

# HERSTORY: QUEEN ELIZABETH AND QUEEN VICTORIA

**Maumita Dhar (Dey)**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Narasinha Dutt College*

*129, Belilious Road, Howrah 711101*

e-mail: maumitadey73@gmail.com

Submitted : 05.03.16

Revised : 03.07.16

Accepted : 05.07.16

## **Abstract**

Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria, two equally powerful monarchs, arouse conflicting, even diametrically opposite attitudes towards them while Elizabeth seized the opportunity to rule powerfully and autocratically, Victoria, passed on the baton of power, to her husband and allowed herself to be dictated. Literature of the Elizabethan age created the eternal image of the Virgin Queen. Shakespeare, the most representative author of the time, seemed to deviate from others in that none of his plays portrayed a strong Queen; rather, keeping in mind Renaissance humanism, all his protagonists are powerful males. However the heroines in his popular comedies show the spirit of Renaissance humanism, and of intellectual enquiry that is so well reflected in the Queen. Queen Victoria's image of power was woven in patriarchy -an image created for its own benefits. She was portrayed primarily as a mother and wielded the power of nurturing the nation to good health. Contemporary women were trapped in this powerful image of the mother as for them it meant a restricted and suffocating life. Literature of the age showed power associated with fertility.

**Keywords:** Monarch, power, literature, opposite, attitude, patriarchy

England has seen a fair number of female monarchs, though only a few of them have gained historical importance as subjects of study. Two such powerful monarchs are Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria, belonging to two different eras, separated not only in time and space but also by their difference in outlook in societal terms. England as a country, underwent such huge and revolutionary social changes in the four hundred years (1558-1901) that separate Elizabeth and Victoria, that the concept of and attitude to monarchy cannot be described or interpreted in similar terms. What is also interesting, is the attitude of the English people to the same aspects of the monarch or monarchy, vis-a-vis these two female monarchs; - they are conflicting, and sometimes

diametrically opposite. This is the attitude that is also reflected in the literature and culture of their respective ages.

The claim of Elizabeth to the throne of England is 'unnatural' in comparison to Victoria. Since Ann Boelyn was considered only a concubine, and not a legally wedded wife of King Henry VIII, Elizabeth was, by birth, illegitimate. If she had not resembled her father physically to the extent that she did, including the Tudor red hair, she perhaps would have been dismissed as a bastard. And if Henry's will did not mention her claim to the throne (third in line, after Edward and Mary, if they died without legitimate heirs) Elizabeth would not have been able to ascend the throne of England. She did not have many supporters in the Tudor court required for a bloody war of succession. But the hope and the desire to sit on the throne was never forsaken by the young Elizabeth. It is noteworthy here that she purposefully cultured an unconventional image of herself that was completely different from anything seen in the Tudor court. The first tool that she used to build this image was education, mainly acquired through reading books. Her residence was stocked with books; she was seen reading books all the time. She was tutored by Roger Ascham in theology, history, philosophy, rhetoric and language (Greek) and her aptitude for studies evoked an appreciating remark from her tutor that her mind had no womanly weakness and her perseverance was equal to that of a man. It is interesting to note here that association with books and studies equates Elizabeth to being a "man". Masculinity is always associated with power complex and this power can be implemented to a great extent if it is enhanced by the power of the mind. Elizabeth at an early age had deeply understood this equation and she consciously put all her efforts and integrity to wield this power of the mind by encouraging a particular perception of her own self as serious, intelligent, and austere, like a regal prince.

The other tool used by Elizabeth to project such an unconventional image of herself was dress. Elizabeth was never seen to dress extravagantly in garish colours or jewels. She dressed with a kind of austerity and severity that made her look unearthly and absolutely in contrast to Mary Tudor. Thus, Elizabeth was able to nurture an image of herself as cultured, educated, modest, intelligent, but in a "masculine" sort of way. This kind of a comprehension of Elizabeth's character by the public would immensely help in creating a girdle of protectiveness

around her and feed the ultimate iconic identity that she successfully established- that of a Virgin.

