

George Meredith and the Woman Question

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ABSTRACT

Meredith —born thirteen years after Trollope, sixteen after Dickens, seventeen after Thackeray and eighteen after Mrs Gaskell — was, in every way, signalling a new direction for the novel. The difficulty of maintaining religious faith became inevitable as the ‘New Sciences’ influenced Victorian People. At the same time, the failure of economic prosperity in the 1870 and the collapse of the One Nation ideal stood as walls in front of the belief to see the world as a benign place. Like George Eliot before him and Henry James after, Meredith’s notion was to involve himself with the problems of other people in the society and this gave his characters a kind of organic growth which would be counter-poised against bland conformism to the norm-bound societal field. The gradual evolution of a new species of woman, intellectually alert and active, became a golden key of his novels as Meredith equipped them with wit, talent and readiness to face the problems of this male-dominated society. He was the high priest of comic spirit, had been an accomplished delineator of female psyche. Like a psychoanalyst, he could delve deep into “Woman Question.” His novels were ample testimony to it. Certain feminist ideas can be detected in meditation and philosophy. His feminism is essentially rooted in the contemporary evolutionary theory of Darwin, Spencer and Comte. Meredith had great faith in the gradual evolution of a new species of women, intellectually alert and active. This new woman or Superwoman would be ready to face the myriad problems of the human society, dominated by male egoism and autocracy. The Victorian England was the happiness of the egoists and snobs. Women were treated as “dolls” in their hands. They found no way or route to emancipation. Meredith equipped them with wit, intellect and readiness to face the problems of these male-dominated society That comic spirit is great boon to feminism. Indeed, comedy for Meredith is a golden key to the gradual social economic and political emancipation of women. It is a close friend of women. It is also the yardstick of civilization to indicate the status and position of women.

KEYWORDS: Meredith -- a thinker, Socio-political and literary background of feminism, Meredith’s women,

Sentimentalism and egoism are George Meredith’s names for diseases of human spirit which are unhealthy first because they are unreal, and consequently, being unreal, they are destructive. Within the arena of Meredith’s intellectual creation one can always visualize the tolerable and the intolerable, the culpable and the non- culpable surrenders to these unrealities. This attitude has remained unchanging in critics more or less during quite a few generations —from V. S. Pritchett and J.B. Priestley to Gillian Beer: that Meredith not only is but always was a difficult case. We can hear an echo of it once again in the very late voice of Alan Horsman when he says in *The Victorian Novel* (1990) that the form was still that of Fielding, Thackeray and the Brontes, with its own distinctive rules, from epic and romance and the drama, and still drawing sustenance, as in George Eliot. The complexity of Meredith’s novels is the result of these wider limits in which he was restlessly experimental. Meredith was not an abstract thinking man. Virginia

Woolf's compliment was very pertinent: "Meredith pays us a supreme compliment to which as novel readers we are little accustomed. We are civilized people, he seems to say, watching the comedy of human relations together." Meredith's intellect, with its delicate irony, is brought into its operation for the first time as he registers his reaction to the times in poems that follow "Modern Love". The lyrical poet of "Modern Love" later transformed himself into a powerful ballad composer in "The Nuptials of Attila". Actually, Meredith was hypnotised by the gloriousness of the power and wealth of the late Victorian England, but it was too much for him. On 5 January 1909, he had made a rather late confession to Hyndman: "One may fear that a landing on our shores alone will rouse the mercantile class. Doubtless also there is an apprehension as to the prudence of schooling the toilers in the use of arms."

England came to be a very different place in 1908 from what it had been in 1837 when Queen Victoria began the longest reign in British history. The world of the 1830's (after the passing of the first parliamentary Reform Act of 1832) still looked back, even though new forces — political social and economic, were vigorously at work. Those forces, principally galvanised and directed by the initiative and enterprise of modern capitalism, in qualities epitomised in the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851, produced in high Victorianism a confidence, belief in progress, and an achievement unmatched before or since in the history of the English nation. Then followed uncertainty — self-questioning, cynicism and even despair. This situation of moribund ultimately called for a radical re-addressal of the entire gamut of thoughts, attitudes and mores of social and critical sensibilities. As of necessity, as it were, an undercurrent of dissension started asserting its emergence and the result was a sort of fictional 'counter-world'. In this situation of moral perplexity the only way out was to admit and welcome the English comic tradition in which, Sartre says, the reader can really encounter the story. That is why one of Meredith's most constant themes is what he calls the "Comedy of egoism", which arises out of man's failure — and it is important that it is man, not woman — to perceive his real place in the human hierarchy and also out of his romantic and egotistical vision of himself at the "centre of the world". *An Essay on Comedy* (1877) and the Prelude of *The Egoist* (1879) speak of the value of laughter and "Olympian" mockery instead of sympathetic identification. Comedy, to Meredith, which mainly germinated from social inequality becomes a desperate remedy for the social cynicism and malady. In this regard: "He was," as Lloyd Fernando goes on to say, "a brilliant and sophisticated experiments in the art of the novel :and his scrutiny of English society, especially its upper echelons, has rarely been equalled in depth."

