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## Exploring Victorian Womanhood in *The Naulahka*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper delves into the multifaceted portrayal of Victorian womanhood within Rudyard Kipling and Wolcott Balestier's collaborative work, *The Naulahka*. Through textual analysis and historical context, this study investigates the depiction of women characters against the backdrop of late 19th-century society. Exploring themes of agency, societal constraints, and individuality, the research uncovers nuances in the representation of female characters, shedding light on their struggles, aspirations, and roles within a patriarchal framework. Additionally, the analysis explores the intersectionality of race and gender, considering how characters navigate identity within colonial contexts. By contextualizing the text within its socio-cultural milieu, this study offers insights into Victorian ideologies surrounding femininity and challenges conventional narratives of womanhood. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Victorian literature and its reflection on societal norms and values.

**Keywords:** Victorian womanhood, gender roles, agency, colonialism, societal constraints.

Rudyard Kipling, a prominent British author and poet of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was indeed influenced by the historical context of Europe during the nineteenth century. His creations frequently mirrored the prevailing attitudes, ideologies, and happenings of his era. Two central aspects ripe for examination within this framework are Kipling's colonialist perspective and his attitudes towards women. Firstly, to look at the

Colonialist Perspective during the nineteenth century, European colonial powers were expanding their empires around the world, leading to a sense of superiority and the belief in the “White Man’s Burden” (1899) – the idea that it was the responsibility of the Western powers to civilize and uplift the so-called ‘inferior’ cultures they encountered. Kipling’s writings often embodied these attitudes, reflecting the imperialist sentiment of his era. Ashis Nandy has analysed Kipling’s imperialist perspective. He argued that Kipling’s works depicted the British Empire as a civilizing force, justifying its expansion and dominance by portraying the colonized peoples as primitive and needing guidance. His critique suggests that Kipling’s writings perpetuated a colonialist mind-set that downplayed the agency and richness of non-European cultures. (37-8)

Secondly, Kipling’s perspectives on women were also moulded by the gender norms and societal expectations prevalent during his era. During the nineteenth century, women were frequently relegated to roles within the domestic realm, and there were limited opportunities for women to engage in public life or pursue careers. Kipling’s writings often reflected and reinforced these gender roles. His portrayal of women in his works tends to be traditional and limited, conforming to the societal norms of his era. Women were often depicted as supportive and nurturing figures, playing secondary roles to men. In his poem “The Female of the Species” (1911), Kipling portrays women as both tender and fierce, yet he predominantly attributes their strength to their nurturing disposition rather than acknowledging their individual agency. It is important to note that Kipling’s views on women were not particularly progressive by modern standards, and his writings often reinforced gender stereotypes prevalent during his time.

*The Naulahka* is set in colonial India during the late nineteenth century and provides a multifaceted exploration of the complex interactions between different cultures, social classes, and individuals within the colonial context. The story follows the adventures of a young American, Nick Tarvine, who arrives in India to claim an inheritance known as the ‘naulahka,’ a valuable gem. He becomes involved in a series of personal and political intrigues as he navigates the complexities of British colonial rule and the diverse native cultures of India. The colonial perspective in *The Naulahka* reflects the prevailing attitudes of the time when European powers held colonies across the globe. The novel presents a view of the interactions between British colonizers and the indigenous population, showcasing power dynamics, cultural clashes, and the challenges of governing and maintaining control over a foreign land. This perspective often highlights the British viewpoint and attitudes, shedding

light on the complexities, conflicts, and tensions that characterized colonial India. The novel's colonial perspective forms an essential backdrop against which characters like Kate Sheriff can be thoroughly analyzed and understood. Analysing the novel through alternative lenses, such as Victorian womanhood, allows a more nuanced understanding of the characters and their interactions within this colonial setting.

### **Contextualizing Victorian Womanhood**

The significance of Victorian womanhood in literature lies in its portrayal of female characters navigating submissiveness, marriage, family and domesticities. Novels often depict the tension between personal aspirations and societal limitations, fostering complex character development and intricate plots. Moreover, literature functioned as a medium for social critique, laying bare the constraints women encountered and stimulating discourse on gender equality and women's rights. Characters challenging Victorian womanhood's confines became symbols of resistance, contributing to changing real-world gender roles. Analysing *The Naulahka* through the prism of Victorian womanhood engages with a literary tradition reflecting historical perspectives and exploring women's societal roles and challenges.

The Victorian era was characterized by a series of transformations in England's social, political, and moral landscapes throughout the nineteenth century. Literary works during the Victorian period show a complex understanding of the intricate practices constituting Victorian women's lives and reveal the domestic ideology of the time. In *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Sarah Stickney Ellis' *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, and John Ruskin's *Of Queens' Gardens* and *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, the reader can see the tensions of the era regarding the Woman Question; in particular, the focus within these novels is on the woman as working for or against the conservative principles of the Victorian Era. The characters of Jane Eyre, Lucy Audley, and Marian Halcombe work against the conventions of idealized femininity during the Victorian era, as described in most of the works of the time.