In a society that looked upon its monarch to produce a legitimate heir through marriage, the acceptance of an unmarried Queen, as a ruler for forty years was an achievement indeed. For Elizabeth, the efforts to get her married to one suitor or another ended, when she proclaimed herself as married to the nation. The accepted image was that the king was the father of the nation and the subjects were all his children. For Elizabeth, England was her husband, and her subjects were her husbands too, and she could serve them selflessly as she had no private family of her own. She uses patriarchal vocabulary, but to her own advantage. Again, it is to be noted here that England is supposed to be the 'mother' land and therefore, feminine. But Elizabeth transformed the gender of the nation to suit her requirements; she embedded herself so much into the matrix of nationalism that the English people were unable to dissociate her identity from that of the country, or associate it with a human spouse. The Virgin Queen then became deified. In Act II Scene i of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon refer to Queen Elizabeth thus:

Cupid all armed. A certain aim he took  
At a fair vestal throned by the west,  
And loosed his love shaft smartly from his bow  
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.  
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft  
Quenched in the chaste beams of the watery moon,  
And the imperial votaress passed on,  
In maiden meditation, fancy-free. (Shakespeare 68)

Though in many of her speeches Elizabeth identified herself as a feeble woman as well as a king or prince, she did use her unmarried feminine status to political advantage. She very intelligently fed both the images she created for herself – the virgin image that prompted her subjects to deify her, and the 'unmarried, available' image, that kept foreign powers under considerable control. Thus Elizabeth portrayed in

her the Renaissance wit, the emotionless participation in politics that is usually associated with a male ruler. Once past the age of marriage, the Virgin Queen image successfully took over, as by that time Elizabeth had established herself as a supremely powerful monarch. Pope Sixtus V's reading of Elizabeth is interesting: she successfully made herself feared by all – Spain, France, the Empire – though she was only a woman and mistress of half an island.

The Elizabethan age is renowned for its contribution to literature, music and art. An entire cult of virginity grew round Elizabeth's image of Virgin Queen. Elizabeth was happy to play the part but never contributed directly to the upkeep of the arts. Interestingly, as she lost her beauty through disease and old age, her representations became more and more beautiful and ageless. She was Belphoebe, Astraea, Gloriana, and the eternally youthful Fairie Queene in Spenser's poems. She depended on wigs and cosmetics (after affliction with small pox) to maintain her appearance, but her paintings were blemish-less. Her power as a ruler, as a protector, as a monarch, rose to such an extent that her portraits became less realistic and more a set of enigmatic icons. It will be worthwhile mentioning here that representations of Elizabeth in English literature by iconic writers like Spenser have enabled in establishing a particular image of the Queen which became widely circulated and accepted as genuine. However, some contemporary historians almost always describe her as haughty, capricious, vain, and ill-tempered<sup>1</sup>. These negative features are consciously kept aside by poets of the age to create a forceful national icon. Idealisation of reality is necessary since poetry of the age not only entertains but instructs as well. Poets like Spenser, through their works have shown how powerful works of art can be, irrespective of history and its facts.

When Shakespeare began writing, the English court was already under this monarch who had destabilised the structure of a society that had always expected a king to be a father to his people and to produce a male heir. Yet in his representative comedies, Shakespeare creates heroines who conform to the conventional social models of wife, lover, daughter, sister and so on. Though they prove powerful in action, they do not occupy positions of power. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus is a powerful king, dominating on the human level, but capable of mistakes. Hippolyta, his Queen to be, is an Amazon warrior but subservient to

Thesus. Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, are all found to don the male attire, which empowers them when they deal with situations of crisis. Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* needs to unsex herself in order to raise herself to the masculine task of destroying life/order. Queen Elizabeth, however, always avoided wearing male garments- she disliked cross-dressing; and when she did put on male military attire at Tilbury, she made sure not a single portrait existed that showed her thus dressed.

