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Women writers of the 17th and 18th centuries and Women's plight in the patriarchal society

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Abstract

The condition of women in the 17th and 18th centuries is examined in this essay, with particular attention paid to their social, economic, and political standing. Women were expected to adhere to traditional gender roles at this time, with single women being seen as a burden and married women being expected to concentrate on household responsibilities. Women had few economic options, and they were prohibited from owning property and conducting business. The cultural and social transformations that were occurring in the 17th and 18th centuries were greatly influenced by women's literature. The impact of female writers on literature and society in the 17th and 18th centuries will be examined in this research paper. The historical background, prevailing social and cultural conventions, and literary accomplishments of a few chosen female writers from this time period will all be covered in the essay. The study will examine the authors' contributions to society, the issues they addressed, and the relevance of their writing.

Keywords: Gender, injustice, patriarchy, social class, suppression

Introduction

Both the public social life and private family lives of the British people underwent significant transformation during the 1670s and 1750s. The Restoration and rising literacy rates encouraged the British people to live more publicly. Apparent class differences were also present in the areas of education, outside social life, and home life. Both leisure and the range of jobs accessible changed as a result of new advancements in amusement, commercialisation, and industrialisation. New fashion trends also appeared on the scene. This page examines Britain's social structure and how it affects both private and public life, in addition to recent advancements that altered how people passed their free time. Although there was a glaring disparity between the rich and the poor, which was evident in nearly every facet of life, there were some circumstances in which class was irrelevant.

Women had limited access to school and jobs in fields like law and medicine and were also excluded from political engagement. Women were supposed to act following the established gender norms at the time; unmarried women were viewed as a burden, while married women were expected to prioritise household responsibilities. With limitations on property ownership and business dealings, women had few economic options. In addition to being denied access to education and jobs in fields like law and medicine, women were also prohibited from participating in politics. Despite these limitations, certain women questioned gender expectations and made vital contributions to society, opening the door for greater gender equality in the following decades.

People's family lives were divided by socioeconomic class and the roles assigned to men vs women. Typically, men were the family's primary source of money, while moms were in charge of running the home. With increased money came more estate to manage, which became increasingly important. Women rarely wed into lower social rungs because marriage was likewise very tightly correlated to the social level. Additionally, it had significant social repercussions for the family's reputation and legacy among their peers.

Patriarchy in the 17th century

Women's place in society underwent a drastic transformation in Britain during the 17th century.

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A patriarchal culture severely restricted the lives and possibilities of most women, despite the fact that some, like Queen Elizabeth I, were able to rise to positions of prominence and authority. Women had limited access to school, and their official education frequently consisted only of instruction in religion and basic literacy. Women were not permitted to enrol in universities or practice medicine or the law.

The main objective of women was to get married, and their value was frequently determined by their capacity to find a compatible husband. Women were treated as the property of their husbands and were supposed to be respectful and subservient to them. It was challenging to get a divorce and frequently required evidence of adultery or abuse. Due to their exclusion from several professions and the limitations placed on their ability to possess property, women's economic options were similarly constrained. Working-class women frequently worked as domestic helpers or in the textile industry, but these jobs paid poorly and offered little in the way of legal or job security.

Women did not have formal representation in politics and were not given the ability to vote. However, women participated in political action and advocacy movements, such as the Leveller movement in the middle of the eighteenth century. Women in 17th-century Britain generally experienced subordination and few chances. While there were significant outliers, like Elizabeth I, most women faced patriarchal limitations on their opportunities and way of life.

Significant Women Authors of the 17th and 18th Centuries.

Women were largely excluded from the literary world in the 17th and 18th centuries, yet despite this, some of them overcame the obstacles and found literary success. The most significant female authors from the 17th and 18th centuries are listed here.

Aphra Behn (1640-1689)

One of the first women to support herself as a writer in the 17th century was Aphra Behn. She was a playwright, novelist, and poet whose works frequently addressed questions of power and gender. *The Rover*, her most well-known play, is being produced today and was a tremendous hit in its day.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

English author and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft is best known for her book "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman." She made the case in her book that education was the key to establishing gender equality and that women should have the same chances and rights as men. Her theories, which were ground-breaking at the time, had a significant impact on feminist theory.

Jane Austen (1775-1817)

One of the most well-known English authors of all time is Jane Austen. Many of her books, including "Pride and Prejudice" and "Sense and Sensibility," have been made into films and television adaptations. Strong female characters, wit, and social satire are all hallmarks of Austen's writing.

Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672)

A poet from the United States named Anne Bradstreet was among the first women to have work published in early America. Her most well-known collection of poems, "The Tenth Muse Recently Sprung Up in America," which was

published in 1650, dealt frequently with the subjects of love, family, and religion.

Mary Astell (1666-1731)

The "first feminist" was an English writer and philosopher by the name of Mary Astell. In her most well-known essay, "A Serious Proposal to the Ladies," she made the case that women ought to have the same access to higher education as men and should be free to decide whether or not to get married.

Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784)

Despite numerous challenges, Phillis Wheatley, an American poet who was born into slavery, was able to achieve literary fame. A collection of her poetry titled "Poems on Different Topics, Religious and Moral" was released in 1773. Her poems frequently addressed issues of race and slavery.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)

English author and aristocrat Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is best known for her writings. Her letters offer a fascinating look into life in England and Europe in the 18th century because of how much she wrote about her travels and experiences.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695)

One of the most significant literary figures in the history of Mexico is the Mexican writer, poet, and nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Her writings are widely researched and praised today, and they frequently dealt with topics of gender, politics, and religion.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)

English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning is renowned for her love poems and the "Sonnets from the Portuguese" sonnet cycle. Her writing frequently addressed issues of social justice, love, and faith.

Hannah More (1745-1833)

English author and philanthropist Hannah More is well known for her efforts as an abolitionist and supporter of women's education. Her most well-known work, "Strictures on the Present System of Female Education," which was published in 1799, was among the plays, poetry, and essays she wrote.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851)

The most well-known work by English author and novelist Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is "Frankenstein." She was a strong supporter of women's rights and education, and the feminist movement benefited much from her work.

These female authors broke new ground in a male-dominated literary field, and their writing still inspires and has an impact on readers today. Throughout their age, these female authors were trailblazers who helped dismantle stereotypes and open doors for later generations of female authors. Their contributions to literature are immense, and their work continues to inspire and have an impact on readers all around the world.

Issues in society that female authors covered in the 17th and 18th centuries

The position and functions of women in society were topics that were extensively discussed by female authors of the

17th and 18th centuries. They wrote about a number of significant problems, including:-

Household Responsibilities

In the 17th and 18th centuries, women were required to fulfil a variety of domestic responsibilities. They were in charge of managing the servants for more affluent families and running the household. Mothers were also in charge of rearing and teaching their offspring. They were also in charge of feeding the family and cooking. This needed women to be well-educated in needlework, reading, writing, and the medicinal and culinary uses of plants and herbs.

Women were generally denied many rights and subjected to patriarchal persecution. SOURCE? The lack of contemporary cleaning techniques made housework extra difficult. Women were required to take care of the household's children, cook for the family, tend to the garden, and ensure that their husbands' wants were satisfied. Because few children were able to survive early childhood, the mother of the home would frequently have a large family. Most moms often had up to eight kids in the hopes that some would live and be able to support the family. A significant problem during this period was the high newborn mortality rates. In England, the average age of death was between 39 and 40.

It was believed that a man or woman would likely only survive for another 20 years after turning 30. The average life expectancy was significantly impacted by neonatal and child mortality rates in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. In the first year of life, 12–13% of children would pass away from complications such as illnesses, accidents at work and birth trauma. Males often handled all home money and the majority of the work required to provide for the family. It was typical for a male to obtain a college degree and work outside the home.

On behalf of the family, the patriarch made decisions on things like whether his wife could have a job outside the home and if the kids could go to school. Women seldom spoke against or divorced their husbands because they owned all the material possessions and financial assets in the home. The patriarch was taught to be obeyed by the young. For women's rights, the first part of the 18th century was a turbulent period. Even though they could work, women did not have access to the same comforts and rights as men. Women were not allowed to vote, own property while still married, attend college, earn equal pay, work in many professions, or even report severe domestic abuse. Women who were deemed to be overly radical or contentious may face harsh and humiliating public punishments. Women who were deemed to be overly radical or contentious may face harsh and humiliating public punishments.

Marriage

Women were supposed to be obedient and submissive to their husbands because they were believed to have no other viable option than marriage. Divorce was tough to get, and women who left their husbands ran the risk of being shunned by society.

