The nineteenth century women Novelists and their writings.

Victorian women writers of the 19th century were greatly influenced by the Victorian society and it shaped or often restricted their writing to a great extent. The rise of the female novelist began in the 18th century, but it was not until the middle of the 19th century that their writings emerged on the literary market. According to Elaine Showalter, the nineteenth century was the Age of the Female Novelist. She believes that with the appearance of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot, the question of women’s aptitude for fiction had been answered .Situation for women writers was very difficult. With almost no formal educational background and little job opportunities, they had no other choice but to immerse themselves in writing novels as their way to escape from the dominant patriarchal society. It has to be taken into consideration that writing, and especially the novel genre, was for many of them the only way to comment critically on some of the social ills, including women’s oppression. They regarded the novel as a powerful tool to raise awareness about restrictions that affected women in the 19th century. Naturally, the messages that they wanted to convey were carried out under a veil of different literary devices. Their resistance would be manifested on the level of plot, characterization or style. Men held almost all the positions concerned with the writing, they were novelists, editors, publishers and in some aspect they felt threatened by the entrance of women in the field of literature. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out, “to many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century men, women seemed to be agents of an alien world that evoked anger and anguish, while to women in those years men appeared as aggrieved defenders of an indefensible order. Thus both male and female writers increasingly represented women’s unprecedented invasion of the public sphere as a battle of the sexes, a battle over a zone that could only be defined as a no man’s land”

The Victorian period was a time of agitation and reform, religious doubts, social unrest and economic instability. These factors appeared in the literary discourse and cultural products. The Victorian period saw the rise of the middle class. New scientific discoveries and new technologies had a huge impact on all aspects of life. The British nation at the time was thriving on private businesses and the middle class was getting richer. Indisputably, the 19th century was profoundly marked by one ground-breaking book, namely, Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species.* C. Darwin’s discovery not only threatened some of the traditional Christian values, but also brought fear and anguish to many. Influenced by the book, people started to question their religious beliefs and the truths that they had held sacred. Science had a profound influence on literature because the plots of novels at the time began to reflect the determinism of Darwinian universe. Despite these new discoveries, the belief that women are inferior and subordinated to men remained unquestioned. There were very few women in the field of science, since they had no access to formal education and they were only allowed to listen to public speeches. Yet, together with scientific advancement, a lot of field work was needed. If they wanted to write something about geology, about nature, about traveling it was considered too exhausting and inappropriate for women to do it. It was believed that they could not climb the mountains, travel through deserts and dissect animals. It was just not done by a lady. Mary Somerville is one of the few who is famous for her work in mathematical and physical science: she was the author of the first scientific article penned by a woman for the Royal Society of London.

Religion was a very turbulent issue during the 19th century. Many people either lost their faith because of scientific discoveries or they converted from one religion to another. Still, for women religion was very important because it made a strong emphasis on their charity work. Women were expected to embody Christian virtues of love, purity, and self-sacrifice, and to instill a Christian atmosphere at home. Religion strongly reinforced the fears of vanity and ambition that beset women who aspired to write. But many Victorians believed it also enhanced the status of women by valorizing feminine qualities for which neither classical culture nor the world of business and power had any place. It lent its imposing authority to the doctrine of separate spheres that restricted women’s access to the world, but it also gave them a kind of moral authority, limited but real, that writers found particularly useful. Church made it possible for women to leave the house and do some work outside of it. And it also gave their writing a sense of purpose that nobody could deny. Some of the women writers who dealt with the problem of religion in their novels are Charlotte Elizabeth, Georgiana Fullerton, Adelaide Procter and Mary Howitt, all of whom converted to Roman Catholicism. Some writers like Harriet Martineau, George Eliot and Frances Power Cobbe, moved toward free thought or agnosticism. Annie Besant traveled spiritually from the Church of England, through free thought, to the wilder shores of Theosophy. Some like Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Gaskell stuck to their own faith firmly.

In the 19th century education for women was one of their most desirable goals. It was believed that women were not able to learn in the way men did, that their brain was smaller than men’s and that it would do damage to their health if they spent long hours studying. Some of them, if they were fortunate enough, were homeschooled, but many of them had no formal education at all. The majority of them had to watch as their brothers went to established schools, universities or spent time with a private tutor. They had to educate themselves with the books from the house library if there were any, but some of them were lucky because their families allowed them to study with their brother’s tutor. Some of them went to schools for girls that only offered to teach them some “accomplishments” like music, drawing. During this period there were many fervent debates about women’s education and many books were written about this topic. A surge of conduct book even became a genre and the most famous were Sarah Ellis’s Exhortations to the Women, Wives, Mothers, and Daughters of England, Elizabeth Sewell’s Principles of Education and Charlotte Yonge’s *Womankind*. But things started to change in the second half of the 19th century. In the 1860s women were allowed to take examinations given by the University of London, and in 1869 the first university college for women and the first lectures for women began at Cambridge. These developments gradually altered the shape of the arguments about woman’s abilities, but they came too late to benefit the major Victorian writers.

