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The Corset Affair

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Abstract:

Susan Brownmiller has stressed the want to “get a grip on the corset” (19) when talking about the femininity in nineteenth century. Thus this research paper seeks to examine the almost near-constant companion (corsets) of females and its practise in that era. The corsets achieved the pinnacle of being known as controversial during the decades, as it was thought to be a symbol of patriarchy and later on as a mark of independence. Using historical exploration regarding corsets, this paper seeks to “get a grip” (19) on it, by understanding its meaning by different people at different times.

It is my assertion that the corset industry gave females, the way to freedom and independence, moreover it was not solely a feminine garment, and an outcome of patriarchy entirely. I will review how the females of the Victorian era, found solace while working in the industries and making something for themselves out of it. My approach towards this will combine the former theorization on the subject, by Valerie Steele at the same time providing new points of departure to look into the importance of Corsets.

Keywords: Corsets, Valerie Steele, Freedom, Male Corsets, Oppression.

“No discussion of the feminine body in the western world can make real sense without getting a grip on the corset as it has played a starring role in the (female) body’s history” (Brownmiller, 19).

It is almost impossible to read about the nineteenth century, without having a mention of Corsets in it. This seven lettered word, has been a subject of debate from centuries but nevertheless it was the essence of the fashion world, as it “meant different things to different people at different times” (Steele, 1). Articulating Steele’s word, it is important to note that the word corset has endless interpretation and unimaginable meanings associated with it. The usage of the corsets started from the time of Renaissance until the twentieth century, when it was given up by almost every lady. The female population of the nineteenth century had their own purpose as to why they wore corsets; in some cases, it was either the mother figure that forced them into it and in some further cases, it was their own personal choice. It can be articulated that perhaps corsets were important as it guaranteed a woman’s respectability in her social circle. Despite the fact that it was invisible, it somehow created the feminine feature; so necessary for a lady to have a tidy and neat look. Thus, not wearing a corset, was thought as ‘indecent’; moreover, commenting on a lady’s class status. As Kortsch have further commented on it that “tight lacers were accused of using the corset to arouse impure desires, not wearing a corset could nevertheless lead to charges of sexual promiscuity or moral laxity” (56).

Right from the birth, most of the females were taught on how to look more beautiful so that they can ‘catch’ a suitable male for themselves. “She is brought up to marry by

“catching” a man with her good looks and pleasing manner” (Orbach, 16). And to achieve these manners and good looks, she must have the knowledge of all the household works, she must be sensual, sexual, and flawless and of course THIN. John Berger in his book *Ways of Seeing* describes this relationship of men and women and their way of seeing things:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves (47).

Since they are taught to see themselves as the worthy candidate for men they have no other choice but to resort to the fashion and diet industries to become what they are asked as, and in this process, they drag other women to the same. The whole motto of some of the females then was to marry a nice man, whom they can lure through their appealing good looks and manners, and this perfect appearance for most of the women came from wearing corsets. Hence, the *Corsets* came into being.

“And yet the corset is *also* undeniably a symptom and symbol of female oppression” (Kunzle, xviii) - assertions like these, have brought the corsets in a very mistaken attention but this is not the only allegation, as there are so many: first being, that it was worn by the females only and another being it was worn due to oppression and patriarchal system of the nineteenth-century. Even though the corset was an essential piece of garment for most of the Victorians, it was claimed as an element of torture and death which was forced onto females by the male authority of the family. Charles Reade, in his novel *A Simpleton*, claims that the corsets were indeed an element of torture for the ladies but dismisses the accusation that corsets were an outcome of oppression. The novelist was very much devoted to the plot of the novel to nullify the allegation of oppression, consequently, he criticized the use of corsets, by portraying the character of Rosa and Dr. Staines: the two extreme mind-sets of the Victorian era regarding fashion. “Throw that diabolical machine into the fire” (Reade, 71), said Dr. Staines, as he believed in a rational sense of fashion and also voiced the author’s concern. Whereas, on the other hand, was Rosa, the heroine of the novel and a stubborn character who does not want to submit and surrender her corset. She is, in fact, the voice of many women who were reluctant to give away their corsets. “It is so unfeminine not to wear them” (58) and “a tiny waist is beautiful” (58), she further goes on to say that fathers and husbands should not be “interfering in such things” (58). By portraying the character of Rosa, Reade wants to show that it was not always the male authority that pressurized women into wearing such clothes, instead, it was more of their personal choice. Critics like David Kunzle, comments on *A Simpleton* by saying “Reade is playing upon a social stereotype of the foolish young woman, in which her tight lacing is a significant emblem of folly” (Kunzle, 131). While labelling all females as foolish, vain or having a poor sense of judgment critics like Kunzle forgot to see why the females were so reluctant in throwing away their corsets. Valerie Steele, in her book, *The Corset: A Cultural History* answers this by saying “Women’s reluctance to abandon the corset was closely related to their interest in fashionable dress” (35). The set image of the women in the nineteenth century confined them to their houses and families, but being involved in the fashion gave some women the impression that they have acquired independence, it was their way to see freedom: “freedom to have fun, to evade their

