CHAPTER- I

The Family in Victorian Society

To trace the origin of Victorian values and beliefs, one has to go back to 1815, to the end of the Napoleonic war, to the age of William Cobett, the Earl of Eldon, Percy Belloc Shelley, Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott. Critics and historians are divided about this age, which was marked by conflicting theories and explanations, scientific and economic confidence sharpened by an awareness of progress. Tennyson the famous Victorian poet sang of its beauty:

Till now the doubtful dusk reveal'd
The knolls once more, where, couch'd at ease,
The White kine glimmer'd, and the trees
Laid their dark arms about the field.

("In Memoriam XCV" 57-60)

but Carlyle denounced “the infidel and mechanical trends of the age, its mammon-worship and machine-worship, its cash-nexus which superseded human relationships…”(42). Arnold on the other hand complained of this “strange disease of modern life, / With its sick hurry, and divided aims,” in “The Scholar Gypsy” (203-204).

In the essay “Introducing the Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians” a well-known philosopher and critic, comments- “The daily life of our time is filled with uncertainties and haunted by disasters”(Russell 19). The age opened with the dread of the Industrial Revolution darkened by doubt. “Constant change, variety and self criticism were the chief features of this age, otherwise marked by peace and prosperity”(Trevelyan 16). The result of this industrial progress was social unrest, leading to sharp class distinctions in society — one, composed of wealthy classes and the other of paupers. A major part of 19th century
British history lies in the drama of the ascendant middle class, which helped in establishing a balance in society. The woeful conditions of this class caught the eyes of reformers, and the stage was set for upliftment. This led to a spurt of Reform Bills in 1842, 1846 and 1856, which ushered in democratic consciousness among the Victorian people. Victorian thought, was thus conditioned, by the idea of progress, and the dominant feature of this age was social peace, possible due to the religious background, which formed men like John Bright, Earl of Shaftsbury and W.E.Gladstone.

A study of the social composition of a nation is incomplete, without the study of its religion, and this study must begin with the Church of England. Religion started to reflect the interests of social classes, and many of the religious difficulties, were often expressions of pain, at social displacement, as men outgrew the bleaker beliefs in which they had been reared. This was a society, where the rites of the church encompassed all main events in the life of the individual and the family. There was "a high degree of Christian commitment" (Sanders 399) despite the shocks of complacency, occasioned by the 1851 religious census, and religion is found to be a powerful force, an anchor where society was bound by "the cement of Christian moral teaching" (399), laying stress on home and family life. This strength has been realized perhaps, more by foreign observers than by the English themselves. It was recognized by the eminent historian Elie Halevy, who made it his central thesis in his classical, History of the English People of the Nineteenth Century (1951). Inspite of uncertainties and doubts that shook this rigid faith, religion was the basis of social peace and co-operation in Victorian England. Religion could not be crushed and this became "assuredly an affair of the family and home" (Rupp 108). From the time of Genesis – the family has occupied an important place in the Christian religion. Having its basis in the Bible, this religion believed that civilization began with Adam and Eve. This was the first family, and for the Evangelical movement,
itself a dynamic force, “its strength lay not in the pulpit or the platform but in the Home
and the family” (Smyth 103). The Home was the shrine and it was in the hearts of
Victorian mothers, that Evangelical piety won the most gracious of its triumphs. Family
prayers were a regular characteristic observance in the Victorian home, and a child learnt
about his religion from his mother’s knee. “Puritanism, it has been said was the religion
of the state: Methodism the religion of the heart: the Oxford movement the religion of the
church but Evangelicalism was the religion of the Home” (Smyth, 104). In the essay
“Evangelicalism of the Nonconformists”, Gordon Rupp observes:

Family prayer and devotional reading, and the common
observance of Sunday were not by any means the meaningless
and unwelcome discipline...The Victorian Sunday, though it
become a burdensome and irritating encumbrance to those
outside the household of faith, was for many millions indeed a
day of rest and gladness. (108)

The special place of home and family was thus, a continuous theme in the Victorian
period.

