

Great Britain and Social Ills: The Victorian Era as a Sample

بريطانيا العظمى والأمراض الاجتماعية: العصر الفيكتوري انموذجا.

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ملخص:

تعتبر الدولة الانجليزية كغيرها من الدول المتقدمة، دولة سطع نجمها عبر الازمنة والعصور، وخاصة حقبة القرن التاسع عشر، فقد كان لهذه الحقبة دور في قيام الحضارة، لما أسهمت به النهضة الأوروبية والثورة الصناعية، في إنجلترا، إلا أنه كما لهذه الثورة محاسن لها مساوئ، ما انكفأت تلوث سماء المجتمع الانجليزي، فالتسلسل الطبقي المفروض على أفراد المجتمع من أرستوقراطية الى طبقية وسطى وأخرى كادحة، ولد عدة مشاكل في المجتمع الانجليزي انتشر الفكر التنويري في المجتمع الانجليزي فحرره من القيود، وحاول التغيير وإضافة بصمته، لتحويل حياته الى الافضل والخروج من تلك المشاكل التي كان واقع فيها، منها: تصادم الطبقة الكادحة مع مصالح الطبقة الغنية، الفقر والمجاعات في المناطق النائية غير لندن، وغياب مقومات العيش الجيدة. هذه المشاكل بدورها أحدثت تأثيرا كبيرا على عقلية الفرد الانجليزي، ليطالب بالتغيير، تغيير مس الجانب الايديولوجي وحتى جغرافي، مما أدى الى انتهاء عصر اللامساواة الذي كان ضاربا في المجتمع الانجليزي بسبب زيادة النمو الديموغرافي التطور الصناعي، وتأثير الطبقة العاملة على نمط العيش، وكذا الجانب الديني الذي تتمثل في ظهور ما يعرف بـ المذهب الروحاني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إنجلترا، فيكتوريا؛ فكر التنوير؛ التحولات الاجتماعية؛ التيارات الفكرية.

Abstract

Several changes in different fields shined in the sky of Great Britain during the nineteenth century, especially the social field. The Industrial Revolution is considered as the first major cause for those changes, which drove Britain to be the first Industrial country in the world, with its economic power as well. The process of the economic field during that period resulted in various social problems, like poverty and bad living conditions.

The motherland Britain and the British citizens witnessed rough and hard circumstances through a transfer that made its trace upon the geographical corners of the soil and the people's mind. The people of England went with the flow of the need of change, because of the increasing number of population and science development and their impact on the working class' lifestyle, religion and spirituality.

Key words: social problems, poverty, bad living conditions, population and science development, religion and spirituality.

1. Introduction

The British literature and society are divided into different and various historical parts referred to as periods while the exact names and dates of these periods differ. Amongst those periods, the Victorian era is considered as one of the most important epochs in the history of England. Therefore, it is as significant as the Elizabethan period in the value of its works. In history, the Victorian age took place from the starting of the reign of Queen Victoria in 1837 to her death in 1901. However, the Victorian age is thought of to begin just immediately after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815.

Additionally, the Victorian age witnessed vast changes and transfer in the domains of politics, economics, and sciences; thus it could be described as an age of reform and transition. One more element, which might seem as a contrast, that though it is an era of progress and advancement, it is an age of doubts and paradoxes at the same time, because of the new thoughts in religion and the building blocks of the society, and problems such as poverty and terrible living conditions.

Generally, Britain was under rapid change and transfer in the way of living and in the minds of its citizenship, as well.

Based on the background of the study described above, this research paper intends to answer the following question:

What are the major problems and challenges that Britain faced during the Victorian era?

Under this respect, these words would keep the door ajar for approaching the veiled era about the society of the Victorian period; hence, it deals with the society of the Victorian era, the system of politics, the economic advance in parallel with the process of science, the effect occurred because of the Industrial Revolution on the population growth, and the religious new wave in the minds of the citizens.

2. The Victorian Society

Great Britain is the name of a nation that had witnessed several and different incidents through the progress of its development, and under the control of different kings and queens.

