



The Importance of Gender Roles in the Victorian Era and the Formation of the Feminist Movement in Literature

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the movement of feminism in literature and gender roles in the Victorian era. The research begins by examining the role of genders by explaining the "cult of domesticity" and then discussing the limitations faced by women in the political, educational, and property spheres. Based on research by authors such as Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and even Shakespeare, women and men have portrayed women as strong and independent characters in their novels. The character of Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's novel would be a noticeable example. According to the feminist idea, women were equal to men in intelligence, they should have equal rights and job opportunities as men, and they should also have the right to vote. These authors were able to start a new movement not only in women's rights but also in literature, despite the limitations and taboos of the time. This movement took place in the early part of the 20th century.

Keywords: Gender roles; feminism movement; literature; Victorian period.

INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century was the most important period of British history; this century witnessed changes, especially for women. Throughout this period, with the development of literature, society and the position of women concerning men have improved. Although they initially had to use pseudonyms to enter the literary world, they achieved this through unity. This essay will be concerned with the movement of feminism throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in English literature, and I will also focus on gender roles in the Victorian period. Feminism is a wide phenomenon, and it is still to be discussed. For this reason, I have chosen to write about this matter.

The origin of word feminism is a French word, and according to the Cambridge online dictionary, feminism is "the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way or the set of activities intended to achieve this state" (Cambridge dictionary

online). British history saw major transformations for women in the 19th century, and this movement for change carried over into the 20th century. The 20th century saw developments in society and literature, as well as the way women were viewed by men. This period also saw the rise of a powerful feminist movement.

British women initiated a movement for equality in the 1800s. Their goal was to overcome limitations, have the same opportunities for education and job choices, and have control over their own lives as men. Throughout the Victorian era, the perception of an independent woman, from whom it was expected to be a wife, mother, and homemaker, has completely changed, more precisely how Martin Luther claimed: “Women should remain at home, keep house, bear, and bring up children. A woman is, or at least should be, a friendly, courteous, and merry companion in life, the honor and ornament of the house, and inclined to tenderness, for thereunto are they chiefly created, to bear children, and to be the pleasure, joy, and solace of their husband.” The woman finds fulfillment without relying on a relationship. Her career choices are wide open, allowing her to pursue anything that interests her. (Martin Luther, 1831).

The rise of feminist ideas wasn’t random. A bunch of things happening together, like the new ideas of the Victorian era and the influence of popular books at the time, helped feminist thought spread and gain traction. In a time when women’s voices were often stifled, they found creative ways to express themselves; one of them was literature. This essay allowed for a deeper examination of who they were and where they were in society.

Before the Victorian feminism movement, women were often shown as models of purity and obedience in writing by men. These were qualities considered very important for a good woman in the 1800s. Victorian-era female writers who challenged the status quo wrote stories featuring powerful women to bring attention to the unspoken struggles faced by women in society. Through fantastical settings, their stories championed female characters and their value, gently nudging readers to accept the reasoning behind feminist ideals.

During a period when women’s creative writing was frequently discouraged, some female authors defied societal limitations by publishing their work under men’s names or without revealing their identity at all. These writers achieved something groundbreaking with a much larger audience, unlike male writers, who were mainly interested in making money and getting famous. Four female authors (Austen, Brontës, Eliot, and Alcott) were the first to write about strong-willed women who actively pursued their sense of self, what they were entitled to, and the power to shape their lives.

VICTORIAN GENDER ROLES

“Cult of domesticity” and ideal woman as wife and mother

In 1800s Britain, a popular belief called the cult of domesticity shaped ideas about what a perfect home should be. These ideas differed depending on social class and period but still had a big impact on Victorian families. The middle class especially valued this concept, where men and women had separate roles, marriage, and children were expected, and family life was seen as holy. However, this focus on the ideal woman created unrealistic expectations that led to problems like divorce and family violence. Despite its drawbacks, some aspects of this movement’s ideas are still around today.

