



Gender Transversal an Integral Legacy in the Victorian New Woman

Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The focus of the article is to show how gender transversal in the Victorian New Woman Fiction presents a transversal politics which unites women in the transition to find commonalities in their oppression and collectively battle through their strivings. A survey of the new woman novels show how the cultural and critical ambivalence of the genre and its gendered implications at the time of its production transformed traditional literary and cultural paradigms to establish a tradition of feminist political writings for female audience. The article illustrates how novelists used fiction to re-figure female desire as divergent and innate; venturing their own representational claim and dissecting the cultural milieu which shapes their female characters. This stratagem in the new woman fiction opens up a largely 'Gynocentric' space for the discussion of feminist thought.

Key words: Patriarchal, genderpolitics, subversive themes, new woman.

INTRODUCTION

The popular genres of the Victorian era have facilitated themselves into the modern and postmodern milieu that has made revisiting constructive. Bakhtin's statement, "Novelistic discourse is always criticizing itself," (49) is a good introduction to revisit the Victorian novel. The period between 1860's and 1920's saw varied shifts in the development and growth of the novel and also introduced new genres which deviated from the conventional genre. Popular genres like the sensational, gothic, and new woman novels created a literary tradition of their own which showed clear demarcation from the traditional cultural paradigms. The generic mode, the subversive themes, plot and subject of the new woman genre depicts the changes in the very acuity of the feminine. It is hard for contemporary readers to reckon the agenda of the new woman novelists; this invites one to debate about this phenomenon called the new woman. She was condemned as they felt she disrupted female dignity and female respectability that Victorians respected. Conservative critics called the New woman an "odd woman"; a "shrieking mad woman." She was an enigma misunderstood by the patriarchal world. The term was addressed to anyone who challenged the traditional patriarchal norms, women activists and writers who addressed the problem of difference, and women who offered a feminine model by indicating new areas for e.g. autonomy and freedom from domestic violence.

The New Woman Fiction

The emergence of the new woman and the portrayal of the same in fiction created unrest in the fin de siècle era. Fiction tried to correct the image of the new woman created by the punch cartoons and periodicals. Periodicals contributed to create a new myth of femininity, the cartoon described

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the new woman as the elegant modernized woman adorned out in a charming display of buttons and bows, sedately intent on travels. Such descriptions of the new woman were an indication of the woman's assertion and dominance and the cartoons showed man as effeminate which clearly explained the decline of masculinity. The first pen sketch carried the caption 'New Woman' a cartoon of a woman clothed in man's dress; her desire for masculine sport gives a physical definition of the new woman as the usurper of patriarchal dispensation. Punch notes in its September issue 1894, "What it Will Soon Come To?" (qtd. Collins 90). "The Sterner Sex" dated September 26, 1896, portrays woman as athletic and masculine. The agenda of the Punch magazine was to indicate the decline of traditional gender barriers. The 1885 cartoon titled "Things One Would Have Rather Said." (qtd. Collins 86) invests the woman with feminine traits but indicates at other meanings suggesting woman's desire to ape the traits of man. Punch cartoons depicting the female cyclist in rational dress provided visual emblem of the social, sexual, political aggression caused by woman in her demand for her equality.

The gender politics of the era made them resort to censure the new woman genre, ignoring the fact that the new woman novelists represented the new woman ideals which showed woman as freeing herself from the patriarchal dictates. Who coined the term new woman? Records state the term was coined by the novelist Sarah Grand. Sally Ledger records, "the now famous- and the then infamous -phrase the new woman...was extrapolated from Sarah Grand's essay, [1894] "The New Aspect of The Women Question." (9) The term 'new' indicates change, and a change is accepted with lot of confrontation. New woman fiction endeavored to correct the long observed conservative beliefs about woman as the virgin or the whore. The new woman novels can be read as a corrective, a revisionist strategy to present the new woman fiction as a new feminine-cum feminist poetics that transformed traditional literary and cultural paradigms.

