

The Garments of Class: The Representation of Social Hierarchy Through Clothing in Victorian England

Samruddhi
Student, Nagpur.

Abstract—This paper explains the social discrimination which was based on the clothing during the late 19th century in England. In the Victorian era the clothing functioned almost like a social language which was supported by legal power. This paper will help us to understand the reinforce of the class hierarchy, the gender roles assigned by the society and the moral expectations attached to the clothing. The paper will help us to explore the relevance of the clothing and its legal status in the society. It is explained that even though there are no written laws related to it still these rules were enforced through courts, policing and social pressure.

Index Terms—Victorian era, status, class, clothing, hierarchy.

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) was one of the biggest turnovers in the 19th century history as it majorly led to the transformation of a predominately rural, agricultural society into an urban, industrial one. Even though major changes were brought in the society, social hierarchy based on clothing was still an inevitable part of the people living during at that time. Victorian society placed the immense importance on appearance, as “keeping up appearances”, was essential in a class obsessed culture where clothing signalled on one’s place in hierarchy.

During Victorian Era, the fashion evolved through decades for the society. Starting from the coronation¹ of the Princess Alexandrina Victoria of Kent or Queen Victoria till her death in 1901. As we witness the Victorian period since last 64 years (1837-1901) the situation can be explained as,

II. CLOTHING AS SOCIAL SIGNIFIER

Fashion and clothing played a key role during the Victorian era as it helped distinguish different sections of the society during that time. Fashion was majorly seen as a subject to represent people based on their status in the society where the rich enjoyed true luxury, the poor couldn’t even afford basic clothing. During the Victorian era or the Reign of the Queen as we say, the fashion evolved through decades for the society while the rich enjoyed true luxury and the poor suffered till death.

The Victorian England is considered to be “THE TIME OF BIG CHANGE”, and these changes affected the fashion tremendously.

The societal structure of the Victorian England divided into majorly three classes:

- The Rich class comprises of the members of the royal families and nobles
- The Submerging educated middle class who got education through overseas trade.
- Poor class which includes people with the majority sufferings.

Fashion was a symbol of status that distinguished these classes based on their true wealth. Women during that time were expected to be pure and take care of the home and children whilst, the men were expected to be strong and responsible.

These descriptions accentuate what fashion was truly like during the Victorian Era. Clothing standards evolved through decades as after the Queen Victoria came into the reign during the 1840s white colour became the sign of purity and the standard colour for the rides during the main wedding ceremony. Laces on

¹ Coronation on June 28, 1838 in Westminster Abbey in London

royal and exquisite dresses became a symbol of the elite, and suddenly fashion shifted from Grecian flow to structured silhouettes. Women became obsessed with silhouettes and fabrics like silk, velvet, museline duois came into a wider picture. Due to the growth and industrial revolution mass production of clothing became easy and was available to all sectors of the society.

The 1870 period also saw a tremendous change in the Victoria fashion as all the drama move to the bustle. The crinoline hoop skirt made with steel cages was a beauty standard back then. And we cannot define the Victorian fashion without addressing the corsets, that gave the ladies the desired hourglass figure. Also, corsets were not just a piece of clothing but a symbol of depicting the responsibility of a woman to be pure and feminine.

Men's fashion was also a structural evaluation through time and decades during Queen Victoria's reign. The rich section of men wore clothing tailored to perfection, with high quality layered clothing emphasizing formality, status and sobriety. The key elements like coats, waist coat, trousers, shirts and neckwear, headwear were the important source to a Victorian rich man's fashion.

As described earlier that even though the Victorian era was a time of great change, the social hierarchy in the society kept it divided. The rich men wore great quality material while poor clothing was majorly more practical, durable and often what was expected of them to wear during that period. The Victorian society discriminated the people based on what they wore as it was one of the major sources that would define one's wealth and eventually lead to its status in the society.

III. CLOTHING AS CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Similarly, there were strict customs related to the mourning attire, widows were expected to wear black. Though these laws are not legally enforced but were followed strictly socially and failing to do so may lead to dispute.

In the Victorian era fashion and clothing not only depict status in society but was deeply tied to the legal systems, social order and morality. Though the primitive sumptuary law faded by 19th century, but their legacy still exists in the society.

The Sumptuary laws are the rules which were exercised in England by the time of the Victorian era under Queen Victoria states what people can wear or consume based on social rank. However, the spirit of sumptuary control still strongly shaped society through social norms, class expectations, and informal restrictions rather than strict laws. In England during earlier period sumptuary laws regulates fabrics, colour and luxury goods. Then by 18th century these laws repealed, instead of law the social enforcement became the main mechanism to regulate the society.

