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**AMERICAN WOMEN OF THE COLONIAL PERIOD AND OF THE NINETEENTH
CENTURY CITY : in Judith Sargent Murray's *On the Equality of Sexes*, Edith
Wharton's *Roman Fever* and Hamlin Garland's *Mrs. Ripley's Trip***

Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to shed light on women's condition within the American society during the colonial period and the 19th century. The study will center on the gendered place that women were forced to take, and on the male constructed stereotypes to which they were subjected from an Enlightenment liberal Feminist perspective. We will bring into awareness how a woman was obliged to obey social constructed prejudices which made of her an object; all opportunities for education, prospect, liberation and development were closed to her.

Keywords: american women condition – colonial period – enlightenment liberal feminism – american literature –

Résumé

**La condition féminine aux USA à l'époque coloniale à travers trois œuvres littéraires :
On the Equality of Sexes de Judith Sargent, *Roman Fever* d'Edith Wharton
et *Mrs. Ripley's Trip* d' Hamlin Garland**

Cet article a pour objet l'étude de la condition féminine dans la société Américaine durant la période coloniale et au 19^{ème} siècle. L'article se réfère à trois œuvres féministes : « Sur l'égalité des sexes » de Judith Sargent, « Fièvre romaine » de d'Edith Warton, et « Le voyage de Mme Ripley » de Garland Hamlin. Sont étudiés dans ces textes, la place réservée à la femme dans la société de cette époque et les stéréotypes dévalorisants dont elle était l'objet

Mots-clefs : condition féminine aux USA – période coloniale aux USA – féminisme libéral des lumières – littérature Américaine –

المخلص

يروم هذا المقال إلى دراسة وضع المرأة في المجتمع الأمريكي إبان فترة الاحتلال والقرن التاسع عشر، ويحاول إظهار المكانة المزرية التي كانت تحتلها المرأة بسبب القوالب الذكورية المفروضة. وعموما فالمقال يسلط الضوء على المظالم التي عانت منها المرأة وحالت دون مشاركتها في مختلف مجالات التربية والتطور التنموي. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** وضع المرأة في و.م.أ- الفترة الاستعمارية- تحرر أنثوي في عهد الأنوار- الأدب الأمريكي.

AMERICAN WOMEN OF THE COLONIAL PERIOD AND OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CITY : in Judith Sargent Murray's *On the Equality of Sexes*, Edith Wharton's *Roman Fever* and Hamlin Garland's *Mrs. Ripley's Trip*

Throughout history, women have always been considered as being created to represent the shadow of men. Their tasks were rooted in the home; consequently, they were deprived of the right to be assimilated to the public arena, like serving in the government. Until nowadays, women still suffer from male oppression and subjection. Men have always been recognized to be the representatives of their families; they have the right to exercise their despotic power on their objects, the right to hold important places such as political officials, judges, ministers and business leaders. These masculine advantages have given rise to the awakening of a feminist consciousness whose motives were the need to correct and discuss gender inequality. Indeed, throughout their lives, women have always been gendered. The ideology of the 17th and 18th centuries of subordinating women was intensified during the 19th century with the birth of the industrial revolution. Public work was forbidden to women. That fact paved the way to job separation between the two sexes. Men were identified as being active, moral and rational and domineering, whereas women were viewed as being naturally inferior to men, subordinate, immoral and irrational.

Subsequently, we will carry out our work through the analysis of three literary works: Judith Sargent Murray's *On the Equality of Sexes*, Edith Wharton's *Roman Fever* and Hamlin Garland's *Mrs. Ripley's Trip* that symbolize the condition of women during two distinct periods of American history. This discussion will turn around the representation of women in the light of the liberal feminist approach. Inequalities that women suffered from at the level of education, of politics, and of employment will be highlighted.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

All over the world, women have suffered from masculine oppression. Women, who are considered as objects for men's delight have been victims of marginalization, rape and sexual harassment. The conditions of women in America during the colonial period and the 19th century have been the centre of interest for many critics.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who resisted to gendered injustices and rebelled against the patriarchal constraints of the nineteenth century, drafted the

grievances in the “*Declaration of Sentiments*” where she called for a change in the social structure with a complete recognition of women’s rights (Donovan, 1992:6). The American declaration was rejected by women whose rights were denied by the supreme law of the land.