There is indeed a tragic dimension in his works, but *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) established the contention that the comic spirit shows the "chief distinction" of Meredith's fiction and the sombre elements in the novel take a different path which may have caused confusion amongst the critics. J. B. Priestley's observation in this context is pertinent: "Richard Feverel is presented as a comedy, and has a tragic ending thrust upon it, quite arbitrarily." The idea of tragi-comedy in novel, other than in drama, was totally innovative for Meredith's Age. According to John Lucas : "... Although, like Browning, Meredith had suffered from years of neglect and indifference, the situation is now being corrected." It is in the 1890's that the comparison between Meredith and Shakespeare became commonplace. Hannah Lynch, Richard Le Gallienne, W.E. Heniey nourished this opinion in their respective criticism and specially R.L. Stevenson admitted to an American reporter in his *The Ordeal of George Meredith* 1954, that *Rhoda Fleming* (1865) : "is the strongest thing in English letters since Shakespeare died, and if Shakespeare could have read it he would have jumped and cried, "Here's Fellow!"

Though Meredith's reputation had suffered many unwelcome reverses at times it would not at all be an ill-humoured conceit to propose that the present generation should look back at Meredith and realise how

much they still owed to him for the changes in a frigidly ‘male’ society which gradually had to open its portals to let in winds of freedom and rights to women. Especially, the women of today can scarcely sleep on the fact that Meredith did a constructive help to the cause of womanhood and progressive education. Alice Woods in *George Meredith as Champion of Women and of Progressive Education* expressed the following notion. It is the almost unanimous opinion of students of George Meredith that the women of his novels are untrue to Victorian Age than those of any other well-known male novelist. The fact is historically important that a group of writers started writing about the gradual social, economic and political emancipation of women — the Brontes, Gaskell, H. Martineau, George Eliot and Meredith; their social coevals were Florence Nightingale, Mary Carpenter, Angela Burdett - Coutts. Pioneer professionals, they were female role innovators breaking new ground and creating new ‘feminine’ possibilities and perspectives. These women struggled on to be free from social and literary confinement, through strategic redefinitions of self, art and society.

In a famous letter to Charlotte, Robert Southey had expressed the notion : “Literature is not the business of a woman’s life and it cannot be.” In this happy nest of egoists and snobs, Meredith’s women were given wit, intellect and readiness to face the problems of this male-dominated society. As we study Meredith’s women characters, they stand before us as down-to-earth human beings, so natural that we regard them in different lights according to our affinities and apathies. Far from being the ideal heroines of romance, they are full of faults and failings as well as virtues. They are the outcome of social inheritance, the creatures of the nineteenth century, living Victorian life through and through. But, unlike Nietzsche, Meredith believed in “struggle”. So, he had faith not only in ‘Superman’ but in ‘Superwoman’ too, for which he gave us a variety of struggling women. Lucy in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) incurs untold sorrow and suffering, constantly enduring the male ego of Richard, and his want of intelligent understanding. When she is pictured on the banks of the river on the verge of the opening of the “Ferdinand and Miranda” chapter, Lucy is a “daughter of earth”, one of Meredith’s natural women. She is in perfect harmony with her surroundings and is set against an opulent background of “green flashing water”, “lilies, golden and white”, and meadowsweet hanging “from the banks thick with weed and training bramble”. Here, she possesses unified personality, a balanced embodiment of Meredith’s triad of blood, brain, and spirit. It shows not only that Lucy has common sense but that Richard would be quite able of benefiting from her insight. This was necessary as women’s aspirations began to flourish outside the narrow confines of the domestic environment, and this has to be accommodated within a larger perspective. Thus the Victorian woman, gets in Meredith’s novels, an acceleration from a patriarchal snobbery and the existing state of things which was thoroughly incompatible with their own inner promptings and hopes. Rhoda in *Rhoda Fleming* (1865) is at war with her own dominant over-bearing nature. Clara Middleton in *The Egoist* (1879), has a terrible struggle to be truly honourable by an act the world would deem dishonourable. Laetitia conquers her foolish worship of an egoist after a hard fight and many falls. According to Lloyd Fernando : “His (Meredith’s) best success was in the representation of Clara Middleton’s dilemma in *The Egoist* (1879). Clara had simply and only to break off her engagement as a result of showing that the dispute between her and Willoughby Patterne was, “between a conventional idea of obligation and an injury to her nature” (chap.30) and pointing out also that the dispute was not resolved, from the women’s point of view, simply by running away from Patterne. So, the new woman, by moving one step further from her predecessors, “feels” her way towards responsible action, realizing that the solution to her problem is not obvious but complicated, and that the onus is on her to seek the solution. Poor Nataly, in *One of Our Conquerors* (1895), struggles almost hopelessly to make a reconciliation between the natural

