

The Thinking Woman: A Theoretical Perspective of 19th Century Women Novelists and Their Impact

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In literature, all superior readers are quite familiar with the bronze sculpture called *The Thinker (Le Penseur)* by Auguste Rodin that shows a male figure sitting on a rock with his chin resting on one hand as though deep in thought and this image has loomed large as a myth, as an image, a symbol and an emblem suggestive of the immeasurable capacities of man. Similarly, a premise is being suggested here that with the advent of the 19th century writers a new age dawned in the domain of world literature and resulted in the birth of *The Thinking Woman* which obviously was consequent to a number of factors that traversed various disciplines and movements in thought.

Philosophy: In philosophy Rousseau's *Naturalism* (who contended that all the ills and miseries of civilization are due to a departure from the Natural state of man), American *Transcendentalism* (that true knowledge is about the self that comes from *within*) and Hegel's *Idealism* (that stated that the finite world was a reflection of mind i.e., the rational alone is truly real) and *Realism* (an artistic movement) - these four among others have had a deep impact on some of the characters seen in 19th century literature by women novelists. If Heathcliff embodies Bronte's view of a primitive stage of humanity, Hareton reincarnates the wholesome state of humanity that balances human natural creativity and cravings with Victorian unrelenting reason. There is a similarity between Rousseau's depiction of the primitive savage man (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*) and Bronte's depiction of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff's uncontrolled passions, desires and natural impulses connect him to Rousseau's savage man. In fact, the destructive forces are chiefly embodied in Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff and Bronte depicts their passions with extraordinary empathic power. In the novel Catharine is described thus:

Her spirits were always at high-water mark, her tongue always going - singing, laughing and plaguing everybody who would not do the same....she had the bonniest eye, the sweetest smile, and lightest foot in the parish: and after all, I believe she meant no harm....

The novel's natural elements are perfect compliments to both Catherine and Heathcliff. Their tumultuous relationship

parallels the weather at the heights. In fact, Catherine is as changeable as the weather on the moors, with unpredictable moods. Similarities could also be drawn to a degree with Emma (*Madame Bovary*) and Anna Karenina for both challenge the institution of marriage because of their impatience with domestic confinements and search for self-fulfillment.

On the other hand, the main quest in *Jane Eyre* is Jane's search for family, for a sense of belonging and love. There is something very real in her resistance (when she is dragged by her cruel aunt towards banishment in the bedroom where her late uncle died). This serves as a catalyst for her quest of true self that amalgamates among others her morality and faith. In fact, Bronte responded to her critics' objections by declaring, *Unless I have the courage to use the language of Truth in preference to the jargon of conventionality, I ought to be silent..* Here, one notices the impact of both - Realism and Transcendentalism.

Scientific advancement vis-a-vis Revolution in consciousness: Mary Shelley, among the 19th century women novelists, carried into her writings the scientific change and advancements that were being made in contemporary times. From decentering God to centering man - the individual - *Frankenstein* demonstrated the infinite possibilities that could be achieved through science. Here the impact of Sir Issac Newton's third law of motion can be clearly discerned. The monster created becomes both a source of deep anguish and angst and at the same time is a warning about an over-reaching science that unleashes forces it cannot control. With *Man* (Heathcliff) at the centre, the laws of action-reaction find resonance in the *Indian theory of Karma* where *Man* is responsible for all that he does.

Education: Education of the 19th century connects closely to the gender association of this period. Men from wealthy families used to be the only persons to be provided with the opportunity to be educated at the University level. Social standing was extremely important during this time. Manners, birth, money, occupation were important parameters of social standing. In addition, speech, clothing, values and education revealed a person's class. And these strict guidelines of Class structure brought about marriages

without love. The setting of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange provide a clear example of social contrast. Education brings about Edgar's financial stability and a spouse in Catherine. And a denial of Education costs Heathcliff his very life (Catherine).

In effect, education brought about a clarity of outlook both for the Women novelist and her women characters. Education in all spheres provided answers to the dominating questions of the 18th century. If empiricism (wherein knowledge through the senses) was the question, the answer was seen in Romanticism and Transcendentalism (wherein knowledge could be attained through self-realization). If the thrust was upon following classical rules and regulations in the 18th century, 19th century laid emphasis on both emotion and intellect. Many of the novelists Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Mary Shelley, Margaret Fuller, among others have characters that demonstrate this balance between the head and the heart. Catherine in particular displays her clarity of mind and states matter-of-factly...

My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of visible delight but necessary.

This is an example of a character who understand the meaning of true education. To be able to make a rational choice keeping socio-economic considerations in mind is the sign of an educated person. Take again, Mary Shelley's character of Victor Frankenstein, his study of chemical processes into the creation of life who later regrets meddling with nature through his creature. The message was heard loud and clear. Not even man has the right to tamper with the creation of God.

The Indian Impact: The translation of some of the Indian scriptural texts into English during the 19th century has had wide-spread impact all over Europe and America in particular. Questions pertaining to life and existence, quest for Truth, spiritual unity and oneness that found place in American transcendentalism was solely on account of the impact Indian thought had on the western world as a whole. Even the Romantics were quite aware of Charles Wilkins' translation of the *Bhagavad Geeta* and in all possibility the doctrine of *Sthithapragna* was no different from Keats' doctrine of negative capability. Accordingly, the impact of the 19th century women novelists on women writers has been profound to say the least. For example the character of Rosie, in Narayan's *The Guide* carries a streak of 'Realism' and draws parallels with Bronte's Catherine. Both are educated, both have shifted loyalties - one from Marco to Raju and the other from Linton to Heathcliff; both eventually end in a tragedy with Raju desiring to lead a selfless life as a *Saint* and Heathcliff desiring to spend the rest of his soul's existence with Catherine's spirit. The conclusion briefly brushes with the concept of self vis-a-vis the philosophy of transcendentalism.

In effect, these few examples laid the foundation to the idea of *The Thinking Woman* that assimilates and accommodates the characteristic qualities of assertiveness, empathy, passion, power, faith, adaptability, courage, gratitude etc. It is poignant to note that contemporary philosophy, political-social-economic conditions, spirituality among others had a lasting impact on the Mind of the Women writer of the 19th century who translated these impressions in the form of some memorable characters in the world of literature.