

# Victorian Gender Codes and the Role of Coquette in Social Transformation with Special Reference to *Agnes Grey*



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## Abstract

Victorian gender codes enforced few traits to be followed by both men and women. The clear line of demarcation was seen between men and women. Men were considered superior to women. Men of the Victorian society were the centre of locus to fundamental rights, where as women were deprived of those fundamental rights and expected to be innocent and chaste. They even did not have the access of basic human rights like right to education and right to possess property. Purpose of their life was just to take care of the interests of their husbands, to cook for the family and to clean the house. They were considered the 'angels of the house'. The idea of these gender codes were questioned by 'Coquettes' or 'Spectacular Women'.

Coquettes in those days were extremely beautiful women who were conscious of their looks and presentation. They enjoyed being beautiful, admired by the people around them, and being flirtatious to men. They loved luxury, fashion and were innately gifted with music and dance. Possibly, the Coquette was introduced to act as a vehicle for feminist concerns ranging from a woman's erotic power to the question of divorce. Coquetry was used as a means through which silencing of Victorian women was resisted or questioned. 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. 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.

In the novel *Agnes Grey* Rosalie Murray plays the role of Coquette. She flirts so much as to make men believe that she wants to marry them and thus turns them down and feels delighted that she is able to crush their feelings for her. This paper seeks to analyse the conditions of women in Victorian society and the use of coquetry for expressing concerns over the prejudicial, forceful and inadequate manner in which the abuse of women is made invisible by domesticity through the case study of Anne Bronte's novel *Agnes Grey*.

**Keywords:** Victorian, Society, Gender, Code, Transformation, Angel, Women, Sex Education.

## 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. In Victorian Period, the status of woman was a complex issue. Many rights were given only to 'the men' of the society and consequently they were considered superior to women. On the other hand women were treated as second class citizens and considered as 'angel in the house'. So many rights were confiscated from women like suffrage right, right to sue and right to possess property. They were expected to be innocent and pure and were not allowed to get education or any other knowledge. Purpose of their life was just to take care of the interests of their husbands and to cook and clean the house.

## Review of Literature

"The Cult of the New Woman Reflected in Henry James's *Daisy Miller*", an article by Hristina Aslimoska, Published in 2017 defines a couple of literary concepts and theories interpreted from a feminist perspective that are used as main methodological tools for conducting the analysis of the novella. Among them are: 'the angel in the house', 'the theory of the abject', 'the theory of marginalization', 'and androcentricism'.

"Fallen Angels: Female Wrongdoing in Victorian Novels", a thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, University of Lethbridge, Canada in 2005 by Gretchen H. Barnhill. This research work talks about that in the novels of Victorian era gender-based social norms dictated appropriate behaviour. Female wrongdoing was not only judged according to the law, but also according to the idealized conception of womanhood.

"Victorian Women and Their Working Roles" a study done by Kara L. Barrett at State University of New York, Buffalo State College in 2013 suggests that women during the Victorian Era did not have many rights. They were viewed as only supposed to be housewives and mothers to their children. Many women needed to have an income to support their families because the men in the household were not making enough money to survive. When the women entered the work places they were not made to feel welcome and were often harassed.

#### **Objective of the Study**

The aim of my research paper is to justify the function of a Coquette which was derogated in Victorian Era, and also to show that the author tried to present women's problems and exposed society's prejudices and raised questions against Victorian gender codes through coquette.

#### **Main Text of the Paper**

In the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, a snobbish character Caroline Bingley lists the skills required by any young girl who wants to be a lady in the Victorian society, so that she could consider herself accomplished in all manners:

"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." (Austen 27, Ch. 8)

In the Victorian era it was very distressing and challenging for a girl to get education like boys. It was necessary for them to soften their erudition with a graceful and feminine manner. Those women who had devoted themselves exuberantly to the intellectual pursuits were called 'blue-stocking' and no one wanted to be called a 'blue-stocking'. 'Blue-stockings' were considered unfeminine and derogated by Men. Men of the patriarchal society felt that they attempted to usurp their 'natural' sphere of intellectual superiority.

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 faults of the wife, as the success of marital bond was a wife's responsibility. Women's art were considered inferior to men. The one and only 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.

Anne Silver in her book *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* highlights that "The Victorians idealized the ethereal and pure woman who had slim body, modesty and meagre appetite". (Silver 67)

Women's work was to remove confusion from the men's mind, to refresh them, 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. Even the law was deficient to the husbands who were unable to maintain their wives.

