the results in 1857, The Married Women’s Property Bill passed its first and second readings in the House of Commons. “The Married Woman’s Property Act of 1882 …was hailed as the Magna Carta for women. “ (Caine 119)

Bodichon exhibits her rationality in terming Marriage as legal prostitution, her audacious and vigorous stance and tirade against male discriminatory policy impressed the Victorian novelist George Eliot. She took her as the model for novel Romola, (1863) Bodichon’s first publication on the laws concerning women provided sufficient proof of the position of women; her awareness about women’s exploitation made her enlist the legal disabilities under which women lived. The English women’s journal facilitated to disseminate her ideas, which awakened women about their rights and duties. Bodichon’s efforts require due praise but she did not find a place in the church records. Her brother who was an arctic explorer was listed in the church records, an instance to justify the discriminatory policy. Feminist’s strivings show that feminism did not happen naturally and women did not get their liberty without struggle and endeavor. The trauma behind the emancipation and the many fervent voices and acts behind the victory achieved are reminiscent of the devoted
and diligent work of feminists. Feminists like Isabella Ford sought to change the working class conditions of women which prove that her loyalties extended beyond the individual cases. She brought connection between socialism, feminism and humanitarianism. She was solely, responsible for establishing The Leed Tailoress Union, (1889) which aimed at improving, the wages and status of women who were working in textile industry in Leeds. This meant that feminists were also motivated by wider collective loyalties. She raised this issue when financial independence was impossibility for women. Industrialization was a blessing, which served to empower women but failed to give them complete freedom from male dominance. Industrialization created variety of innovative jobs in factories. It provided women with domestic or feminine types of job like bread making, tailoring, soap making etc. It was carried out on an increasing scale by factories. The rise of specialization of labor propagated array of jobs in factories and home. The disparity in wages proclaimed discrimination between man and woman. It facilitated the proletariat but the middle class women were deprived of economic usefulness. 1860, Victorian society witnessed the emergence of a new representation of womanhood, that was less constrained by Victorian norm and domesticity than the previous generations. For instance they viewed corsets as a burden restricting free movement, typifying women’s restriction and constraints. Bodichon and Parkes abandoned the corset, shortened their skirts to pronounce their vituperation and reproach. They represented the tendency of young woman at the turn of the century. Emancipation of women was the driving theme of many Victorian novelists, like George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Sarah Grand, Thomas Hardy and Gissing. Hysterical forces unleashed by the suffragette movement represented a challenge to the Victorian ideology. Victorian novelists were involved in countering the stereo-type image of women.
The number of characters in Victorian fiction, sometimes meant to be touching, sometimes not....to most Victorian women....invalidism appeared not merely interesting but attractive; it was almost the only way in which they could attract attention to themselves, while remaining models of propriety,... (Klein 13)

George Eliot, The Bronte Sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell flooded the novel market expressed and influenced the ages expectation for women. These writers wrote with pseudonyms to gain recognition, an instance to show the restriction women novelists had to endure. They expressed sentiments of countless women who were subjugated and whose interests were curbed. They raised the moral and intellectual standards by which women centered novels could be judged and viewed. The mid-nineteenth century writers tried to redefine female identity and help women gain access to the public sphere. Late Victorian novelists like Thomas Hardy, Sarah Grand, and Mary Braddon, created radically independent heroines who struggled for autonomy, identity and power their aim was to,

Resituate [themselves] as critical subject[s] while maintaining a position of effective agency and rejecting the temptations of [patriarchy] essentialism or [institutionalised] pragmatism. (Kranidis 71)

Their narratives are women centered which illuminates female attitudes and experiences and throws light on the texture of women’s lives. These novelists raised one’s awareness and one’s consciousness about gender. Their avowal and the audacious stance, make them deviate from the familiar feminine ideals. British society had held women as consecrated fruits of Christianity and one of the glories of British civilization. “These mythical
sentiments served not only to obscure the true position of the great majority of women in
Britain, but also to suggest a false status for women” (Bromely 433)