Harriet Taylor and John Stuart were two other outstanding critics concerning women’s statute in society. They dealt in “*Essays on Marriage and Divorce*” (1832) with the subjection of women to male authority. Thomas Pain also spoke about men in his essay “*Women, Adored and oppressed*” (1775) as being tyrants and slaves for women at the same time. He claimed that all women since antiquity have been subjected to men’s greed. Pain stated that society, instead of emancipating and protecting women’s liberties and happiness, tended to bring the miseries of life and ill-being to the female sex. According to him, “*beauty in bondage waits the caprices of a master*”; women have always represented an object for men’s entertainment. (Kramnick, 1995: 588)

METHOD

This work will be carried out in the light of the enlightenment liberal feminist approach which aims at reaching an explanation, reevaluation and understanding of gender inequalities. It evaluates the roles of women in their societies and stresses their social conditions, as well as their state of subordination. It examines their conditions as subject for “*sexual objectification*”, oppression, discrimination, stereotypes and patriarchy. women’s claim and need to enjoy the same rights as men will be brought into awareness; the need to enjoy full citizenship under the supreme law of the land, and more important women’s struggle to get their civil and civic rights during the colonial period and the 19th century. It is worth to tackle the feminist problem from a liberal feminist approach to get close in touch with the problem of educational opportunities, the unequal distribution of employment as well as of political rights among women.

Before the 19th century, women were not involved in movements for their emancipation. Therefore, they were more concerned with their domestic tasks and accomplishments. They had to perform heavy tasks for their households and their husbands’ needs. A Christian theologian of the 13th century described women as being “*created to be men’s helpmeet, but her unique role is in conception...since for other purposes men would be better assisted by other men*” (Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia, WIC).

As a matter of fact, the condition of women suffering from oppression and marginalization had been subject for many philosophers, writers as well as thinkers. The feminism views and gender theories of J.J Rousseau, Sarah

Grimké, E.C Stanton, J.S Mill, Harriet Taylor, Susanna Anthony or Mary Wollstonecraft will be referred to in order to acknowledge the silenced images women had to take, the oppressed and restricted social norms they were forced to identify with, and finally, the subordinate and ‘othered’ woman.

DISCUSSION

Women during the colonial period in Judith Sargent Murray’s ‘*On the Equality of Sexes*’

During the colonial period in America, both men and women were forced to work in order to face the hard living conditions, especially in the southern part where men outnumbered women. John Smith declared in the Virginia colony that “*he, who does not work, will not eat*” ([http:// en. Wikipedia.org/wiki/ 19th_century](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/19th_century)) Women did not share the same occupations; clothing, sewing, cooking, caring for domestic animals, production of household accommodation such as candles and all domestic affairs were attributed to them, whereas men were more involved in building, farming and harvesting, plowing, fishing, hunting and protecting the family from dangers. The status of women in the colonies was not different from that of the British woman at that epoch. The colonists brought to America the same attitude and spirit towards the status and role of women. In fact, “*women are completely wretched*”; they were regarded as mentally, physically and emotionally defective (Kramnick, 1995: 587).

To study Judith Sargent Murray’s poem, we need to get an overview of her life in order to better understand the goal behind her works. Murray was born in 1751. She is an American playwright, poet and defender of the rights of women as being equal to men and able to exercise their inner abilities. Her poem “*on the Equality of the Sexes*” (1790) was published in the Massachusetts magazine. Judith advocated the right for equal education since she received a different education than that of her brother. Her parents did not allow her the right for a further education. She was against the oppression that the patriarchal society exercised over women. She published several works under male pen names including “*Mr. Vigilus*”, “*The Gleaner*” and “*Constantia*”.