The Victorian novels are full of the references of "Coquette" or the "Spectacular Woman". The purpose of coquettes' appearance in the narratives was to question the propriety of the middle-class notion of purity of women and Victorian gender codes. Many writers used coquettes in their works e.g. Ginevra Fanshawe plays the role of coquette in *Villette*, Rosalie Murray in *Agnes Grey*, Dora in *David Copperfield*, Rosamond Vinci in *Middlemarch*, Estella in *Great Expectations* and there are so many other novels too in which coquetry is shown as a tool that questions predominant patriarchal mind-set against women.

According to the conventional morality, a true woman was self-effacing, invisible and domestic. Victorian writers examine Coquette not only in terms of eroticism and sensuality but through the character of a Coquette, the issues related to women's rights were raised by them for a social change. Certainly, 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 means through which silencing of a woman 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 arch 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 women'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 through 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 femininity. Susan Sontag asserts,

"Beauty can illustrate an ideal, 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" (Sontag 45).

A Coquette is interested in courtship as well as display of her own beauty for covetous advantages. She romantically flirts to have a rich husband. The coquettes are not domestic minded, enjoy genuine flirting and welcome male's admiration. At the same time they like to indulge in the pleasure of fashion, food, music, dance and courtship game. The coquette embodies a female's love of art and fashion. She is considered as a reason of marriage failure and domestic abuse because of her persistent 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, sexuality, sensuality and expression, and remain inconspicuous.

*Agnes Grey* is the story of Agnes, younger daughter of a clergyman who loses her fortune in a sea venture. Finding herself destitute and lonely, she sallies forth into the world on children's governess. The novel describes her experiences as a governess with the Bloomfield, where she has to undergo many hardships and sufferings. Her miserableness is presented with appalling vividness. The troublesome children cause havoc and she being a governess who found herself unable to cope up with the drastic situation, is dismissed from service. Later on she joins an aristocratic family, the Murrays of Horton Lodge as a governess. She is shocked by the manners and morals of high life, but she succeeds in winning the respect of her pupils Rosalie and Matilda. She pays visits to the houses of the poor and falls in love with the new curate Mr. Weston, who represents a serious version of Mr. Weightman. Agnes does not marry Mr. Weston but goes to help her mother who begins a school at a seaside resort. The novel ends on a note of happiness.

Rosalie plays the role of coquette in the novel. Rosalie Murray is a beautiful girl 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 but she has no effect of her reining 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.

Anne Bronte has presented in the novel dangers lurking in angelic womanhood ideals. She is drawing our attention to the lack of sex education for women, and the consequences of this had on their marriage options and choices. *Agnes Grey* uses Rosalie to speak of the necessity of sex education for women. Rosalie says in the novel that "Besides mamma ought to have known better than either of us; and she never said anything against it- quite the contrary" (237). Education about sex for a woman was considered perilous to their innocence. Innocence was courteously used for ignorance. Rosalie becomes the space where two discourses meet; the cult of domesticity, and a discourse concentrating on women's plight.

One of the main functions of the Spectacular Woman is to upset the dominant point of view by doing the discourse of beauty which centres on and involves the point of view of a beautiful woman. In the novel *Agnes Grey* coquetry is an account of all the obstacles placed in the path of a woman by patriarchy; it is the questioning against various ways through which women were disempowered and made invisible by Victorian society. *Agnes Grey* is a feminist novel, according to Bettina Knapp,

"The legal status of married women who had to give over their dowries and fortunes to their husbands, there by reducing them to slave status and keeping them virtual prisoners of their own homes. In *Agnes Grey*, Anne Bronte pleaded for self-fulfilment for women and equality of the sexes" (Knapp 127).

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.

Victorian Patriarchal culture placed a lot of obstacles and hurdles in the path of women which was not allowing them to stare at themselves freely and frankly in the mirror, and coquetry is an exposition of that mind-set. Coquette defines that women may exist in the space of their own despite these obstacles. Men have defined an erotic aspect of women in a conspiring way, but coquette argues that women can redefine this aspect in a femino-centric way and help themselves in search of fulfilment.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude it can be said that the Coquette was a commentary on the legal rules, social morals and cultural attitudes which defined woman's rights, duties and 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 women visible.

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