The novelists in their own way exposed the hypocrisy of religion and society. Tess,
Idella, Becky Sharp have all proven this view wrong, and shown that they are not the
glories of British civilization but crumpled and crushed beings. Charles Dickens, Elizabeth
Gaskell, Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, each in their own way have in at least one major
work questioned the absolute nature of two groups of women the pure and the fallen.
Through their study of sexual fall (Tess, Becky Sharp, Hetty Sorrel and Nancy), these
novelists were able to envision the acute and manifold enigma of Victorian women from all
classes, and denude the spurious respectability which personified the patriarchy. In so
doing like many feminists and social reformers, they worked to improve the conditions of
women and express their support for the cause. Tennyson’s poem The Princess (1847) is a
simple argument for women’s right in higher education. Incidentally the First British
institution of higher education was opened a year after the publication of the Princess. The
involvement of novelists in varied types of activism, though they didn’t take to streets
helped in altering women’s position and subtly questioning the unjust male laws and
victimization of women. The activists and writers in some ways admit what Juliet Mitchell
affirms, “Feminism as a conscious, that is self-conscious, protest movement arose as a part
of a revolutionary bourgeois tradition that had equality of mankind as its highest goal.”
(Qtd. in Bacchi 109)

Women could not demand equality in the Victorian era the notion that woman was
helpless was strongly felt by the Victorians, yet in the assiduous work of the feminists to
counter male regime served to inspire many writers of the era. Hence they offer new
insights into complexities of women’s growth and independence and gain brief authority. Hardy favored the question of enfranchisement and the issue of illiterate votes. His views were different from liberal feminists who insisted that true destiny of woman lay in fulfilling the role of the mother and wife. He nurtured strong anti-marriage views on marriage which was more socialistic, and such a view comes closer to radical feminist’s views.

The heroine has become a capable being with power and opportunity to shape her own lot, and with individuality and a purpose in life which insist upon the respect of her chronicler and in many cases supply the main motive of the story. (Priestley 12)

In making their Women characters defy most of the cultural standards of the Victorian era, proving for themselves a paradigm for aspiring feminists of their days, the late Victorian novelists (Hardy, Grand, Braddon.) created a niche by incorporating feminist ideals into their work. Ethelberta’s selection of Lord Montclere, Audley’s choice of Michael Audley, Ideala’s rejection of family and volition to help society, Aurora’s choice of John Mallish and her rejection of Talbot, Beth’s decision to move out of the marriage circle choosing writing and oratory as her vocation over the dint, power, and cogency that these novelists gave to women. The late Victorian novelists signaled an entry into the 1890’s debate on the women question. The novels showed numerous examples of changed forms many of them hold jobs not normally held by women. Women held variety of occupations (Governess, religious text illustrator, Dairy Maid, social worker etc.). This subversion of women in almost all kinds of employment was a form of social control that late Victorian novelists
depicted. The era saw the rise of protest novel, new woman novels and sensational novels that fiction laid the foundation for the resurgence of popular feminist fiction

