

Depression, a Major Theme of Modern Literature as the Culmination Point of the Degradation of Human Feelings Found in Victorian Literature

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DOI: doi.org/10.37854/ACIELJ.2024.6301

Paper Received on 17-05-2023, Paper Revised on 12-09-2023

Paper Accepted on 22-09-2023, Paper Published on 28-09-2023

Abstract

This study aims to show how life is portrayed in the Victorian Age through Victorian literature and its effects on modern literature. The paper represents depression, considered to be the central theme of modern literature, also found available in modern society where degradation of human feelings found in Victorian society and literature that acted as the catalysts of depression. To make this paper more acceptable, a comparison of Victorian and modern writers' writing styles and techniques is shown. To show the writing styles of Victorian and modern novels, Victorian novels have been described as having grotesque elements. In contrast, modern novels use a 'stream of consciousness.' Victorian poetry uses dramatic monologue, whereas modern poetry uses 'interior monologue.' Another comparison is held, keeping in mind the spiritual conditions of humans in the two periods. In the Victorian Age, people remained far away from spirituality; on the other hand, in modern society, people have an attempt to clutch the spiritual senses. Finally, this paper talks about how Victorian literature primarily reflects depression that comes from the breakdown of romantic spirits and disillusionment, followed by the rise of materialistic achievements during industrialization, which results in the cry of a departed and disinterested human soul prevailing in modern literature.

Keywords: Victorian Age, depression, Culmination Point, Degradation, disillusionment

1. Introduction

The term 'Depression' is closely related to hopelessness, a state of low mood and reluctance to all kinds of activities that can affect a person's thoughts, behaviors, tendencies, and sense of well-being to a great extent. Massive degradation of human feelings, behaviors, and adverse relationships of humans are considered to be the key factors of depression, which are vividly seen in modern society and are drastically portrayed in modern literature. These portrayals are found in Victorian literature. Victorian literature primarily reflects depression, which refers to the decaying romantic spirits that are followed by the rise of materialistic achievements during industrialization, which resulted in the cry of a departed and disintegrated human soul from his world prevailing in modern literature. The juxtaposition of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror results in disillusion among the contemporary people as during the French Revolution, it was expected that political freedom, social construction, and enlightenment would be brought to Europe; but unfortunately, these expectations were dashed because of the 'Reign of Terror' as during Reign of Terror many persons were ruthlessly executed by the ruling faction that ultimately causes disillusion in the society. So, disillusionment is the beginning of depression and is considered to occur from the distance between Romanticism and realism.

For this reason, the Victorian Age was preceded by Romanticism and followed by modernism and realism. Victorian literature can also be called a mixture of romantic and realist writing. All the writers of this period had three general characteristics. Firstly, the literature of this period tends to face realism, which has become a powerful weapon for human progress. Secondly, Victorian literature deviates from the strict principle of " Art and Art's sake" and asserts its moral purpose. Thirdly, as reflected in its literature, the Victorian Age was an age of depression, pessimism, and confusion that have been grasped in modern literature.

2. Literature Review

In the mid-1970s, Peter Lewiston deconstructed that depression is caused by a combination of stressors in a person's environment and a lack of personal capabilities or skills. According to Lewiston, depressed people are precisely those people who do not have ideas on how to cope with the fact that they are no longer receiving positive reinforcements like they were before. For example, a kid who has newly been shifted to a new home and has consequently lost touch with prior friends might not have the social skills necessary to make new friends easily and could become depressed. In the same way, a man who has been executed from his job and faces numerous difficulties finding a new job might become depressed.

According to Sigmund Freud, the tendency to internalize lost objects is normal, and that depression is simply due to excessive super-ego. Thus, the depressive phase occurs when the individual's super-ego or conscience dominates. By contrast, the manic phase occurs when the individual's ego or rational mind asserts itself, and s/he feels controlled. To avoid the losses turning into depression, the individuals need to engage in a period of mourning work, during which they recall memories of the lost one. This allows them to separate themselves from the lost person and so reduce the inner-directed anger. Although depression is a modern phenomenon, its root lies in the Victorian Age. Analyzing the literature, art, poetry, and plays of the Victorian period, it is found that Victorian society and culture have a strong influence

on modern society in the evolving depression that we find in modern literature. Silvia Plath, a modern poet and novelist, portrays her struggle and depression in her novel *The Bell Jar*. It has become a modern classic and poetic way that describes the character Esther Greenwood's bitter experience in New York as a young fashion intern's spiraling journey into depression:

" I did not know why I was going to cry, but I know that if anybody spoke to me or looked at me too closely, the tears would fly out of my eyes, and the snobs would fly out of the throat, and I'd cry for a week."

