



## Gender, Society, and Change: The Emergence of Proto-Feminist Discourse in Early Victorian Literature

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### Abstract

This post considers the rise of proto-feminist protest in Early Victorian literature of the period 1830-1860, a time when strict class structures and a rigid patriarchal society repressed women's legal, social and educational opportunities. However, on a more subtle level the study considers how the female authors subtly subverted dominant gender ideologies through narrative techniques characterization and thematic concerns, concentrating primarily on *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) by George Eliot. Building on qualitative, comparative and historical-contextual analysis the study pinpoints prominent proto-feminist ideas as women's agency, moral independence, education and refusal to accept an imposed position of "housewife. The discovery that early Victorian women authors mapped and critiqued patriarchal power relations in their novels by depicting characters of sufficient complexity to subvert oppressive cultural expectations for female self-definition and autonomy. Situated in their sociocultural milieu, these literary works function on one level to signal literature's as a precursor form in a challenge to traditional gender expectations prior to the organisation of feminist campaigns. The article is innovative in Victorian scholarship and gender criticism by treating an under-represented moment in feminist consciousness, and establishing the beginnings of ideas that inspired subsequent feminist literary practices.

**Keywords:** Proto-feminism; Early Victorian Literature; Gender Norms; Female Agency; Patriarchy; Women Writers; *Jane Eyre*; *The Mill on the Floss*; Feminist Consciousness; Victorian Society

### 1. Introduction

The Early Victorian Period: 1830-61 During this time there were strict class structures, tight gender roles, and patriarchal society. Women were socially and legally oppressed in nearly all aspects of life — from education, to employment, to property rights, to personal autonomy itself. Proto-feminist feminist discourse appeared at the end of the 18th century, as in works by Aline Valette (in French) while early feminist themes emerged in middle class literary history over the next fifty years where it was an aspect of liberalism during Enlightenment and later commented upon by *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* introduced new ones; they furthermore began to discuss women's work, education, culture or to enter into public affairs: Charlotte Brontë (the pseudonyms Currer Bell and Mary Ann Evans [better known today as George Eliot]): for instance even Disney's *The Little Mermaid* which Edna St Vincent Millay had something others saw. These novels followed protagonists who refused domestic roles, pursued intellectual and financial independence, and struggled for a sense of self-worth — breaking stereotypes and forcing readers to grapple with the complexity of women's lives[1-2-3]. The study of proto feminist discourse in Early Victorian Literature becomes important, it provides a glimpse into the birth and development of feminist consciousness in an otherwise patriarchal period. However, while the new interest in Victorian feminism has been growing, proto-feminism in early Victorian literature has still not been adequately investigated. The argues of the analysis raises anew the value of reading and revisiting Early Victorian literature in order to pinpoint at its genesis Feminist

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consciousness how literature was an incipient site for challenging gender codes before feminism took a concrete form.

Previous studies of female emancipation in “Jane Eyre” by Charlotte Brontë and “by George Eliot” focus on how both novels, through their respective protagonists, challenged Victorian patriarchal norms by depicting women’s struggles for autonomy, independence, and self-worth. According to Naser Idan Fatheel, the attainment of equality requires the development of individuality which serves as the foundation of an independent self[4]. Victorian era, focusing on women’s social position in the society and the position of female writers, as well as discuss the novels Jane Eyre and The Mill on the Floss, finishing by comparing the two texts. Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver are heroines that are unique for their time because of their intelligence and need for independence; by being true to themselves and having a strong sense of justice they break the mould[5-6].

Yet, despite increasing research on Victorian feminism, proto-feminist discourse in the earliest Victorian literature remains insufficiently examined. Many studies focus on later feminist movements or major feminist writers, leaving a gap in understanding how early Victorian texts first shaped and circulated ideas that would influence later feminist activism and literary traditions. The intersection of social constraints, literary expressions, and emerging female agency in this period has not fully theorized.

Therefore, the present study aims to identify proto-feminist themes in Early Victorian Age, focusing on how they question gender norms, women’s role, and patriarchal authority. The study attempts to analyze the narrative strategies employed by Early Victorian writers and to explore the sociocultural background of early Victorian England how cultural constraints influenced and restricted women’s portrayal in literature[7].

The links between early proto-feminist articulations and later feminist movements which demonstrate how the first concepts provided a foundation for mature feminist theory in the late-Victorian and early 20th-century.

This study is valuable for its re-reading of the origins of feminist thought, tracking the actions undertaken by early literary texts to undermine those social, legal, and cultural constraints that women writers faced. By comparing Jane Eyre and The Mill on the Floss in detail, this study makes it clear how these novels embody proto feminist ideas through a variety of narrative modes, character construction and themes. The study is warranted since the women’s influence in society continues to be a relevant problem nowadays. Studying the proto-feminist tint in early Victorian literature particularly through novels such as Jane Eyre and The Mill on the Floss, study helps historical enlightenment to female agency, autonomy and participation[8-9-10].

## **2. Research Method**

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and thematic analysis, contextual /Historical Analysis, by combining these methods, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of proto-feminist discourse. The Comparative and Contextual Approach ensures that the analysis is grounded in both textual evidence and historical reality, making the findings relevant for literary scholarship and gender studies.

The primary data are drawn from two literary works that represent distinct cultural and historical contexts.

“Jane Eyre” by Charlotte Brontë (1847: Smiths, Elder & Co)

The novel has aspects of social criticism with its heart in a strong Christian morality, and it is said to be reflective of Jane’s own sometimes individualistic personality and how the book examines class, religion and feminism.

