The Victorian Gender Ideology and Women in the British Caribbean in the Post-Emancipation Era

Muriel Blommestein

Introduction

In Victorian caricature, the metropolitan household was about the quintessential bearded, authoritarian, white male breadwinner in charge of his home and work sphere. His wife would be prone to displays of wan feminine incapacity as she grooms daughters to be good housewives. Typically, they belonged to the middle class and lived in homes of detailed and fussy architecture. Also, fainting-couches, crinoline garments and lace handkerchiefs seemed natural evolutions of the aesthetics of this era and were rooted in its ideology. In reality, Victorian gender ideology was based on patriarchal authority entrusted to white, wealthy males. Beckles (1999: 86) notes that Britain condoned a masculine colonialism. Females were perceived as the property of men who owned ‘citizenship’ on behalf of their wives and children. But for Mohammed (2002: 55), gender was combined with race and ethnicity in the Victorian era to contrast the ruler and ruled. She argues that, at the “heart of British domestic policy”, the thinking was that the more property men possessed, the more ennobled were their spouses, and by corollary, the greater the progress of British civilization. This idea was echoed by the educator Sada Stanley, Superintendent of Lyndale Girls’ Home in Jamaica. She remarked that: “No people can be truly great without true or great mothers” (Shepherd 1995: 248). Thus, the ennobled and ‘fruitful’ housewife was touted as a coveted metropolitan female. From this near-cloistered Victorian Mama, there developed a preoccupation with ‘Helen-centered’ and prudish femininity which transitioned to colonial societies. This discussion, therefore, examines the nature of this gender ideology, and its influence on women in the immediate post emancipation century in the Caribbean.

Gender Notions in Metropolitan Society

Persuasive of the ideals of the Victorian gender ideology, was the thought of being a ‘cherished’ or ennobled female. Like a “selfish gene” whose mandate is survival, (Dawkins 1978: 95-96), this ideology replicated itself by attaching to the harmless concept of self esteem, drawing more than ordinarily on the human need to feel cherished or thought of as cherished. For elite white women of the Victorian era, it was appropriate to look after their ample families. For them, idleness was an attractive feminine condition, the converse of which would be working class drudgery. There was always room for virtuous service to the poor or unwell (Trevelyan 1984: 562). These apart, ennobled women were perceived as being capable of little else. Joan Perkins, citing Victorian physiologist Alexander Walker, aired the view that women were inferior to men who possessed the masculine faculty of muscular power, associated with courage. Therefore, men were best suited to protect. Further, women had little ability to reason, since they were feeble, timid and in need of protection. Thus men naturally governed, while women naturally obeyed (Perkins 1993:1). Notions of Christianity also implied that
women were inferior to men. Given that Eve was created from Adam’s rib, humility was to be the proper response of a good woman. Perkins also records the educationalist, Elizabeth Sewell, as saying that boys were to be “sent out into the world” to be hardened, while girls were to “dwell in quiet homes.” Submissive and retiring, they were to be seen but not heard (Perkins 1993: 2).

On the question of female sexuality, public prudery was encouraged, and the ideal bourgeois woman was sexually passive, demure and respectable, unlike the “fallen” prostitutes who lured men into sin. Roberts (1984:3-6) saw the roots of respectability as derived from the Bible, from whence came the rejection of vices, and from the Pauline tradition which initiated the suppression of female sexuality. Victorian work ethic justified a working class. Simply put, for the poor, work led to salvation; idleness to damnation. Also, nineteenth-century Methodism rationalized arduous labour as self-discipline, and sprouted maxims such as ‘cleanliness is next to Godliness.’ (Thompson 1963:10-11). These filtered down to British West Indian society.

Gender as Colonial Strategy

“White privilege” and example had to be preserved in the post-emancipation period, failing which the consequence for ex-slaves was reversion to barbarism. Moore and Johnson (2004: 96-97), however, espied in the Victorian ideological package a British civilizing ploy to produce ‘palatable’ and homespun husbands and wives in the immediate post-slavery labour unease. The object was the ‘gentrification’ of former slaves and arriving labourers.