woman and the proto-typal, whilst her daughter Nesta struggles manfully against the manners and customs of a world that “insists on ignorance for brave young girls”, who are ready and willing to face the myriad problems of the society. Women as free spirits had a precarious task in balancing independence with a fundamental sense of responsibility to society at large. Therefore, they should cultivate powers of self-reliance and employ intellect to the full, Nataly Dreighton is human enough to be overcome by the effort of both the situations; when she decided to live with Radnor and when she frustrated his scheme to gain an entry into the aristocracy. Her responsibilities were clear and she fulfilled them with courage. The inevitable consequence was, losing of much of Victor Radnor’s rapport with Nataly. But when he learns of her death on the night of his election meeting, he suffers a schizophrenic attack. Through Radnor’s mental odyssey Meredith puts forth the condition of women in the forefront of problems confronting society. The stalwarts of the society will be brought low by the very complacency with which they regarded their private relationship with women. In his gallery of women he presents us women of intellect. Thus, he writes : “My people conquer nothing; win none; they are actual yet uncommon.” It is the clockwork of the brain they are directed to set in motion, and — poor troop of actors to empty benches ; - the conscience residing in thoughtfulness that they would appeal to.

“Thus, he has given birth to his ‘New Woman’ ” - the term which George Gissing, later used in his *Odd Women* in 1893: “A Strong character, of course. More decidedly one of the new woman than you yourself – isn’t she ?” And Sarah Grand in *North American Revolution March*, 1894 and Quida again, used the term. Meredith’s “my people” belongs to the same rally of stronger women. The new woman is defined in *The Oxford English Dictionary* as: A woman of ‘advanced’ views, advocating the independence of her sex and defying convention. Meredith revolted against the idea, which Thompson in his *Sex and Society* points out, that women never have had the same freedom of action through which variation comes. On the contrary, Meredith’s opinion was : “Men disincline to believe that women grow.” So, it is not actually women but men who should be enlightened and humanized. Diana in *Diana of the Crossways* (1885) speaks in anguish : “The top and bottom sin of society is cowardice, physically and morally alike.”

Literature happened to be one of the most efficient vehicles of the complex reception of the ideology of the rulers by the ruled. By abrogating the power of didacticism, literature succeeded as the most convincing instrument for consolidating the heirloom of this ideology. Meredith, like many of the radical reformers, is a social optimist and a futurist. And, the complex interaction between his ideology of the emergence of strong-natured women and the contemporary socio-political atmosphere gave birth to truer-to-life moulds different from that of the paste board women of popular Victorian fiction. Mrs Millicent Garrett Fawcett’s (1847-1929) work for the Higher Education of women and for women’s suffrage, the world’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) and Lucretia Mott’s (1793-1880) efforts to arrange the historic Women’s Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in 1848 paved the way to animate the self-confident women in Meredith’s novels. The Stephensian phraseology, however, was rankly at war in those days against any bid for women suffrage. It would swear by the spirit of the conservative past and hold out a stern remonstrance to: “the aspirations of young ladies, who wish to learn Latin and Greek when they ought to be nursing, babies and supporting hospitals.” Such notions, which were then rampant, had surely instigated Meredith to intrude into areas tacitly considered to be out of bounds for women, as well as to take up the issues which were not exactly soothing to male egos. Meredith approached the woman question with a poet’s heart, for indeed a poet he was. In this he is not very far away from the position of Lord Tennyson in “The Princess”:

For woman is not undeveloped man / But diverse.

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