Due to the value of land, daughters posed a significant issue for households who owned land. Few women, excluding widows, owned land, and many daughters rarely received any; thus, they didn't bring an estate to their marriages. Also, it was crucial for families to retain their social

standing so that a daughter was never wed to someone from a lower social class. In order to benefit the family, mothers and fathers invested a lot of time in finding their children the finest partner. As a result, families would frequently give their daughters a sizable quantity of money as a dowry. Due to a family's financial situation, these marriage discussions placed some of the most challenging demands on a mother and father.

Nevertheless, another issue arose when the early 20th century saw a tremendous rise in individuality, rationality, and romantic sensitivity, which led to girls desiring to pick their own husbands. There was less pressure on poor families because there was not nearly as much at stake when getting married. Men and women were free to marry who they pleased because it was difficult to convey poverty to one another or to lose any type of societal position as a result of a marriage.

When it came to planned weddings, many problems and worries were raised. English culture had a rigidly patriarchal structure in which women were expected to be cared for by men for the entirety of their lives. When puritanical influence increased in the 17th century, the idea of a strictly male-controlled nuclear family started to catch on. Due to their enormous wealth, many wealthy people neglected their kids. It was unpredictable how the structure and attitude of poorer families were; it may be hostile, hospitable, or just generally uninteresting. As was already established, an elevated infant mortality rate was a problem for poor households.

However, this was largely mitigated by high birth rates, which frequently made up for this aspect. Most of these houses, which ranged in wealth from rich to poor, had some kind of animal. With the unnecessary exception of some people keeping pet monkeys, the upper class kept a variety of animals, from dogs to horses. The majority of pets owned by the middle class were cats, birds, and dogs that could protect the home. The majority of the poorest families owned livestock such as cows, pigs, and geese that could feed the family.

Parliament handled marriage and Divorce and was a protracted, expensive process reserved primarily for the affluent. There were just 13 documented divorces between 1700 and 1749. A husband's infidelity was not a valid reason for divorce, nor could a woman initiate one on her own. These divorces could be finalised by a private contract in an open church court. An average family's life in late 17th-century England was straightforward yet arduous. Many people resided in small, one- or two-room homes that were frequently shared by many large families and lodgers. Typically, women gave birth to eight to ten children but only raised five or six due to high mortality rates. Children from typical or low-income homes started working very young, perhaps as young as seven. They frequently left home to work on farms as apprentices, cowherds, or shepherds. In these families, daughters stayed home and frequently helped the matriarch until they met a husband and began their children.

In order to inherit the land, the oldest son of each household would also remain at home. Many families had conflicts over the idea of inheritance. Bathing was unusual for common and low-income families in late 17th-century England because they did not yet have the convenience of piped water due to the unclean way of life. Lice and other

pests were extremely prevalent among these households as a result of their filthy lifestyle.

The wealthy households in late 17th-century England were far more pampered than the typical and underprivileged ones. The wealthy lived in lovely suburbs or villages as compared to the rustic homes of the average household. The architecture of homes was evolving to reflect and boast about the affluence of the families that resided there. The wealthy were finally able to enjoy the convenience of indoor plumbing. On average, families with ten or more members lived in these dwellings. At these homes, the women were in charge of ensuring orderly operations. If the spouse was not there, they were in control of the servants and managed the land. Women spent so much time working for their husbands' companies frequently.

Despite the disparity in financial standing between wealthy and average or poor families, there were many commonalities. Marriage was more of a business transaction than a romantic alliance in both families. In 17th-century England, marriage was not influenced by love. Typically, a woman marries in her early 20s. Most arranged weddings took place to obtain resources like money and land. It was not viewed as a problem when a man hit his wife because it was expected. Neither the children's parents nor their siblings were particularly close to them. A prevalent problem was the high infant death rate, which led to many women having multiple pregnancies but fewer children overall.

In agricultural families, men often provided the lion's share of the household income. Families were led by a patriarch who had total control over every element of the home. The roles of women were to be submissive. The most challenging work in the fields was done by men, including clearing, ploughing, sowing seed, harvesting, and threshing. Also, their sons and hired labourers assisted in this. Their daughters or domestic staff assisted women with everything from knitting to cleaning to caring for the animals to instructing the young. Since much interior caring in the home was considered to be the responsibility of women, they were expected to handle it. In households with shopkeepers, both men and women were employed there. In artisanal households, the wife was still in charge of keeping the home tidy and occasionally managed the staff. Due to the "economic realities" of the 18th century, there was a lot of pressure on women to work, and some of them ended up as prostitutes, actors, or coal miners.

