

"The Awakening of the Angels": Women's Education in the Victorian Era

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Abstract. Victorian England underwent drastic social changes, among which the progress of female education was one of the most representative achievements. At that time, on the one hand, the rapid development of the industrial revolution and the gradual completion of the democratic reform created a relatively free social atmosphere for the reform of women's education; on the other hand, the overall reality of the country's male and female population and the spread of liberal ideas further created favorable conditions for the development of women's education. As a result of this combination of factors, the professional norms for female teachers have gradually been systematized, public primary education for women has been popularized, the system of secondary and higher education has been improved, and the practicality of education has been strengthened. Eventually, based on the introduction of a series of government measures on female education, the overall literacy rate of women has increased rapidly, and there has been a major shift in individual consciousness and an expansion of social contributions. However, due to the constraints of the times, changes in women's education are still influenced by the traditional concepts of men and women, and are being obstructed by political conservatives; they have not yet freed themselves from patriarchal interference, and are still some way from realizing true equality between men and women in education.

Keywords: Victorian Period; Female Education; Change.

1. Introduction

With the downward shift of historiographical perspective and the attention paid to women's topics, women's education has become one of the important themes in the study of the history of education today. The Victorian era, as a key period for the rapid development of women's education, has already produced relatively rich results. For example, it discusses the reform of women's primary and secondary education in the middle and late Victorian period; [1] Explore the role of women in education in Victorian England; [2] Discusses the impact of the feminist awakening on the boundaries of female educational reform; [3] also notes the impact of the Industrial Revolution on women's educational status. However, most of the studies only skimmed over the development of the Industrial Revolution and the influence of liberalism as a part of the default environmental background at that time, and seldom presented a complete picture. Therefore, this paper attempts to present a full picture of the development of women's education in the Victorian period while sorting out the overall context of the era and pointing out its influences, with a view to further deepening the current discussion on women's education in Britain.

2. Overall Context of the Development of Female Education

2.1. The Impetus of the Industrial Revolution

The rapid development of the Industrial Revolution created an opportunity for women's education in Britain to flourish, and became an important objective condition to promote the change of women's education. In the mid-to-late 19th century, with the further development of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the mode of social production gradually shifted to the production of large-scale machines, and more and more factories began to employ women as a supplement to the labor force, which

provided work opportunities for the majority of working-class women who then left their families to participate in the daily competition in the labor market and thus gained a stable economic source. This provided working-class women with job opportunities, and they stepped out of their families to participate in the daily competition in the labor market, thus obtaining a stable economic source.

At the same time, the change in production methods has also raised the demand for professional knowledge and labor skills for workers, including women. For example, in operation, operators are required to have a certain degree of literacy and at the same time accurately understand the details of the work, which means that women must have a certain degree of literacy in order to standardize the operation of machines, thus effectively reducing the potential safety hazards of production, and acquiring professional knowledge cannot be separated from education. In this way, the Industrial Revolution indirectly created opportunities for the development of female education.

In addition, the Industrial Revolution also promoted a sense of competition among individuals through the provision of jobs, which led to a consensus on the need for women to receive a standardized education, and accelerated the pace of change in women's education to a certain extent, so that women's education focused more and more on meeting the needs of reality, and the proportion of practical courses was constantly increased.

2.2. The Promotion of Parliamentary Reform

In the late 19th century, the British parliamentary system underwent major changes, with more and more industrial bourgeoisie gaining seats in parliament and participating in the governance of the country, and they demanded an efficient and clean government from a utilitarian point of view in order to promote economic development, which, on the one hand, changed the monopoly of power by the aristocrats and promoted the democratization of politics, and, to a certain extent, provided a relatively relaxed political environment for the development of women's education. On the other hand, the fact that women were still explicitly excluded from political rights, such as the right to vote, also stimulated the awakening of women's awareness of political participation. [4]

As the industrial bourgeoisie increasingly enters parliament and assumes state power, they demand the government work efficiently and cleanly in order to better promote economic development, which objectively leads to the emergence of a liberal atmosphere in society and provides the necessary space for women's education to change. At the same time, the rapid rise of the mass media continued to push political culture downward into all strata of society, creating opportunities for the birth of feminist ideas and spreading them continuously. Feminist activists thus began to lead the formation of a number of feminist organizations in line with their own interests, and through the founding of women's magazines, seized public opinion positions. They also actively organized political petitions and marches, using a variety of means to fight for more legitimate interests for women, including changes in the right to education.[5]