In this poem, Judith relates the injustices, to which women were reduced; she is also concerned with the marginalization under which generations of women were condemned to live. Murray gives the image of the woman of the colonial period as a subordinate creature that was condemned and deprived of education, freedom as well as of individual rights. Women’s opportunities were rigidly restricted; they could neither hold public offices nor vote. They were forced to be obedient towards their husbands. This submissive

attitude was to be accepted without being questioned. Jean Jacque Rousseau asserted that “*Women are naturally subordinate to men*” and that “*they can be consulted only about what concerns the body, whereas, morality and rationality are male’s domain*” (Kramnick, 1995: 569)

However, the functions of both men and women were complementary. But by late 18th century and early 19th century, the positions of both sexes became rigidly distinct because of the industrial revolution. The latter caused a shift that had an impact on gender roles. As the economic system shifted from agrarian to industrialization, women became excluded from the professions they previously occupied. Work in the fields was very harsh and difficult. So, this new economic system changed the structure of social roles, arguing that women were far from being able to occupy these professions since they were considered sensitive, and spiritually and intellectually inferior to men. To respond to these attitudes, women took part in the anti-slavery movements, women’s rights and religious reforms. They wanted to introduce a reform program for social changes. They had met great pressure and opposition. They created “*The Female Moral Reform Movement*” which aimed at a change of prostitutes’ conditions as well as of women living in small towns.

J. S Murray’s was motivated to affirm women’s position within the patriarchal society, and to emphasize the fact that social judgments concerning women should be based upon their critical thinking and imagination instead of their sex. Education and critical reasoning would position women as active participants within the public arena. Donovan speaks about the place of man in women’s life as a bridge separating her from the light of intellectual improvement. Murray claims that it is the educational system which separates girls from boys. Both sexes cannot be judged in accordance to the opportunity to which one of them is deprived of. She claims,

That minds are not alike, full well I know,
This truth each day’s experience will show;
To heights surprising some great spirits soar,
With inborn strength mysterious depths explore;
Their eager gaze surveys this path of light,
Confest it stood to Newton’s piercing sight. (Murray, 1790)

Accordingly, Elizabeth Cady Stanton claimed that women had to enjoy their rights in all the fields, including the right to vote. In 1830, women were allowed to teach and replace men. Women favored teaching than domestic works; and this fact paved the way for intellectual construction. Indeed, teaching was used as a strategy to keep women’s intellectual spirit under control. Women could not get access to higher education; consequently, they were prevented from occupying higher professions.

In a much similar way, Murray claimed that “*she does not want to make reference to biblical testimonies, because they are merely metaphorical.*” (Kramnik, 1995: 605) She sees that the judgment of human beings and principles should not be based upon their sexual anatomy, but rather upon four major principles drawn from their imagination, reason, memory and judgments (Kramnick, 1995: 601). She states,

Yet cannot I their sentiments imbibe,
 Ho this distinction to the sex ascribe,
 As if a woman’s form must needs enroll,
 A weak, a servile, an inferior soul;
 And that the guise of man must still proclaim,
 Greatness of mind, and him, to be the same:
 Yet as the hours revolve fair proofs arise, [...] (Murray, 1790: 01).

In fact, women experienced harsh living conditions. Their oppression was rooted in the patriarchal system of their society whose all public spheres were closed to them. They were looked at as being created to be the toy of men. In this respect, Women’s subordination took its origin from biblical laws that say that women do not have the right to speak in the presence of men, and it is considered a sin to speak openly in public. Sarah Grimké opposed this biblical justification given by Saint Paul to keep women in subordination. She attempted to break the constructed stereotyped images associated to women in the bible, and claimed the right to enjoy full rights equal to men,

...False constructions [of scripture] has no weight with me: they are the opinions of interested judges, and I have no particular reverence for them, merely because they have been regarded with veneration from generation to generation. So far from this being the case, I examine any opinion of centuries standing...as if they were of yesterday. I was educated to think for myself and it a privilege I shall always claim to exercise. (Donovan, 1992:14)

