

Published on 14, Oct-Dec 2025

ISSN:2320-4842 (P) 3049-2688 (O)

A Profound Delve Into The Psychological Upheavals Carried By The Female Lead Characters of Victorian Literature.

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Abstract

Feminist and Psychological lenses are integral to the evolution of English Literature. Psychology plays a pivotal role in literature, as it provides readers an insight into the emotional landscape of the writers and their characters and also offers profound reasons behind their actions. On the other hand, Feminism serves as a powerful tool in literature, voicing out for equality and shedding light on women's trials and tribulations. Together, these two notions generate an essential framework for exploring the mental health of women. This paper aims to analyze the mental anguish endured by the female lead characters crafted by the Victorian writers.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender roles, Equality, Women's Rights, Psychological Distress and Mental Health.

Introduction

The Victorian period spanned from 1837 to 1901 under the governance of Queen Victoria, and addressed an array of societal issues like gender inequality, oppression of the working class, morality, poverty and female-centric challenges. The Victorian writers weaved their female characters with psychological intricacies, facilitating an in-depth exploration of their thoughts and emotions, also mapping out their intricate layers of mental anguish. The pivotal aspect of Victorian writings are, certain female lead characters are depicted as weak-willed and confined by the domestic realm, there are also some that defy cultural conventions, push against societal constraints and assert their autonomy and authority in a patriarchal society. Victorian novels featuring this significant theme are Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* and Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*. This study will focus on the mental afflictions encountered by the Victorian women characters inflicted by societal pressures.

A Snapshot Biography of the Noteworthy Authors.

Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) was a renowned African writer, feminist and social advocate, chiefly recognized for her novel *The Story of an African Farm*. She was the ninth-born of

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twelve children in a missionary household in Wittenberg. Being raised in the tough circumstances of colonial South Africa, which reflected in her writings, especially while sketching out the South African backdrop and psychological intricacies of her characters.

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) was a short story writer and novelist born in London. Her literary contributions present a vivid portrayal of societal issues prevalent in her time period. Her early life was clouded by dark episodes of personal grief, such as the loss of her mother and her relocation to Manchester with her husband. Manchester, an industrial hub with a sharp divide between prosperity and poverty, fell as the backdrop for her novel *North and South*. It also shaped her view on industrialization and class injustice.

Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855) was born in Thornton, West Yorkshire. Charlotte's journey towards literature started with the publication of her poems, but it garnered with proper acknowledgement only after the establishment of her novels. She was a leading voice in the literary realm, her influence on Victorian literature was undeniable. Her literary contributions are acclaimed for addressing complex emotions, showcasing resilient female lead characters, and offering insightful criticism of societal challenges.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was an African American novelist, poet, feminist and social activist. Despite lacking formal education, she possessed an insatiable interest in reading and her profound insight into social problems allowed her to scrutinize those issues. She actively took part in the abolitionist movement and voiced for women's suffrage. She was a prominent orator in the meetings, advocating for the end of slavery. Her works frequently examine themes such as women's liberation, racial justice and social reform.

An Executive Summary

The Story of an African Farm (1883): The novel chronicles the life of Lyndall and Waldo, two significant characters raised on a secluded and rural African farm. Lyndall was a determined and self-reliant young woman, on the other hand, Waldo is an empathetic and thoughtful individual. As they grow up, they are pushed to face various obstacles, including financial deprivation, social exclusion and so-

cietal constraints. Lyndall ventures beyond the farm to pursue her dreams and aspirations while Waldo stays and supports his family. Olive Schreiner emphasized Lyndall's character, which is not just a picture of the period she lived, but also a manifestation of Schreiner's sharp condemnation of the cultural constraints that incarcerated women into domestic chores, withholding their intellectual and personal autonomy.