Numerous studies have sought to trace the historical and structural evolution of
the family. George Peter Murdock in his study Social Structure (1949) defines the family
as a “multi-functional institution” (184), which is indispensable to society. Sociologists
have rightly regarded the family as a “cornerstone of society” (Haralambros & Heald
325). A basic unit of social organization, it is difficult to imagine how human society
could function without it. It’s many-sided utility, accounts for its universality. “The
original meaning of the word family (familia) is not that compound of sentimentality and
domestic strife, which forms the ideal of the present day Philistine, among Romans it
refers to the total number of slaves belonging to one man” (Marx, 478). The Romans, to
denote a new social organism, whose head ruled over wife and children, and a number of
slaves, invented this term. "The modern family contains in germ not only slavery (servitude) but also serfdom" (Marx 478). D.J.H. Morgan was the first man to study the history of the family from its primitive stage. The development of the family takes a parallel course, but here the periods have striking marks of differentiation. In his work entitled *Social Theory and the Family*, Morgan observes:

> The family represents an active principle. It is never stationary but advances from a lower to a higher form, as society advances from a lower to a higher condition. (444)

Many sociologists have however tended to bypass the family in their preoccupation with social class. Friedrich Engels who wrote *Origin of Family Private Property and the State* (1891) took an evolutionary view of the family, attempting to trace its origins and evolution through time. He argues that as the mode of production changed, so did the family. During the early stages of human evolution, Engels believed that the forces of production were communally owned, and the family as such did not exist. This stage was characterized by promiscuity. There were no rules governing relationships and society was in effect, the family. History reveals a "progressive narrowing of the circle, originally embracing the whole tribe, within which the two sexes have a common conjugal relation" (41), until it includes a single pair – the dominant form of marriage today. Morgan divides the history of man into three stages – Savagery, Barbarism and Civilization, and accordingly there are three principle forms of marriage – group marriage, pairing marriage and monogamy. The first type leads to two families forms (a) the Consanguine and (b) the Punaluan. The Consanguine consists of descendants of a single pair, the descents of these descendents being brothers and sisters and therefore husband and wife. This form is however extinct. In the Punaluan family, there was a mutually common possession of husbands and wives, within a definite family circle, from which brothers of wives and sisters of husbands were excluded. The increasing
complications of these prohibitions led to its extinction, and group marriage was replaced by the pairing marriage. In this stage one man lives with one woman, but relation is such that polygamy remains the right of man. Women had to maintain strict rules of fidelity. The third form, the Monogamous nuclear family developed with the emergence of private property in particular, the private ownership of the forces of production and advent of the state. "It is based on supremacy of man, the express purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity" (Engels 340), which solved the problem of inheritance of private property. It is distinguished by a greater strength of the marriage tie, which can be dissolved only by the man. The position of woman becomes inferior, and she suffers humiliation and domination. This form clearly expresses the antagonism between man and woman, expressed in man's exclusive supremacy, and exhibits in miniature, the same oppositions and contradictions as those in which society has been moving. Changes evolved and "the modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass; composed of these, individual families as its molecules (Engels 65).

Prior to the nineteenth century, the concept of the family in England was also divided between the notions of co-residence and kinship, which included resident kinfolk, and domestic servants under a common patriarchal head. Eighteenth century painters painted family groups - "an assemblage of parents, children, dogs and ponies painted in an open air with a vista of rich areas, stretching behind (Calder 82). Such paintings suggest a crucial relationship between generation and property. In the nineteenth century however, this relationship appears narrow, due to the focus on the increasing middle-class. In the fiction of this class an immediate connection between money, aspiration and life-style is portrayed. The Victorian family won a reputation as a noble institution upon whose continuance depended all that was fine and stable in British Civilization. "Every
English man's home was his castle" (Beales 344). In its sanctity and privacy a man escaped from the trials of the grim outer world. “The family was an estate, like the British Empire and subject like it to the benevolent despotism of its lord and master” (Beales 344). The Victorian middle class drawing room was one point of stability in the rapidly changing world, and to preserve this sanctuary, men took great care to exclude from it all the harsh realities of life:

comfortable, overstuffed with furniture and relics, crowded with children of all age groups playing on the piano, doing needle work, painting under the supervision of the governess, and in a corner just beneath the aspidistra, the eldest daughter bashfully received the attention of her suitor. All this presided by the mother whose children must be seen but not heard – who at the age of forty an awe – aspiring matron held the threshold of her organization like a bunch of keys. (Klein 262)

Possession of an entire house was strongly desired by every Victorian gentleman, for it throws a sharply well defined circle around his family and hearth. G.K. Chesterton in *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1966) remarks that this was the first generation that asked its children to worship the hearth without the altar. John Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies* (1910) defined the family with a note of longing, and hailed it as a place of refuge – “a place of Peace; the shelter not only from all injury by all terror, doubt and division” (72). It was thus a symbol of security in the chaotic Victorian world. To support life and seek a balance between incompatible opposites, Victorians turned to an intensification of personal relationships and an unbalanced exaggeration of domestic virtue:

Ah love let us be true
To one another! for the world which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various so beautiful, so new