The emergence of the genre marks the re-emergence of the women question which was taken up by Mary Wollstonecraft. Two important events, expansion of the parliamentary franchise in terms of working classmen and the women's suffragette movement represented the changing landscape of class and gender hierarchies in England. The new woman novels witness what Martha Vicinus, and Michel Foucault state about the final decades of the 19th century that it was a crucial period in the modern, sexual and gender identities. The act of looking back prompts us to scrutinize the purpose of the genre and its aims. Subtle probing exemplifies the fact that the New Woman fiction established a tradition of feminist political writings for female audience. The fiction opened up a largely Gynocentric space for the discussion of feminist thought which marks a new history in the Victorian cultural and literary scene. New woman fiction aimed to turn away from the well known themes of showing woman as the ideal woman. Instead, the writers seek to alter and transfigure authoritative cultural and aesthetic discourse.

New woman novelists like modern feminists allow their woman characters to talk for themselves, so that submerged knowledge and hidden alternative can be brought to the surface. New woman novelist Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird, "can be jointly credited with implanting the new woman fiction in the fin de siècle era." (Heilmann 4) They ascertained political activism as an expression of female creativity. Each writer with an aim to revise and revolutionize authoritative cultural aesthetic discourse, feminized and transformed traditional literary paradigms by narrative cross-dressing and seditious morals and re-visioning mythologies. With the rise of cultural studies popular genres are regarded not as low or vulgar but as a genre with a purpose and a message which endeavors to deconstruct the patriarchal myth. They differed from the mainstream novelists like George Eliot, Thackeray, Dickens, and the Brontes'; they mimicked, feminized, and altered cultural tropes and paradigms. It is seen in how the cult of femininity was mobilized by Grand, and in

Schreiner's use of allegory and Caird's endeavor to revision myths. Thus we see how the new woman novels stand in antithetical relation to dominant gender and literary ideologies.

Grand, Caird and Schreiner, sought to enhance the status of women's political writing by establishing the concept of feminine aesthetics by blending art politics and feminism. The new woman in fiction who is seen as an intellectual, struggling to equal men unlike the depiction of new woman by the punch magazine created a new generation of woman. Grand's novels *Ideala* (1888) and *The Beth Book* (1897) provide a broader platform to women presenting them as active agents within the married world. Her apparent even handedness helped her to perceive the difficulties new woman faced. The depiction of women subtly illustrates the trauma and conflicts that women in the transition underwent. It pays attention to the multiple voices of the texts and offers a close linguistic and gendered reading which reflects the ideological tensions in the late nineteenth century. Eliza Linton's *The Wild Woman* (1891) revised the conventional plot in interesting ways, Linton by exploring the polarity between presenting woman as a victim and an agent showed the split in her women, which reflected the ambiguities of women in the fin de siècle society. And their stories destabilize the existing boundaries; women characters are presented as speaking subject, they are empowered by a cause and they struggle for a place of their own. They also picture women's journey toward a new image of the feminine where we see the depiction of women's struggle to assert her 'self' within the cultural constraints. If Phallogocentric tradition misrepresents women by associating the feminine with irrationality, 'lack' and 'non being' their stories evince how they construct a counter tradition in Victorian fiction. We commonly understand the Victorian portrayal of women as moralistic but we see a new image of women, a new vision of the female self which clearly displays the early stirrings of a transition in literature that takes full force in the 20th century.

The rebellious woman was termed as a threat by the 19th century critics but modern critics commend her for her intellectual astuteness, for her rational and skeptical bent of mind which brings her closer to the woman of contemporary times. *New Woman Strategies* by Ann Heilmann (U.K.2004) focus on shifts and inconsistencies in the writings of Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird. His analysis confirms how the unconventional practice helped to turn out new plots or revise the old ones. It also helped to discern the new woman artist's purpose; they tried to rescue female sexuality from the decadent image of woman as the doomed fallen woman. Novelists began to represent the modern woman as a new type; whose demand for sexual equality replaced the pure woman. Scholarly interest in the new woman has grown since the 1980's, initially considering her as a reaction to the old or true woman of the Victorian era. Lyn Pykett observes that the new woman in new woman fiction functioned as a figure of authorial 'self reflexivity': she terms her, "as an intruder into the masculine sphere of art, she was the cultural equivalent of the feminists" ("Portraits of The Artist" 128).