Was Shakespeare then creating a female model that was opposed to his Queen? If we look into the task each was performing, we will find that all his leading ladies were performing roles ultimately assigned to women. Viola, Rosalind, Portia, or Lady Macbeth- they were either organising others' lives, taking care of others' health, sorting out problems within the family, sharing another's sorrow, standing by one's partner and so on. It is interesting that the heroines in Shakespeare's comedies marry the more effeminate or weaker male and play compromising roles (e.g. Portia has to obey her father's will and only hope that Bassanio chooses the right casket). In Act I, Scene i of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Thesus warns Hermia regarding her fate, if she does not marry: "But earthlier happy is the rose distilled/Than that which withers on the virgin thorn/Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness" (Shakespeare 50). Queen Elizabeth neither married nor compromised; she occupied a male territory with great success, and resolved the gender confusion between her body politic and body natural to emerge as a powerful figure, able to merge into the public weal any personal self she might have, to produce the Queen's one body, the body politic, which has subsumed all else of her. Shakespeare seems to have borrowed his Queen's innate intellectual powers, her spirit of Renaissance humanism, and her strength of purpose for his heroines; however the roles they perform seem to point to the fact that he believed in a balanced patriarchal order, attained and sustained through marriage and domestic bliss.

Elizabeth's image, her memory, her legend was revived during the Napoleonic wars, in Victorian England and in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, when she became a romantic

symbol of the national resistance to foreign threat. As is common with legends, all her shortcomings were ignored and dismissed as effects of stress. Queen Elizabeth I remains etched in public memory as the most successful and powerful English monarch who ruled the world; the portrait of Elizabeth, with her hand resting on the globe, after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, symbolises her international power.

Queen Victoria was the longest ruling monarch of England and additionally the Empress of India. Yet she presents an interesting paradox. Victoria is powerful and powerless at the same time. The English parliament had already evolved into a strong two-party system – the Labour Party and the Conservative Party – and the monarch was nothing more than a constitutional head, above the two parties. As a monarch, Victoria was powerless in comparison to Elizabeth, who was the example of an absolute monarchy. Victoria's power evolved from a completely different arena – that of the family. She was primarily a mother – her portraits almost always included her husband Albert and their nine children. She held up to the court and the public a picture of domestic bliss that needed to be attained by all British wives. Domesticity, blessed motherhood, family – these gained an immense precedence over public life for women in the contemporary society, as the Queen herself was seen to inhabit comfortably a space that was private, protected and peaceful. Motherhood is an area outside the male purview or domain; only a woman can be a mother, and along with motherhood comes the associated idea of nurture. The Queen came to be seen as the mother of the nation; as she nurtured her own family, she would also nurture the good health of the nation and maintain its unity. She emerged as all powerful. Even in a novel like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the Victorian women's paradoxical possession of both motherly and queenly traits is discernible. Mrs. Sowersby, like Queen Victoria, is everywhere and nowhere at the same time; she sends baskets of fruits for the children in order to nurture their growth and is constantly mentioned in different conversations, though she appears only in the second last chapter of the novel. She is the mother figure, the nurturer, and exemplifies the quintessential housewife, empowered by maternal nature. The Queen of Hearts represents dysfunctional, powerless monarchy. As she rejects maternal and feminine traits, she compromises her authority. The Queen of Heart demonstrates that in

order to establish and maintain female sovereignty, one has to embrace the maternal image.

Torn by conflicting ideas about the identity of God after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), and in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, the image of the Queen as mother and nurturer of the nation gained so much importance that it became an alternative to the lost idea of the traditional God. Victoria became a study in contrast: virtually she was powerless but eventually she projected power as a Queen mother. But paradoxically enough, the literature of the age shows how women were sadly restricted to home and how they were robbed of any political or social right. It turned out more to be a disadvantage for common women when they were asked to emulate the Queen. Victoria herself kept supplying support to the idea of devoted wife and mother when she went into mourning and seclusion for twenty five years, after the death of her husband. She presents a sharp contrast to Elizabeth, the powerful female monarch who preceded her, though her image was that of Queen of Great Britain and Empress of India, not "mistress of half an island". She is indeed a sad contrast to her own self before her coronation or marriage. In her private diary, Victoria mentions the word 'alone' five to six times, sometimes in capitals, while describing the morning when she received the news of her accession from the Archbishop and other dignitaries; her exhilaration underlines a sense of freedom from the control of a dominating and subjugating mother, and seems to emphasise a newfound sense of power. But strangely, she forfeits this sense of power and freedom immediately after marriage, by not taking any decision without approval from her husband. In contrast, Elizabeth had used this 'alone'-ness to protect her from being dominated upon by any male partner. The rebellious nature that seemed visible in Victoria is sadly curbed by her devotion to, and involvement in, the affairs of the family.

