

Meredith's Women Characters and Victorian Reform

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Abstract

As a champion of the Victorian women's cause, George Meredith tries through his artistic representation of female characters to question and examine the social and legal status of women in the Victorian Age. In his novels, Meredith disentangles the inextricably intertwined political and social complexities of the different notions about identity, self-renunciation, self-annihilation, and realization of the self. His novels bring into a degree of prominence major conflicts which seem to conspire against the evolvment and the actualization of womanhood. The female characters in his novels attempt to undermine and defy the conventional set of social rules which are mostly defined by egoist male characters. The apparent challenge of subverting the already established patriarchal notions of womanhood is contingent upon sheer masculine hostility and defiance. By exemplifying the female characters' efforts to re-define their status—sexual, emotional, social, legal, political, and even economic—Meredith emerges as one whose art communicates ideas of social and moral reform. Just as many Victorian fictional works question womanhood, so do Meredith's novels reflect upon marriage as a social institution and upon identity as an important concept.

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شخصية المرأة في أعمال جورج مرديث والإصلاح في العصر الفكتوري

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الملخص

جورج مرديث واحد من أهم الكتاب المناهضين لحركة المرأة في العصر الفكتوري؛ يدل على ذلك تصويره لشخصية المرأة في كتاباته من الناحية الاجتماعية والمركزية الرسمية التي تمثلها المرأة في المجتمع الفكتوري. وقد حاول مرديث في رواياته تفكيك الحبكة المعقدة التي تناقش الحياة السياسية، والأنماط الاجتماعية التقليدية السائدة في المجتمع الفكتوري. وعالج الصراع الذي يقف حاجزا أمام المرأة لإثبات ذاتها في المجتمع؛ إذ تحاول الشخصيات النسوية في تلك الروايات أن تتصدى للأنماط الاجتماعية التقليدية التي تناصر الرجل الذي شكل موقفاً عدائياً وعائقاً رئيساً في تقدم المرأة في مختلف المجالات.

فالمرأة تحاول جاهدة تحدى هذه الأنماط الذكورية السائدة في المجتمع الفكتوري للتعريف بدورها من النواحي الجنسية، والعاطفية، والاجتماعية، والسياسية، والاقتصادية. وقد وضع مرديث في رواياته الأسس الداعمة لإصلاح المجتمع، وإعطاء المرأة حقها، كما حاولت أعمال أخرى ذلك في العصر الفكتوري. وركز على الزواج، بوصفه مؤسسة اجتماعية، وأكد مفهوم الهوية الفردية للمرأة بوصفها حقاً مكتسباً لها.

The Victorian age, as it appears to modern readers, was a scene of constantly evolving, changing ideas and attitudes, doing away with old traditional practices. In a state of social and moral confusion, this age of transition seems to be sincere in its attempt to reassess and evaluate the different aspects of its life and culture. This trend is reflected in Victorian art and literature, politics and religion. But the most important change which appears to surface from this vortex of views and attitudes is that of the concept of womanhood. It is significant to explore the different areas in which women have suffered in England since the seventeenth century, when husband and wife became one person before the law, the husband being that person. Marriage was considered the only future for women in society, and the husband controlled all that belonged to a wife materially. Since marriage and family came to be considered all important in a woman's life, she was denied proper education which might be useful for a profession. In the nineteenth century, in the face of the problem of "surplus" women, dearth of professional qualification among women resulted in their acquiring only the job of governesses or menial domestic help. On the other hand, those who managed to get married were expected to remain passive, dependent and chaste, giving in to all types of moral and legal oppression, which at times crossed the limits of decorum to become physical oppression as well. A mother had no legal claim over her child just as a wife had no legal right over any of her earnings after marriage. These violations saw justice in the nineteenth century in the various laws enacted: *Guardianship of Infants Act (1886)*, which later became *Infants Custody Act (1925)*, *the Married Women's property Act (1870)*, *the Marriage and Divorce Act (1857)*, *the Matrimonial Causes Act (1923)*, and such others. Education became compulsory and higher education was also gradually allowed for all women who could qualify for them.