Well all this proves that the new woman changed the emotional landscape of Britain. But how did this get reflected in the text? What were the responses of the public and women? Sydney Grundy's *The New Woman* (1894) an original play in four acts states that the new woman has invented a new genre which distances her from the conservative circle. Hardy in *Candour in Fiction* debated that traditional notion about women should not intervene in the candid depiction of women. The candidness that Hardy talks about serves to show the range of feminine concerns as against feminine fulfillment that formed the core of the British culture. The power of word helped to change what these novelists aspired to alter; and all this substantiates their astute observation of their surroundings and their sense of reasoning which presented a different ethics which confused women and men about their stance. From post-feminist perspective the new woman novels may be

moderate and by the standards of 20th century feminism they may be radical. Such associations are made because the fictional woman 'talk back' (Bell Hooks) at a time when society thought her to be voiceless.

Women's inability to articulate is dubbed by Betty Friedan as *The Problem That Has No Name* (in *Feminine Mystique*, 1963). Friedan wrote her book when she was unable to find a publisher and a host of women saw themselves in it. Her problem echoes the problem of the new woman writers faced in finding a publisher. For instance, Grand published her own book when publishers expressed their dissent. The novelists knew that they were a focus of literary controversy with regard to what they wrote. She had to be shown as the thinking woman and one can decisively state that the picture of the female genius helped to counter the existing status reserved for the male writers. Presenting signs of creative genius she summoned herself as an innovator and leader in the society. New woman according to Angelique Richardson had become a marketable novelty figure.

Her positive attributes of physical and mental health, and combining these with traditional heroines' attributes of youth and beauty, enabled authors to create an attractive heroine who was thoroughly modern and topical. (64) The new traits of the new woman extended the imagination of the 19th century world, for instance, Grand used the genre to extend the meaning of the new woman, her characters as observed by Mangum,

Cover the spectrum of the turn of the –century, middle class, independent women;

adolescent-hoydens, gender switching heroines, ...women of genius, novelists and orators, suffragists and social reformers, teachers and business women. (4)

In a nutshell Mangum defines the new woman which also suggests the manifold orientation of the new woman distinct from the fixed images prescribed by the fathers. This proves that the women asked for greater autonomy in everything. *Diana of Dobson* by Cicely Hamilton (1908) is known as a popular work which gives a realistic picture of woman's work in a drapery store and its examination of the economic motives for marriage. *Elizabeth Robin and Florence Bell's, Alan's Wife*, (1893) are labeled as new woman plays for their exposition of the oppression of family, life and labour in their works. *Agnes Grove's, Ubiquitous Woman*, (1909) a short story that exhibits the oratory skills of a vivacious woman throws the male chauvinist narrator into a state of confusion because she is described as intensely feminine looking woman but her actions are unwomanly. Grand's *Ideala*, *The Beth Book*, *Mona Caird's The Morality of Marriage*, (1897) and *Olive Schreiner's The Story of An African Farm* (1883) served as a theoretical frame work for modern feminism.

The era witnessed heterosexuality and its associations with molestations and contagious diseases that might have been one of the prominent reasons for the decline in heterosexuality which the new woman writers illustrate. (Grand's novel *The Heavenly Twins*) Their novels encourage utopian idea of egalitarian sisterhood and the power dynamics of female friendship. They voiced their disregard for heterosexuality which encourages them to regard each other as rivals and discourage female bonding. The genre if analyzed considering what critics (Showalter to Joseph Boone) have observed that fiction responded to conservative challenge and male opposition with forces of deft logic and can be read as writings that estimated modernist formal experiments to articulate problems. The new woman writers imploded the cultural and literary framework constructed by the patriarchs to bear out female artists as genius. They used fiction to refigure female desire as divergent and innate, venturing their own representational claim and dissecting the cultural milieu which shapes their female characters. The novelists also reflected their own identities as they

provided an insider's commentary. They combined the individual with the collective to present a problem and also provide solutions and individualized woman's oppression (Beth in *The Beth Book*, Ideala in *Ideala*, Evadene, and Angelica in *The Heavenly Twins* 1893) and the readers could identify it as their suffering. The novelists feminized contemporary scientific discourses by linking feminism to evolution.