The influence of Victoria upon her contemporary age was immense. No one openly raised a scandalous finger at her when she depended on her butlers too much; nor was her procreativity eroticised. The Madonna image (Virgin mother), that was used for her can be a split between herself and Elizabeth - the 'virgin' part for the Tudor queen, and the 'mother' part for Victoria. In literature, Queen Victoria had a lasting influence as the 'angel in the house'<sup>2</sup>. All female characters in Victorian

literature conform to norms of social and moral behaviour that stem from the image of the Queen. Their exploitation or subjugation, claustrophobia or stifling domination by the male partners never finds attention with a majority of the authors. Only a few female authors like George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte and Emily Bronte created women characters that seemed to have a mind of their own, but mostly became victims of the social order; their works occasionally present a kind of wish fulfilment which few Victorian women had the courage or power to translate into reality in their lives.

The patriarchy, then, very conveniently deified an image for its own advantage. So the rise of feminism as a woman's movement came as no surprise in England. Another aspect of Victorian literature is its obsession with children, mostly males, orphans, vagabonds or cast outs, who need nurturing, care and love to be brought back to the path of goodness and morality, to respectable society. Again the mother image propagated by the Queen is reiterated, as the guiding hand comes from a sister, aunt or governess. The novels of Charles Dickens abound with such examples of young boys who are nurtured by motherly women.

Queen Victoria ruled for over sixty years and her influence and popularity are reflected in many structures and monuments built in her honour, not only in England, but all over the world. Queen Elizabeth's influence, with about forty years of power, is seen in the invocation of her image in times of national political crises, like the Napoleonic wars. Queen Elizabeth was more conscious as a monarch; she had a target; she wanted to become like an Emperor. The idea to be equal with a male ruler was nourished with care in her heart. With Queen Victoria there was probably no such ambition for she was happily surrounded by men, not as suitors but as co-rulers. She herself was complacent about it, for she projected herself first as a woman, then as a monarch.

It is a unique thing to note that the subjects of England, perhaps, are more inclined to reflect emotionally on their monarch and her/his relation to the nation; it does not matter whether the nation is the 'husband' or 'mother'; but it is a family instinct that they looked for. This subjective approach mattered most in the making of the monarch. The images of Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria, though poles apart in their influence over literature, culture and history of their age, have

survived the changes in social perceptions to remain historically and culturally relevant till this day.

**Notes :**

1. The Venetian Ambassador Giovanni Michiel, writes in spring 1557: “Proud and haughty, as though she were born of such a mother, she nevertheless does not consider herself of inferior degree to the Queen....”(The British Monarchy website. <http://www.royal.gov.uk>. 20, February, 2016.01, March, 2016).The Spanish Ambassador De Faria writes in 1559: “She is a very vain and clever woman”.(The British Monarchy website. <http://www.royal.gov.uk>. 20, February, 2016.01, March, 2016). Elsewhere he says, “She is incomparably more feared than her sister, and gives her orders and has her way as absolutely as her father did”.(The British Monarchy website. <http://www.royal.gov.uk>. 20, February, 2016.01, March, 2016).
2. A poem by Coventry Patmore published in 1854, in four instalments; it became a touchstone of British culture in the 18th century in such a degree that Virginia Woolf, in a speech delivered before a branch of the National Society for Women’s Service in 1931, had mentioned ‘killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer’.(The British Monarchy website. <http://www.royal.gov.uk>. 20, February, 2016.01, March, 2016).

**Works cited :**

King, John. N.“Queen Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen”. *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990). 30-74.

Mueller, Janel.“Virtue and Virtuality: Gender in the Self-Representations of Queen Elizabeth I”. University of Chicago Digital Collections. [fathom.lib.uchicago.edu](http://fathom.lib.uchicago.edu). 2001.

Percival, H. M. *The Fairie Queene, Book I*. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd.,1964.

Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Ed. R.A Foakes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1984.

“Historic Royal Speeches and Writings”. *The British Monarchy website*.  
<http://www.royal.gov.uk>. Victoria. February 20, 2016. March 1, 2016.

Waters, Elissa. “Images of Mother Monarch Queen Victoria in Victorian Children’s Literature”. *Valley Humanities Review*. 2014.