

B.A (English-Hons) Part-P
Paper - I

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Topic :- Women novelists of the Victorian Era

For the first time in the eighteenth century women novelists came in the limelight; they shook off their insularity and blazed a trail in the department of domestic and Gothic fiction. If in the hands of Richardson and Sterne, the novel delved deep in to the inner recesses of human heart and sentimentality, and in Fielding and Smollett, the novel reflected the broad and hilarious life of the street and the inn, most of the eighteenth century women novelists restrained themselves in the depiction of domestic life. They created domestic fiction which had to blossom in all its maturity in the hands of the women novelists of the Victorian Era. The plant of domestic fiction which was nourished in the eighteenth century, yielded fruits in the Victorian Age.

Charlotte Bronte :- The first woman novelist in the Victorian era that holds our esteem is Charlotte Bronte. With her the hero or more frequently the heroine for the first time steps forward and takes a dominating position and the story is presented not through the eyes of impersonal truth, but openly through her own. She is the first subjective novelist, the ancestor of Proust and James Joyce and all the rest of the historians of the private consciousness. As Thackeray was the first English writer to make the novel the vehicle of a conscious criticism of life, Charlotte Bronte is the first to make it the vehicle of personal revelation. There is little intimacy in Scott, while part of

Jane Austen's charm lies in her sense of gentle self-detachment from her novels. We think mainly of the art of the story-teller in reading *Pride and Prejudice*; we think primarily of the personality of the story-teller in reading *Jane Eyre*.

In all Charlotte Brontë has written four novels - *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, *The Professor* and *Shirley* - of lonely, repressed womanhood with a passion and intensity unsurpassed in English fiction. Her best novel is *Jane Eyre*, which, with all its faults, is a powerful and fascinating study of elemental love and hate, reminding us vaguely of Marlowe's tragedies.

→ Emily Brontë

:- Emily Brontë is a romantic novelist. Her fame rests on *Wuthering Heights* in which the characters are the personified powers that stormed and despaired in Emily Brontë's own being. Commenting on *Wuthering Heights*, Compton Rickett remarks: "Shadowy, incoherent, remote from concrete human existence, oppressive and appalling in its violent imagery, it is lit up and transfigured by a tragic splendour rarely surpassed in English fiction."

Emily presented a new conception of the heroine as a woman of vital strength and passionate feelings and in the presentation of wild moor-scenery. Magnificently does Emily describe the moors - in winter, when the sky and the sombre hills are mingled in one bitter whirl of wind and suffocating snow and the moor is become a billowy white ocean; in spring, when the larks are singing beneath a blue sky and the bees are all brimful and humming with a mellow flow, in summer when the bees are humming dreamily above the purple heather; in the cool of the September evening, when the moths are fluttering among heath and harebells.

• Mrs Gaskell

∴ Mrs. Gaskell was the daughter of a Unitarian minister and the wife of a distinguished Unitarian minister working in Manchester. For the first time with her, we notice industrial and economic problems that were to enter in to other Victorian novels later on. She was an industrial reformer. She reflected in her novels — *Mary Barton* and *North and South* — the conditions of the labouring classes in the new cities of the industrial North. Her best novel is *Cranford*. The outstanding fact about Mrs Gaskell as a novelist is her femininity. Her genius is so purely feminine that it excludes from her achievement not only specifically masculine themes, but all the more masculine qualities of thought and feeling. She could not build a story round a central idea, like Meredith. Nor could she describe intellectual characters. The chief contribution of Mrs. Gaskell to the Victorian fiction is that she was the first to deal with industrial and economic problems in feminine fiction. If the Brontës applied romantic method in their novels, Mrs. Gaskell adopted the realistic method of Jane Austen. But more than Jane Austen, Mrs. Gaskell lays stress on emotional life of her characters and she is interested not in the external history but in the internal history of her characters.

• George Eliot

∴ George Eliot is a prominent woman novelist of the Victorian age. She is more of a preacher and a moralizer than any of her great contemporaries were. She has written a number of novels such as — *Scene of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Middlemarch* etc. 'Mill on the Floss' is undoubtedly a great novel which represents the contrast between the world's values and the inner reality. She is the last great name among the women writers of the Victorian fiction, but there are many other women novelists who achieved popularity in their own age.

Mrs. Heary Wood is a sentimental novelist. Her fame rests on East Lynne. Mrs. Craik is also a sentimental novelist whose John Halifax Gentleman proved only second to 'East Lynne' in its tear-compelling quality. Mrs Charlotte Yonge was once a popular novelist but today her novel 'Heir of Redcliffe' has few admirers. Mrs. Oliphant was a writer of great promise but she could not do justice to her novels as she produced plentiful novels without caring for their quality.

Thus, The Victorian age is flooded with feminine novels and some of the women novelists like Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot can even sit beside Dickens and Thackeray. In the eighteenth century among the women writers Jane Austen stands in the vanguard, in the nineteenth century George Eliot remains in the forefront.