Indeed, Murray calls for the separation of the soul from the sex and for the right to have access to the same educational and intellectual opportunities. She states that women who are plunged in the chain of the daily routine should take cognition of their subordinate condition and status quo. According to her, no one has the right to interfere in their life. Yet, the condition of women within the American society revealed a paradox; they represented an important labor force but were seen as subject of men’s oppression and marginalization. They were deprived of a place in the public sphere as well as in power. Colonial daughters were taught to be obedient to their parents and husbands, to be submissive to their instructions, to be dependent on their decisions and subjected to their delight. As it is quoted from a newspaper during the 18th century, “*I am married, and I have no other concern but to please the man I*

love; he is the end of every care I have; if I dress, it is for him; if I read a poem, or a play, it is to qualify myself for a conversation agreeable to his taste”(Luedtke, 1995: 258)

Women in colonial America were restricted to motherhood and wifehood at the service of their husbands and children. Women’s role in life was associated with ornamentation, fetishism and exterior accomplishments. Jean Boydston admitted that “*performing their (women) labor within the household reinforced the perception of women as secondary earners and kept their wages artificially low*” (Matson, 2006: 358).

In her poem, Murray stresses the idea that all human beings are born to live together and enjoy the same rights since they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. Her poem reflects the condition of women during the colonial period and the restrictions put upon her. In this respect, Grimké stated that women should not be judged according to their exterior accomplishment, dress and fetishism, but rather according to their unsexed reasoning and intellectual authority. She said,

[...] during the early part of my life my lot was cast among the butterflies of the fashionable world; and of this class of women, I am constrained to say, both from experience and observation, that their education is miserably deficient, that they are taught to regard marriage as the one thing needful, the only avenue to distinction; hence to attract the notice and win the attention of men, by their external charms, is the chief business of fashionable girls (Donovan, 1992: 16).

Murray observes that a woman can be more clever, courageous and better than a man, and that the mind is unsexed. We cannot judge an individual by virtue of his sex, but in relation to his mind and thinking. For her, the differences between the two sexes are the results of different educational systems,

But imbecility is still confin’d,
And by the lordly sex to us consign’d;
They rob us of the power t’improve,
And then declare we only trifles love;
Yet haste the era, when the world shall know,
That such distinctions only dwell below;
The soul unfetter’d, to no sex confin’d, (Murray, 1990: 01)

During the colonial period, there were women who were doctors, teachers, as well as preachers, but in the 19th century, women’s involvement in the public life was restricted to heavy works in factories and teaching. By contrast, other domains were for men only. The medical field was restricted to men and some unmarried girls hindering, thus, the right of women to get higher intellectual education. Grimké looked at the relationship between husband and

wife/ man and woman as domineering/dominated relationship within which power relations were displayed.

She noted that “*men condition women to please them, men deny women the possibility of a decent education and prevent their developing powers of critical analysis*” (Donavan, J, 1992: 15). As a sample, in 1846, the American medical association excluded women from membership as well as the right to attend ‘men’s’ medical colleges; consequently, women represented only 5 percent of doctors in America. (Johnson, 1998: 87) So, we can state that Murray’s poem represents a feminine refusal for different educational systems and backgrounds.

Nineteenth Century Women in Edith Wharton’s *Roman Fever*

Edith Wharton’s *Roman Fever* is a short story which relates the lives of two successive distinct American female generations: two mothers and their two daughters. This short story reflects the spirit of the 19th century women’s liberation from social restrictions. After analyzing it, we come to understand how the daughters behave differently from their mothers. They try to acquire the freedom and independence that their mothers did not enjoy. In the short story, Mrs. Ansley questions the motives of this new female generation that wants to achieve freedom in a patriarchal society. She says, “*Do you suppose they’re as sentimental as we were?*” *I’ve come to the conclusion that I don’t in the last know what they are*” (Wharton, 1957: 243) Ansley’s words reflect the shift in thinking and motivations of the new female generation that wants to get rid of a life in bondage like their mothers.

During the 19th century, women were treated as second class citizens though they were beginning to gain admission to colleges. They were forbidden medical and legal professions. Those who were married were forced to give up their rights, including the right to property. The 19th century was also marked by the birth of different reform movements, like the feminist movement. So, since women could not get the right to divorce, they sometimes ran away from their households when they were beaten. Women were demanding rights to take part in different fields as well as reform industry and birth control too.