chaperones, to flirt” (Anderson, 118). Ergo, it is interesting to note that in the nineteenth century the synonym of independence for most of the females became corset.

Similarly, Charles Dickens wrote numerous novels like *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Bleak House* to fight against the stereotyped image of the females who didn't wear corsets- “a woman who did not wear a corset was considered lazy, sloppy, and indecent; indeed, loose” (Berglund, 322). The frequency with which he wrote such novels, was a way for him to show his disapproval of the corset, as he considered it as a cruel device that had severe health effects. He was against it and against the idea of unnatural beauty. “Dickens was as enamoured of the beauty of tiny feet and luxurious hair as he was repulsed by the associations of the wasp waist” (Kunzle, 130). Dickens had his own standards of femininity and he believed that a lady should be generous, soft flowing, innocent and childish, but as soon as she wears a corset, she no longer remains a generous lady- “Tightly she shakes her head. And tightly she smiles” (Dickens, 252). The novelist held the notion that not only stays and tight lacing harm the inner organs, but also harms the natural beauty of a lady. He was in a way more concerned with the manner with which corset created stiffness in the body of the women which stood against his belief of soft yielding femininity. “Beside her sat her spinster daughters, three in number, and of gentlemanly deportment, who had so mortified themselves with tight stays that their tempers were reduced to something less than their waists, and sharp lacing was expressed in their very nose” (Dickens, 55). Dickens was one of the few who looked upon at corset with utmost disgust, he believed that not only it did harm the inner body but also destroyed the character of a person.

Likewise, in the novel *A Simpleton*, the author tries to convey to the readers that one does not need to wear a corset to become attainable for marriage. “It in fact reassures its readers, that such artifices are unnecessary, for the men in the novel, are all drawn to the healthy and vibrant Rosa, as she is when unrestricted by her corset” (Byrne, 123). It was not the male society that forced the females into anything, as they were most of the time away from home, or they were ignorant of the ill-health of the females in the family, like Rosa's father or condemned the practice harshly like Dr. Staines. “The opinion of other women is what matters in terms of appearance, and masculine approval is not sought” (Byrne, 123). For the ladies, it was always the matter of class and Reade in his novel constructs fashion as a concern of high-class. As for Rosa, dresses were meant to define her social status and she used to do tight lacing to imitate her wealthier friends. She is easily “horrified when her maid blurs the boundaries between them by wearing very similar clothes” (Byrne, 124). Women accepted corsets as an integral part of their life and even after knowing all the problems associated with it. They wanted to be that one Lady in a party, who was beautiful of all. “Deformity has through long custom become to us beauty” (Ballin, 151) – custom of wearing it to look more appealing.