It is evident from the writings of eminent Victorians, in fiction and non-fictional works, that the position of women in society both in private and public life was being reassessed. Not only did this bring about new theories regarding the role-prescription for women, but also

Victorian society considered it fit to pay heed to reforms regarding the status of women. There were opinions opposing one another, and yet all gradually leading towards a greater awareness of the oppressed state of women. This awareness found expression in the works of philosophers and thinkers, political figures and in the works of a host of Victorian novelists. A new way of portraying women characters mark many of their works, revealing their interest in the “woman issue” of the day, even though overt expression of support to the women’s cause may not be found. This is an attempt to examine a few of George Meredith’s women characters and to relate them to the changing attitude of Victorian society towards women, as well as to highlight his interest in some of the legal reforms regarding women which were brought about during that period. It may be mentioned here that Meredith, according to Gillian Beer, avoided committing himself positively to any organized body of opinion¹.

George Meredith’s career as a novelist chiefly covers the years between 1859 (*Ordeal of Richard Ferval*) and 1895 (*The Amazing Marriage*). The latter half of the nineteenth century is significant since it not only witnessed the state of women in social and moral bondage, but also their struggle which was gradually bringing forth emancipation. These years saw the rise of pioneer women reformers, who fought for higher education for women and various improvements regarding their position in the legal structure of England. Meredith’s novels reflect some of these ideas which this essay attempts to examine briefly. I have selected *The Egoist* (1879), *Diana of the Crossways* (1885) and *The Amazing Marriage* (1895) as representative novels by Meredith which duly illustrate his views regarding women.

Meredith appears to be interested in the Victorian reforms, primarily those concerning women’s legal status after marriage, her pecuniary position, her right over her children and especially the system of education of women. The position of women within the framework of marriage as an institution is portrayed in *Diana of the Crossways* and *The Amazing Marriage*, while the demands of the male ego in relation to women as a possession, is examined in *The*

Mohammed AL Mahameed

Egoist. Meredith's views about education are most explicit in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* and *Lord Ormont and his Aminta*, while reflections on the shortcomings of conventional education for girls are present in nearly all his works. Education is perhaps the chief means to bring about the realization of one's identity. Man learns not only through the experiences of life, but also from "education", which is, "a formal process to help the young to be adjusted wholesomely and wisely in body, mind and spirit to the social life into which they are born, and to contribute to that life what is best in themselves"². This statement of Alice Woods aptly describes Meredith's view. In his portrayal of women this particular function of nurturing through education is highlighted. Meredith advocates co-education as a primary process for the positive development of character and for the growth of mutual respect between the sexes, as evident in his letter to Lady Ulrica Duncombe of April, 1902³. He has voiced this idea through Aminta and Mathew Weyburn in *Lord Ormont and his Aminta*, where they plan to set up their model school in Switzerland. They plan to introduce co-education so as to eradicate the differences between the male and female worlds which tended to alienate them. Such proposals were both radical in and essential to Victorian society. For women, education should mean the organizing of resources by which they would be able to fend for themselves in all circumstances. Knowledge of the acts of life would teach them to consider such facts as normal and natural instincts, neither unclean nor depraved. They must learn not only to *do* but also to *think* and *observe* and thus be able to arrive at their own conclusions, as portrayed in the character of Carinthia Jane in *An Mazing Marriage*. Aminta, on the other hand, has had a typical Victorian upbringing. Victorian women traditionally were to live within the bounds of the private world of feeling. Thinking was within the public sphere of existence, for independent thinking led to purposeful action. When Aminta begins to think, she starts weighing women with men, which is another departure from the accepted Victorian practices.

Meredith, in his reflections regarding married women, does not appear to oppose marriage in itself. In fact, what comes to the surface is his Victorian belief that marriage and family life is the natural goal

for women. But he appears to protest strongly against the prevalent attitude of husbands who treated their partner in marriage as a commodity. A wife must be free in her thoughts and actions, and circumstances within marriage should encourage independence so that women become better mates in life.

