Racism In Victorian Era

Racism is an ideology based on the superiority of races. Today's racism lost this idea of "superiority" but it seems that it is linked to people's fear and anxiety towards those who are different from them and that they don't understand. This fear results in them not being able to accept those differences and despise others. Today's racism is mainly based on the colour of the skin and physical features. Most of the time it is also linked to a certain amount of clichés such as foreigners "stealing" people's works or them being the cause of every problems in the country. It is a method to find a proper scapegoat in a society.

In Victorian era, racism was also based on social classes. It was not only about the colour of the skin but also about people's place in society. Those belonging to lower classes were considered racially different as Africans or Asians were. Class distinctions were at the heart of the society and depended mainly of the family you were born in. It also depended on religion as Victorian society was very religious and racism also touched Irish people who were caricatured. It is not easy to understand this peculiar vision of racism as nowadays the idea of race is intertwined with the idea of colour.

Racism towards black people originated from theories of "scientific racism" which was a belief that white people were superior to non-white people who were seen as closer to apes than humans – theories that were reinforced by Darwin's On the origin of species, published in 1859. Even though slavery was abolished in 1834, prejudices remained in people's minds. The black population was mainly male and it decreased over the years, probably because they married white women. During the 19th century, most literary works did not feature black characters at all and if they did they were rarely given an important place. Many scholars have agreed that racism in Victorian era was used as a mean to justify imperial expansion in Africa and in Asia. Moreover people from the upper-class believed that foreigners were inferior to them and stained what they called "English purity".

In 1800, Ireland became part of the United Kingdom after the Act of Union was passed. The Anglican Church became the official Church of Oreland and the Catholics had no representatives in institutions aven though 80% of Irish were Catholics. In Victorian era Catholicism was seen as an irrational religion based on emotions rather than rationality. Moreover in Ireland the birth-rater was more important than in Britain and this was thought to be the result of an animal-like sexuality. Thus, exactly like for the English working-class, they were seen as closer to animals than them. Cartoons in Punch, a Victorian magazine which had been published from 1841 to 2002, represented Irish with bestial or even demonic features and they were stereotyped as violent or alcoholic. In Liverpool, after immigrants settled to escape the Great Famine, Irish were discriminated and it was more difficult for them to find a somewhere to work if they had an Irish accent or an Irish name.

In Britain, aristocracy had a very important influence over politics and their decisions for centuries. In Victorian era they still had influence and another class, the upper-class, emerged to be as important as the aristocracy. The middle-class consisted of merchants and shopkeepers, a population that grew rapidly over the century. The working-class consisted of uneducated people who had to do manual labour and did not have access to clean water or

proper clothes. The lower-class consisted of poor people and orphans whose survival often depended on donations. Some women had to become prostitutes in order to survive but they were frowned upon (as shown by the "Contagious Diseases Act" (1864, 1866, 1869) which was not passed to protect them from getting them harmed but to protect men from contracting diseases). These social classes were determined by one's profession, their family connections and their birth. At that time, appearances mattered a lot, people were very judgmental and valued one's outfits as they showed what social classes they belonged to. Lower-classes suffered from diseases and children had to work in terrible conditions, often in coal mines, and a lot of them died. However as politics were influenced by Aristocrats, it took years before conditions got slightly better for children and women.