Emily Bronte's eminent novel, *Wuthering Heights*, is a very dreary book as many of the main characters in the novel act. In today's society, the characters in the novel would have been identified by certain aspects of mental illnesses that may have ultimately changed the whole effect of the novel and the effect that each of the characters had on each other in the novel.

Although characters depicted with depression have emerged from Victorian literature with forced lobotomies, evil nurses, and mad women confined in attics, and possibly, readers with mental health matters of their own can identify and diagnose some of the more modern depictions, more needs to be done to create more literature with trustworthy and realistic protagonists that will portray depression crystal.

3. Key Factors Behind Depression

3.1. Alienation

Alienation is the inability to involve oneself in social activities that generate depression felt by that person as he gets isolated from his whole surroundings. Alienation is not always a phenomenon created by the victims; rather, sometimes, the social environments become responsible for it. In many uncivilized societies, especially in the Indian subcontinent, an AIDS patient is forced to live alone and has to lead a miserable life that causes abundant depression.

3.2. Aimlessness

Aimlessness is also a common phenomenon in modern society, the victim who leads his/her life just as living as a 'puppet' since he/she can see everything but doesn't enjoy his/her life due to aimlessness. His/her life becomes like a boat without any rudder. Life becomes futile and meaningless for a modern man and woman. Thus, modern people need clarification about the values of their life.

3.3. Frustration:

Statistics show that more than sixty percent of people in the modern Age are suffering from frustration. People become mostly frustrated when they can't get the output according to their demands or expectations. It may happen when someone needs to get jobs according to his worth or a student can't produce results according to his expectation. Nowadays, people are getting more frustrated than in the past due to the modern social structure.

3.4. Realism

Realism, also known as naturalism, is the representation of something truthfully without artificialities. When people feel the bitter taste of realism, they remain too far away from their imagination and Romanticism and get attacked with terrible depression.

3.5. Surrealism: Arthur Schopenhauer, a renowned philosopher, used the term "will" as an aimless, mindless, and nonrational impulse to mean surrealism. For Schopenhauer, the world

of "will" is an entirely blind impulse and endless striving with no end, devoid of knowledge and lawlessness. With Schopenhauer's vision of the world as "will," there is no God to be comprehended, and the world is a whole of meaninglessness. If anthropomorphically considered, the world is represented in eternal frustration, as it goes nowhere and endlessly strives for nothing in particular. It is a world beyond any consideration of good and evil. Schopenhauer's characterization of the thing-in-itself as "will" is understood to be a blind and aimless striving. This aimlessness and blind striving for life is also a reason for depression for modern individuals.

3.6. Nihilism

Frederick Nietzsche, a nihilistic philosopher, used a term called "eternal recurrence," meaning means the meaningless variations of life. This idea of "eternal recurrence" becomes the cornerstone of nihilism. Nietzsche viewed his argument for eternal recurrence as a document of the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. He states:

"This life which you live must be lived by you again, and mere will be nothing new in it; the eternal hourglass will again be turned and turned, and you with it be dust of dust. "

3.7. Existentialism

It provokes the introspection of the sufferer about personal morality, thus revealing the psychological repression. A person suffering from an existential crisis asks himself if his life has any meaning, purpose, or value. When he does not find satisfactory answers, he ultimately gets depressed about his meaningless life. According to the great philosopher Sartre:

"If a man, as the existentialist sees him as not definable, it is because, to begin with, he is nothing. He will be something later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. "

4. Victorian Literature That Have Influenced in Evolving the Degradation of Human Feelings and Depression in Modern Literature