“The Cult of Domesticity”, or “The idea of The Cult of Womanhood,” sought to assert that womanly virtue resided in piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. As you read, consider why these characteristics were seen as so crucial to promoting a woman’s “proper role,” and how such assertions about the roles of women might have served as a response to the growth of industrial capitalism. (Barbara Welter 1966).

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which, a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, neighbors, and society. It could be divided into four cardinal virtues_ piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife_ woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes with them. She was promised happiness and power. Faith provided comfort and kept women

focused on family duties. Women were expected to be innocent and faithful, a source of strength for their families. Taking care of the house and creating a loving environment were her main jobs. The husband was the boss, and the wife was expected to follow this lead. A woman's influence wasn't supposed to go beyond the household. The public world was for men. Housework, childcare, even managing servants- it was all a woman's duty, not something she should be paid for. Schools weren't important for women since they were destined to be homemakers. (Barbara Welter 1966).

Many working-class women had to take factory jobs or work as servants to survive. Not all women accepted these limitations. Some, especially wealthier ones, fought for education and careers. The cult of domesticity valued family life but also held women back. Knowing about this ideal helps us understand the challenges and achievements of women in history. "Meanwhile, industrialization also forced free women into the northern working class, as street vendors, tavern keepers, and boarding-house operators, paid domestic servants, garment workers, prostitutes, and a variety of other occupations. Young women from New England farms provided the nation's first factory labor force in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, beginning in 1814. A surprising number of middle-class families also depended on the paid labor of wives. Lydia Maria Child, whose earnings as an editor and writer supported her family, is one example, although the most famous is probably Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose income as a writer far outstripped that of her college professor husband." (Jeanne Boydston).

Limitations on Women's education, property rights, and political participation

Women's education

The Victorian Period took great development in terms of education, and this period had explicit characteristics regarding the educational system. The public education system had a special place in this period due to the new laws that made education compulsory for more people. The Victorian period witnessed the progress in education system; however, there was still a significant gap between social classes and genders. On the other hand by the end of the period literacy rates among the population increased dramatically.

At this time there was a great difference between social classes and genders in Education. The children, who belonged to the upper class, were raised by governors. When they were quite young, about ten, they would usually go to a public school. "Winchester College" was one of the first kinds of public schools, founded in 1382. Boys who belonged to the upper class had the best chance to have a good education.

On the other hand, private schools were only for males and they were expensive, therefore it was not affordable for poor families to send their children there. One of the main roles of public schools was to prepare boys to act like gentlemen. To be scholastic did not get a strong emphasis; the main focus was on sportsmanship, religion, leadership, and confidence, so these schools provided the all necessary skills for boys, to be legitimate members of the greatest class in society.

On the other hand, the girls who belonged to the upper class were not attending public schools. They had to stay home and learn the skills that would benefit them after they got married. In the Victorian period, it was the most common issue. Girls had to know how to sing, sew, cook, and play instruments. These skills must be learned before marriage, they learned them to make their husband proud. Ultimately, women's colleges opened and their chances of education increased.

The literacy rate was just about 60% among Enlightenment and approximately below half among women at the beginning of the Victorian era. However, in 1870 the literacy rate became equal for men and women by about 90%. It dramatically increased during the 19th century and women had a high literacy rate. The main reason for increasing the rate of literacy was government involvement in schools and education.

The Enlightenment played a crucial role in increasing literacy rates. A few years before the beginning of the Victorian period, enlightenment began to decrease to a point. Philosophers like John Locke, by the extra effects of philosophical thinking and reliable writing, created a stable increase in literacy rates. At the beginning of the 20th century, men and women's literacy rates in

Britain were almost 100%.

In Victorian England, women were believed only to be educated in “accomplishments” such as artistic talents (singing and dancing), and languages, essentially anything that would allow them to earn a husband and become the “Angels of the House” (Hughes Kathryn 2016).