Localising their observations to white women in Jamaica, Moore and Johnson note that such women ideally hoped to marry moneyed partners. Brereton, citing Daniel Hart, paints a wry picture of upper class Victorian society in Trinidad where ladies kept indoors from the heat of the day in fear of developing freckles. They “did no housework, never marketed, and rarely cooked, though they did direct private armies of domestics” (Brereton 1979: 59-60). Middle-class coloured women, and a few upwardly mobile black women, also responded to this mandate for marriage and domestic life. However, some of them were required to earn a living for their families. At times, jobs they selected encouraged exclusivity and color barriers to occupations such as shop assistants and telegraph operators, otherwise accessible to the lower class.

The Influence of Slavery

For Caribbean slave societies influenced by these ideologies on work and the family, the anomaly was that chattel slaves constituted an omnipresent, allegedly visceral underclass; not the working class poor, well accommodated in metropolitan thinking and space. Also, the prevalence of concubinage, and female-headed households were other issues with which this ‘prim’ ideology of Christian monogamy had to contend. From monarch to labourer, it was perceived that the duty of woman, as ‘Madonna’, was child bearing and rearing. Victoria bore nine children for her Albert, but Mary Prince, as a slave, witnessed the excessive physical cruelty slave-owning women employed in the ‘othering’ of their property. So that at times, it was the enslaved who exhibited compassion, as was
the case when Mary Prince defended her master’s daughter from his sadistic beatings (Ferguson 1998: 60-61). Clearly, slave women lived in the ‘twilight’ of Victorian gender ideology where life was public and coarse.

Ex-Slaves Leave the Fields

Notwithstanding realities regarding the post-emancipation labor market, this ideology tabooed manual labor among women, and encouraged gender-sensitive lifestyles. Women were wooed to the ‘private sphere’ of domestic life, and men encouraged to the ‘public sphere’ of work outside of the home. But the playing field was pitted from the vagaries of slavery, and for a considerable part of the century, the formerly enslaved were still fighting merely to assert their humanity. Examining family strategies for survival in the immediate post-emancipation years, Brereton (1999: 100) identifies the desire to avoid sexual abuse from planters and to attend to child rearing, as the primary motives behind females withdrawing from estate labour. She believes that the ultimate goal of ‘gentrified life’ strained at Afro-centric family forms and religious concepts that were popularly practiced among the lower classes. Former slaves were asked to embrace the concept of ‘husbands’ of ‘cherished wives. But some had only recently retired as feared ‘head men.’ Particularly during Amelioration in the 1820s, slave women were frequently and severely whipped, much to the consternation of members of the British Parliament (Canning 1824). Violence to women, therefore, was adjunct to ownership and authority. Victorian gender ideology skirted dangerously close to the concept of authority vested in ‘breadwinner’ male in charge of the dutiful and obedient wife. Many descendants of former slaves still speak with ‘pride’ of the sound whippings they received as children with little provocation in order to set them on the correct path.

Thus, while monogamous Christianity and the attraction of middle class lifestyle canvassed upward mobility, there was a widening cultural gulf between ex-slaves of the lower classes and an emerging middle stratum. Could Afro-centric ex-field women, free to become the ‘bearers of their culture’, be lured into accepting monogamous, Christian marriage? Moreover, ‘women in cherished homes’ had not been a fruitful concept in Caribbean society. Slave women, as concubines, were often testimony to failures here. Brereton writes that: “Maria Nugent swiftly became aware of the sexual politics of Jamaica”, adding that both “Nugent and Fenwick considered ‘immorality’ rife even among elite men of Jamaica and Barbados” (Brereton 2001: 244-245).

One sex-typed chore, Brereton reports, was the work of hucksters, who were nearly always women! These mobile colorful folk “covered great distances from market to rural villages” (Brereton 1999:101). Their sojourns were captured by T. Redcam, Jamaica’s poet laureate (Redcam 1912: 353). He infused grace and humility into the arduous toil of these peasant women timelessly committed to burdensome work. Elevating them to the coveted Victorian status of “The Mothers of the City, he inquired:

What is the noise that shuffles
On the roads that lead to the town,
While the city slumbers deeply,
While the hours lie dumbly down?
When the gas lamps talk together
   As they sentry the empty street,
   And the silence barely quivers
   To the passing of dead men’s feet.

Oh, who are the weary pilgrims
   That caravan now on the way?
‘Tis the burdened market-women
   With their hampered donkeys grey...