In the sphere of work, women had very few jobs to choose from even if she wanted to work. Women at the time had few employment opportunities. Most of them could only choose between the position of a governess or a teacher. The stigma of women earning was changed with the emergence of women’s writing. Preoccupation with writing did not seem very degrading for women. It could be done without anybody seeing it and it required little money. Women could enter the literary market and become journalists, editors and especially editors of journals for women and children: Geraldine Jewsbury was an editor, Mary Howitt’s diverse, wide-ranging literary career included *Howitt’s Journal*, a joint venture with her husband, and Eliza Cook, a poet, published *Eliza Cook’s Journal* from 1849 to 1854.

The 19th Century also sees is the immense success of the novel which was mainly due to the fact that the novel was the vehicle best equipped to present a picture of life lived in a given society against a stable background of social and moral values by people who were recognizably like the people encountered by readers, and this was the kind of picture of life the middle-class reader wanted to read about. The most famous women authors were Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, Mrs. Gaskell, E.B. Browning, H. Martineau and George Eliot. Many turned to novel writing because it did not require any knowledge of classic texts and poetry on the part of the writer. New technologies allowed for faster, more effi cient printing, which, in turn, meant that a large number of books could be sold and women for the fi rst time could make money as writers. The foundation of circulating library was a phenomenon in the 19th century. Books were borrowed and sent into all parts of the country, so novels appeared in almost every household. The characters that most women novelists used were very diverse, as can be seen from the genres in which they wrote. Interestingly, they did not give them the freedom that some of the authors enjoyed. The worlds they put their heroines in were restricted by ideology and customs. At the end of the 19th century, most of them used the figure of a woman artist as the heroine for their novels and an invader of the masculine world.

There were different themes that dominated women’s writing .The governess was a common figure of nineteenth-century fiction and there were so many novels with this topic that they could be considered as a specific genre. One of the themes tackled by Victorian female writers was the social position of the governess in the families, the loss of their social status and their struggle. A few detective novels were also written, led by Ann Radcliffe. Her most famous work was *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Sentimentalist novels tried to effect change by influencing the hearts and the feelings of their readers, exploiting the feminine cultural value of feelings and sentiments. In religious writing, novelists accepted the subordination of women because it was read as God’s will. They wrote to inspire and preach to others. They believed that woman’s life could get no meaning from matrimony, so they portrayed lives that were not shown in mainstream fiction, where they do not marry, but they live happily nonetheless. For the romantic and sensation novelists for whom writing was a worldly career, they shocked and titillated readers while nominally adhering to conventional morality, and violating feminine decorum with impunity. Children’s literature was very popular in this period and its representatives were Maria Louisa Molesworth, Julia Horatia Ewing, Frances Browne and Jean Ingelow.

The society in which women authors in the 19th century lived was in a constant flux. New towns were emerging, people moved from the country to the cities looking for new jobs; factories and networks of railways were building all around the country. The immense British Empire was expanding because of new colonies. Religion was questioned because of the new discoveries in science and Darwinian thesis. Education was in the men’s area but schools started to open for girls who previously had only access to books through circulating library or maybe library in their own homes. Although they were educated the job market for them was almost non-existent ,unless they wanted to work in a factory. The only other options they had was either to be a governess or a writer. But the 19th century literary world, was dominated by men. Writing was considered unworthy of women, and only if she had a good reason for it like if she was the sole breadwinner in the family, it wasn’t frowned upon

Before the Victorian period, woman’s roles in art were very different. She was either men’s muse, his inspiration, or she helped in his composing but only a few women dared to write. The first great literary works by Victorian women were Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* in prose fiction, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Upon the publication of their works, first era for women writers was born. They wrote about various topics, and in different genres like the governess, detective, sentimental, religious, divorce, children’s literature, New Woman etc. The courage that took women novelists to write, to publish, to publicly admit the authorship of their works was something that today most of women cannot imagine. Though many of them today are judged according to the stance they took on the issue of womanhood, it would be unjust to put them only into categories of radicals or conservatives taking into consideration that what we consider conservative for today’s point of view was radical in their periods. Their writing, their struggle, their courage, their opposition opened doors for new generations of women writers.