The society of the nineteenth century used to work on a cliché that ‘*clothes make the man*’ and they profoundly followed this cliché and made it their truth. Therefore, most of the sex roles of the nineteenth century were defined by the way of dressing. But such an ideology saw some changes with passing time, as men got involved with the fashion world. As more and more corsets were linked with the female attire, the more ignorance was getting created

towards the fact, that a corset was not entirely a female clothing part. “Some men also wore corsets” (Steele, 2). Consequently, the other men condemned it and wanted to make sure that it remains a female attire only, but they were successful in doing so. This was a little controversial during the first half of the nineteenth century but later on, it became more prominent. Corsets were preferred by men especially by military men at first for medical reasons and back purposes. “Corsets support the back (at least in the short run), they were favored by military men, especially cavalry officers, well into the nineteenth century” (Steele, 38). But as the time progressed corsets came into being more by the males. Stout gentlemen used to wear them, to tuck in their waist and to become more good looking. Another reason for them to wear corsets was their interest in the fashion culture, even though they were made fun of, for being involved in a world of females. The fat Joseph Sedley, a character in William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* had an interest in the corsets and he had tried “every girth, stay and waistband then invented” (Thackeray, 12).

Adornment and self-fashioning were applied to both men and women during the nineteenth century. Whilst all debates regarding the corsets were going on, the historians always linked stays or tight lacing to females and regarded it as a feminine garment, though the great majority of people wearing it were, of course, females but males were not far behind. Even the advertisements regarding corsets were centred more for the males, as it was considered then, that the personality of a person is enhanced more with the thinness of his body and narrowness of his waist. Furthermore, *The Workwoman’s Guide*, which was published in London in 1838, claimed that “men’s stays or belts... are worn by gentlemen in the army, hunters or by those using violent exercises” (68). The whole impression that males were indulging themselves with wearing corsets, was hugely discriminated by the fellow males as they were not comfortable by being tagged with a feminine attire. People travelling to England in mid-nineteenth century like Peter Kalm, told in his description of England, for a publisher that in the city “*All go laced*” as both the men and women were actively involved with the fashion world, and widely made use of the corsets for their own different purposes.

“Victorian upper-class school girls were sometimes pressurized into wearing corsets. It was not only seen as a way of disciplining the child in neatness and decorum but also of preparing the girls for marriage” (Rodrigues). It was not in all cases, that wearing corset or stays was not considered as oppression, but this oppression was not due to a male figure of the family, it was more of a female concern. The mother figure in the family forced the females of the house to wear corsets so that their image in the marriage market would be appreciated and taken into consideration. “Older women, not men, were primarily responsible for enforcing sartorial norms” (Steele, 51). The nineteenth century saw the wave of tight lacing to its extreme ends, as tiny waist and marriage became the two main concerns for the females. “Of course, women have constricted their waists with tight belts and corsets to varying degrees throughout history.. but never before with such intensity and ruthless determination as in the latter part of the nineteenth century” (Martin). Nineteenth century was termed as ruthless, because it became more and more superficial, everyone was concerned about their looks, which ultimately made most of the females conscious about their appearances. Thus, being beautiful was every female’s duty and to allure a perfect man, the ultimate agenda. The females of the nineteenth century, cannot be called as oppressed by the

fashion, or by the patriarchal system in the terms of corset, rather they were obsessed with the thought of being beautiful. “These dressings upheld their beliefs that in putting up with all these, they were being courageous while enduring pain” (Rodrigues). They were not concerned with what was happening to their bodies, as they were already in the rat race to climb the social ladder. “Many women did reduce their waists by several inches but accounts of tight lacing to extreme tenuity usually represent fantasies” (Steele, 2) - fantasy of becoming more beautiful and more attainable. Even Though these fantasies were condemned by many historians, doctors, and especially male authorities, the triumph of the garment occurred anyway and it was not due to repression but “because the industrial revolution and democratization of fashion gave women more access to corsets” (Steele, 36). Being in the household for most of the time, they started to take more interest in the fashion world, as the males were mostly busy in the outside world. Therefore, “fashion became their major occupation” (Rodrigues).