By and by, things get changed in England to a certain point of transfer; the period between 20th of June 1837 and 22nd of January 1901, marks both the Queen's Victoria reign and the Victorian era of British History. Historians in this field describe this period as timing of peace, prosperity, refined sensibilities, and national self-confidence for Britain. Indeed, the term Victorianism under the roof of social history refers to the study of the attitudes and culture of the Victorians with a more focus on moralities and behaviours. It is also particularly known that this era comes after The Georgian period and before The Edwardian period (Huntington, 2002, P. 137)

2.1 The Request for Change

Generally speaking, nothing may speak and describe the Victorian society like its search for self characterization; because the sixty three years of Victoria's reign were noticeable by social changes. Within this context Sharpe and Henderson (2004) claim that "the sixty three years of Victoria's reign were marked by momentous and intimidating social changes"(p. 451).

In spite of the challenges that Britain faced and the threat of losing the real meaning of society, the Victorian era could be described as an age of reform. Thompson claims that:

The whole meaning of Victorian England is lost if it is thought of as a country of stuffy complacency and black top hated moral piggery. Its frosty crinolines and dingy hansom cabs its gas lit houses and over ornate draperies concealed a people engaged in a tremendously exciting adventure _ the daring experiment of fitting industrial man into a democratic society (cited in Sharpe and Henderson, 2004, p. 460)

Once more, as it is taken into consideration; Britain was smoothly moving to a state of becoming Europe's most stable and prosperous country. Different events and incidents mark this transfer among which The Industrial Revolution, the railway age, and steam engines are noticeably observed. Thus, it can be described as an age of transition.

However, though the industrial revolution, Britain was still seen as an agricultural country. For so, the country's society was seen as feudal and affected by Feudalism; a small agricultural community controlled by land owners to whom rents were paid by tenants of farms and cottages, except for surgeons, and some with high position in the society within rural communities . These elements picture the characteristics of this society and of the lower regions as the same as 'the life of old times rather than the present life of the higher regions' (Woodward, 1984, p.01).

In the scope of this, in the mid of the 19th century the request for social change was a middle-class complex and challenge of values and attitudes which is named Victorianism. One of the main aspects of it is that the middle class and not the aristocracy which takes the torch for self-improvement and change, with getting the responsibility in charge to tone the rights down for all of the society of the 19th century. Bagehot Jessica (2013), as many social commentators says:

Queen Victoria reigned over a society dominated by contrasts. On one side were men of ideas and men of power who had made their way to success or inherited it; on the other side were 'ignorant' Dorset labourers, who would pelt 'agitators' rather than listen to them(p. 1).

Thus, this social conflict takes a hierarchical path wherein; the lay people in a side are trying to defend their right of moving ahead over progress and development, and the literate citizens from the other side with their brightening doctrines and ideas.

2.2. Process of Science and Population

The rapid development of manufacturing with the flow of industrial revolution makes things easy and facile in the latter part of the 18th century by the arrangement of coal and steam engine, which put England the richest country in the world at that time, and the process continued throughout the period (Huntington, 2002, p. 180). It marks the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of the world (Hobsbawm, 1999, p. XI).

Moreover, the Industrial Revolution created deep changes in the British society at that time, because the expansion of London and other famous cities in Great Britain marked a change from a focus on the land to a more developed and modern economy based on manufacturing and financial institution (Carter and McRae, 1997, p. 71).

One more point, the flourishing of the nation in this side helped the increase of the population from less than thirteen millions in England in 1825 to nearly three times as many at the end of the period.

Moreover, what also helped to increase the population was the foundation of the steam railway and steamship, at the beginning of the period, replacing the lumbering stagecoach and the sailing vessel, and changing the old characteristics of life into fashion and accessible habits. This also raises the number of voyages and travels 'at least a thousand times' (Hobsbawm, 1999, p. 2).

In addition to this, the electric telegraph as a new discovered tool in 1844 brings the whole of main part in Europe, and eventually of the world.

Within the same meaning of thought, people in England started to find their refuge not just in wealth yet in health as well; which by all means brought happiness and stability in their life due to the remarkable advance in the sciences of medicine, surgery, and hygiene. By all these elements, one might notice that the Victorians were the first who experienced rapid social and technological change, and this exposition makes Europeans admire the British Wealth system.