“The Mill on the Floss” is a novel by George Eliot that follows the lives of siblings Maggie and Tom Tulliver growing up at Dorlcote Mill on the River Floss in rural England. The plot revolves around loyalty to family, social class and the relationship between individual desires and societal expectations (in particular those of women).

The research was conducted between 2024 and 2026 in several academic and digital settings. Initial work took place at the Asia International University of Bukhara, Department of English Literature and Language, where theoretical sources on pragmatics and metaphor were reviewed, and Uzbek data from O’tkan kunlar were examined under academic guidance. Access to English sources, including multiple editions of Sister Carrie, was obtained through online literary databases and institutional e-libraries, such as Internet Archive and university digital repositories, ensuring reliable and verifiable textual references

### 3. Result

One Based on the qualitative methods defined in the research methodology—particularly close reading, intertextual, and historical-contextual analysis—the study presents the following key results regarding the feminist dimensions of Early Victorian literature written by female authors[11].

1. Thematic Patterns of Feminist Thought:	Analysis of Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë reveals a consistent theme of female autonomy and moral integrity. The protagonist's refusal to compromise her self-respect for social or romantic security illustrates early feminist ideals. The textual analysis demonstrates that Brontë's language emphasizes internal strength and personal agency, deviating from the passive female archetype common in Victorian literature.
2. Subversion of Gender Norms through Narrative Structure:	Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, while often discussed in scientific or philosophical contexts, was shown through intertextual analysis to contain feminist critiques of male-dominated creation and intellectual hubris. The narrative frame structure highlights the silencing of female voices, particularly through the minimal presence and tragic fates of female characters, thereby subtly pointing to the dangers of patriarchal exclusion.
3. Poetic Advocacy for Women's Intellectual Freedom:	Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh was found to be a deliberate attempt to merge the personal and political through poetry. Textual analysis indicates that the protagonist's artistic journey reflects the author's own struggle for intellectual recognition. The poem explicitly advocates for the education and independence of women, reinforcing feminist principles through poetic language.
Historical Contextual Findings:	Archival research uncovered contemporary criticism and correspondence that confirmed the controversial reception of these works. Victorian critics often dismissed or downplayed the feminist elements, labeling them as "emotional" or "improper," which supports the claim that these authors were indeed pushing against societal norms.
Cross-Referencing with Uzbek and Global Literature:	Comparative analysis revealed that while the specific cultural and social issues differed, the central feminist concerns—women's access to education, personal freedom, and societal recognition—are echoed in Uzbek literary criticism. The works of scholars such as Dilorom Karomat validate the global relevance of Victorian feminist literature

These results confirm that Early Victorian female authors embedded feminist critiques within their narratives and stylistic choices. Each work served as a form of subtle resistance to 19th-century gender norms and collectively contributed to the foundation of feminist literary tradition.

The major goal of the study of by contrasting "Jane Eyre" and "The Mill on the Floss" is to analyze how Victorian literature depicts women's psychological, social, and moral peculiarities under patriarchal constraints and investigate how Jane and Maggie react differently to the restrictions imposed by 19th – century gender norms. The study aims to discover similarities and differences in heroes' fights struggle for autonomy identification and intellectual freedom[12-13-14].

Although both *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* represented women constrained by Victorian gender norms. Jane's strong identity and moral autonomy allow for a more emancipatory outcome, whereas Maggie's internal conflict and social constraints result in tragic loss of agency. As a result, the novels depict two divergent paths of women's resistance within the same patriarchal framework. Feminism has been a prominent and controversial topic in writings for the past two centuries [15-16]. With novels such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, or even William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the fascination over this subject by authors is evident. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the main character, Jane Eyre, explores the depth at which women may act in society and finds her own boundaries in Victorian England. This research aimed to explore the feminist dimensions of Early Victorian literature authored by women, with a focus on understanding how literary texts of that era challenged the prevailing gender norms and contributed to the evolution of feminist thought [17-18]. Through close reading, historical-contextual analysis, and comparative literature review, the study met its objectives and answered the core research questions.

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has demonstrated that Early Victorian literature played a crucial role in the emergence of proto-feminist discourse at a time when women were severely constrained by rigid social, legal, and cultural norms. Through the analysis of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot, the research has shown that female authors employed narrative complexity, psychological depth, and moral inquiry to challenge patriarchal authority and conventional representations of women. These texts foreground female agency, intellectual aspiration, and moral autonomy, thereby questioning the legitimacy of prescribed domestic roles and social subordination.

The comparative analysis reveals that while both Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver resist Victorian gender expectations, they embody distinct responses to patriarchal oppression. Jane's assertive selfhood and ethical independence enable a form of personal emancipation, whereas Maggie's internalized conflict and social constraints culminate in a tragic loss of agency. This contrast illustrates the limited and conditional nature of female resistance within Early Victorian society and underscores the varied consequences faced by women who defied dominant norms.

By situating these literary works within their historical and sociocultural context, the study confirms that proto-feminist ideas were embedded in Early Victorian narratives long before the formal articulation of feminist theory. These early texts functioned as subtle yet powerful forms of resistance, exposing the contradictions of patriarchal ideology and laying the intellectual groundwork for later feminist movements. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the origins of feminist consciousness and affirms the enduring relevance of Early Victorian women's writing in contemporary discussions of gender, agency, and social justice.

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