Some doctors believed that too much education by women would prevent them from reproducing their abilities. Therefore, many families avoided sending their daughters to universities, since they thought one would marry them afterward. However, when more and more women’s colleges opened, women were fascinated to be educated in other subjects rather than just in “fashion”. Therefore knowledge got power and sparked the desire for having the vote rights and creation of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage in 1897” (Picard Liza 2016).

Forty years after the Victorian Era began, with the Education Act in England in 1870; both males and females were required to get an elementary education, while attending secondary education was not considered even for upper-class families until the 1890s.

There was permission to teach for female teachers; however, they received a much lower salary than male teachers. Female teachers had to choose whether to have a career or get married, therefore they remained unmarried while male teachers were not.

Thomas Holloway built Britain’s largest all-female college named The Royal Holloway Academy, he built it based on his wife’s suggestion to answer his question “How best to spend a quarter of a million or more” (Picard Liza 2016).

Women’s property rights

“Thy husband women’s thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
And for thy maintenance commits his body
To painful labor both by sea and land....”

W. Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Before 1882, when women married and became one person with their husbands, they did everything under their husband’s control and directions. Their property and money they had owned transferred to their husbands, even the children were their property, if they decided to divorce each other; men had the right and expected custody of their children. However, these situations improved gradually over the century.

Women after marriage did not have any control over their property as well as their income. Her personal properties such as money or investments and even her jewelry, passed to her husband. She could not part with them without her husband’s agreement. Although in 1870 there was some improvement in the Married Women’s Property Act, these changes allowed them to keep their earnings and properties after marriage.

It might be argued single women with property and significant possessions had to give up everything. Some of them could stay single and live on their own; however, for many of them, marriage was a safe place and acted like a roof over their heads and food on their tables. Marriage for middle and upper-class women was an expected duty, and society prevented them to live on their own and be independent. It means they were convicted to an inescapable life with dependency on man’s income.

In 1870, as an act of parliament, women were allowed to retain their earnings or properties after they got married. In 1873, if women divorced, they could keep supervision of their children up to sixteen. In 1882, women were eventually allowed to keep whatever they owned after marriage. Regardless of these victories, men still considered themselves the superior sex. Their superior physical power gave them opportunities to keep women under their control as long as they could.

Women's political participation

Now historians are looking beyond the fight for voting rights, to understand how Victorian women, engaged with politics in other ways. This research illustrates how some women despite limitations, found creative strategies to influence the political world.

The definition of politics is an important issue. A central issue is the definition of politics. "Are women absent from all political arenas, or are they concentrated in particular areas?" (Sarah Richardson 2013). In the 19th century, the formal political world forbade women considerably until 1918, when women under 30 could not obtain to vote at the parliamentary level. They could vote as same as men. "However, to some extent, this has been due to a narrow definition of politics that excludes women. By adopting a broader interpretation of political participation and identifying the sites where women were able to contribute to political affairs in the nineteenth century (as opposed to those where they were excluded), it is possible to paint a very different picture of female public engagement" (Sarah Richardson 2013).

Until the Municipal Franchise Act of 1869, women could not vote or manage office. The representation of the People Act of 1918, allowed women who were over 30 to vote in national elections. This is largely due to two landmark pieces of legislation in the 1830s that restricted the right to vote to 'male' persons: the Reform Act of 1832 and the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. This, and the emphasis on the women's suffrage campaigns of the later nineteenth century, has led historians to view early to mid-nineteenth-century politics as becoming increasingly 'masculinized'. However, women could only have the right to vote in parish and vestry elections, and they also were allowed to vote for poor law Guardians and Town Commissioners.

Many women are actively involved in politics, but their contributions are often overlooked, both today and historically. Significant obstacles still prevent women from fully participating in public life. To address this, political organizations need to take a more active role in acknowledging women's achievements and changing systems that shut them out.

Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, Christabel and Sylvia. This union activity was concentrated on promoting support for women to vote under socialist and trade union branches in the Manchester area. By the beginning of the slow progress and a violent approach, they were disillusioned. "This approach was called the arson campaign: suffragettes in all parts of Great Britain began destroying property" (Brigitte Remy-Hébert).