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain,

And we are here on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

(Arnold, “Dover Beach” 29 - 37)

The family as it appeared in the Victorian Age leaves necessarily indirect rather than direct records of its true qualities. These records are available in the unconscious evidence of novels, newspapers, and magazines, even in such popular sayings as ‘children should be seen and not heard’. “The portrayal in Thackeray’s Cornhill Magazine, the quieter fullness of the days of William Arthur’s Successful Merchant, reflects the middle class habit and outlook” (Beales 346). The image that emerges is that of an established routine, of a division of labour, between man and woman that correlates with known social habits. The rising middle class put a premium on the idleness of their woman. It attached a definite prestige value to it. The social function of the bourgeois woman apart from childbearing was to be a living testimony to her husband’s social status. Society fixes marriage as “the destination for women, the prospect they are brought up to and the object which it is intended should be sought by all of them” (Mill 27). Accordingly, her virtues were chastity and a sense of propriety. This did not include either industry or intelligence. Innocence and inexperience, and a cultivated fragility were characteristic attributes of the Victorian girl. Delicacy as a sign of refinement was widely upheld by polite fiction. Ann Oakley in the Saturday Review, Hudson of 1859 illustrates the ideal woman and her role in the family in mid – Victorian times – “Married life is a woman’s profession and to this life her training – that of dependence is modelled” (380). It was
also a situation which made matrimony the only possible means for a woman to provide for herself, while at the same time minimizing her positive contribution to marriage to such an event, as to make her feel a burden rather than an active partner in a common enterprise. Patriarchy was the ideal towards which the middle-class family strove. Women were tutored to be submissive to their husbands and fathers. Their life was rationalized by a greater emphasis on the joys of self-sacrifice. Victorian middle class ideology of the proper sphere of a woman was, who would be “a Perfect lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to man, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home” (Showalter 14). Queen Victoria announced in the Hudson Review, 1970 “Let a woman be made what God intended; a help-mate for man but with totally different duties and vocations (380). Thus a combination of factors locked the married women into the mother/housewife role, and these factors filtered down to the working class.

In an age of rising bourgeois, when all powers economic, legal and political were under the control of the male, the respectable female also belonged to some male. The Victorian woman was debarred from the functions of pre-industrial England and this “set her apart from the world of commerce and generally of intellect” (Althick 80). Unaccustomed to public life, women became too weak to face the hostile world of competition and business. Even women who required jobs were allowed jobs appropriate to a woman’s sphere. She lost access to public and community life, her chief task being to be a moral preceptor of the family, the guardian angel, and one who will guide another who strays from the path of virtue. As her husband’s companion she should be a solace and joy to him – to provide relief to the tired Victorian man. Her married life was perfect, if she led a noiseless life under the protection of her husband, supervising the large retinue of servants, sons, daughters, nephews and nieces, or could engage herself in
benevolent work, by visiting or caring for the sick in her own estate. This was her realm and as a mistress, she was the Commander of an army—“as with the Commander of the Army so is it with the mistress of the house; her spirit can be seen through the whole establishment” (Rees 62). John Ruskin describes a perfect woman in *Sesame and Lilies* (1910):

> The best woman are indeed necessarily the most difficult to know; they are recognized chiefly in the happiness of their husbands and the nobleness of their children; they are only to be divided not discerned by the stranger; and sometimes seem almost helpless except in their homes ... so far as she rules all must be right or nothing is. She must be enduringly incorruptibly good; instinctively infallibly wise — wise not for self-development but for self-renunciation, wise not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fall from his side; wise not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless bride, but with passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable... (90)

In other words for Ruskin the best woman is the most self-denying and malleable woman. Next to the wife, domestic servants without whom the Victorian family was incomplete played a vital role. They lived in close proximity with the members, and reflected the status and wealth of their employers. Servants inevitably knew a great deal about the private lives of those they served. They had the capacity to make or break a reputation, and often feature in fiction as a devoted follower, who performs tasks, and gets the employer out of difficulties when they arise. This type appealed to the nineteenth century imagination. “A married middle class woman’s existence was to a great extent defined by this relationship to her servants — they were in effect part of the family which circumscribed her life”(Calder 85). They were involved in the most critical moments of
her life, and protected her from the grimmer realities of life. Peggotty in *David Copperfield* is the best example of such a character. The Victorian family was incomplete without the Nanny and the Governess. The Nanny was important as a status symbol, and Victorian mothers constantly overburdened with pregnancy and childbirth, had to rely on the Nanny. Concern for her health and the rising nature of material comfort, made it difficult for the mother to personally look after the rearing of her own children. Nurses, wet nurses, governesses and tutors trained children. The Nanny played an indispensable role of mother – substitute that demanded a high standard of character and morality from her. The Governess was a testimony, and an indicator of the economic power of the mistress. She was one of the appendages of the paraphernalia of gentility. Her position was discomfiting - a lady not a servant, a guest not a mistress yet employed she was caught in a confused mesh. Unsure about her position her relationship with the family members was somewhat unsatisfactory. “She fulfilled the anomalous roles of household drudge and novel heroine with ladylike resignation”(P. Thompson 37).