2.3. The Push of the Real Situation

During this period, the expansion of overseas colonization activities led to the involvement of more and more men, and a large number of women had to stay at home. At the same time, the average life expectancy of women increased as a result of improvements in medical technology and quality of life, and women's choice of spouse was limited by the 19th century British concept of marriage within the same class. In addition, with the rise of social standards, the economic pressure on families increased, leading to a gradual delay in the age of first marriage for middle-class men, which objectively reduced women's chances of getting married.[6]

As a result, under the combined influence of multiple factors, the problem of gender imbalance was extremely serious, which made it impossible for a large number of women to obtain economic support through traditional marriage channels, and their existence, according to the concepts of the time, on the one hand, undermined the morals of society, and on the other hand, was not conducive to the reproduction of offspring, and was therefore scornfully called "surplus women". Therefore, they were

scornfully called "surplus women".[7] In reality, they had to live under the cold eye of the society (except for a few unmarried women with good families who could rely on their inheritance to survive), and they also faced the pressure of lack of stable livelihood security. Moreover, due to the overall social environment at the time, these women had limited opportunities to find suitable jobs to support themselves. Eventually, under the "force" of this reality, more and more women began to try to enhance their competitiveness by receiving basic education and expanding their professional knowledge, so as to seek job opportunities and pursue their own values through social labor. Their inspirational practices have fundamentally contributed to the development of women's education.

2.4. The Influence of Liberal Concepts

The development of the Enlightenment gradually brought the concept of freedom and equality to different levels of British society, which greatly contributed to the enlightenment of feminist activists. John Locke, a representative of the British Enlightenment, was the founder of liberalism. In his *Treatise of Government*, he mentioned that "*men of the same common nature, abilities, and powers are by nature equal by birth, and all ought to enjoy common rights and privileges.*" This statement recognizes women's human rights on a logical level. [8] Although this view is still based on the product of patriarchal thinking and carries the prejudice that women lack rational thinking and can only stay at home, objectively it still plays a certain role in promoting women's pursuit of freedom and equality.

As society developed further, liberal ideas became more and more favorable to women. John Muller, the great feminist author of *The Subordination of Women*, proposed that women were not inherently inferior, but were subjugated due to various social factors, including unequal laws, women's deep brainwashing through slavery education, and political exclusion, etc. He further proposed that women should have equal rights in law, education, employment, and political participation.[9] From these perspectives, their ideas transcended the traditional conception of women, provided ideological guidance for the promotion of gender equality, largely contributed to the awakening of women's consciousness, and brought different voices to the world of thought that had long been in a state of "women can only be submissive and please men".

3. Specific Development Content of Female Education

3.1. Regularization of the Occupational System

With the help of a group of visionary female principals, the professionalization of female teachers has continued to rise, and the norms of the profession have become more systematic. Initially, compared with professions with strong professional barriers such as doctors and lawyers, the teaching profession lacked professional prestige and had a low professional threshold due to the lack of a comprehensive training system, specialized examination forms and clear qualifications.[10] Especially in the group of female teachers, most of them have insufficient cultural level, and even more lack specialized professional training, taking on the responsibility of nurturing others only by mastering some basic etiquette, elementary talents and a small amount of knowledge, thus leading to the practitioners' mostly low treatment and low social status, which ultimately hinders the long-term development of the female teaching profession.

In order to solve this problem, a group of visionary educators began to form different educational associations, and put forward corresponding work objectives, formulate industry norms, and ultimately formed an educational alliance to help standardize the development of female teachers' careers, of which the Association of Women Principals founded by Bass is the most representative. The Association was founded by Bass in 1874 to bring together principals of different types of girls' high schools in the hope of clarifying the goals of school development and promoting the standardized development of the female teaching profession. Through the collective efforts of these associations, in the end, both advanced European educational theories were introduced and the professional knowledge system of female teachers was perfected; professional groups with a common identity and

special expertise were also formed, thus effectively raising the barriers of the profession and expanding their influence. [11]

3.2. Universalization of Primary Education

In 1870, the enactment of the Primary Education Act was of great significance to British women and to British primary education as a whole.