In 1912, Emmeline Pankhurst declared and urged her followers: "Those of you, who can break windows, break them. Those of you who can still further attack property to make the government realize that property is as greatly endangered by Women's Suffrage as it was by the Chartists of old, do so. And my last words to the government: I incite this meeting to rebellion" (page 217, Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women, A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866-1914*). "The most conservative estimate suggests that property worth well over £500,000 was destroyed within 18 months" (page 230 Barry Cunliffe, *The Penguin Illustrated History of Britain and Ireland*).

THE CHALLENGE OF FEMINISM

The goals of the feminist movement

This section will illustrate the concept of feminism and its influence on the literary concept. It will begin by notifying the origins of the feminist movement, highlighting the specific challenges they faced, and finally ending up with an intellectual shift.

The word feminism is a French word, and the Cambridge online dictionary define it, "the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way or the set of activities intended to achieve this state" (Cambridge Dictionaries Online). A cultural, political, or economic movement aiming for equal rights for both women and men are used to describe the term "feminism". Until the 1970s the terms 'feminism' and 'feminist'

did not gain widespread meaning use. They started to be used in public discourse more frequently.

The feminist movement concludes with sociological and political theories relevant to gender distinction issues. During the mid-1850s, British women took their first step against the oppression. Along with the avocation of inequality by the first feminists and the emergence of the first suffragette movement, women have initiated achieving their goals to have the same rights and positions in society as men have. The feminist framework illustrates how to define the problems and ask questions. For example, “according to the definition in *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development* written by Jane L. Parpart et al, inequality results from “the need to establish unequal incentives to motivate the most talented people to do the most important jobs efficiently in society” (Jane L. Parpart et al. 2000). Another definition from the same book also says that inequality results from “the practice of providing differential rewards to keep a less powerful working class fragmented by gender and race” (Jane L. Parpart et al, 2000).

Women who were from Britain and France started fighting for their rights, education, and above all respect. Simone de Beauvoir wrote that “the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex was when Christine de Pizan wrote *Epitre au Dieu d’Amour* (Epistle to the God of Love) in the 15th century” (*History and Theory of Feminism*, Network GWANET) However, Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the commanding *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, who received the lion’s share of attention, began to achieve changes in society the early of 19th century. Wollstonecraft was a woman who, as Arianne Chernock says in her book *Men and the Making of Modern British Feminism*, “spoke up, quite loudly, for what had been until then a largely silent section of the human race” (Arianne Chernock, 2010). Even today, Mary Wollstonecraft is considered a founding mother of British feminism by Scholars and her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* can be considered as a first unambiguous feminist work. In addition, Florence Nightingale was one of the main social reformers of the early 19th century, who was convicted that women had “all the potential of men but none of the opportunities” (Michael D. Calabria, 1994), she originated that nursing schools are important and act as a defender of better education for women.

Nonetheless, women attended to organize equal opportunities for both males and females. In this way, feminist men also helped to improve women’s liberation. However, they were not enough. John Stuart Mill was one of the English philosopher and feminist, who was inspired by his wife women’s rights advocate Harriet Taylor Mill. Mill once declared: “[T]he principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (Derek Malone-France, 2012). Mill also became the first British Member of Parliament to introduce a bill calling for women to receive the vote.

A brief historical background

The movement has divided into three separate waves by feminists and scholars and each of the waves is significant for the movement in achieving different goals. The women’s suffrage movement was the main focus of the first wave in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the United Kingdom and the United States; this was focused on women gaining the right to vote. Originally, the first wave concentrated on the promotion of equality and property rights for women and the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women and their children by their husbands. As Margaret Waters claims in her book *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, “for a married woman, her home becomes a prison-house. The house itself, as well as everything in it, belongs to the husband, and of all fixtures, the object is his breeding machine, the wife. Married women are slaves, their situation no better than that of Negroes in the West Indies” (Margaret Walters, 2005, 44). Women were treated as if they acted like servants and they did not have any rights and possessions. The essay “A Plea for Women” by Marion Reid, which has been described as the most thorough and effective statement by a woman since Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, argues “if women’s rights are not the same as those of man, what are they?” in one sense, she admits, “woman was made for man, yet in another and higher she was also made for herself” (Walters, 2005, 42). Reid focuses on reasons why women should not be limited only