Whilst all the controversies were going on regarding the use of corsets, some women turned it to their benefit, through sewing. “Nineteenth-century heroines usually knew how to see” (Kortsch, 23). Sewing was part of the basic knowledge given to any female at that time and it was considered as something important. “A woman who does not know how to sew is as deficient in her education as a man who cannot write” (Farrar, 34). This is not to say that every female was treated like these but most of the females knew how to sew and cook. Moreover, it was considered that the skill needed with sewing usually describes a character and therefore Victorian novelists never failed to provide their heroines, the education of sewing. Even Jane, in Jane Eyre, teaches the schoolgirl the most important skill of sewing reading and writing. Even though the critics and feminists protested this kind of education, they somewhat had the idea that females can use this knowledge of sewing for their own benefits. At the same time, there were ongoing debates on corsets claiming how unhealthy and dangerous they are for women’s health, the historians forgot to mention that even this “dangerous” piece of cloth became a symbol of independence and freedom for some females. The education given to females regarding the sewing and needles came to be of use in the corset business. “It is not amusing to make a corset, as it can be to make a ballgown [or] a hat.. but that doesn’t matter; a young woman must be able to make everything she needs” (Burtel, 5). Therefore, women started to involve themselves with the corset business, they imparted their knowledge to make their own attires. As women were unwilling to give up on corsets, they started making their own stays and used their spare time. Now, instead of being within the household territories and doing the same thing daily, women started sewing their own corsets. Like Mary Barton, of Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, who helps her family by earning even a meagre amount by becoming a dressmaker’s assistant. Earning a small amount of money basically gave them pride, and a sense of being not dependent on their husbands. They were able to go out and socialise outside their homes.

Furthermore, to help women, there were certain books that provided them with the information for making corsets. Books such as “*The Workwoman’s Guide* (1838) and the *Young woman’s Guide* containing correct rules for the pursuit of Millinery, Dress and Corset making (1847), also included information on constructing homemade corsets” (Steele, 39). All the needed information for the corset making provided by such magazines. As corsets

were claimed to be an important dress for females- “dress to retain as long as possible the charm of beauty and the appearance of youth” (Caplin, 66). The reason who so many women were indulging themselves in the corset business were manifold. First of all, some females were poor who could not afford to buy corsets from the market. Second of all, those who could afford wanted to make their own so that they can loosen and tighten them up according to their own choice, additionally some women wanted to make healthier and comfortable corsets, which were not available. Thirdly, it was a way for them to earn money and become independent. It was a source of income for them. “Women had begun to establish themselves as professional stay makers” (Steele, 40). And by the mid-nineteenth century, the majority of corset manufacturers were females and so were the dressmakers.

As the women started to establish themselves more and more, critics started criticising even that. Madame Roxey A. Caplin’s book *Health and Beauty; or corsets and clothing constructed in accordance with the physiological laws of the human body* claimed that women have moved away from nature and got more and more involved with the fashion. Moreover, she criticised women for indulging in corset industry- “unfortunately, corset making has fallen into the hands of quacks” and “working people, generally females of little or no education” (42). There was no way for the corset to be not judged, whatsoever was happening around it, people judged and mostly associated it with insanity and torturous.

Tight lacing, in the Victorian era became a situated practice that meant different things to people living in different eras and at different times, but the allegations made on the corsets were strong and left the readers of the nineteenth century wondering as to how much corsets were deeply implicated in the construction of a passive feminine ideal, but such was of course not the case. Even though the corsets have been blamed for things that were not possible, the garment made its way through it, and lived for 400 years till the progress in women’s liberation resulted in its demise. Even after its end it remained as the most discussed topic for debate for centuries and still is, but almost most of the critics remained ignorant of the fact that it had some positive connotations as well except for few like Valerie Steele, Christine Bayles Kortsch. Though some women considered it as an assault on their body, some women rebelled against it, while many used it to gain their freedom from the household duties. The corsets cannot be only termed as a symbol of oppression, as it also became an amalgam of freedom and femininity, for women who involved themselves in the corset industry and earned a sufficient amount of income for their families. Moreover, it was a garment, worn both by males and females, as a health aid in the nineteenth century. However, there is no denying to the fact that some women did use it to the dangerous extents which had adverse effects on their health but that does not completely makes it dangerous and torturous. People used it differently with different motives in mind., and women certainly were not ‘slaves’ or ‘victims’ of fashion.

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