4.1. Novels

Literature always expresses the ideas and sentiments of the human mind, which are closely connected with and conditioned by the ages. The reflection of any age depends on the quality of mind in which it is reflected. A sensitive mind can render back the slightest shades, and its creation is characterized by delicacy, subtlety, and depth. During the Reign of Terror (June 1793 – July 1794), the sans-culottes and the Hebertists put pressure on the National Convention delegates and contributed to the overall instability of France. This Reign of Terror caused the breakdown of all the hopes and expectations of the French Revolution because the economic and political freedom and social construction were completely shattered, which resulted in disillusion. This disillusion is much more responsible for the degradation of human feelings and people's adverse relationships as people gradually lose hope and tolerance. The impact of that hopelessness and loss of tolerance has evolved in Victorian society, as portrayed in Victorian literature.

The novels of the Victorian period acted like such a genre, which aimed to entertain the rising middle-class people and to depict contemporary life in that cumulative changing society. Although the novels of this period were in the way of development since the 18th century with the works of Henry Fielding, Lawrence Sterne, Samuel Richardson, Daniel Defoe, and others, it was in this period when the novels got much acceptance as well as readership. The overseas

colonies, the domestic market, the growth of the cities, and an increase in the publications fascinated the growth of the novels as a form. The characters were well-rounded, and the protagonists usually belonged to the middle class, who struggled to create their position in the industrial and mercenary world. The stress was on realism and attempting to portray the struggles of the ordinary people that middle-class readers could associate with. The moral tangents were an attempt to rescue the moral degradation prevalent in society and hope and positivity to the audience. One of the renowned authors of this Age, Charles Dickens, was much more concerned with these matters and portrayed his own autobiographical experiences in his *Oliver Twist*. His novels usually open the world of workhouses, the dens of the thieves, and the streets. While there was economic prosperity on one side, there was extreme poverty on the other, and while virtue and morality were championed, hypocrisy was a big part of that society. His social commentary was found in his novels. Class conflict is eminently found in his novels. Degradation of human values and behaviors such as thievery, criminality, decline of religion, lies, deceit, vanity, guilt, and blame are also common themes of his novels. In his eminent novel, *Oliver Twist*, class conflict is vividly seen where the folk are pathetically ignored due to belonging to the lower class. In the same novel, he depicts the criminality and thievery of the people of the Victorian Age, where the character Sikes is a thief, Fagin is the receiver of stolen goods, and the girl is a prostitute who painted them with deformities, wretchedness, and poverty. The decline of religion is also found in this novel, as religion is shown as an organized and institutionalized form that did not take care of those who turned to the church for help. In his masterpiece *Great Expectations*, Dickens shows the terrible effects of industrialization, for which an acute class conflict is seen while the rich people are practicing their vanities and the newly becoming gentlemen are becoming snobs. Excessive vanity is found in the characters of Miss Havisham and Estella, belonging to the upper class. They mock the shabby clothes of Pip, a lower-class boy, but when Pip became a gentleman at a young age, he became very snobbish. He wished that Joe would be brought up gently, too: "I wished Joe had been rather more gently brought up."

In *David Copperfield*, human suffering is portrayed much more by Dickens. So, it can be said that suffering is the primary tool of characterization in *David Copperfield*, where Mr. Copperfield is rudely abused by Mr. Murdstone, and Dr. Strong is passing sorrowful times for the thought that his young wife was cheating on him. Novels of Thomas Hardy also reflect the degradation of human feelings and behaviors in his renowned novels. In his famous novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, he shows that religion plays two contradictory roles: it shapes people's moral principles on the one hand, and on the other hand, people misquote the Bible. Being alcoholic is also a vivid theme of this novel: Workman Joseph Poorgrass, being too alcoholic, becomes dumb and more clumsy than usual. Pride is shown in the way that everyone is trying to be better than another in subtle ways. Gabriel Oak, who had lands and sheep of his own, lost everything in a freak accident and became a shepherd; he got depressed because his beloved Bathsheba did not want to marry him, which is also an outcome of class conflict.

