

# Gender Codes in Victorian Society and Coquette as a Paradigm Shift

## Abstract

Victorian gender codes enforced few traits to be followed by both men and women. There was no equality between men and women. Men were considered superior than women, more rights were given to men i.e. right of vote and own property. Women were expected to be innocent and pure. They were not allowed to be educated or gain knowledge. Purpose of their life was to take care of the interests of their husbands and to cook and clean the house. They were considered the 'angels of the house'. These gender codes were questioned by Coquettes or Spectacular Women. Coquettes or spectacular women were not only beautiful, but also conscious of and comfortable with their own beauty. They enjoy being beautiful, they enjoy admiration, and like to flirt with men. They love luxury and fashion, are gifted in music and dance. The purpose of my paper is to identify their role as a paradigm shift in Victorian Period.

**Keywords:** Gender Codes, Foil, Coquette, Feminism.

## Introduction

The Victorian period formally began in 1837 (the year Victoria became Queen) and ended in 1901 (the year of her death). It was a time of great change. During the Victorian Period the role of men and women became defined. Earlier women were allowed to work alongside their husbands, brothers etc. As the nineteenth century progressed, men increasingly commuted to their places of work like factories, shops and offices. Wives, daughters and sisters were left at home all day to oversee the domestic duties like cooking, cleaning and child-rearing.

## Review of Literature

"Gender roles in the 19th century", an article by Kathryn Hughes, Published in 2014 defines that the role of men and women in Victorian Period was completely distinguished from each other. He has mentioned several facets to justify gender discrimination in Victorian Period i.e. women's separate sphere, their education, marriage, sexuality etc.

"Role of Women- Paradigm Shift", an article by Haley Sabitus, Published in 2012 defines that the role of women has been changed and still changing in our society. He has specified various movements happened in the twentieth century which supported the cause of women empowerment.

"Gender Ideology & Separate Spheres in the 19th Century", an article elaborates gender discrimination and social changes that occurred in Victorian Period. Further defines that how women were considered physically and intellectually as the 'weaker' sex and subordinate to male authority in every walk of life.

## Objective of the Study

The objective of my paper is to identify the function of Coquette in Victorian novel and their close resemblance with the feminism.

In *Pride and Prejudice* the snobbish Caroline Bingley lists the skills required by any young lady who considers herself accomplished;

"A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved." (Ch. 8)

As Miss Bingley emphasizes, it was important for a well-educated girl to soften her erudition with a graceful and feminine manner. No one wanted to be called a 'blue-stocking', the term given to women who had devoted themselves too enthusiastically to intellectual pursuits. 'Blue-stockings' were considered unfeminine and "off-putting". Men felt that they

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attempted to usurp their 'natural' intellectual superiority. Some doctors reported that too much study actually had a damaging effect on the ovaries, turning attractive young women into dried-up prunes. Later in the century, when Oxford University and Cambridge University opened their doors to women, many families refused to let their daughters study therefor the fear that they would not make a "good catch", i.e. they would not get rich, eligible men as their life partners.

Victorian gender ideology operated on a system of exclusion of women from intellectual pursuits. Society was of the opinion that if a marriage failed, it was owing to the fault of the wife, that success of marital bond was a wife's responsibility. Further women's art could only be inferior to men. The way out of domestic violence was prayer, not law. A woman had to adhere to the Victorian norms in order to be accepted in the society. According to Anne Silver,

"The Victorians idealized the ethereal and pure woman who had slim body, modesty and meagre appetite."

Women's work was to remove confusion from the man's mind, to refresh him, to act as a second conscience, to be a humble mistress clothed in moral beauty. Home was the first sphere for a woman's angelic mission. She was an angel of redemption.

"All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of man; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and it is their nature to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves and to have no life but in their affection for husband and children."

-John Stuart Mill

The law was deficient to the husbands who were unable to maintain their wives. The right to divorce was severely limited. Husbands had a right to chastise and rape his wife. Marriage was called by Mill the only actual bondage known to law. A husband could commit any atrocity except killing her.