by domesticity and that taking care of the household and children should be in the interest of both, the wife as well as the husband. Many female writers and feminists argued that their need was based on women's needs, to fulfill their potential and own natures, not just focus on equality. In "A Room of One's Own" Virginia Woolf talks about the wasted talent of women. To support her statements, Walters comments on it: "She contemplates several greatly talented women from the past, from the Duchess of Newcastle to George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë – who were deprived of experience, intercourse, and travel and that is the reason they never wrote quite as powerfully and generously as they might have. Woolf also reasoned that a woman needs money and a room to write" (Walters, 2005, 96).

In the middle of the 19th century, to improve women's education, and give those opportunities to work outside, some changes in laws, and rights to vote, there were emerged organized campaigns, clubs, and the formation of women's rights. One of the first female groups that were led by Barbara Leigh Smith, called "The Langham Palace", its name comes from one of their meeting places. The duty of this group was to define the issues, women's better education, opportunities in their career, and improving their legal positions in marriage. As Leigh Smith noticed in her pamphlets, as soon as women marry they lose all their property, she discussed this issue as "the problem of marriage settlements".

At the end of the 19th century, the main focus of activism was on women gaining political power and the rights of suffrage. This right of suffrage played an important role not only in accepting women in society but also in improving their lives. Throughout this period, the attempts of suffrage for women never pass by parliament. They said that if parliament influenced by women, as Walters suggests it would lead, "to "hasty alliances with scheming neighbors, more class cries, permissive legislation, domestic perplexities and sentimental grievances" (Walters, 2005, 73). Even though suffragettes could not achieve any chance of victory during the 19th century, they did not give up and remained persistent at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Pankhurst family, Emily Davison or Emily Davies were the greatest characters of British suffrage. Emily Davies conducted women's education, she considered they should have the same education rights as men; she also tried to form a committee to foster the chance of women attending the University Local Examinations, established in the late 1850s. Awarding degrees to women began in 1878 by Queen's and was Bedford Colleges. In 1908, women came to be full members of the University of Oxford; The Pankhurst family played a crucial role in the movement of suffragette. Emmeline Pankhurst the leader of British suffragettes was acknowledged as the most impressive woman in British history. The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was established by the Pankhurst. The WSPU challenged effectively and most radically for the vote as Christabel Pankhurst once remarked: "It is unendurable to think of another generation of women wasting their lives for the vote. We must not lose any more time. We must act" (Kristin Olsen.1994, 196). Finally, in 1918, the vote for women over 30 who owned houses was ahead, granted by the Representation of the People Act. However, this right was extended to all women who were over the age of 21 in 1928. After World War I, seventeen Women finally got a chance to sit in parliament, while as late as 1840, only 12 were elected. Since women had been active on school boards and other local parts, they had significant growth after the war.

The second wave of the feminism movement originated after the World War II. The main responsibility of this wave was focusing on women's legal and social equality rights and most importantly on ending inequality. The second wave was also identified as an extension of the first wave of feminism. The first wave was created after the second wave's emergence. However second wave had a slightly different goal and it required a new term. It recognized women's cultural and political injustice as "inextricably linked and encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures"(History and Theory of Feminism,2016). One of the most influential feminists of the early 20th century was Simone de Beauvoir, who is also the author of *The Second Sex* and of the very famous statement "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (History and Theory of Feminism,2016). De Beauvoir distinguishes sex from gender and suggests that gender is "an aspect of identity gradually acquired. She states that "gender is the cultural meaning and form that body acquires the variable modes of

that body's acculturation" (Judith Butler, 1986, 35).