North and South (1855): This narrative focuses on the central character Margaret Hale, a young woman from the South of England, whose life takes a turn when she moved to the North of England with her family. There she confronts the stark realities of city life like poverty, labor strikes and perplexities of industrialization. She crosses paths with John Thornton, an affluent cotton manufacturer, and embarks on a stormy relationship. The novel illustrates the multifaceted nature and fortitude of a young woman, adapting to the socio-economic upheavals of the Victorian England. Elizabeth Gaskell weaved Margaret Hale's character as a representation of the women who encounter psychological and emotional turmoil caused by the society in the name of social stratifications, gender dynamics and ethical standards.

Shirley (1849): is an engrossing story that captures the emotional profundity and psychological entanglements experienced by the female lead characters Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone, who live in the Yorkshire village. Caroline, a modest and soft-spoken young woman residing with her uncle, who is a clergyman. Shirley, a prosperous and autonomous heiress, who comes back to the village to assert her inheritance. As the story progresses, Shirley and Caroline forge a strong friendship, assisting one another with unwavering support during tough times. Charlotte Brontë depicted Shirley's character with the layers of complexity. Being an economically self-sufficient woman, she embodies resilience and independence, but despite being self-reliant, she grapples with inner turmoil caused by the social pressures to adhere to the conventional norms. In contrast, Brontë portrayed Caroline's role as a representation of challenges encountered by women during this era because of social seclusion, unreciprocated feelings, and intellectual constraints.

Iola Leroy (1892): Set against the backdrop of

the American Civil War, the novel explores the life of Iola Leroy, a strong-willed and educated African American woman. The narrative also focuses on her family's survival during the tumultuous period of the civil war and its aftermath. Iola, born into the oppressive environment of slavery, was raised as a white woman; however, the story reveals her true racial identity. Embracing her identity, she decides to devote her life to the upliftment of her community. Iola's revolutionary journey is fraught with daunting challenges and struggles, including racial identity, gender inequity and women's rights. Harper presents Iola as a tenacious and ethical woman who defies traditional gender norms. By dint of Iola Leroy, Harper advocates the importance of women's education, self-autonomy and their role in social activism.

Psychic Burdens Borne by the Victorian Female Lead Characters

Female Subjectivity is a recurring theme when it comes to Victorian literature. Victorian writers frequently scrutinize the psychological and emotional struggles of women who confront societal constraints and personal dilemmas. Victorian writers weave their female figures with significant mental intricacies by facilitating a profound exploration of their internal reflections and sentiments, also unveiling the entangled layers of mental anguish. While certain female characters are portrayed as passive and tethered to the domestic sphere, there are women who break societal conventions to assert their autonomy and thrive as powerful figures in a male-centric society. Lyndall from *The Story of an African Farm*, Margaret Hale from *North and South*, Shirley and Caroline from *Shirley* and Iola Leroy from *Iola Leroy* are the heroines and trailblazing female icons of radical change. But the psychological agony and emotional distress burdened their mental health. So, their psychological upheavals are going to be the heart of this study.

Olive Schreiner penned Lyndall's character not only as a product of her historical period but also a searing indictment of societal expectations that silenced their mind, stifled their emotions, and suppressed their identities. Her psychological setbacks are not purely personal but also embody the stumbling blocks encountered by women who strive to etch their identity in a society that persistently turns a blind eye to it. Oliver Schreiner designed