Diana of the Crossways is the most interesting of Meredith's novels in its presentation of the Victorian woman in the context of her position as wife, and her relationship with the opposite sex outside and after marriage. Diana Merion is a beautiful young Irish woman, intelligent, witty, impetuous and unconventional in thought and action. She finds herself at the center of unwelcome attentions as a single woman, and to safeguard herself makes an imprudent marriage. In spite of Diana's independence of spirit, her weakness as a woman in a male dominated society comes to the forefront. Her husband is dull compared to her. Meredith describes Diana's efforts to be a conventional wife:

Not only did she strive to show him to advantage by leading him out: she played second to him, subserviently, fondly; she quite submerged herself, content to be dull if he might shine⁴.

Her husband accuses her of intimacy with an elderly statesman of repute, Lord Dannisburgh, and in order to avoid a lawsuit, Diana flees to her ancestral home at the Crossways. Thomas Redworth is a reliable and sensible Englishman who appears as her rescuer, and finally marries the widowed Diana at the conclusion of the novel. In the meantime, Diana's affair with a rising young statesman, her divulging an important state secret for money, her consequent remorse and psychological crisis make up the rest of the story. Diana is a remarkable character to be portrayed in Victorian literature, in her decision to leave her husband, to stay by herself in lodgings with her maid, Danvers, to face her enemies and the various accusations brought against her, and mostly, to take up writing for a living. Her need for money once more brings to our attention the total absence of financial independence of married women in Victorian England.

Mohammed AL Mahameed

Moreover, in her dealings with both Sir Lukin Dunstane and with Percy Dacier, her lover, may be seen the power to resist and discipline. Yet, at moments Diana fails like any other human being when she consents to leave England with Dacier, only to be saved by Redworth's intervention on behalf of Lady Dunstane, or when, in a fit of passion, she betrays the state secret to the news agent. Diana is unconventional in matters of habit too, which also shows her independent spirit, or freedom of action, a quality Meredith appears to acclaim as necessary for the development of a character towards maturity. All these interactions leave a mature, though more subdued, Diana at the end of the novel.

Diana is spiritually at the crossways, a midway between the old and the new. Meredith describes Diana as a woman of two natures: according to Jan B. Gaordon, she appears to "wear a mask that hides some private or inner self"⁵. She has an external self, which is a fortress against the world. Diana is made to operate right from the beginning within the framework of Victorian conventions, as for instance when she makes her debut at the Ball. But after that she moves away from the Victorian pattern, from her private existence to the public life. Gordon argues:

Diana's education moves her from the mediated posture of the eighteenth century woman who passively provides a focal point for the dance pattern at the Irish Ball to the unmediated attitude of the so called "new" woman who appears at the commencement of the twentieth century in the plays of Shaw and the fiction of Forster⁶.

Meredith has presented a woman of creative intelligence in a society which denies her claim to being a woman and a novelist at the same time. Gillian Beer has described the theme of the novel as "the disparity between the awakened intellect and the slumbering sexual nature of Diana, her attempt to reconcile her individual identity with her inescapable instinctive being"⁷. Is *Diana of the Crossways* an exploration of individual identity—of Diana's quest through the experiences of life to her discovery and assertion of self? Meredith is being Victorian in his presentation of Diana as inclined to avoid

sexuality when faced with it. For example, her relationship with Percy Dacier is intense, not physically, but intellectually. Her response falls short of being natural as sexually she is under stress. Diana assesses herself as “the woman of two natures”. Her preference of the masculine name “Tony” as a pet name is also significant. Diana’s recognition of feminine weakness as the chief cause behind woman’s oppression is perhaps representative of Meredith’s view on the position of women. Most of Diana’s consequential actions are executed under stress, due to fear of losing her gender identity. This becomes apparent in her decision to marry Warwick and later in her betrayal of the state secret. In contrast to her, is Constance Asper, the typical Victorian heroine. Diana is not innocent, but has a complex psychological progress. She marries Warwick to escape unwelcome attentions attracted by beautiful unmarried women. But marriage exposes her to complicated emotions, and she runs away from the resulting developments. Her extramarital affairs present different dimensions in her emotional build up. Finally, passing through all these levels, she reaches the point of becoming a more complete woman. “Meredith asserts the principle of change”⁸ in the personality of Diana. Though the novel concludes in marriage and Diana’s submission to a man, she transcends her fear of being sexually inferior, and is independent even in acceptance. *Diana of the Crossways* becomes more interesting due to the fact that the heroine has been modelled on the Hon’ Caroline Norton, granddaughter of the dramatist Sheridan, and one of the pioneer reformists. Mrs. Norton had experienced practically all the miseries in her married life which were aided and abetted by the contemporary laws of England. A beautiful and intelligent woman, a poet and novelist in her own right, her name was sullied by her husband in the law court, she was left penniless, her children removed from her and she was also beaten up by her husband. She brought about the *Infants Custody Act* (1886-1925) which had become a law as early as 1839, and her bitter sufferings anticipated the *Marriage and Divorce Bill* of 1857, and its various amendments, as well as the *Married Woman’s Property Act* of 1870⁹.

