

MAPPING THE VOICE IN VICTORIAN YOUNG GIRLS' PERIODICALS: A FEMINIST APPROACH

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Abstract: Though History of English literature witnesses(-ed) the disposition of women in every period, special attention is always sought by the Victorian women, perhaps, on account of their very modernity which had been perceived as menace to the very fabric of national identity and patriarchal society in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Victorian era begot the 'New Woman' who courageously strove to push away all the obstacles laid down in the male dominated society for them, and resultantly added an altogether new dimension to the literary field, mainly dominated by male, by penning their sufferings, desires, emotions, and aspirations. Women writing flourished in the Victorian period. Besides women novelists, some periodicals run by women also contributed to the women writing in this era. The girls' periodicals like '*Monthly Packet*', '*Girl of the Period Miscellany*', '*Girl's Own Paper*', '*Atalanta*' etc. are quintessential in the this matter. This paper concentrates on the feminist approach to those periodicals published by the young girls.

Keywords: New Woman, Victorian Era, Periodical, Feminist.

Introduction: "*Femininity is always represented in [women's] magazines as fractured, not least because it is simultaneously assumed as given and as still to be achieved*" - Margaret Beetham, A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine 1800-1914 (1996)

Periodicals are such magazines, newspapers, and journals which get published at regular intervals. Usually periodicals contain grave matters. The inundation of publications is the striking characteristic in literary culture of the Victorian period. As the poetry is the key production of Romantic period, the Victorian period finds its distinguished place in the realm of literature with its myriad literary publications, especially *novel*. Apart from novel, other literary genre like periodicals had been able to touch the heart of commoners. For that "nineteenth-century British periodicals regarded the press as a phenomenon of the age" (E. M. Palmegiano, 2013:VII). Periodicals reached the zenith of success in this period for the winsome augmentation in the fields of literacy, and the advancement of printing technology and distribution of literary works. Even the periodicals run by the girls became quite popular among the girls of this period.

Victorian Society: Having been exploited, subjugated, and marginalised in patriarchal society women's indomitable spirit never allowed them to yield to the constructed power of society. In the nineteenth century the women period always claim a significant position in the realm of literature for their contribution as the writers, and stirring the world by penning their sufferings, emotions themselves. But it was the Herculean task for them to turn their manuscripts into the books as the male dominated society never provided them with the prospect, rather many hindrances were imposed on them regarding law, education, and tradition. Middle class women, who were expected to be indulged in household affairs, could be depicted as '*angel in the house*' (Coventry Patmore, 1862). In male dominated England, women had to adopt the names belonging to masculine gender to reach the publishers with manuscripts. In this regard, Mary Ann Evans is exemplified with her adopted name *George Eliot*.

It is really unfortunate that the girls' in this period faced discrimination regarding education. They were taught by poorly trained governess without any standard curriculum. But the attitude towards girls switched a bit when girls started receiving the opportunity for going to school in 1950s, and colleges for

girls were founded in 1960s. This change in the attitude towards women came with idea, that girls required education to perform well as future wives and mothers, advocated by **Mary Wollstonecraft** in her works- *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

Periodicals Run by Girls: Victorian period recorded a great number of periodicals, but most of them got brought out by men. It does not mean that girls lagged behind them, rather they began penning their own personal and social experiences in their own periodicals. Their periodicals provided them with much required space where they could voice up their own sufferings, and exploitation in their own periodicals. To the literary field of Victorian period Women contributed both as producers, and consumers (Bibhash Choudhury, 2010:228).

The notable periodicals by girls in nineteenth century were (i) '*Monthly Packet*', (ii) '*Girl of the Period Miscellany*', (iii) '*Girl's Own Paper*', and (iv) '*Atalanta*'.

Monthly Packet: '*Monthly Packet*', a periodical edited by **Charlotte Yonge**, a woman with excellent editorial skill, was inceptioned in 1851. It was brought out with a particular objective to guide females towards feminine religious ideal. The aim that Yonge proclaimed for the beginning of *Monthly Packet* in January 1851 in her "*Introductory Letter*" was to cater assistance to "*young girls, or maidens, or young ladies, whichever you like to be called*" (i). The target readership was the group of girls ranging from the ages of 15 to 25. The magazine was

"meant to be in some degree a help to those who are thus forming it; not as a guide, since that is the part of deeper and graver books, but as a companion in times of recreation, which may help you to perceive how to bring your religious principles to bear upon your daily life, may show you the examples, both good and evil, of historical persons, and may tell you of the workings of God's providence both here and in other lands." (i-ii)

Monthly Packet of Evening Readings for Younger Members of the Church of England guided the pious girls towards their feminine moral and quintessential duty for the Almighty, and members of their families. It reflected the religious ideology through delineation of girlhood as the magazine appeared for the very first time in the year when controversy regarding *Tractarianism*¹ prevailed. Yonge in her letter opined that the magazine was a "*collaborative venture, emerging at a time of great tension,*" and its objective "*was to secure the loyalties of the next generation of Tractarians, by ensuring that their early associations were entwined with Church of England doctrine of the purest kind*" (*Yonge Letters* 64). From its initial issues the magazine made clear its intention to make the girls cognizant about their moral and spiritual onuses and through this it made them succumb to the power of patriarchal society.