Lyndall's character with multiple layers of psychological intricacies as intellectual goals, emotional reflections, psychological predicaments, and tranquil seclusion. Despite being strong, Lyndall felt a sense of detachment from the society. This solitude budded from the societal standards that caged women without letting them to explore the outside world. This created a psychic pressure for Lyndall, which gradually eroded her mental health. From her childhood, Lyndall has a deep intellectual curiosity. She thought that education is the only weapon to destroy the boundaries set by the society for women. But her enduring search for enlightenment leads to solitude because she's embraced by the members of the ignorant society who weren't wise enough to see the fire behind her dreams. Lyndall's romantic interactions illustrate an additional level of complexity to her character. Her love encounters, specifically her engagement to Em, fell short of her expectations and closed on a bitter note. Her romantic experiences crumbled under the weight of unmet desires and gave way to sorrow instead of joy. This disillusionment left a profound impact on her mind and soon her wavering thoughts settled into a certainty that the prescribed domestic roles of mother and wife stand contradictory to personal autonomy and self actualization. Lyndall's psychological toll resulted in a rebellious gesture. Her opposition to mainstream cultural practices and her marching to the beat of a different drum leads to social detachment. Her tragic pregnancy and her death serve as a testament to the lives of Victorian women relegated to domestic duties and social submission. "I have no fear of society. I shall confront society." (Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, Pg. 279). Lyndall's story and her grim demise underscore the necessity of restructuring the societal norms that acknowledge women's autonomy.

Elizabeth Gaskell unfolds the emotional and psychological shades of the protagonist Margaret Hale by emphasizing the societal setbacks like morality, marginalization and gender inequality in a rapidly changing society. Margaret Hale lived in Helstone, where she was a home bird who lacks sufficient knowledge and experience. Her sudden shift to Milton pushed her to face the harsh realities of the industrial life. This relocation deeply affected her mental health because she had to confront the societal injustices she had been

unaware of. Margaret Hale's core aspect is her rebellious nature against the conventional gender norms that suppressed her mental health and resulted in psychological agonies. Her life was shadowed by dark and gloomy chapters like the demise of her parents, buried truths and personal losses that test her mettle, strengthen her resolve and fosters personal evolution, which also transforms her from a protected youth to an empowered woman. Margaret breaks some Victorian norms by voluntarily taking on tasks that are specially assigned to men. As the youngest daughter, the family assigned Margaret to be a serene and subservient woman, but unfortunately, particular obligations burdened her, such as revealing the relocation to her mother, a task actually meant for her father. Her father's devastation after her mother's death compelled Margaret to perform the funeral rites, a task traditionally performed by men. "I would repeat the action, regardless of others' opinions of me. If I prevented a single act of violence, a single cruel and wrathful deed that could have been executed, I accomplished a woman's task." (Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, Pg. 247). Even though it manifested her as a determined woman, tethered to these duties took a heavy toll on her mental health and leaving her shoulders to bore the brunt of double duty by juggling both familial responsibilities and traditional tasks carried out by men. Margaret's tears at her mother's funeral led society to brand her a fallen woman, negatively judging her for seeking public attention, something forbidden to women. Even her romantic encounters with Mr. Thornton left her drained and emotionally vacant. Elizabeth Gaskell's Margaret Hale is a portrayal of all the women navigating the societal constraints and conventional judgement by enduring the muted heaviness of emotional and mental strain.

Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* unfolds the psychological tension and inner conflicts of the female protagonists Shirley Keeler and Caroline Helstone. Though Shirley was portrayed as a determined and autonomous woman, there is a layer of internal struggles and psychological agonies that stemmed from the societal pressures which pushed her to conform to the traditional codes and customs. She firmly believed that love might turn her into an object of possession which leads to emotional strain and will diminish her identity in a patri-