The prudish, ultra-feminine, “dependent housewives” of the Victorian era over whom “husbands and fathers were to exercise authority” were not mirrored by the images of female field laborers in the immediate post-emancipation Caribbean. So argues Frances Lanagan of Antigua, who, according to Brereton (1999: 104-105), noted that some female ex-slaves were “masculine in their voice, manners and appearance.” Brereton (1999: 104) also points out that the Victorian “ideological package” showed contempt for the woman defeminized by hard manual labour.

From the point of view of postmodernism, plurality is recognized both as differences and variety within differences. There are no a priori limitations. Yet, Charles Day encountered no variety among Afro-Creoles in Trinidad. Accordingly, he saw only the: “brutal, stupid negro…” so “hideously-visaged” that it was his misfortune to so consistently experience (Day 1852: 181). He also encountered the African-descended females of his time on whom fell the onus to presume the myth of “cherished housewife.” What a journey it must have been for such females to be likened unto the wan, secluded, Victorian Mama, essential for advancement of their self-esteem!

Indian Women and Victorian Order

Victorian gender ideology morphed through accommodations with other patriarchies, as the contemporary Caribbean reflected the commingling of other ethnicities. According to Reddock (1996: 232), the Victorian concept of “naturally weak women” as unproductive labour facilitated the exploitation of Indian women. She argues that although their tasks on Caribbean plantations were often equal to those of men, prevailing gender ideology relegated them to “cheap labor” earning half the remittances of men. Here, too, Mohammed’s (1995: 35) argument of Indian women as the “othered” victims of competing dominant patriarchies finds relevance. Like Indian men, some single Indian women opted for independent migration; but, unlike Indian men, they were rendered invisible by a male-managed, colonial state (Reddock 1996: 230-231).

Post-1870 saw the establishment of Indian settlements. Paramount to Indian males was the desire for stable relationships to preserve their cultural identity. Thus, the ethno-sexual desires of Indian males further proscribed Indian women. The rigidity of this patriarchal system to Indian women sometimes led to the loss of life. High levels of uxoricides (or wife killings), a reflection of Indian patriarchy, were confirmed in Trinidad in the nineteenth century (Trotman 1986: 172-174). Trotman also cites the cases of Rookmania, Chetapeah and Romain.
While customary secluded Asian lifestyle had resonance with the Victorian gender ideology, some Indian women disliked being handed over to the authority of males at thirteen. Citing the Jamaican Indian experience, Shepherd writes that “creolised Indian women abhorred this practice of early betrothal,” and cites Nora Bedasee’s letter to the Editor of the Daily Gleaner in 1940. Bedasee wrote: “today the growth of education and culture must allocate such preternatural customs to the past” (Shepherd 1995: 248-249). Additionally, Indian women were also targeted by the proselytizing efforts of gender-biased Christian churches. Of the 49 Presbyterian mission schools in Trinidad by 1890, 1,958 boys participated in the gender select curriculum of industrial training and land cultivation, while 926 girls were groomed for life as housewives (Reddock 1996: 235). According to Shepherd (1995: 248), similar gender infractions were experienced by Indian women in Jamaica - they were often kept at home to be prepared for housewifely roles while the boys were sent to school.

**Conclusion**

In the British Caribbean the rules of ‘genteel’ society were influenced by marriage, property and employment in the male-centric and class stratified period under scrutiny. But entrenched western imagery - the baggage of this ideology - strongly shaped political, economic and social development in the region. However, the end of slavery and indentureship contributed to the ‘independent’ spirit of former female labourers apparent in the abundance of female heads of families” (Colon and Reddock 2004: 268-270). Many of these females, and others, sought to make a living outside of the home, but they were still perceived as belonging to a private and domestic ‘sphere’ that they had momentarily eluded. However, the arbitrary mixing of races and ethnicities as a result of British colonization and imperialism, challenged Eurocentric Victorian femininity, and demanded inclusiveness of women, and repairs to damaged self-esteem. Later, women turned to careers such as teaching and nursing, as the role of education more than that of timely marriage, facilitated upward but still limited mobility. But, clearly, as Perkins (1993: 242) warns, there was no significant divestment of patriarchal power.

**References Cited**