Roman Fever symbolizes a quest for freedom. Mrs. Ansley’s words reflect the new emerging ideas of emancipation that women were beginning to claim. They reflect the need to restore a voice and a feminine identity in a country that claimed to be the land of freedom, equality, happiness and opportunity. Mrs. Ansley is depicted as being a clever and important woman who experienced the harshness of life. The author describes Mrs. Slade as having a sad life, full of failure and mistakes. She describes the outcomes of unemployment and

economic dependencies. When Mrs. Ansley was contemplating the vision, questioning the different achievements Rome would bring to each generation can be seen as metaphorical; it emphasizes the opportunities which would be offered to future female generations. Her words symbolize the female's gradual liberation from patriarchal oppression and restrictions. She says,

What different things Rome stands for to each generation of travelers. To our grandmothers, Roman fever; to our mothers, sentimental dangers- how we used to be guarded! - To our daughters, no more dangers than the middle of Main street. (Wharton, 1957: 243)

Still more, Edith Wharton's work reflects the spirit of enlightenment liberal feminism that came to transcend women's liberties. An era wherein two important figures emerged to assert the right to "*legitimate*" their own vision, ideas and interpretations: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susanna B. Anthony. Susanna B. Anthony saw that it is the right and the duty of a woman to enjoy her full unalienable and natural right since "*the sexes are alike*" (Donovan, 1992: 18). She qualified marriage as being an "*instant civil death*" (Ibid). As a matter of fact, she had been accused for civil disobedience in 1873 for having voted in the congressional election. She stated,

One half of the people of this nation to-day are utterly powerless to blot from the statute books an unjust law, or to write there a new and just one. The women, dissatisfied as with this form of government that enforces taxation without representation,- that compels them to obey laws to which they have never given their consent- that imprisons and hangs them without a trial by a jury of their peers- that robs them in marriage, of the custody of their own persons, wages, and children- are this half of the people left wholly at the mercy of the other half, in direct violation of the spirit and letter of the declarations of the framers of this government, every one of which was based on the immutable principle of equal rights to all (Donovan, 1992: 20)

John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor were among the pioneers who contributed to the liberal feminist thinking. Accordingly, Stuart Mill advocated the emancipation of women and their full recognition as a human being. In his work, *Subjection of Women (1869)*, he urged women to transcend the public arena and get the opportunity for equal civic and civil rights. The female characters in *Roman Fever* urge the need for women to get rights related to their marriage. They had to enjoy the right for property, divorce and to challenge the laws and established institutions to which they had never given their consent. In the nineteenth century, women started to leave the domestic field and joined men in shops, and "textile mills", suffering from hard and unsanitary working conditions. It was until the 1910's that the United States of

America passed the law of restricting working hours for women. In this respect, Mrs. Ansley describes the condition of women from different generations.

The two mothers associate their daughters' flight to light and sentiment. Light is metaphorical since it represents the source of emancipation, freedom and independence. Mrs. Slade's daughter is described as a dynamic woman. The two daughters are described as being angels with rainbow wings. The mothers spoke about time to bring into awareness the condition of the American female from one generation to another:

They're wandering by the sea with their young men; and here we sit... and it all brings back the past a little too acutely"(Wharton, 1957: 249). Mary Wollstonecraft saw that "The attractive way of female dressing gives rise to envy, and contests for trysting superiority, which do not render a woman very respectable to the other sex. (Wollstonecraft, 1787: 37)

Mrs. Ansley associates her past with shadows and August rains.

The two women expect from their two daughters to get a happier life different from that of previous generations. The author describes the place where the two women were sitting as shadowy and deserted. This sitting exemplifies the movement of change and emancipation to which women are introduced through time. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley represent the suffering of an old generation which was submitted to the harshness of an oppressive society.

