

Status of women's in the 18th century's English society

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Abstract

This paper will deal with the attitude of early eighteenth century towards women and their roles in society. In this paper, I try to present some of what it is possible to discover about the actual status of women in 18th century. The 18th century is a very significant period in order to analyse how the society at that time dealt with women. In 18th century, women lived in an age characterised by gender inequality. It was the man dominated society. All the power and pleasure were only for men. Women passed their lives as dependent on their man. Some social historians have depicted "woman's place" as very low, indeed: with few legal and economic rights or even receiving little respect, women can be seen as oppressed victims of a patriarchal society. They were seen as, docile and domestic creature. Women didn't have any freedom to choose their life partner and their profession. Education didn't mean for women. In this patriarchy society, women were only eligible or accomplished to opt profession of midwife, domestic servant. I have also tried to examine different elements affected the lives of women such as their education, legal rights, marriage, social status etc.

Keywords: docile, slavery, domestic servant, suppressed, infantilized, preclude, womanhood

Introduction

Sole Aim (Marriage)

Women's sole purpose in life is to find a husband, reproduce and then spend the rest of lives serving them or we can say that for 18th century's women, marriage was the only real choice in order to have economic security and a respectable, fulfilling life. If a woman were decided to remain single, she would be ridicule and pitied by the community. If a girl married, it was usually between the age of 16 and 19. If she entered her twenties unmarried, her prospect of marriage were consider slim. If she reached the age of 25 and was still unmarried, she was considered a spinster and her prospect for marriage was nearly impossible. We can also notice these problems related to marriage in novels of Jane Austen. In pride and prejudice, Charlotte is 27, not especially beautiful and without an especially large "portion". It is therefore her advancing age hastened her engagement to Collins "solely the pure and disinterested desires of an establishment. Thus to Charlotte, marriage is a transaction undertaken in the self interest. In her novel, Jane Austen revealed in 18th century how marriage was based on monetary system but not on love or choice of a girl.

Education

According to historians since women did not usually have career and were not citizens in the sense of being directly involved in politics, there was little generally perceived need for education for them. Most of the writers on the subject of "female education" preferred that women should receive a practical training for their domestic role. Despite the national education system established through the education acts of 1870 and 1876, girls attending public or state school, received essentially the same skill related to the domestic role such as classes in laundry, home management, needle work, cookery classes piano classes and etc. Women were not allowed to attend university. John Ruskin, a writer during this period, believed that "a woman's education should be such that it

takes into consideration a husband's need to his interest with his wife and conduct intelligent conversation with her".

Legal Status

English common law left a woman very little economic freedom, for it ruled that whatever property a woman owned before marriage or might receive thereafter automatically became her husband's. Thus, daughters of wealthy fathers frequently became prey of fortune-seeking men, and daughters of fathers of limited fortunes often had difficulty in finding husbands at all. A married woman had no distinct legal identity since she was under her property. She could neither sue nor be sued, as well as she could not enter into contracts. In addition a married woman had no freedom of leaving her home without the consent of her husband and could not claim the custody of her children. Hence the law 'infantilized' married women by considering them to be incompetent of managing their affairs. On the other hand, single women had some rights equal to man namely making contracts, and owing properties, but these rights were very much limited. In private law, a single woman had no rights resulting in exclusion from citizenship. In Pride and Prejudice Col. Fitz William Darcy, a rich man hints to Elizabeth that he can't marry her

"our habits of expense make us too dependent, and there are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry me without some attention to money." ch.33

Profession

Men were the primary wage earners, while women were expected to be primarily responsible for housework and childcare. Most married women did not work outside the home because they did not have time. Even middle class women were kept busy organizing the servants. However life could be hard for spinsters. Single women worked as spinners, tailoresses, milliners and washerwomen. Many women were

domestic servants. Others were midwives and milkmaids. Women were not taught academics and science related courses so they couldn't take up professions such as lawyer and doctor.

Social Rank

Different elements affected the lives of women. In particular their social and economic position affected the circumstances in which they lived. It didn't matter if they were single; married or widowed. Married women didn't have any separate identity or entity. They were not free to do anything without their husbands' permission. Sometimes they seemed imprisoned in marital bound. At the time any adult women without a husband were seen like a anomaly, people talked about single women in term of their failure to marry. Women who were not married or whose husbands failed to support them, found living difficult. Even women cannot make any statement in public. They did not have right to vote but they could influence their friends, relatives indirectly. But in 1867 women over 21 got the right to vote but with some conditions.

Seeds of revolution

During this time, generally women accept all kinds of discrimination with them as their fate. An upbringing of a woman was designed to make her ready to serve man as their master i.e. the only aim of their lives. They did not aware of their own talents, rights, likes and dislikes. But in the latter half of the 18th century few women such as Mary Wollstonecraft began to speak out publicly on women's rights, including education and marriage laws. Though women had better access to education, the goal of women's education was to attain an ideal "womanhood"—a "proper education" was viewed as one that supported domestic and social activities but disregarded more academic pursuits. Women such as Wollstonecraft advocated access to education for women that was equal to that of their male counterparts. Marriage laws, which overwhelmingly favoured men, also spurred public debate, though little was accomplished to reform laws during this period.

Conclusion

The above discussion makes it clear how women were placed or treated in 18th century English society. The idea of the superiority of men and their ownership of women is terribly supported by a glance at English laws involving women. Women were depending on mercy of men. Male dominated society always had doubt on women's mental abilities and their characters as well. Firstly they were debarred from the very basic rights of one human beings life such as right to education, right to choose profession, put their views in public. Secondly they were debarred from citizen right i.e. right to vote. Even they were not allowed to choose their life partner according to their own choice. The society custom and set rules made people believe that they didn't have any abilities any talent in them and most of the women accept this discrimination as their fate. But in the latter half of the century some of the women speak out against these faulty customs and high discrimination. It is a result of their struggle; a woman can breathe in free society. In contemporary English society women not only have equal place in society and nation but also left men far behinds in many fields of life by their intelligence and hard labour.

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