Within the family the father was the supreme head. He reigned as lord and master and his authority was never questioned. This insistent theme of patriarchy is an intrinsic feature of Victorian literature – the authoritarian husband and father appear in various guises “as hero, villain, righteous man as moral pervert, as pillar of society and destroyer of individual freedom”(Calder 82). With this sovereignty was allied a remoteness. This was customary in an age when the fathers worked away from home, and were generally hard – working. Business, public duty, official duty forced them to be away for most part of the day and many times a year. The size of the family was also a contributory factor for this remoteness. Moreover the large families with its numberless aunts, uncles, cousins and frequent visits of relatives and friends, made it more confusing. Fathers often found their own children noisy and bothersome. This attitude together with remoteness, both
physical and psychological, usually separated the father from both children, as well as the mother. Though physically non-existent, he established himself firmly in the children and wife’s psyche, and mentally was always present. “Fatherhood was a conservative institution in Victorian England, one that prompted continuity more than it did rebellion” (Roberts 63). The patriarchal father liked to see the symbolic value of his wealth solidly represented in his home. Women and children are seen tamed and acquiescent in view of man as the provider and arbiter. Jenni Calder locates in Victorian fiction, a vision of the middle class family as violent and destructive in contrast to the myth of the family as secure and supportive:

Fathers terrorize and coerce their children, husbands enjoy breaking the wills of their wives and writers participate in these scenarios with verbal exactitude and zest-husband and wife, parent and children can only choose the roles of victim or oppressor. In a cannibalistic world you are either a corpse or you are feeding on a corpse. Roles of male predator and female parasite are equally tainted and damaging. (84)

Duty and obedience to those in authority was of prime importance to them. Paternal responsibility was seen in terms of money and it was in money that the father’s authority and power lay. “He paid for the servants, for the clothes, for the dinners, stumped up for the son’s debts, bought the ball gowns for his daughters” (Calder 83).

In return the father imposed a serious morality and admonished the children to learn self-discipline. Daughters had to submit themselves even more than the sons. To win praise or approval they should be perfectly weak, tender, affectionate and docile. The daughter should follow the mother’s footsteps and should prefer her father’s choice and advice rather than her own. She must marry with her father’s consent and never marry below the station of her father. “Daughters can only have a choice among those people
whom their parents like, and who like their parents well enough to come to their house" (Nightingale 346). The daughter’s life centered around the father’s chamber and feminine education conformed to these standards. “Innocence and inexperience and a cultivated fragility were characteristic attributes of the Victorian girl” (Klein 264). Discipline was expected from sons as well, but in certain cases they had an upper hand. As the next patriarchal head they were favorites of the father who provided the best of everything for them. In a letter to Mrs. Wooler on 30th January 1846, Charlotte Bronte writes:

You ask me if I do not think that men are strange beings? I do indeed. I have often thought so; and I think, too that the mode of bringing them up is strange: they are not sufficiently guarded from temptation. Girls are protected as if they are frail or silly indeed, while boys are turned loose on the world, as if they of all beings in existence, were the wisest and least liable to be led astray. (165)

The boys thus, had more access to public life, and this freedom gave them a controlling power over the girls. Patriarchy was ingrained at a very young stage, and nuances of this, is evident in novels written by women writers. Tom Bloomfield of Agnes Grey is a good example. When Agnes reprimands him for striking his sister, Tom replies –“I am obliged to do it now and then, to keep her in order (AG 39). Tom here is ingrained in childhood itself to control his sisters and his subordinates.

The general attitude towards children was conflicting. On one hand, children were seen “as original innocents, on the other they were seen as limbs of the devil” (Calder 86).