During the Victorian era, the ideal woman's life revolved around the domestic sphere of her family and the home. Middle class women were brought up to "be pure and innocent, tender and sexually undemanding, submissive and obedient" to fit the glorified "Angel in the House", the Madonna-image of the time (Lundén et al 147). Gender inequalities in politics, economic life, education and social intercourse for women manifested themselves within the

nineteenth century into a topic called the “Woman Question.” The Woman Question is a multifaceted debate regarding gender ideologies and what is expected of the perfect Victorian lady. Various incidents and circumstances were responsible for raising questions about the role of women in society; their privileges, their deprivations, their opportunities, and their problems (Anis 21).

Women were no longer willingly submitting to the principles of the time as they had once done. In D. H. Lawrence’s “Do Women Change?” (1929), he censures women’s desire to reinvent themselves and states:

Women used to see themselves as a softly flowing stream of attraction and desire and beauty, soft quiet rivers of energy and peace. Then suddenly the idea changes. They see themselves as isolated things, independent females, instruments for love, instruments for work, instruments for politics . . . And as instruments they become pointed and they wanted everything. (Walls 238)

This quotation from Lawrence’s work aptly relates to the change of ideologies in the Victorian era amongst women. They were no longer willing to be perceived in that manner as the *Angel in the House*; women sought liberation from the shackles of social conventions.

In choosing female protagonists, most writers who were determined to represent women as strong figures that challenged the conventions of the time would represent them as capable creatures rather than beautiful ones (Anis 24). So, the protagonist's physical appearance wasn't always central to the narrative; instead, it was her ability to assert herself, exemplified in characters like Kate Sheriff. Whereas Kate is more plain than beautiful, this character is represented as fully capable of inner strength, as Kipling describes Kate in the first chapter of the novel “A brown, sad-eyed little woman sat beside him, staring quietly at the moon. She was tanned with tan of the girl who does not mind wind and rain and sun” (Kipling, ch. 1)

Due to the expansion of education as well as the contribution of the printing press, the nineteenth century became the “great age of the English novel, this was partly because the novel was the vehicle best equipped to present a picture of life lived in a given society against a stable background of social and moral values by people who were recognizably like the people encountered by readers,” and this is the kind of picture of life the middle class reader wanted to read about (Anis 19). Literature is the mirror of society, and during the nineteenth century, it took up the Woman Question immediately.

### **Kate Sheriff as a Victorian woman:**

Kate Sheriff, a central character in *The Naulahka*, emerges as a compelling embodiment of Victorian womanhood within the complex colonial landscape of the novel. Born into an American household, Kate's background situates her within the privileged upper echelons of society as her father was a Civil Engineer. Her upbringing is characterized by the prevailing societal ideals of the era, as "... she had often stayed long enough at the end of a section with her family to see the first glimmering streaks of raw dawn of civilization" (Kipling ch.1) where emphasis was placed on the domestic sphere and moral virtue.

Kate's personality reflects strength, determination, and a subtle defiance of traditional gender norms.

... she liked Nick Tarvin but she had a duty elsewhere. This duty, as she conceived it, was, briefly, to spend her life in the East in the effort to better the condition of the women in India. It had come to her as an inspiration and a command two years before, toward the end of her second year at the St. Louis school, where she went to tie up the loose ends of education she had given herself in lonely camps. (Kipling ch.1)

Her circumstances, particularly as a young woman in colonial India, allow her to navigate the era's challenges while embodying the qualities expected of a Victorian woman. Her engagement with the colonial society introduces tensions between her personal and societal expectations.

As a member of the privileged class, Kate has received education and exhibits intelligence, curiosity, and a keen awareness of her surroundings. However, her education is tempered by the constraints imposed on women's aspirations during the Victorian era. The limitations that Nick reminds her about the family against her aspiration, when, she decides to go to India to serve, he says, "you've got a father and a mother, haven't you? You can't say it's the square thing to give them up. And you've got a man sitting beside you on this bridge who loves you for all he's worth." (Kipling ch. 1)

Kate Sheriff and Nick Tarvin are emblematic figures, each possessing solid wills that intersect and clash within the intricate. Kate's character embodies the Victorian womanhood ideals of the era, while Nick's determination reflects a more unconventional and ambitious pursuit. These conflicting wills provide a captivating exploration of individual desires within the context of a society moulded by both colonialism and Victorian values.

Kate Sheriff, with her upbringing and education, epitomizes the essence of Victorian womanhood. As an upper-class woman, she is anticipated to embody the virtues of domesticity, modesty, and moral rectitude. However, Kate defies these expectations with her

aspiration to serve in India, subverting the traditional role of women as homemakers. Her desire to be of service and contribute to colonial society contrasts with the limited opportunities afforded to women, revealing her determination to shape her destiny beyond societal norms.

On the other hand, Nick's will is driven by a vision of progress and modernization, as evidenced by his ambition to introduce railroads to Topaz. His character embodies an entrepreneurial spirit that challenges the limitations placed on him by his social status and class. His insistence on realizing his railroad project in the face of obstacles mirrors Kate's determination to fulfil her aspirations.