Hamlin Garland's *Mrs. Ripley's Trip*

In his short story *Mrs. Ripley's Trip* (1888), Hamlin Garland relates the story of an old lady who decides to get rid of the boring and absurd routine of cooking and knitting which makes her life meaningless. She desires to start a new life by imposing upon her husband the duty of sharing the same domestic work. The story also evokes the theme of women's financial dependency. Mrs. Ripley asserts that she has contributed to raise the money of her family. She claims the right, as her husband, in sharing subsequent financial gains. For his part, the husband denies his wife's contribution. At that time, women were suffering from "*taxation without representation*" (Donovan, 1992: 15). Accordingly, in her household, Mrs. Ripley suffers from "taxation without representation" since she is deprived of her money to pay her trip in order to pay a visit to her family that she hasn't seen since her wedding ceremony. Jean Boydston admitted that "*the value of a woman's unpaid contribution to the family economy amounted to twice the cost of her maintenance and perhaps exceeded her husband's total wages*" (Matson, 2006:359).

Mrs. Ripley tries to break the silenced image and shadow which render her inefficient in the household. She looks in vain to affirm herself after sixty years

of suffering, domination and submission. Her trip symbolizes a place for freedom where she could affirm herself. Mrs. Ripley mirrors the feminist spirit of the 19th century and the need to cross gender lines and divisions. She expresses it openly when she says, “*I’m sixty years old*”, *she went on, with a little break in her harsh voice, dominating him now by women’s logic, “and I’ve never had a day to myself [...]*” (Garland, 1888: 209). Like Mrs. Ripley, Sarah Grimké called for a radical reform in her “*Letters on Equality*” (1838) where she denounced female subordination and marginalization. Garland stated,

It is striking that women, once married, they become civilly dead. They have no right for property. Mrs. Ripley has not seen her parents since her marriage. Her husband seems to dislike his wife’s decision about her trip and the rest that she would like to take. To deprive her of the ability to exercise her opinion, he evokes the problem of money which she should use to support herself while travelling; he wonders how she is going to raise the money which would enable her to pay her trip. (Garland, 1888: 213)

Hamlin Garland portrays the condition of the 19th century woman who revolted against patriarchal oppression. Mrs. Ripley’s story is a morality. Garland highlights the feminist spirit of the time. The American government was described as being an “*oligarchy of sex*” where the domineering patriarch exercises his power on the powerless dominated female character. In order to make her trip, the old woman explains how she has contributed in the advancements and accomplishments achieved. She insists upon her rights to take part in the raised money. She claims: “*I guess if I had what I’ve earned since we came on this farm I’d have enough to go to Jericho with*” (Ibid: 211). Mrs. Ripley questions and searches a means for raising money in order to pay her trip. She says, “*I guess I’ve worked just as long an’ as hard as you, an’ in storms an’ wind an’ heat, ef it comes t’ that*” (Ibid: 212).

Mary Wollstonecraft claimed that the enlightenment liberal thinking which stresses the importance of men’s unalienable rights was denied to women. She also states that “*he who will pass life away in bounding from one pleasure to another [will]... acquire neither wisdom nor respectability of character*” (Donovan, 1992: 14) Mrs. Ripley’s trip is a revolt against the masculine oppressive society. Accordingly, the trip is very suggestive. It represents a change and a new vision of society based upon more equality as well as more economic freedom for women. When Mrs. Ripley rejects her husband’s money, she aims at rejecting her subordinate position and overthrow gender divisions. The old woman seems to have achieved her dreams. After making

her trip, she has been released from a heavy burden and suffering she has carried since her marriage. Actually, she is starting a new life.

In this paper, we tried to bring into awareness the condition of American women within two distinct historical periods. Our critical reading demonstrates how Judith Sargent Murray resisted gender oppression and inequalities as reflected in her essay '*On the Equality of Sexe*' and how she foreshadowed women's aspiration for freedom and equal opportunities. Then, the contrast between the colonial woman and the woman of the 19th century has been developed and commented. Hamlin Garland's *Mrs. Ripley's Trip* and Edith Wharton's *Roman Fever* reflect the restrictions that the industrial America put on women to keep them in perpetual subordination to men. To conclude, it can actually be claimed that most the gendered positions that awakened the feminist consciousness and revolt against masculine subjection in America have been hinted to.

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