2.3. Fundamental Issues

The stress of creating a new form of politics which goes hand in hand with the new face of society has generated some challenges like:

- a. The virtual situation of the House of Commons, Lords and Monarchy which form altogether The Constitution, to impose a question in how could the Monarchy still exercise any of the powers it theoretically possessed before?
- b. The opening of the door widely for people belonging to different classes in society, has created kind of fear from a revolution starting, or a good image to the faithfulness of workers, through The Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, and 1884.
- c. The reproduction of two-party system does not work and suit most of the Victorian era. Parties were not well organized and ready to split and disappear

(The Tories in 1846, the Liberals in 1886).

d. The Laissez-faire doctrine which dominated the Victorian attitudes in the economic policy; basing on free trade, minimal state, and balanced budgets (Evans, 1976, p. 35).

2.4. The Working Class

The political progress has even touched the working class which- to some extent- seems real and bona-fide: Labour unions are legalized, and the strike right is recognized immediately by all governments. One important outcome is that Great Britain among all the European nations does not experience a strong socialist movement or a great revolutionary wave during the 19th century. This happened because of the confidence found in the hearts of the workers towards their government and its politics.

France, Italy, and Germany witnessed a strong revolutionary wave during the 1848, while Britain kept its peace and social stability. As the German economist Werner Sombart commented, "Against roast beef and apple pie, all dreams of socialist Utopias come to nothing".

Historically proven, this political achievement created a kind of shock to the remaining countries in Europe, in 'how did the British manage to deal with an industrial revolution that literally changed everything without seeing a great political upheaval occur at the same time?'. The answer to this is that the right of vote which the government give to the middle class and the working class created an atmosphere of mutual understanding intelligibility.

The middle class of the period befallen more rich and powerful force in the society, whereas, despite of the fact that new acts and rules have been created; the working class remains poor and forced to work in bad conditions (Carter and McRae, 1996, p. 126).

In the scope of this, BurgessWillson (1958) speaks that:

The Victorian Age thus had a large number of problems to face. In many ways, it was an age of progress of railway –building, steam ships reforms of all kinds but it was also an age of doubt. There was too much poverty, too much injustice, too much ugliness and too little certainty about faith or morals – thus it became also an age of crusaders and reformers and theorist" (p. 80). Hence, uncertainty shadowed the minds owned by the working class because of the ever-increasing number of challenges, which influenced the faith of the inhabitants.

2.5. Religious Change

The Victorian age is considered as a religious age. The French revolution, the reign of Terror, the wars of Napoleon, the skepticism and rationalism of the enlightenment, are the most important features which influenced the Christian faith as a whole. J.A. Froude as a historian noted that "an established religion...is the sanction of moral obligation; it gives authority to the commandments, creates a fear of doing wrong, and a sense of responsibility for doing it..." (Evans, 1976). So that, as time of enlightenment is passing,

the desire for religious alteration goes further and further along with the permission given to the ethical values to a much more complicated aspect labeled spiritualism.

2.5.1. Spiritualism

In the most memorable and engaging realisations; Spiritualism is considered as the new biggest religious movement in the Victorian era. It has what to do with a continuous connection with ‘the dead through mediums’ In other words ‘dead people were all the rage’.

It flourished because it imposes nothing specific on people to believe in; i.e. , they are not fixed but free. Indeed, women are the main element in this belief , in ‘a position of prominence’; simply because women used to attend in the church more than men did. However, Christianity was too much questioned; and this is the main reason why people of the period did not find a stable religion to follow in a total disciplined way till the end of the era.

The Bible was seen as the best source, and in other terms the best guide to a moral life. ‘They saw the hand of God in every event’, and success was argued as a reward of virtue, and on the other had failure as a punishment of vice (Huntington, 2002, p. 139).

3. Conclusion

As concluding words, a general agreement is set about the interrelated relation between Victorianism and the name Queen Victoria, who inherited the thrown from 1837 till she died in 1901. Yet, in how long lasted Victorianism experts agree that it has nothing to do with the governing of the Queen, because some evidences show that it ended up after her death with the production of new scientific publications on 1910 (Carter and McRae, 1997, p . 130).

In the same line of thought, the Victorian era marked its touch upon the history of England in general, and seized up the social needs of that time in specific; so that none would disagree if the speech is to concert the rough social ills that the British citizens swallowed and after with the transfer occurred spouted.

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