...She had her own will. They sat on the bridge beating out their difference until they heard the kitchen clock in a cabin on the other side of the ditch strike eleven...he knew she meant that she must go to India, and his own will crumpled helplessly for the moment within hers. He asked himself whether this was the will by which he earned his living, the will which at twenty-eight had made him a successful man by Topaz standards, which was taking him to the State Legislature... (Kipling ch. 1)

The dynamic between Kate and Nick takes a complex turn as their will intersect. Nick's encouragement for Kate to relinquish her desire to serve in India stems from his own perspective on women's roles and a desire to see her support his endeavours. Conversely, Kate's insistence on pursuing her calling challenges Nick's perception of gender roles, highlighting the tension between their ambitions and societal expectations.

The clash between Kate and Nick's wills encapsulates the broader theme of personal agency within the confines of a colonial and Victorian context. Their interactions reflect the intricate interplay of gender, power, and ambition within a society grappling with change. As their characters navigate their paths, the tension between their respective wills adds depth to the narrative. It underscores the complexities of identity, autonomy, and the pursuit of aspirations within the boundaries of tradition and progress.

Kate and Nick emerge as two distinct perspectives on marriage, reflecting the intricate interplay between personal ambitions and societal expectations. Her unwavering determination to pursue her ambitions clashes with Nick's insistence on his own vision, leading to a nuanced exploration of marriage as a dynamic influenced by individual aspirations and the complexities of the era. She embodies a resolute commitment to her aspirations, challenging the conventional notion of marriage as a primary life goal for Victorian women.

... Marriage is that way. It is right. Marriage means that – to be absorbed into another’s life: to live your own, not as your own but another’s. It is a good life. It’s a woman’s life. I can like it; I can believe in it. But I can’t see myself in it. A woman gives the whole of herself in marriage – in all happy marriages. I haven’t the whole of myself to give. It belongs to something else. And I couldn’t offer you a part it is all the best men give to women, but from a woman it would do no man any good” (Kipling ch. 18)

Her strong-willed nature and desire to serve in India define her identity, highlighting her resolve to define herself beyond the confines of marriage. “I don’t say that; but suppose I did, would it be so strange? Be honest, Nick, suppose I asked you to give up the centre and meaning of *your* life? Suppose I asked you to give up *your* work? And suppose I offered in exchange – marriage! No, no!’ She shook her head. ‘Marriage is good; but what man would pay that price for it?’” (Kipling ch. 18) Her ambition takes precedence, leading her to resist the traditional path that society expects her to follow. This defiance is emblematic of her determination to shape her destiny based on her convictions, irrespective of societal norms.

In contrast, Nick Tarvin’s perspective on marriage is profoundly shaped by his achievements and aspirations. With the attainment of the ‘*naulahka*’ gem, a symbol of his material achievement, Nick’s ambitions seem to converge on a personal level. “I am grateful, Nick, it’s a gift – the highest, the best, and I’m grateful. But what is it you really want? Shall you mind my asking that, Nick? You want me to round out your life, you want me to complete your other ambitions. Isn’t that so? Tell me honestly, Nick; isn’t that so?” (Kipling ch. 18) He sees Kate as an integral part of this newfound success, which prompts him to insist that she give up her own ambitions and accompany him to Topaz. Nick’s view of marriage is intrinsically tied to his vision of a shared life that aligns with his achievements and aspirations.

The tension between Kate and Nick’s differing views on marriage underscores the complex dynamics between personal goals and relationships. Kate’s steadfast determination represents a broader shift in societal expectations, reflecting changing perspectives on women’s roles during the Victorian era. Nick’s insistence on a more traditional path demonstrates the struggle to reconcile personal desires with the societal norms of the time, particularly in the context of a changing world shaped by colonial influence.

Their interactions highlight the intricate interplay of personal agency and external pressures within marriage. As Nick’s ambition is fulfilled with the acquisition of the gem, his desire for Kate can be interpreted as a culmination of his personal conquests. This dynamic



mirrors the multifaceted nature of marriage within the context of personal aspirations and the broader societal landscape.

## **Conclusion**

In Kipling's *The Naulahka*, a tapestry of perspectives and complexities unfolds, shedding light on the Victorian era's intricate web of societal norms and personal aspirations. Kipling's nuanced view of women is subtly woven throughout the narrative, offering a glimpse into the evolving roles of women during that era. Kate Sheriff, a quintessential embodiment of Victorian womanhood, is a remarkable character within this multifaceted tapestry. Her resilience, determination, and defiance of conventional norms exemplify the essence of a Victorian woman navigating a colonial landscape.

Nick's emphasis on family adds another layer to the narrative, intertwining his ambitions with his yearning for a shared life. The conflict between Kate and Nick's wills further underscores the clash between individual aspirations and societal expectations, mirroring the broader struggle of women like Kate, who sought to redefine their roles. Kate's perspective on marriage stands as a pivotal aspect of her character. Her steadfast commitment to her ambitions and resistance to the conventional path underscores her agency, illustrating her determination to shape her destiny on her terms. In this regard, Kate Sheriff emerges as an emblematic example of a Victorian woman who defied the normative constraints of her time.

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