Class conflict is also portrayed in Hardy's masterpiece *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, where Alec, who belongs to the upper class, takes away the chastity of the young, poor girl Tess, who used to work in Alec's house. Anthony Trollope also depicts the degradation of human values

in his novels. In his masterpiece *The Warden*, he shows that people are getting far away from religious values due to the decline of religion, where religious matters shift from the gentle benevolence of Reverend Harding to the more dogmatic positions of the strict high churchmen. The character of Harding, Trollope, shows that human kindness is much more important than dogmas. Social privilege and poverty are also seen in this eminent novel. Elizabeth Gasket shows her prudence in portraying the decaying values of humans during the Victorian Age in her novels. In her *Mary Barton*, she skillfully depicts the difficulties faced by the working class. In her famous novel *North and South*, she shows snobbery and class conflict, where Margaret, a poor girl, thinks she is worthy of marrying Thornton as she is educated and cultured. However, Thornton's mother did not want her son to marry Margaret as she was poor and Thornton was rich.

4.2. Plays

Victorian plays also portray the degradation of human feelings, as the writings of Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, and Euripides. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* shows how class conflict is flagrant in the Victorian Age and gives birth to the vanity of upper-class people. Members of the upper-class society practice a great deal of pretense and pride, feeling that they are inheritably entitled to their higher social status and wealth. On the other hand, the lower class people are shown as humble and less pretentious. In the same play, Wilde shows how lies and deceit prevailed in Victorian society. None of the play's characters ever show genuine remorse or guilt for telling lies. Jack and Algernon repeatedly lie about their respective identities. Specifically, the fictional personas they made to cover up their doings, shirk their duties and deceive their beloveds.

In his *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde satirizes the corrupted ruling class, specifically, Lord Illingworth, a very conscienceless member of the House of Lords and an inveterate seducer of the opposite sex, with a woman of little resources and power.

Some plays by George Bernard Shaw also expose the degradation of human feelings prevailing in Victorian society. His famous play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* shows the adverse relationship between mother and daughter, where the daughter accepts her mother, and Mrs. Warren's profession is prostitution, but she rejects her as mother. In the same play, Shaw proves love to be a commodity. He logicalizes that prostitution is often looked down upon as a disgraceful profession because it is one kind of commoditization of sex. However, the characters point out in various ways that, in some cases, marriage is also a commoditization of women. Through the conversation between Mrs. Warren and Vivie, Shaw wants to make the readers understand that prostitution is also a work like marriage; it may not be enjoyable for most women, but it's a way to survive for them. In his *The Devil's Disciple*, through the character of Anthony Anderson, Shaw shows how money-obsessed the people of Victorian society were. Anthony Anderson proves himself as a coward by grabbing money and escaping from home.

Henrik Ibsen, a renowned playwright of the Victorian Age, shows how terrific the class conflict was in Victorian society through his play *An Enemy of the People*, which resulted in the degradation of human feelings and behaviors. In this play, Ibsen shows the inequality among the people that took place due to class conflict; while members of the upper class want

to rule over the lands, lower-class people are struggling and working hard to change their fate. Vanity is also a common theme of this play, as many of the characters are concerned about maintaining their face in public. Hypocrisy runs rampant throughout the play. The characters are seen to compromise themselves for a host of reasons. Power, money, and public image all play a vital part. Dr. Stockmann, the play's protagonist, refuses to compromise his beliefs no matter what they are. His dedication to his principles sharply contrasts with many other characters. Many of the characters have solid reasons for compromising themselves.

Euripides, a renowned classical dramatist of the Victorian period, shows how betrayal causes a significant crack in the relationship between husband and wife in his masterpiece *Medea*. In this play, Euripides shows that all the violence and terror is caused by Jason's betrayal of his wife, Medea. In this play, an inhuman activity, "exile," is shown through the banishment of Medea's father, the king of the play. Revenge, one of the elements of degrading human relationships, is also an essential feature of this play, where the protagonist, Medea, is seen taking revenge on her husband, Jason, for betraying her. Gender discrimination, another element of degrading human feelings, is also seen in *Medea*.