Social class

Life in the public sphere was frequently characterised by social class, just like the more intimate family life. The more affluent groups could afford to send their kids to private schools at this time, but most people still could not. Due to the substantial education divide at the time, it was challenging for the poorer citizens of Britain to advance in society.

Nonetheless, other things were available to everyone and loved by all classes, such as the theatre and, subsequently, the growing importance of organised sports. The concept of a "social class" or status hierarchy was a defining characteristic of the 18th century. Everything in society was governed by this hierarchy, which also sealed their eternal doom.

The attitudes that each class displayed were one of the distinctions between them. The underprivileged could spend

their entire lives trying to climb the social ladder and acquire some semblance of riches and "class," but these men and women were mocked and pitied for their lack of social graces. There was still a pecking order and a sense of allegiance to social superiors, despite the pigeonholes that were placed on people with lower social standing. In this era, owning land was the only route to success. Landowners possessed authority and sway. This made it challenging to advance socially, as purchasing land was still regarded as a luxury in those days.

Legal Status

Legal status for women was lower than for men. Without their husband's consent, they were not permitted to own property, inherit property, or run a business. They were also not permitted by law to vote or take part in political activities. Although the majority of the time, this class structure was established from birth and was fiercely guarded by those who had previously attained high social rank, it was not impossible for individuals of lesser status to overturn it.

The majority of people were governed by the same set of laws, and the governing classes did enjoy some advantages, but only to a limited extent. Property could be bought, which was the key to wealth and power. As a result, any man might accumulate wealth and land and start moving up the social scale; conversely, any family could lose everything they owned and watch their social standing decline.

Employment

Women's career options were limited, and they were typically limited to low-status, low-paying industries, including domestic work, the textile industry, and agriculture. During the time, London was England's largest, busiest, and most industrialized metropolis. By the start of the century, it was home to some 500,000 people, and it would continue to expand. The people were as diverse as the commerce, with many different faces, including the wealthy and their servants, innkeepers, beggars, doctors, prostitutes, and pickpockets.

One could also find any type of business, from merchant shops to ale houses. The streets were shared by the affluent and the poor, providing a fascinating glimpse into 18th-century society. Sadly, the streets they walked on were appallingly covered with filth and unclean water that had been dumped from higher windows for the more significant part of a century. Human faeces and horse dung were also frequently found in public places. For the higher class, new delicacies like bananas, pineapples, and chocolate were consumed. Additionally, exciting new beverages like tea and coffee were introduced, and new coffee shops were sprouting up to support the economy and create jobs.

Education

The majority of women were not taught to read or write, and they had limited access to education. Only daughters of the rich received education, and even then, it was typically just focused on domestic skills. Boys and girls from wealthy families were assigned to small schools like preschools. However, only boys attended grammar or primary school, while upper-class girls received tutoring. Prior to the introduction of boarding schools, several mothers taught their daughters in the middle class.

Writing, music, and needlework were frequently taught to these girls. It was thought that ladies simply needed to be taught courses that were more in keeping with their talents while boys studied more intellectual subjects. Boys attended school in grammar school from 6 or 7 in the morning until five or so in the evening. They were given some mealtime breaks, but if they misbehaved, they would receive a swat on the bare butt.

Clothing

Women wore heavy skirts, petticoats, and corsets, which were constricting and uncomfortable. This attire was made to limit a woman's movement and highlight her femininity. Women also put on "stays," which are corsets, in addition to their linen shirts and chemises. These chokers were considered necessary for excellent posture for the greater part of a century. Petticoats and overskirts were frequently worn by women to conceal their legs, which also featured the "fake rump," which was typically made of cork.

However, "fan hoops" quickly emerged (between 1713 and 1740), pushing the fabric out on all sides. There were defences and criticisms of various dress-related devices. Some claimed they made it difficult for women to move around and destroyed their comfort.

Conclusion

Women's roles in society underwent tremendous shifts during the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly in the literary world. Women authors of this era were able to question prevailing gender roles and preconceptions and made significant literary achievements. These authors paved the path for subsequent generations of female writers by claiming their intellectual prowess and artistic talent in the face of substantial societal obstacles. The influence of their writings is still felt today, providing a distinctive viewpoint on contemporary concerns and serving as an inspiration for new generations of writers.

Women in 17th-century Britain generally experienced subordination and few chances. While there were significant outliers, like Elizabeth I, most women faced patriarchal limitations on their opportunities and way of life. Although these women's contributions did not result in more gender equality right away, they were significant advances in that direction. These women's contributions have influenced feminist movements today and the ongoing fight for gender equality.

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