Carinthia Jane, Lady Fleetwood, in *The Amazing Marriage* appears to be a victim of at least three major setbacks in Victorian law regarding women. Brought up in the midst of nature, and taught that

Mohammed AL Mahameed

marriage is the aim of a woman's life, she accepts the first offer that comes to her. In her acceptance there is that spirit of self-sacrifice advocated by Ruskin "self-renunciation"¹⁰. Carinthia tries to help her brother by shifting the burden of her maintenance from him. So she enters the marriage bond without any knowledge of its true relevance, and in doing so exposes herself to various evils of the Victorian marriage system. *The Doctrine of Coverture* maintained:

by marriage.... the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended, or at least it is incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything, and she is therefore called in our law a femme covert¹¹.

The doctrine sees her well-equipped with every necessity, and she is allowed to draw up bills, but she die not possess a shilling of her own. This situation may also be related to the *Married Woman's Property Act*, aiming at reforming this particular state of married woman as total financial dependents. Carinthia had not had any exposure to men, except her father and brother. She appears to have little idea of marriage, or even inclination towards it, apart from relieving her brother of his guardianship of her. She is shaped by the interaction between her inner nature and external social attitudes towards her. Lord Fleetwood's egoism finally drives out her love, which could have been a valuable possession for him – the untarnished first love of an unblemished character. Her softness of nature is replaced by a stern acceptance of the theory of the marriage bond, which appears to be a criticism of the theory in essence. Meredith makes his inclination very clear in the dialogue between Carinthia and her husband when he finally acknowledges his love for her. It also betrays Carinthia's conventional upbringing. She acknowledges the sacredness of the marriage bond, and states she would be true to it:

Lord Fleetwood: "To your husband? To his name, to his honour, to the vow live with him?"

Carinthia: "My husband broke that for me."

Lord Fleetwood: "Carinthia, if he bids you, begs you to renew it? God knows what you may save me from."

Carinthia: "Pray to God. Do not beg of me, my lord" ¹²

Her fear lest her husband separate her son from her might be related to the author's awareness of the necessity of the *infants Custody Act* with all its amendments. It appears Meredith still had the case of Caroline Norton on his mind.

The development of Carinthia's character is marked by changes in her emotional state resulting from the changing circumstances of her life. This development runs parallel to her transition from one state of awareness to another—her childhood—her awareness of the relationship between Chillion and Henrietta—her marriage and the birth of her child. Meredith has portrayed the marriage bond as a conformity with the traditions of contemporary society. According to Mohammad Shaheen:

Meredith exploits the marriage convention to expose the social background against which Carinthia's character develops. The marriage shows that one partner exploits the other, and shows society and egoism in action against nature. For Meredith's women, marriage is the only way to establish partnership with men in society. . . .

Once marriage takes place, female characters being to realize the crudity of the act, their reaction against society expresses itself in the form of their quest for love. . . . ¹³

Carinthia, who has stepped into the framework of the social convention and the ideal of self sacrifice, wakes up to find herself degraded by the prevalent practices of Victorian marriage. By rejecting Fleetwood, she appears to reject marriage as an institution, but perhaps not marriage itself. To her marriage appears to be still the inception of a relationship of love and compassion, of perfect understanding between the sexes. Carinthia emerges as a new woman from her confrontation with Fleetwood. She accepts once more the bonds of marriage with Wythan, but on a different basis.