Before the enactment of the law, the British primary education system was disorganized, charitable in nature and arbitrary. With the change of social background, both individuals and the country are paying more attention to education, and the British government hopes to use administrative means to enhance the control of primary education, so as to promote the overall strength of British education.

As a result, the Elementary Education Act was enacted in 1870. In terms of school enrollment, the law stipulated that "children between the ages of five and thirteen must be enrolled in school".[12] After the enactment of the law, the country was divided into a number of different school districts, and the government began to allocate funds for the establishment of schools and led the establishment of school committees, thus clarifying the voice that the state possessed in education at the legal level. Since then, primary education was transformed from a "charity" to a public service for all, and the principle of its public nature was gradually established, and public schools in the true sense of the word were established in Britain for the first time.[13] In 1876 the government enacted the Sanden Act, which further stipulated that every parent was obliged to make his/her child receive the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), otherwise he/she would be punished, and the Mundra Act in 1880, which was based on the Sanden Act, further elaborated on the requirement that children of school age had to be enrolled in school unconditionally, as well as the premise that children of 10-13 years of age could be exempted from schooling under the premise of what kind of education they had attained. The Mundra Act, on the other hand, further refined the requirement of unconditional enrollment of school-age children on the basis of the Sanden Act, as well as the level of education at which children aged 10-13 are exempted from enrolling in school. It can be said that the enactment of the Mundra Act marked the establishment of the compulsory primary education system in Britain. [14]

3.3. Improvement of Secondary and Higher Education

With the improvement of the primary education system and the further promotion of social development, the demand for women to receive a higher level of education is increasing day by day, and thanks to the efforts of some visionary feminists, a breakthrough in women's secondary and tertiary education in the United Kingdom has also been achieved.

First, the most crucial is the government introduced the Endowed Schools Act in 1869, which adjusted the endowment fund from the legal level and increased the proportion of endowment for girls' secondary education, thus greatly facilitating the establishment of female secondary education institutions.[15] Secondly, under the support of a series of policies and the advocacy of scholars, the British society established many representative women's secondary education colleges, such as the Queen's College, the North London, and the Cheltenham College, etc., which provided schooling experience for the later schools, no matter in the curriculum or in the administrative management. At the same time, the greatest value of these schools is that they provide more women with educational opportunities and train a group of outstanding talents for society. Thirdly, secondary schools were encouraged to establish stable links with tertiary institutions, paving the way for women to receive higher professional education. With the active promotion of the Government and relevant persons, not only did a number of higher education institutions for women appear, but women were also gradually qualified to sit for local exams, honorary degree exams, and to be awarded degrees, thus breaking the long-standing exclusion of women from the higher education system.

Since then, women not only obtained the qualification of being granted degrees through long efforts, but also gained the recognition of the British education system.

3.4. Pragmatization of Educational Objectives

The gradual improvement of the education system and the increasingly fierce competition in society have led to a stronger tendency towards the pragmatization of women's education in the United Kingdom.

As a result, in order to meet the needs from different levels, many private schools began to offer additional practical courses specifically for middle-class children, such as additional simple science skills courses, physical education classes, and mathematics classes, in order to teach students some employment-oriented professional knowledge and daily skills.[16] At the same time, as a large number of working-class women entered factories to become cheap labor, factory owners hoped to achieve the discipline of working-class female laborers by upgrading the labor skills of their workers through education and fostering their labor qualities. Thus, in order to achieve this goal of the factory owners, a group of adult girls' schools - night schools - gradually appeared in the society for female workers, where they were taught various kinds of practical knowledge, mainly including reading, writing, arithmetic, sewing and other courses, so as to enhance the competitiveness of women in the labor market.[17] In addition, institutions such as mechanics' colleges and workers' colleges for lower-middle-class women to receive vocational training emerged to meet the employment needs of adult women.