In *A Clean Well-Lighted Place*, Ernest Hemingway shows that unhappiness, discontent, and dissatisfaction are the most common elements of modern life and offers a fairly general view of the world, suggesting that even the happiest people, being young and wealthy and are content with their lives, someday get drunk, feel lonely and dissatisfied, that ultimately drag them to depression. Existential depression is one of the techniques Hemingway uses to convey the story's inherent theme. The story of the play says that the old man's attempt to commit suicide and the young waiter's interpretation of the Lord's prayer are the symptoms of depression they both always suffer from. Using the word "nada," which means "nothing," the waiter can only utter the following prayer:

"Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name, thy kingdom nada, thy will be nada, as it is in nada. Give us this nada, our daily nada and nada, as our nada as we nada our nadas not into nada, but deliver us from nada, pues nada" (177).

Everything is just "nothing" for both the old man and the young waiter, and both of them are trying to escape from the wreck of nada, the nothingness that comes with existential depression.

4.3. Poetry

Victorian poetry also portrays the decaying values of human beings, which are found in the poetry of Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. These poems highly influence modern poetry in portraying the degradation of human values, which have directly drawn out depression, which we find in the poetry of W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden. Although there are some differences in the writing techniques and styles of the Victorian poets and Modern poets, both of these two groups emphasize the same theme- the degradation of human values that ultimately causes terrible depression, which is clearly noticed among the characters of Modern poetry and also in modern social life. In most of the poems of Matthew Arnold, there is psychological conflict, the recurring theme of man's loneliness, and an utmost search for an inner life. In his *The Scholar Gypsy*, the speaker criticizes the fatigue and strain of modern life, which is totally depressing and toilsome, and yearns for a better world where he can peacefully survive:

"Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt,
Which much to have tired, in much been baffled, brings.
O life unlike to ours!"

Robert Browning uses much more dramatic irony in his poems, and his poems expose the degradation of human values through the use of abnormal psychology, misuse of arts, vanity, and so on. In his *Porphyria's Lover*, the speaker murders his beloved Porphyria and gives the description of the murder and how awfully he had accomplished it, which exposes 'abnormal psychology' as he murdered her by strangling her with her hair, then sits and admires the corpses for the rest of the night :

" In one long yellow string, I wound
Three times her little throat around
And strangled her."

Almost the same ideas of Victorian poetry regarding the degradation of human values are found in modern poetry. Although the writing styles of modern poets are different, the portrayals of the degradation of human values are almost alike, ultimately turning into depression. T.S. Eliot, in his *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*, shows that Prufrock has spent all his life in contemporary modern society in which society there are many frivolities and flippancies but little sense. Just as Arnold criticizes modern life, addressing it as a "disease. " Eliot, through Prufrock, also criticizes modern life as it is monotonous and abounds with trivialities. Eliot uses a lot of metaphors in this poem. Sometimes Prufrock compares himself with Prince Hamlet as, like Hamlet, he himself is also suffering from indecisiveness, and sometimes with a worm which is pinched against the wall just like Prufrock is also suffering from being in confinement. All of these are the reasons for his depression, as he cannot make the appropriate decisions in his life:

" Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt ends of my days and ways
And how should I presume?"

William Butler Yeats uses a combination of technique and style to express meaningful ideas and revolutionary types. Style and content throughout all his poems. His style helps to understand the complexities of modern life. He demonstrates how he is automatically unique through his innovative utilization of style and contents in case of degradation of human values in the modern Age and how it brings depression in modern society. In his famous religious poem, *The Second Coming*, Yeats demonstrates that, as a result of man's indifference to God's call, things are disintegrating. The center, therefore, cannot hold its position, and the forces of disorder now become eruptive dominant: " Things fall apart, the center cannot hold." The poet sees a widening gyre, which is at the top speed, and its controller cannot control it. This is compared to the falcon, which is not controlled by its master because of the distance of the two. The result is an all-round convulsion in which the finer values of life are lost; anarchy is let loose upon the world. The poet's mind is stuffed with the anarchy and the blood-dimmed tide of the modern world:

" The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned :

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity."

As a result of these wrongdoings, Yeats got depressed and thought that Jesus Christ should incarnate once more to eradicate these wrongdoings.

the dropping slow."