Yonge published a series of articles entitled '*Womankind*'. In this series she threw light on the girls, including the status of women, education, and charity. According to June Sturrock, *Monthly Packet* can be compared to some feminist journals like the *English Woman's Journal* and the later *Victoria Magazine* as it delineated extensively with women issues. The *Monthly Packet* emphasised on "*the individual's experience of the need for work, relating this need to social and domestic structures—social class and, above all, family hierarchies*" (Sturrock "Women" 65). The magazine persistently encouraged the girls to "*look for the services that she can fulfil by head or by hands, by superintendence or by labour, by pen or pencil, by needle or by activity, by voice or by music, by teaching or by nursing*" (NS Vol. 17 29). The editor with her immense psychological strength could easily perceive the dilemma that the women went through between onus and extensive reading. She advised the girls to adhere to their duties first, and never let their reading evade their essential responsibilities. She was very much conscious about the girls' education, and eventually suggests *In School and Out of School* (1878) because the value it bears for teachers and schoolgirls "*whose learning is in danger of devouring homely duties*" ("Hints on Reading" Vol. 6 160)².

Girls were found indulging themselves in the adoption of the image of religious girl. As the magazine propounded the conservative characteristics of the religious ideal, the reality of the girlhood was something different. In the year 1999, the last issue of the magazine was published.

Girl of the Period Miscellany: *“The Latest Sensation, profusely Illustrated”* was a statement of an advertisement in 5th July, 1869 regarding the issue of the *Athenaeum*, (Kristine Moruzi, 2012:54). This monthly magazine entitled *Girl of the Period Miscellany*, generally emphasized on women’s social liberation, and rights. It was not at all a typical girls’ magazine, rather it was enjoyed by male readers of its satirical representation of *“Girl of the Period.”* The “girl” was presented in the magazine through huge illustrations, and eventually, the “girl” in the illustration became the visual role model for the girls of this period as the “girl” was not confined within the drawing room, rather she could actively participate in all activities in all domains of life.

This magazine was opposite to *The Monthly Packet* in terms of depiction of girls. *Girl of the Period Miscellany* never described women in an orthodox way, rather they were spotted to switch their role from conventional mid-Victorian feminine ideal into the more progressive fin-de-siècle model of femininity. However, the *Miscellany* wonderfully captured the tension between the two ideals, but constantly it supported for new possibilities for the girls or the women of the period. *“It was inspired by Eliza Lynn Linton’s unsigned article, “The Girl of the Period,” the Miscellany reworks the Girl of the Period from Linton’s object of disdain into a figure who might be humorous, but who was also engaging and sympathetic”* (Kristine Moruzi, 2012:54). The magazine mainly addressed to French, Irish, Scottish, and American girls.

This magazine faced very short life. Perhaps it fell short in the marketing to attract more readers towards it, or it could not identify its targeted readership. It might live for very short span, but it’s thought of advanced women in all sphere of life is no doubt praiseworthy.

The Girls’ Own Paper: The most popular girls’ magazine of the nineteenth century was *The Girls’ Own Paper* edited by Charles Peters. Peters desired *“to foster and develop that which was highest and noblest in the girlhood and womanhood of England”* (Klickmann 1). This weekly magazine was in great demand as it provided with the girls all the elements like informational articles, serialized fiction and correspondence part that they usually looked for in other magazines. For the girls this one penny magazine also provided *“stories of their own”* (Briggs and Butts 158)³. It presented girls’ health as feminine ideal. Health was never considered as important element of femininity among the mid-Victorian middle class people. This magazine could easily surpass other magazines for girls in the market as it was quit cheaper as well as more enriched in quality, and more frequent.

Atalanta: *Atalanta*, first published in 1887, mainly delineated with the girls’ education which was not highlighted even in the most popular magazine *The Girls’ Own Paper*. It also published a number of articles on higher education. **Girton** and **Newnham** Colleges were two of the first colleges established for women, and their depictions also found place in the magazine. *“The girl in the pages of Atalanta, then, understood the need for education, but was less clear about how this intellectual life could be integrated with a life of marriage and motherhood”* (Kristine Moruzi, 2012:116).

Feminist Approach of These Periodicals: In the male dominated literary world, these periodicals by girls in the nineteenth century specially for the Victorian middle class girls undoubtedly are noteworthy. **Susan Gorsky** argues that *“[e]xploring the role of women during the nineteenth century means considering the evolution of feminism.”* All the periodicals for girls raised voices for women empowerment by liberating woman from social hindrances, giving social rights. It is found in *Atalanta* that education was emphasized for mid-Victorian women as education could bring enlightenment for them, and they could seek for the right of equality in society. Yonge asserted in *The Monthly Packet* in 1876 as part of *“Womankind”*,

Be strong-minded enough to stand up for the right, to bear pain and danger in a good cause, to aid others in time of suffering, to venture on what is called mean or degrading, to withstand a foolish fashion, to use

your own judgment, to weigh the value of compliments. In all these things be strong. Be the valiant woman, but do not be strong-minded in a bad sense in discarding all the graces of humility, meekness, and submission, which are the true strength and beauty of womanhood. (NS Vol. 21 476).

Conclusion: The periodicals run by the girls vividly exhibit the challenges for welcoming new ideas. Sometimes the editors had no option but to compromise the shifting feminine ideal to retain readership. Whatever may be the negotiation, but the feminist approach of the Girls' periodicals between 1850 and 1915 reflect the changing nature of girlhood during this period.

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