**Diversity and complexity in Victorian feminism:**

Women’s movement during the Victorian era owes its identity and history to the cultural, political and social context of the country. British feminists assumed drastically different stances when advocating for female empowerment and autonomy. Hannah More represents a different approach from the radical feminists of the late Victorian feminists. More believed that allegiance to gender conventions can function as mechanisms for female social mobility and gender equality. She stressed on woman’s duties; her approach was condemned as anti-feminist, she is reckoned as the successful expedients for spreading conservatism. Early feminists Davies, Cobbe, and Hannah More were conservative and represent a different approach from feminists of the latter part of the era. Davies emphasized that the feminine and female power must be expanded within the frame work of Christianity. Fawcett and Butler were liberals; liberal economic arguments were used to argue against obstacles that women faced in employment. Caine states, “Davies’s conservatism is evident in the way that her feminism is seen as something quite distinct from her other social and political ideas.” (57) Butler and Fawcett referred to themselves as liberals and Davies referred to herself as conservative. Davies and Cobbe believed in organizing a committee which comprised of respectable people, Butler sought the support of ordinary people but one cannot ignore that Victorian Feminists portrayed women as bodies, as suffering various forms of cultural and social oppression. Women’s movement in Britain paid more attention to the right to vote, right to property, right to education, patriarchal marriage, and sexual double standard. Though Wollstonecraft is regarded as the
original harbinger of feminism, late Victorian feminists refused to accept the ideals of Wollstonecraft. They differed from Wollstonecraft’s radicalism and her beliefs in natural rights. Victorian feminist’s formed their own views. Their emphasis on knowledge demonstrates their accordance to the veritable spirit of the era. The early feminists Harriet Martineau, Davies, Hannah More, stressed on female education. Public oratory helped Hannah More to awaken women to their social and political rights. The early and mid Victorian feminists initiated a campaign on women’s empowerment. Their radical and liberal feminism prompted a number of women thinkers to deal more openly with social and economic issues. Davies’s innovative attempts to expand educational possibilities and her approach to education is worthy of praise. Her stringent approach was criticized by Bodichon. Davies failed to get the recognition that Bodichon got. “She was less charismatic of the larger Victorian feminist work known as the Langham place circle.” (Murphy xix) In America feminist movement represented by some of the important rational and intellectual activists, like Suzanne La Follete, Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane and Ayn Rand kindled the Anglo libertarian feminism. Margaret fuller an advocate of women’s rights did much to erase the gender bias. Her book Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845) was considered the first major feminist work in the United States, she demanded for the eradication of social, economic and intellectual restriction imposed on woman. The mission of feminist’s in Europe, Brittan and America was to resist gender inequality. This substantiates that women all over the world suffered from similar conditions, and women saw the need to assert their rights. Hence the nineteenth century is notable for the rising consciousness in women. The suffragette movement received wild response from conservatives who believed that it would shake the very foundation on which the stable
society was built. Queen Victoria’s disapprobation of the women’s suffrage as a ‘mad folly’ was a clear indication for women to restrict themselves to the domestic domain. In spite of the criticism hurled against it, suffrage movement gained strength in European countries. The 1823 Anti-Slavery society argued for the abolition of slavery. Anna Richardson, Elizabeth Pease Nichol, Sophia Sturge were involved in the abolition of slavery it is believed that the Anti-Slavery Act motivated women to enter the public sphere. Mary Somerville, Lady Byron and Florence Nightingale were involved in the welfare campaigns. They enlightened women about the benefits of education. Their efforts though commendable launched the fervor and intensity of the later feminists who zealously worked to actualize their resolution. Historian’s view feminism as an aspect of late Victorian liberalism, rise of democracy and reform acts, might have persuaded feminists to consider the state as the supporter of social change. Liberal feminist’s ethical ideas did much to improve the conditions of women. Fawcett and J.S. Mill stressed the importance of granting voting powers to women as it would broaden their sphere beyond the narrow sphere of private life. Barbara Caine’s objective observation and analysis of Victorian feminists makes her affirm, that though J.S. Mill argued that marriage was a social slavery, he continued to view domestic service as important to women. Proving his inability to transform marriage, Mill’s silence towards the problems of single women estranges him from other women’s movements. Victorian feminists show solidarity and obligation, they were committed to the work of the universal. Josephine Butler, Lydia Becker did not work to serve the cause of women alone but worked to serve the downtrodden as well. The dissent between the feminists and the political exploit was an actuality that feminists attempted to parley at the personal and collective level. Feminism, was a boon to women,
women vocalized their demands, questioned the exclusion and violence to which they were subjected. The strength and power of women’s movement helped to acquire a broader vision through greater and longer exposure to social realities. Feminists had to face opposition from men, government and women as well. The New Woman by gaining mobility through the bicycle, through marginal access to education and financial independence, enjoyed her freedom. She despised womanhood and desired to cultivate masculine habits (smoking cigarettes, riding bicycles). Feminist’s rejection of the feminine which reflected surveillance to man, was not liked by Anna Kingsford, Queen Victoria and Eliza Linton.