However, due to their different status and social orientation, the meaning of practical education is not the same for different classes, nor is it perceived in practice; for example, middle-class women's education courses focus more on improving their ability to take care of their families, while the practical value of working-class women's courses is mainly in terms of serving their families and preparing them for employment, and so on.

4. Impact of the Flourishing of Female Education

4.1. Positive Impacts

1. Increase in the overall literacy level of women

As a direct result of the changes in women's education, the overall literacy level of women in Britain has been effectively raised. 1870 saw the enactment of laws, including the Elementary Education Act, which brought primary education into the scope of formal education in the country, and made it compulsory and public in nature. As a result, women's rights and interests in education have been further safeguarded and their literacy level has been greatly improved.

According to the data, with the popularization of the Elementary Education Act, the proportion of literate female population nationwide in Britain was 73% (80% male) in 1871, rose to 82% (87% male) in 1881, and further to 93% (94% male) in 1891, and by the end of the 19th century, the proportion of literate men and women were both close to 97%. [18] The girls of the underclass benefited significantly, and in 1887, the president of the Poor Schools Federation said excitedly about the teaching in Sunday schools, "*The Education Act is very effective; before the Act was enacted, most of the children in our poor schools could not read a word, and now almost every child is able to read the Bible.*"[19] There was also a marked rise in female literacy in several areas, with the percentage of literate females in Norfolk rising from 76% in 1870 to 91% in 1895, and in Suffolk, where literate females accounted for 78% of the total in 1870, they also reached 91% in 1895.[20] Between 1850 and 1885, the number of illiterate Norfolk brides fell from 44% to 10%, and Sussex from 47% to 11%, and women's literacy improved.[21]

2. Growing awareness of women's individuality

While receiving diversified education, women's sense of individuality is gradually changing, and they are increasingly moving out of the family circle and into the workplace, pursuing their personal social

values. Against this backdrop, the acquisition of more knowledge and skills has gradually become a collective pursuit of women to enhance their personal competitiveness and acquire capital for independent living.

As a result, women were given more employment opportunities, and the range of career choices for middle-class women, in particular, was widened. They were no longer confined to the choice of 'governess', but began to engage in a variety of fields, and middle-class women appeared in the three main professions of nurses, teachers, and clerks, and gradually formed the 'white-collar' group, which came to represent the collective of women in late nineteenth-century Britain, who were known for their professional knowledge and vocational skills.[22] They are increasingly entering traditionally male domains, and are playing up their gender advantages more and more actively, demonstrating a new era of self-respect, self-improvement and self-reliance for women.

Occupational changes have greatly affected their self-perception. Outside the workplace, women have begun to more courageously pursue their own rights and boldly express their different demands. For example, after the gradual completion of the parliamentary system, in order to move into the political arena and take part in social governance, women have initiated a number of group campaigns to fight for the right of women to vote, launching a strong challenge to the traditional political order. This not only pushed forward the process of democratic reform to a certain extent, but also shook the stereotypes of women in traditional discourse, and gradually built up the image of new women.

3. Women's increasingly visible contribution to society

The establishment of girls' primary, secondary and tertiary education on a large scale has not only expanded the resources for women's education, but has also increased the overall share of funds invested in women's education. At the same time, it has enriched the level of education for women in terms of quality. With the gradual implementation of various policies, the impact of women's inclusive education has gradually emerged, and various types of schools have nurtured a large number of female talents for British society, who are gradually applying the knowledge and skills to society, contributing to the development of society at the same time.

On the one hand, they continued to provide professional services to society in traditionally female-heavy professions such as teachers, nurses, clerks, typists, and so on.[23] For example, Barbara Wootton, as a student of classical economics at Gurdon College, graduated as the first female teacher to teach economics at Cambridge University and helped to establish the national welfare system in the UK and was president of the British Broadcasting Corporation after the completion of the reforms;[24] In 1883, Miss Bath Broadquant established the Preston Special Training Centre in London to provide short obstetrics training and specific nurse training to nurses from rural areas, which enhanced the operational capacity of rural nurses. [25]