Elizabeth Langland in her book *Ann Bronte, The Other Onesays*,

"By and large Victorians believed that woman belonged in the home where she is resided as a Presiding Angel. The notion Angel in the house appeared in 1954-56 in Coventry Patmore's poem of that name. The angel in the house idealized woman and her innocence in ways that made central her confinement to a separate domestic sphere, where free from the vicious influence of the competitive business world, she could preserve the nation's moral values. Even Victorians who did not subscribe to the idea of the Angel in the House

were attracted to the implicit ideal of woman's redemptive or salvatory potential".

During my survey of the Victorian novels, I came across the term "Coquette", the spectacular woman. Who was a Coquette? Was she not a domestic woman? Why not was she made the protagonist in the novels? What was the purpose of the novelists in introducing her? Was a coquette more beautiful than domestic woman? Was a coquette wicked and vicious creature who was dangerous to society?

According to conventional morality true woman was self-effacing, invisible and domestic. Did the Victorian writers examine the coquette only in terms of eroticism and sensuality? Or through coquette, the issues related to women's rights were raised? Why did the protagonist look at them worth an odd mixture of fascination and disapproval or even repulsion? Possibly the coquette was introduced to act as vehicle for feminist concerns ranging from a woman's erotic power to the question of divorce-coquetry was used as a mean through which silencing was resisted or questioned, coquetry's story tested the main story. Coquettish beauty thus became an organizing term for female subjectivity, a way in which women had to learn to displace women's plight into the arc of female frivolity. It became a collective female effort towards understanding a female experience. It thus prompted an examination of the network of social, legal and cultural values in the survival of women. So coquetry was an investigation into woman's status, the limits and space of female autonomy.

According to Oxford English Dictionary Coquette is a noun and it describes women who behave heartlessly. Their heartlessness comprises mere trifling with the affections of men. In the Victorian era, the women who did not devote themselves to the happiness of others i. e. husband, children, relatives and instead pursued their own happiness, aggrandisement and advancement were called coquettes. One variety of coquettes looked for sensuality, flirtation and frivolity. The other variety was mercenary looking for a rich husband though caring a fig about domesticity.

Coquette means a spectacular woman who is not only beautiful but also is conscious of her beauty, enjoy appreciation and admiration, flirtations, loves luxury and fashion, is gifted with accomplishment in dance and music. She loves laughter and pleasure and dislikes domestic sobriety. Such women are blessed by God in their physical accoutrements but trivialized by society. This trivialization can be called humiliation of the feminine. Susan Sontag says,

"Beauty can illustrate an ideal, a perfection or because of its identification with women, it can trigger the usual ambivalence that stems from the age-old denigration of the feminine. Much of discrediting of beauty needs to be understood as a result of the gender inflection."

She was interesting in courtship and display of beauty for mercenary purpose. She flirted with splendid white-clad figure to gain her a rich husband. The coquettes had qualities i.e. they were not domestic minded, they enjoyed genuine flirting, welcomed male's admiration, they had fondness for pleasure of fashion, of food, of music, of courtship game.

The coquette embodied female art, love of fashion. She was attached to marriage failure, domestic abuse and a questioning of Victorian gender codes. There was always a bond between the coquette and the protagonist which was rarely severed. Actually, through her, the author expressed an awareness of a female sensual and erotic identity. The author presented through them women's problem and asserted that these problems were the result of strong prejudice on the part of society as well as women themselves otherwise why were the women advised to seek help from God through prayers and not by law? Why was it said that if the woman prayed devoutly enough, her husband might change or she might be given strength to endure? Was all this not an ensconcing of an attitude in women's mind to prejudice them in the legal and social fields. Gradually, these prejudices gained moral authority. We can call them strategy of exclusion of women from the main current and forcing them to deny and abort some parts of their identity, their sexuality, their sensuality and expression, and remain inconspicuous.

The character of coquette was often used by writers as a foil to the protagonist. A foil is a character that shows qualities that are in contrast with the qualities of another character with the objective to highlight the traits of other characters. A foil is generally a secondary character that contrasts with the major character to enhance the importance of the major character e.g. Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book I is based on the comparison of God and Satan.