These four decades were also important to the women suffrage movement, not only for laying the foundations and eroding anti suffrage prejudice, but for understanding just what it must have meant to Davies and Fawcett finally to be able to cast their first votes.  (Wingerden 1)

Anna Kingsford a staunch supporter of women’s rights did not approve of the sacrifice of womanly attributes. Eliza Linton, in spite of her feminine finesse views felt that feminine skills should not be renounced. Linton contested to retain women in the subaltern position. Her Darwinian beliefs were contradictory to feminist’s beliefs. Her disapproval of women’s political participation made the feminist’s term her a major hindrance to progressive ideas. A divide among the feminist groups inform the varied strategies used by the feminists to bring in reforms. The non-violent methods used by National Union of Women’s Suffrage societies led by Fawcett were a contrast to militancy and press baiting methods of Emmeline Pankhurst, Christabel Pankhurst, Sylvia Pankhurst of the late Victorian era. David Morgan (1975) notes, that activist’s realized “Teaparties would not
do it……sensational publicity and martyrdom might.” (301) and Ray Strachey states that “Prime minister, Campbell urged women to go on pestering…..and exercise the virtue of patience” (301) Campbell’s utterance infuriated feminists who had been working since 50 years; 50 years of pestering had done them no good. Government’s procrastination, broken pledges, political parties reluctance to alleviate the plight of women substantiated their nonchalance to commiserate, and feminists disputed such profanity. All these factors resulted in feminist using violent methods, women activists were united in their mission; the support of likeminded people strengthened their cause. Contradictions, hostility and varied attitudes demonstrate the complexity of feminist ideas, for they served a larger purpose of unraveling the domestic violence, and also exposing the male pretense. Victorian feminists faced the dilemmas and perplexities that bother, contemporary feminists. Victorian feminists were not artless and incoherent; they strived vigorously to correct the gigantic gender power of their time. Their thoughts and beliefs provide an insight into the complexities of feminism in the Victorian era. The Women’s Social and Political Union led by Emmeline Pankhurst had 2000 members which dramatically fell when it began arson campaign. Pankhurst is generally called the militant suffragette who brought the issue of votes for women to national attention. Her militant activity into the British women’s suffrage campaign has been an arguable issue. She confounded the Edwardian Britain through her violent attacks. Through her public speeches she envisioned a society transformed by feminine energies. These late Victorian feminists incited a rush on parliament, defended their cause with rational arguments. They abandoned the pacifist approach of Fawcett and Butler. Their protest revolutions, arson bombing, stone throwing,
rallies and violent campaigns followed by imprisonments were condemned by the people but it made the leaders yield and grant voting powers.

Their different approaches were a merit, not a hindrance. Woman’s articulation of their demands and their struggle to attain them made an impact on British social consciousness, woman’s identity, and self image. The feminists in 1880’s recognized the states intention to protect women’s goals. This was a major shift as it helped to erase the earlier suspicion that the state was hostile towards men and acted as an agent of male oppression. Their inability to comprehend the diverse and complicated political economic forces which brought about the distinction between public and private sphere may have been a stumbling block to attain complete freedom because their effort to erase gender inequality, gained partial success. This did not make them less accomplished but justified that the path to freedom was not a trouble free task. It is a bitter irony that this fact has been erased by the knowledge that freedom was eventually won. Mapping woman’s journey from its faltering beginnings, from the early nineteenth century to late nineteenth century and early twentieth century shows the impediments faced in the process. The effort of many voices, many minds sustained the journey.

Victorian feminism had, of course, different priorities and strategies from those of 1970’s and seeing it only as inadequate ran the risk of anachronism, of mistakenly judging the past only by the terms and conditions of the present. (Gorman 71)
Conclusion

Myriad of conflicting narratives show that feminist’s were a challenge to the Victorian sentiments. Along with social and political upheaval it was the voice of the women asserting her desire that made the Victorians re-assesses the stance and position of women. Feminists with a combination of intellect, ambition, ability and flawless character created a sense of awakening by cautioning women about the dangers of male hegemony. History of Victorian feminism its impact on society and literature arouses interest to study the Victorian novels from the below, from the marginalized perspective.
Works Cited