A striking feature of middle class family is the sheer severity of parents. Children were a threat, a potential challenge to family life and parental authority as much as they were an intrinsic part of the rounded domestic scene. E.P. Thompson remarks:
Break their wills betimes...Let a child from a year old be taught to fear the rod and to cry softly; from that age make him do as he is bid, if you whip him ten times running to effect it... Break his will now, and his soul shall live and he will probably bless you to all eternity. (385)

The chief defect of the Victorian middle class was that it lived too much in the present. Rooted in tradition, it did not allow room for development in regard to acquisition of new freedom and new enjoyments. The new public schools came to be dominated by Arnold’s Rugby School. The ideal behind this system was that of the English gentlemen and people were pressed to conform to this ideal. In the essay “The Victorian Family”, an eminent philosopher argues that:

though some care is taken to fit youth of both sexes for society and citizenship, no care whatsoever is taken to fit them for the position of parents. While many years are spent by a boy in gaining knowledge of which the chief value constitutes the education of a gentleman and while many years are spent by a girl in those decorative acquirements which fit her for evening parties, not an hour is spent by either in preparation for that greatest of all responsibilities – the management of a family.

(Spenser 347)

There were sides of family relationships, which caused doubts and resentments to arise. Family bonds in the working class became purely financial, and parents were concerned not with the children but with their wages. The result was instability, and children found themselves in the mercy of dangerous influences. In such a morbid atmosphere the members of the family were no better:

Recklessness, improvidence, unnecessary poverty, starvation drunkenness, parental cruelty and carelessness, filial
disobedience, neglect of conjugal bond and rights, absence of
maternal love, destruction of brotherly and sisterly affection were
the main factors that led to the degeneration in the quality of
family life. (Calder 50)

External factors like the standard of living, collective bargaining, shorter working
days, education etc failed to strengthen the Victorian family. Coming under the influence
of new biological and psychological knowledge, the Victorian family began to look
outward as it became smaller, and better equipped, both culturally and educationally. In
The Way of All Flesh (1903) Samuel Butler observes, that more unhappiness comes from
the attempt to prolong family connection unduly and to make people hang together
artificially who would never naturally do so.

These reasons took parents and children out of the family circle, weakening the
earlier familial bond. This resulted in the revolution of Emancipation, which led to
substantial modifications of internal relationships of marriage, and therefore the
institution of the family. The Matrimonial causes Act of 1857, which limited grounds for
divorce, and the Custody of Infants Act 1939, incorporated by Caroline Norton, paved the
way for reformers, like Josephine Butler and Mrs. Beasant, who brought in changes in the
family set-up, and the validity of the family was not in doubt as it fitted into the golden
age of the self-made man.

In fictional terms, the Victorian family prescribed a shell of conformity, but
inside, was a confused mess. This is exposed beautifully by prominent writers of the
period, especially women writers since “Women, it was argued wrote best about what
they knew best”(Foster 1). Victorian women faced a crisis of affairs that emerged from
cultural and social conditions, and women writers faced another crisis that of conflict
between personal and professional roles. While placing the family at the centre of her
vision of social harmony and emotional fulfillment, George Eliot maintains a coolly
critical awareness of its perils and shortcomings. Like other women writers, she shows how women may be trapped by the false promise it offers. Charlotte Bronte on the other hand, expresses her skepticism about the family, by pointing out the glaring disparities between the ideal and the actual. There are other writers who accept the conventional view of family and marriage. Charlotte Younge, an archetypal Victorian conservative, accepts unequivocally the conventional view of family. In her book *Womankind* (1887) she observes, “Home making is perhaps the most essential of all duties of womankind” (264). Another contemporary novelist upholds the belief that “the true happiness of life – of women’s life especially – [is] love, home and its joys” (Kavanagh 143). There is thus a difference of opinions echoed throughout the literature of that period. But behind these images there existed a much tougher understanding of the family’s purpose. It was not only a social unit but also a political unit, a unit of stability and order, a symbol of acquiescence in the hierarchy of authority that rose over it. When the family disintegrated, extreme poverty, anarchy and chaos ensued. The family was a restraint against working class discontent. It was something private owned by the members themselves and exclusive of outside forces. Cherished as a refuge from the harsh realities of life, the family was a unit of private ownership, the idea of protection. However buffeted the members may be by the outside world, within the family, they could exercise their own authority in safety. The Bronte family beautifully portrays all the features of a typical Victorian family. A close-knit family, they depended on each other for inspiration and shared “exceptional gifts, interests and ambitions. Their story is the account of a family growing up together towards a dependent maturity” (Wilks 9). The Bronte’s have never ceased to be the centre of curiosity, and their family story with its reeking, unhealthy village, bleak parsonage and wild lonely moors, is of perennial interest to any reader of Victorian fiction. The next chapter reviews the family history of the
enigmatic Bronte's, with the aim of highlighting the biographical as well as social reasons that lead to the Bronte's' interest in the family as a major theme in their novels.
Works Cited


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