archal society. So, her love life was filled with shadows of fear and broken hopes which ultimately resulted in solitude and she was completely detached from the society, which made her emotionally weak. Shirley's economic independence created her as a capable and self-reliant woman and she was soared by her own strength, which the Victorian woman failed to achieve, but this same independence isolated her from the society. The psychological stress she endured while fighting for an independent life distanced her from the outside world. Shirley's emotional turmoil worsened when she waded through storms to emancipate herself from the male-centric society without abiding by their norms and standards. Shirley bottles up her feelings and emotions to present herself as a bold and resilient woman, but this suppression becomes the root cause of her psychological conflicts. The crux of Shirley's psyche is, despite her worldly achievements, she grapples with her internal tension and emotional sensitivity caused by the conventional practices of the society. On the other hand, Caroline's character unleash the psychological agonies encountered by the Victorian women due to the conventional codes and customs which shut down their opportunities and constrained their emotions. Unlike Shirley, the author portrays Caroline as a meek and submissive woman, full of psychological trauma and mental complexities. Her psychological turmoil arose from her unmet aspirations, emotional inhibition and social disconnection. "Caroline resided in complete isolation, venturing beyond the garden only with her uncle's consent, and having no company except for her own reflections." (Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, Pg. 96). Her unreciprocated love for Robert Moore elevates her mental agony and made her psychologically weak. Caroline doesn't receive a fair chance to socialize with the outside world and devoid of personal relationships, restricted her from venting out her feelings and emotions, which intensified her psychological trauma. Her detachment from the society deteriorated her mental health, and she was pressured to face her haunting thoughts and inner demons in solitude. The root cause of Caroline's mental distress is a profound sense of aimlessness. The society fails to acknowledge her talent and compelled her to conform to the norms that are imposed on women. "I feel inadequate. I am unable to assist or provide support to anyone. I lack a

calling." (Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, Pg. 205). Brontë connects Caroline's psychological turmoil to her thwarted ambition, arguing that society denies her a contented and autonomous life, leaving her searching for meaning and clarity.

By dint of Iola Leroy's character, Frances Harper unveils the ramifications and impact of slavery. She states, especially when it comes to women, the repercussions left by slavery traumatize them across generations. The core theme of this narrative is Iola's massive transformation from a wealthy white young lady to a prideful African American woman. However, confronting excessive societal pressure as an African American woman profoundly affected her mental health. "I, who had always been insulated from every worry and grief, to be reduced to the status of a slave." (Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Pg. 56). Iola's psychological distress stemmed from the unanticipated revelation of her true identity after her father's demise. The drastic loss of her personal liberty, family's integrity and prestigious status aggravates her mental turmoil. She woke up to find her mother went missing and her sibling's sudden death, these back-to-back horrific incidents devastated Iola. "What have I done to be subjected to slavery, deprived of my inheritance, separated from my mother, and commoditized like an animal?" (Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Pg. 77). Disclosing her racial identity brought her a bunch of relentless obstacles, which weakened her inner strength. Iola's mental agony induced by the societal pressures and practices dumped on her as a black woman. Her emotional turmoil symbolizes the collective experience of African American women crushed by racism and gender discrimination. During slavery, the commercialization of African women traumatized their psyches. Iola was mentally shattered when she was manifested as an object rather than as a human. She was badly betrayed by the society both personally and professionally. Society unfairly denied her career opportunities because of her race. Society secluded Iola because of her racial identity, destroying her mental state and letting her to endure the sole pain of slavery. Iola was forced to relinquish on her dreams, because she was emotionally torn between the societal constraints and self-realization. Iola embraced her racial identity and stepped into a leadership role within the African American community.

This decision fosters a profound emotional liberation emerging from progressive self-acceptance. Frances Harper crafted Iola's character with minute psychological strings that caused mental torments because of societal norms, which represent the melancholic life led by the African American women.

Conclusion

Lyndall from Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, Margaret Hale from Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, Shirley and Caroline from Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and Iola Leroy from Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, by anatomizing the psychological upheavals encountered by these Victorian female figures, a recurring theme is emphasized, which is nothing but, the patriarchal society confines women in the name of conventional codes and customs. If they failed to adhere to societal standards, then despite their talent, society withheld opportunities from them. A lack of purpose and perplexed identity caused emotional distress and pushed them into a depressive state. Society keeps women as slaves, not allowing them to explore beyond the home, forcing them into household chores and expecting them to remain within the domestic realm. But the authors' optimistic dimension highlights that these psychological distress and emotional setbacks nurtured confidence, fostered resilience and enabled them to spread their wings to soar high. Their persistent quest for self-identity ignites a passion in the next generation to fight for equality and acknowledgement across all the realms. The psychological upheavals they confronted are not just predicaments but a powerful weapon to create a revolutionary society.

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