In *Hamlet* of Shakespeare, we find that Hamlet is reluctant to actually do anything. He makes everyone believe that he is going mad and puts on a fake play about a man killing his brother and taking the throne. None of his actions directly accuse his uncle at all. In this play Laertes serves as a foil to Hamlet. Laertes has many similarities with Hamlet. They are roughly of the same age; both return home schooling abroad, and both have strong-minded fathers. Both have fathers who have been murdered. This is where the difference between Hamlet and Laertes can be seen. Upon hearing of his father's death, Laertes rushes home from France, ready to take action against the murderer. Laertes' decisiveness, courage and nobility in the face of the same situation as Hamlet, shows him as a strong foil. Another foil in the play is Fortinbras who is valiant and determined. He even brings an army to avenge his father while Hamlet does nothing courageous. They show the difference between a brave man and an insecure man.

In the novel *Villette* (1853) written by Charlotte Bronte the protagonist is Lucy Snowe. The novel begins with its famously passive protagonist Lucy aged fourteen staying at the home of her

godmother Mrs. Bretton. A family tragedy leaves Lucy without family, home, or means. After some initial hesitation she is cared by Miss Marchmont, a rheumatic crippled woman. Gradually, Lucy gets contented with her new life style. After Miss Marchmont's death, Lucy goes to London and then goes to Villette and gets employment as a *bonne* (nanny) at Mme Beck's boarding school for girls.

The coquette in the novel is Ginevra Fanshawe who is beautiful but shallow and vain eighteen years old English girl with a light and careless temperament. She is an incorrigible coquette and has a relish for flirtation. Despite her faults, Lucy cherishes fondness for her. Ginevra thinks of Lucy as caustic, ironic and lyrical and calls her "old lady", "dear cross patch" and "Timon" who was a Greek misanthrope in fifth century B.C. She eventually elopes with a man named Count DeHamal. The figure of Ginevra links woman's beauty, woman's talents in music and love of fashion with an irreverence of man and to questioning Victorian gender codes.

In Anne Bronte's novel *Agnes Grey*, we find Rosalie as coquette. Grey is daughter of squire and he marries a poor parson out of love. Mary and Agnes are born. The family is happy in its small house. Mr. Grey feels bad because his wife had to give up his high standard life because to get married with him. So he tries to improve his fortune by speculating and investing his patrimony in a merchant's sea voyage. But the vessel is wrecked. Everything is lost and the Greys are left penniless. Mr. Grey's health also falls. Daughters seek work to their family. Mary sells her paintings to meet household expenses. Agnes decides to become governess at Wellwood, the home of Bloomfield family, is received coldly. She finds that the boys to be looked after are idiotic and rude.

In next *Job*, Agnes is given the charge of two older girls who are not much more cooperative about learning than her first charges. One girl is Rosalie Murray who reaches the age at which she is introduced to society, entertains her suitors and marries while she is under Agnes instruction. Although Agnes tries to rein in this girl's flirtatious manner, she has little effect on her. Rosalie flirts so much as to make men believe she wants to marry them and then turns them down, delighted that she is able to crush them. Agnes finds this manner of courtship not only unbecoming but also unnatural and coquettish.

Victorian Social History does not refer coquettes in good terms and consider them antagonistic to domesticity and a danger to society. She flirts and enjoys her erotic power, loves luxury and admiration laughter and pleasure but society gives her denigration due to gender deflection. Coquette seeks her own happiness whereas a true woman is expected to seek happiness of others. She deviates from the ideology of devotion and service.

### **Conclusion**

The Coquette was a commentary on the legal rules, social morals and cultural attitudes which defined women's rights, duties and their place in society. She was also a commentary on the particular way, rules and practices of women and their conflicting feeling in nineteenth century. The study of the

coquette was revelatory of erotic and playful aspect of Victorian Women. It was the coquette who makes the problematic position of woman visible.

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