

19th Century Women Novelists

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Degree- I (English Hons)

Paper - I

Even as the modern English novel saw the light of the day in the 18th century, its full blossoming as an art form is attributed to the 19th century. To this development of novel the role of a few women writers is immensely important. The emergence of women as novelists in the 19th century is due basically to two factors. By entering the intellectual circles through the portals of Oxford and Cambridge for the first time, woman assumed an important place in literature. Secondly, the 19th century being an age of emotion, the spirit of the Romantic age attracted the women and gave them the opportunity to express themselves in literature, particularly in novel. Women being more emotional than men responded magnificently and a major trend was set. While Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, Francis Burney, Jane Porter and Susan Ferrier enriched novel in the first half of the 19th century, i.e. the Romantic Age the second half i.e. the Victorian Age was predominated by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte and George Eliot. Together, these writers form a cute constellation and are known more popularly by the term 19th century women novelists.

Jane Austen (1775-1815) is the most important among the women writers of the

first half of the 19th century. In her novels, she presents the truth full account of the life of English country society as Wordsworth does through his poetry. But unlike Wordsworth, she was gifted with a great sense of humour but her works. Like the French novelists have an exquisite perfection that of a delicate miniature painting. In fact, she is something more than a miniature painter. Like Henry James, she is fascinated by the complexities of personal relationship. She explores humorous nature and humorous conduct. With complete verisimilitude, she gives us common place person and as characters who are true to life. The most important among her novels are *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma* and *Mansfield Park*. Sir Walter Scott's very aptly remark.

That young lady has a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I have ever met with.

Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) is the Irish novelist who continued the tradition of 18th century 'Moral feeble' she focused on the social and religious problems of per day besides she has a zeal for reform which she reveals through subtle psychology. Her three major novels *Castle Rackrent*, *The Absentee* and *Disunion* show a Scott like presentation. There is no doubt a lack of integration in a total pattern but her works have humour and pathos, brightness and simplicity.

Susan Ferriar (1782-1854) a

Scottish writer is as great a painter of Scottish life and character as Maria Edgeworth is of Irish life her three novels— *Marriage, Destiny and the inheritance* won her, among other Walter Scott as an admirer. The other writers— Francis Burney, Jane Porter, Mary Shelley— to have their own contributions while Francis Burney is the most direct English successor onto Richardson and was written in *Evelina* and first English novel of home life, Mary Shelley is known for her monumental *Frankenstein*.

The novels in the hand of the women writers of the Victorian Era mark a deeper affinity between the activity of novel writing and the serious and sincere convictions of the writers. At times they reveal the subtle operation and power of poetry as we find in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* a novel of 'passion' vehemence and grief matchlessly portrayed' to quote Matthew Arnold. Emily's sister Charlotte Brontë is known as a more gifted writer. Her *Jane Eyre* is a powerful and fascinating study of elemental love and had reminding us of Marlowe's tragedies. Mrs. Gaskell, the biographer of Charlotte Brontë, is a keen and sensitive observer of village life. Her *Garrard* deals with the small affairs of a country village with sympathy and gentle humour. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) is the most consistent writer of this group. She was also the most learned of all the women novelists of the 19th century. All her novels from *Silken Marner* *Adam Bede* *Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch* to *Romola* aim at draw

matizing the play of universal moral forces. They also aim at establishing moral laws as the basis of human society. She is more conscious moralizer than any of her contemporaries. There are touches of Shakespearean humour, Wordsworthian poetic flavour and the grace of the pre-Raphaelites in her novels. These women writers of the 19th century are, thus, significant both as pioneers and as trend-setters. Their glorious emergence is one of the unforgettable literary happenings in the annals of English literature.

By-

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