W.H. Auden's poetry unfolds two wings of his mind. The first of them is the pressure of his time, which he was unable to bear, and the second effect is the urge to integrate theory, such as love or faith. Much of Auden's poetry is concerned with moral issues and evidence and strong social, political, and psychological content. In *Shield of Achilles*, Auden compares the values of the old Age and the modern Age and shows his depression for the degradation of human feelings. In the Homeric shield, there were carved scenes of religious rituals, but in the modern Age, the religious rituals are gradually decaying, as people put much concentration on camps where the pale prisoners of the wars are tied to the stake and brutally shot dead:

" Girls are raped, two boys

knife the third

Were axioms to him"

So it is found that Modern poetry is the lamentation of the lost souls, and souls are found disintegrated from their bodies. As a result, modern people are also socially disintegrated.

5. Findings And Analysis

5.1. Industrial Revolution and Class Conflict

The adverse consequence of the Industrial Revolution in the Victorian Age also has awful social effects: tremendous poverty, massive overcrowded dwellings, child labor, sexual harassment, dirt, and drunkenness. It had successfully converted Merry England into a sooty and squalid England. Values of money were prevailing as a result of the increased materialism of that period. Utilitarianism and laissez-faire became the most popular philosophy of that time. As utilitarianism emphasized the spiritual requirements of humans, a large number of workers migrated to towns where they built up a new working class. In the industries and factories, the workers were experiencing numerous injustices, including harsh working conditions, ruthless child labor with smoke, and pollution. Kellow Chesney had described that terrible situation in the following manner:

" Hideous slums, some of them acres wide, some no more than crannies of obscure misery, make up a substantial part of the metropolis..... In big, once handsome houses, thirty or more people of all ages may inhabit a single room." 7

At that time, the street children were mostly orphans without any caregivers. Charles Dickens portrayed the miserable conditions of those wretched children in his eminent novel *Oliver Twist*. In this novel, Dickens condemns the bitter outcomes of industrialization in 19th-century England. He shows how various contemporary social wrongdoings, including the poor's residences and their working places, child labor, and the process of making children criminals, took place due to industrialization.

5.2. Decline of Religion

The decline of religion is found in both the Victorian and modern periods and its effect in the literature of both periods, but there is a comparison in determining the declining process

of religion in the two periods. During the Victorian period, the priests utilized religion for their own benefit when they didn't feel shame about using art as an element of the churches. But during the modern Age, people remained aloof from religious activities and suggested that churches should be demolished. Perhaps, the decline of religion is also a reason for modern people's depression, as their souls are far away from the proximity of God.

5.3. Money Obsession:

One of the most common characteristics of the Victorian Age is 'money obsession.' To the Victorians, the view of money is somewhat different from ours. For example, most families prefer to spend the lion's share of their resources on food- one of the facts that makes it difficult to calculate the exact equivalencies between money in their time and our own. In the high money-obsessed society of the Victorian period, money provides an opportunity for some, while its absence prevents others from fulfilling their dreams. Money and the attainment of high social status are perceived as the greatest of all aspirations, as one's worth seems to rise along with one's economic situation. So, money is the means of social prestige for middle-class people, and its absence in Victorian society creates a social prison, incarcerating the poor in the lowest level of life. As a result of this money obsession, an invisible wall is created between the rich class and lower class, which results in separation, and the aftermath of this separation brings about depression in the lower class people who were unable to attain a higher status due to the absence of money.

6. Conclusion

Through the above discussion, it is found that the Victorian Age is the junction between the Romantic Age and the Modern Age, which is characterized by the juxtaposition of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, which gradually brought out disillusion and depression. The degradation of human feelings, mutual relationships, and behaviors prevailing in Victorian society is considered to be the outcome of the disillusion that had resulted from the juxtaposition of the French Revolution and the Reign of the Terror. Victorian literature is much more successful in transferring the decaying human values that have completely evolved in modern literature and modern society, ultimately bringing out depression in modern social life. The catalysts of The Victorian period are science, technology, socio-economic conditions, politics, philosophical ideas, a decline of religion, industrialization, and class conflict.

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VS Publications

Alford Council of International English & Literature Journal (ACIELJ)

Impact Factor: 5.35 (SJIF) An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal

www.acielj.com Vol-6, Issue-3 ,2023 ISSN:2581-6500

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