Even though women's social standing wasn't ideal, they still fought for a fairer place in society. This fight involved the feminist movement, which demanded equal chances for education and work pay. They also advocated for women to have control over their bodies, including access to birth control and abortion. Unlike the larger first-wave movement, second-wave feminism involved smaller groups of women meeting to talk about specific problems they faced. These discussions helped them share experiences, understand their shared identity as women, and tackle issues like rape, which remains important today.

The third wave of feminism sometimes also called post-feminism began in the 1990s and continues up to the present. The wave devoted time to perceiving failures of the second wave and it tried to continue fighting for the same beliefs as in the first and second waves. However there were some slight changes in the third wave movement, instead focusing more on political process and law. It focused more on the individual self. Feminists are more diverse now, feminists were mostly Wasters, middle-class, white women, in the first and second waves. However, the third wave of feminists consisted of women from different ethnicities, colors, religions, and social backgrounds.

In the 1990s, women witnessed noticeable changes and recognition in society not only in the United Kingdom but also in other countries all over the world. Now we can see that women have the same rights and opportunities for education, and occupation as men. They even have a chance to express their opinions and are valued and respected by others.

The feminist movement has helped women to stand on their own and to be aware and acknowledged, this happened over the several decades. Although today feminism cannot be defined as it used to be during the first wave, some women still perceive it as a rigid and outdated movement, and they even do not like to deal with feminism. Nonetheless, in September 2014, a new campaign called "HeForShe" was launched by the United Nations and Emma Watson one of the famous British actresses became Women Global Goodwill Ambassador. The feminist movement has helped women to be independent and acknowledged over the several decades. Nevertheless, today it is hard to define feminism, it is not as visible as it used to be during the first wave, and some women do not want to be associated with feminism as they still perceive it as a severe and dated movement. Nonetheless, in September 2014 a new campaign was launched by United Nations, it was called HeForShe whose Women Global Goodwill Ambassador became the British actress Emma Watson. It was not only her popularity but also her activity and participation in the campaign and speeches at the conferences that grabbed the attention of many people. As Watson herself mentioned at one of the HeForShe conferences: "How can we effect change in the world when only half of it is invited or feel welcome to participate in the conversation?" (HeForShe Campaign 2014). One of the important goals of the campaign is to lure men and boys to claim their rights, this is very crucial because the main aim of the campaign is to make men feel comfortable and call them feminists as well. Even though the campaign was faced with some problems, it is being criticized as it was exclusively run by women. However, the good sign is publicity attention that was drawn to the feminist issue became gradual again.

CONCLUSION

This essay aimed to explore the movement of feminism in the Victorian period. I focused on the history of the phenomenon. The main focus was on the gender roles, differences, and limitations of women in different spheres of life. At first, I tried to define the "cult of domesticity" and the ideal woman as wife and mother in the Victorian Era, then I broke down these roles into three different categories, namely, women's education, property rights, and political participation.

The second part of the research focused on the feminist movement in literature and the development of feminism in the Victorian era, from the first half of the 19th century up to the present. The aim was to explain feminism from its beginning. The most significant figures mentioned were "Mary Wollstonecraft", who is considered to be the founding mother of the movement, Florence Nightingale; and the Pankhurst family. The research depicts the first and second waves of feminism, where women fought for their suffrage, education, equal opportunities,

and independence. Third Wave (since 1990s): reacts to perceived shortcomings of the second wave, advocating for global women's rights and addressing issues beyond suffrage and legal equality. It also depicts the perception of feminism today and continues up to the present. I also tried to mention the differences between the writers and their perceptions of sexuality. They had more freedom to project liberation and character.

Generally, the feminist movement has been developing over the centuries, and the style of writing has been changed; new themes have been needed to address, for example, sexuality and homosexuality, and the importance of freedom has become more apparent. The noticeable difference between the 19th and 20th centuries was that women could vote, freely represent themselves in society, and had equal rights as men. The topics would be perceived as taboos in the 19th century; they would be chosen freely in the 20th century; however, among them were rejection of religion, homosexuality, and sexuality in general.

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