Kun Yang

HIS 211-03

Mrs. Ward

Women’s role during antebellum era

Women are the acting as one of the most important role in the current society; however it has gone through different changing from the earliest colony era to the antebellum era. Throughout the process, women had gained surprisingly amount of civil rights, for example voting, acquiring jobs outside of the household, etc. This essay argues that during the antebellum period, the women from the south of the Missouri boarder were restricted to the home, due to social norm dictated by religion, cult of domesticity, and inferiority.

During the antebellum period, the women were expected to stay home due to one of the reasons, religion. They were religiously expected to marry into a man’s house, and living in the house was the only available job that women could acquire. From the article “Harriet Martineau on the condition of American Woman”, Author Peter Smith stated “Marriage is the only object left open to woman.”(Hollitz 166) Peter heavily adjusted that women were only open to marriage; he referred preaching, paying visits to the poor was a “good practice”, however doing the opposite which was doing anything outside of religious practice was a “bad practice”. He believed that activities other than religious practice or staying in home were over taking the women’s energies, though the women should just do the requirement of their social roles. The restricted religious reason has planned in women’s mind when they were young; therefore the women were forced faithfully to believe that they weren’t strong enough to do any outside practice during the pre antebellum period. Their mind were forcefully being closed by the religion, therefore they mindfully believed that it was the women’s destiny to put the husband as the individual personal priority, sacrificing such belief was an act that believability against the god, which ultimately viewed as religiously violent, due to the guiltiness of disobeying religious will regarded as a bad human behavior.

Another major reason for women being restricted to the home was the cult of domesticity, in another word, the society was the determined factor of both gender’s role. The article “The Ideal Southern Woman” by Thomas Drew, has successfully addressed the physical appearance was the pre-determined reason of women who were supposed to stay home. He argued that “The greater physical strength of men, enables him to occupy the foreground in the picture”(Hollitz 274), the dominated physical appearance has made the male more capable of working and providing the family, and because the superiority of males made the men easier to deal with the outside hardship environment. When the women were acting as the warm welcoming environment to men who were back from the outside hardship environment, therefore the author believed the women’s role at the early antebellum era was intended to be a passive character, where he mentioned that women should be subdued to the great strength which was the dominated male’s characters. It was unbelievable for Thomas to describe that men at the antebellum era could take advantage over the loving, caring, and grace character of women, and also he adjusted that it was women’s nature to be subdued to the masculinity. By that said, he created the unequally between men and women, which at the end it will be viewed as sexism during the modern day with the argument that human created equally.

The last point justified the inferiority for women who were restricted to the home. The article “Treatise on Domestic economy” by Catherine Beecher argued the necessity of the inferiority of women. She believed that women had the right to be came part of the society by acquiring a job, raising the attention of women voting, and making laws that reinforces the rights of women. However she suggested the argument that the future of the America was based on a good foundation of a well educated youth, therefore Catherine believed it was women’s role to fulfill the necessity of being the educator of the youth. “the success of democratic institution, as is all concerned by all, depends upon the intellectual and moral character of the mass of the people”(hollitz 266) She heavily believed that only women could do a better job of educating the youth, and it was important that being an educator was designated to the females in the antebellum society, which ultimately made the women to believe that staying home and educating the youth was the only contribution to the society. However the male could also do the job as well, which Catherine or any women at the antebellum period had not considered.

A significant article could justify the women’s role changed from 1820s to 1865 “We Mean to Be Counted: White Women & Politics in Antebellum Virginia.” by Jean Harvey Baker. Article adjusted mainly on the topic of middle-class Virginian women’s role in the antebellum period, from the early 1820s to 1865 after the civil war. The author importantly stated the early role of the Virginian women during the late colonial period 1820s, when the women supposed to present the inferiority to men. After the colonial period 1830s, the Virginian women had became a group of people who were known as the “opinion maker”, however they had not accomplished with the goal of ending slavery. At the post evolutionary period 1840, the Virginian women started acquiring public expression like joining the Whig party, by following the Whig party’s principle, the women were supposed to educate the families. The author stated that the book “we mean to be counted” was demonstrated the changing of society role as race and gender in the antebellum of southern America.

Such article well contributes to the understanding that women from 1820s to 1865 experienced the gaining of civil rights, which ultimately allowed such history to demonstrate that women had noticed the inequality between the role of women and men, and they were willing to take action to gain their ground step by step.

“The Women Left Behind: Transformation of The Southern Belle” argued the changing image of the southern women of the pre-civil war period. The article believed the original role of the southern women was the holder of the cultures, Feminine, and the domestic sphere of the household. As the author argued for the women’s identities, they believed that women had assigned to the sphere that women should embrace the “femininity”, “beauty”, “simplicity”, and “submissiveness”. The authors as well as adjusted the social role of the southern women; they believed that the southern women should be “nurturing mother”, “dutiful wife”, and the “social moral pillar”.

The author mentioned that, it was required of women who were under the law of marriage to be “suspended” or “consolidated” into the men, due to the reasons that women were under the protections of the men. Therefore, such action from women enhanced the masculinity of men, while women still remained the moral value of acting as the idealistic kind counterpart of the male.

During the middle of the peer-review, the authors interestingly stated that the historian argued the southern women’s role with two identities, “a victim of slave society”, or the women were the highly educated people who caught at the struggle to improve the social statues, however, both ideas shared the same trait, where women were eager to change into a higher stander of social role.

The author showed that women’s working role had increased after the civil war, where the domestic inferior southern women got the chance to move into the male-dominated labor. And due to the Second Great Awakening, the women’s thoughts had again re-elaborated, it shifted from only being submissive to white male into individual independency; the minister encourage the women with charity and hospitality, which the women gathered up in response of helping the less unfortunate with their actions and prayers, this action has given the group of these southern women independency.

The authors had successfully demonstrated the changing role of the women, at first the women were viewed as the culture holder, the domestic sphere of the household, and the identity of submissiveness to men; which changed into the more independent, well organized group of force, who was still carrying the caring and loving characters at the same time.

At the end women are important throughout the face of history; their right movement represents the fight for freedom and the fight for equality. The fight was originally started with the issues that during the antebellum period, the women from the south of the Missouri boarder were restricted to the home, due to social norm dictated by religion, cult of domesticity, and inferiority.

Work cite

“Harriet Martineau on the condition of American Woman” Peter Smith *Think Through the Past, Vol1*(June 2009) 165-166

“The Ideal Southern Woman” Thomas Drew *Think Through the Past, Vol1*(June 2009) 274-275

“Treatise on Domestic economy” Catherine Beecher *Through the Past, Vol1*(June 2009) 265-267

“We Mean to Be Counted: White Women & Politics in Antebellum Virginia.” Jean Harvey Baker *Journal of American History*, 85:4(1995 March):1595-1596

“The Women Left Behind: Transformation of The Southern Belle 1840-1880” Brown, Alexis Giradin *Historian Summer* 62:4 (2000) 759