Mohammed AL Mahameed

She has moved from a state of poetic vision to hard reality. Her disillusionment moved her to a relationship founded on perfect understanding of the position of women. Her movement towards awareness has been more gradual than others, but Meredith's exploration of the question of female independence appears more thorough.

Meredith's tendency to show men as egoists, as in the characters of Lord Fleetword and Sir Willoughby Patterne is perhaps from a semiconscious acknowledgment of the position of power men hold in society. This view has been powerfully expressed through the character of Mrs. Marsett in *One of Our Conquerors*, who tells Nesta, 'Oh, there are bad women as well as bad men, but men have the power and the lead, and they take advantage of it and then they turn round and execrate us for not having what they robbed us of'¹⁴. It is also interesting to note the observation of Meredith through Gower Woodseer in *The Amazing Marriage*: 'Men hating Nature are insane. Women and Nature are close. If it is rather general to hate nature and maltreat women, we begin to see why the world is a mad world.'¹⁵

The Egoist has been described as an 'anti-conventional novel'¹⁶, spurning the expectations of society. Clara Middleton, as soon as she realizes her mistake in being engaged to the egoist, Sir Willoughby Patterne, fights to break through the bonds of social obligations negating her natural instincts. She has realized the marriage proposed by Sir Willoughby, is in actuality not only self-renunciation but self-annihilation. She is caught in her own promise. To be courageous means also to break with conventional honour. But she acknowledges to herself that her mind is her own, married or not. To Sir Willoughby, she states with conviction that she must be herself to be of any value to him. This repudiates of Ruskin's advocacy of the doctrine of self-renunciation as the ideal of womanhood. Egoism is necessary and natural in all complete human characters. Clara desires to be loved, but betrays sexual revulsion when Sir Willoughby tries to caress her. The doctrine of coverture once more is implied by Sir Willoughby's assurance that she is at

liberty with the law. Through Clara, Meredith voices his criticism:

The capaciously strong in soul among women will ultimately detect an infinite grossness in the demand for purity infinite, spotless bloom. Earlier or later they see they have been victims to the singular Egoist, have worn a mask of ignorance to be named innocent, have turned themselves into market produce for his delight¹⁷

She too seeks to free herself from being unhappily married by flying from it. Meredith never for once advocated that women should remain single. None of his protagonists remains a spinster. But the novelist appears to have a very definite stand where the status of marriage is concerned. Imposition of selfish motives on the partner is not to be pardoned. In Meredith's own words:

Ladies, fatally predestined to appeal to that from which they have to be guarded, must expect severity when they run off their railed highroad: justice is out of the question: man's brain might, his blood cannot administer it to them. . . .¹⁸

Meredith's women characters have a double function. The poet in the novelist bestows rare beauty and glamour on them, but the critic of social conventions uses them as a test. In 1927, J. B. Priestley observed that Meredith's women are definite individualities with clearly marked characters, where the novelist takes care to expose and examine the springs of their action and their motives. They are departure from the Victorian prototypes, doing away with 'old easy sentimentalities of the sexual relation, to approach it intellectually. . . to compel us to think and not merely to feel about it'¹⁹.

Apart from Diana, Clara, Carinthia, there are also minor characters like Nesta in *One of Our Conquerors*, who tend to question the values of Victorian morality. Meredith's interest in and contribution to female education has been discussed by Mary Struge Gretton in 1926²⁰ and also by Alice Woods in 1937²¹. These

Mohammed AL Mahameed

are women's assessment of Meredith's interest in reform for women. To evaluate Meredith conclusively as a champion of women's cause would necessitate a detailed study of his life and letters apart from his novels. But even to the casual reader Meredith emerges as a distinctive figure among Victorian writers, with a definite standpoint regarding morality, and the married status of women, a writer who criticizes the social sanction given to the psychic and sexual oppression of women in nineteenth-century England.

Notes and References

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