Victorian society was stratified on the basis of clothing in different types of classes. The Upper class wore expensive materials like silk, velvet and even fine wool. This class even follow strict social rules for occasions like marriage and mourning. Even changing many outfits in a day was expected. Then the Middle class tried to imitate upper class fashion but within the budget. Whereas the working-class practice durable clothing. Hence from the above discussion it can be stated that in Victorian era the laws were not enforced by government but by social pressure, moral codes and even by class expectations. The sumptuary laws did not disappear but they transformed. Victorian society effectively created a system where your clothing still defined your place but the punishment came from society, not the state.

Clothing still termed as status symbols and even has some of the unsaid social rules which needs to be followed. These unsaid rules are not illegal but they definitely have some of the social consequences. Some of the clothing styles depicts class. Victorian society was strong follower of modesty. Some of the local laws and rules enforces a proper dress code specially for the women section of the society. This includes showing too much skin or wearing inappropriate garments could be treated as public indecency and was also termed as punishable offence. The laws were influenced from morality. Even the cross dressing was considered against the social and public rules, was punishable. People were not allowed to wear clothes of opposite sex.

IV. CLOTHING AS A MARK OF LEGAL STATUS

During the emergence of Industrialisation there was change in the clothing style. The Factory Act regulated some of the rules for the working class which includes not to wear loose clothes near machinery. Even the

workers were often restricted to limited clothing which led to debate about the poverty and even certain legal reforms. In the primitive society stealing of clothes was a common offence and hence due to which it was always listed in legal records. The descriptions of the suspect of particular crime are mostly identified because of the attire.

Similarly professional clothing was strictly exercised. In legal system there were proper dress code which needs to be followed since Judges, Barristers used to wear specific attire that includes the wigs and robes which ultimately symbolizes authority. These traditions are still followed in some parts of the world.

V. CASE LAWS

Case law related to dress in the Victorian era reflects broader legal concerns about morality, gender roles, class identity, and public order. Courts often treated clothing not just as personal choice, but as a social signal tied to law and propriety. Here are some notable themes and examples:

In Victorian era wearing clothing traditionally associated with the opposite sex was termed as illegal. In *Boulton and Park*² case, two men Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park were arrested for appearing in women's clothing. They were charged with the conspiracy to commit sodomy. These two were acquitted due to lack of evidence. Courts often judged such cases based on the intent that whether the clothing was used to deceive or commit another offense.

Similarly, laws like Vagrancy Act 1824³ and even the common law addressed the indecent exposure. The clothing plays quite vital role, too revealing or lack of clothing, showing skin could lead to arrest. Courts often considered them as offence against public morals. The rise of women wearing less restrictive clothing for example bloomers could led to legal disputes. Amelia Bloomer⁴ promoted Bloomer dress. Though not central to a famous court case, the controversy around her clothing reform sparked legal tensions about acceptable attire. Though not always

leading to formal case laws but women were denied entry to public places and were charged under public order or nuisance laws.

VI. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it can be stated that there were no Universal dress code laws but the regulation came through broader laws like decency, fraud and public order. Clothing was one of the deciding factors in the society which indicates the class and status of the individual. In Victorian era intent matter especially in cross dressing and impersonation cases. It can be clearly stated that moral standards dominated the society rather than legal regulations. The legal outcomes often reflected prevailing the Victorian values through clothing and garments.

Clothing in the Victorian era was much more than just a practical necessity it reflected social status, morality, and strict cultural values. Looking at it from a modern perspective, there are both admirable and problematic aspects. On one hand, Victorian clothing showed incredible craftsmanship and attention to detail. Garments were often handmade, with fine fabrics, embroidery, and structured tailoring. Fashion was elegant and expressive in its own restrained way long dresses, corsets, waistcoats, and top hats created a very distinctive aesthetic that still influences fashion today. However, the clothing also reveals the rigid social norms of the time. For women especially, fashion could be restrictive and even harmful. Tight corsets shaped the body to fit ideal beauty standards but often caused discomfort and health issues. Heavy layers and long skirts made movement difficult, reflecting how society expected women to behave graceful, modest, and confined. Men's clothing, while more practical, still emphasized class and discipline. What a person wore clearly indicated their position in society, reinforcing divisions between the wealthy and the working class.

Overall, Victorian-era clothing can be seen as both beautiful and limiting. It represents a time when fashion was an art form, but also a tool of social

² R v Boulton and Park (1871)

³ The Vagrancy Act 1824 was a British law passed to deal with homeless, poverty and public disorder in the early 19th century.

⁴ Amelia Bloomer (1818-1894) was a well-known reformer during Victorian period, activist, journalist and advocate for women's equality.

control. From today's point of view, it highlights how far clothing has evolved toward comfort, individuality, and freedom of expression.