On the other hand, they were actively involved in industry, finance, commerce, medicine and other fields to give full play to their talents. For example, after graduating from the girls' aristocratic school in Musselburgh, Mary Somerville taught herself mathematics, astronomy and physics, and published a number of works such as *Celestial Mechanics* and *The Correlation of Physics*, etc. The popularity of her works helped non-specialist readers to understand the advanced scientific theories, and among them, *The Correlation of Physics* also influenced the European scientific community, so that scientists began to regard physics as a unified field, rather than a collection of separate branches. She eventually became one of the most prominent science writers of her time, earning her the reputation as the "Queen of Nineteenth-Century Science".[26]

4.2. Limitations

1. School education is still gender-differentiated

While girls' education has made great breakthroughs, it has not yet escaped the influence of the traditional patriarchal system, and social prejudice against women still exists. For example, women were still unable to enter all occupational fields, and women were seldom seen in banking, insurance and railway industries, so they could only choose to give full play to their professional strengths in professions such as teachers and nurses, etc. In addition, the main subjects of most schools, such as physics and chemistry, were still only open to male students.[27]

The main reason for this situation is that in traditional society, where men are superior to women and women are considered to be incapable of rational thinking and therefore cannot engage in politics but can only be involved in some occupational fields, such as teaching, the gender division of labour requires women to play the roles of wives, mothers and daughters in the home. In the long run, this idea has become deeply rooted in people's minds, and as a result, even though universities are allowed to admit female students, they still have to impose quota restrictions to control the number of female students; in addition, in terms of curriculum, even though the content of learning is gradually enriched in the later stages of the process, there is still a differentiation between the curricula, with men learning a wider range of knowledge, while women's learning is still mostly confined to reading, writing, arithmetic, sewing and some other simple knowledge; at the same time, there are also some other simple knowledge that is not taught in universities. Although the proportion of donations to girls' schools has increased, it is still far lower than that of boys' schools, and female students have fewer chances to get scholarships than their male counterparts, and some scholarships do not even take women into consideration.[28]

2. Class differences still exist in the educational process

Although women's education in England has developed considerably with the enactment of various laws and the emergence of educational institutions on a large scale, it has always been strongly coloured by hierarchy. As the English poet Crabbe once wrote, "*Each rank has its particular school, each class has different rules, and each heart has its own spiritual food.*"[29] This is a very visual representation of the differences in the education received by different classes.

In the implementation of the specific education policy, women from the upper, middle and lower strata of society go to different schools, receive different education, and eventually work in different professions, with clear boundaries between them. Usually, the content of the education received by upper-class women did not change too much during this period because most of them were well-educated, had a high status, and enjoyed the right to property, inheritance, and the right to make wills;[30] The education received by middle-class girls was more of a family-style education, the main content including religious knowledge, behaviour and morality, language, talent, etc, especially focusing on the girls' decent behaviour, so they chose more to receive education at home by tutors or to go to some family nature of the girls' school; while the working-class girls generally could only accept the bottom schools, most of them were founded by charitable organisations, church groups or factory owners, mainly housewives' schools, Sunday schools, charity schools, factory schools, Roman Catholic schools, day schools and so on, most of which only provided education of an introductory nature.[31]

5. Conclusion

During the Victorian period, the Industrial Revolution, the transition to democracy, the spread of feminism and the emergence of the phenomenon of surplus women have pushed forward the changes in women's education in the United Kingdom, improved the literacy level of British women, and helped more women to pursue their personal values and make their own contribution to society.

However, it is not difficult to see that although women's education has made great progress in this period, it is still influenced by traditional women's concepts and obstructed by conservatives, and it is still difficult to get rid of the restrictions of the patriarchal system, and there is still a long way to go to realize the real equality of the rights and interests of men and women in education. Even so, the

gradual transformation of the "angel of the family" still highlights the importance of "education" in the awakening of women's consciousness.

Through the research in this paper, we can see that the improvement of the education system not only helps to better protect the rights and interests of both sexes, but also contributes to the overall development of society to a large extent. It is important to continue to promote the construction of the education system, including basic education, to help individuals broaden their horizons and improve their thinking, and then provide strong support for the sustainable development of the country. Due to space constraints, this paper has yet to explore the limitations of change in depth, and the role of Queen Victoria herself in the change has yet to be paid attention to by the academic community.

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