Darwinism helped to see men not as divine creation but as normal men. His definition of survival of the fittest undermines the dominant evolutionist discourse of the fin-de-siècle. Women demanded revolution than gradual change which emphasized men as vulnerable. Women writers' emphasized female friendship and sisterly affection as more important than sexual love; she contested the gender codes in such manner that earned her the title incipient lesbian. "Friendships developed only between new women characters themselves who often came from the same upper –middle –upper class background. "(Heilmann 21) Lesbianism in the new woman fiction offered a counter plot to the conventional marriage; these aspects mark the novels' radical purpose. One can see them as visionaries who championed sexual freedom; Grand makes Ideala remark, "A woman is made to swear to love a man who is probably unlovable" (75) They mark a clear shift from the works of the early 19th century women writers, who could not articulate realistically.

They were not obliged to preface the works with disclaimers and apologies as the earlier women writers. Yet their surrogates within the fiction offer fervent appeal for social and artistic freedom. The utopian impulses of woman artists were largely responsible to construct stories which re-imagined the roles of artist and muse. (Women writers had to become muses themselves) Olive Schreiner *The Buddhist Priest's Wife* (1892) Charlotte Perkins Gilman *The Yellow Wall Paper* (1892) Grand's *Ideala*, *Mona Caird's*, *Daughters of Danus* (1894) are instances to show the crucial differences between male and female experiences. Women in these novels tap a wide range of feminine anxieties about the confinement of marriage, the burden of motherhood, and the demands of the body. The novels provide the space and climate for women's personal growth and such presentations make Sally Ledger comment, "The new woman novelist was herself regarded as 'advanced' and very much associated with the modern world, fiction." (27) The striking feature of the novels is that female characters are endowed with creative ability; feminists' belief articulated gives an idea about the responses of women at the fin-de-siècle. Grand's *Beth* and *Ideala*, Hester Gresham in *Mary Chomondeley* (*Red Pottage* 1879) are learned, and shrewd to explode patriarchal ideology.

To frustrate the assertion of the new woman, male critics condemned their writings as boisterous, perverse (Huysmans and Jean Baudelaire) but they failed to see that their fiction does not portray woman as Venus fly traps but represent female desire as creative force in artistic imagination and as Schaffer asserts "Fictionalizing the new woman does not seem to relegate her to a safely marginal space." (44) and a survey of the new woman evince that they were involved in the debates on gender and reproduction. Novelist's different approaches and varied portrayal of woman only clarifies that women in the late Victorian era differed. This is seen in how new woman novelists, Grand and Schreiner were committed to social advancement of women with a belief in eugenics. Francis Galton (1883) coined the term 'Eugenics' meaning 'good in stock' meaning it is not confined to questions of judicious mating, and takes into account all influences that would enable a better chance of prevailing. While Grand and Schreiner approved of it, Caird attacked the apostles

of eugenics and termed eugenic love as crude biological determinism. Such diversity serves to illustrate new woman novelist's strategies, their style, and creativity.

The eugenic concerns are touched upon in Grand's last two novels *Adams Orchard* (1912) and *The Winged Victory* (1916) where they evince Grand's retribution but critics like Teresa magnum (1998) discern how Grand finds it difficult to free herself from the ideological maze of conflicting ideas and hence could not complete her work. Motherhood was held in regard by Grand and Schriener while Mona Caird opposed the ties of maternity. Hadria Fullerton the heroine of Caird's *Daughter of Danus* is filled with aversion at the sight of a woman with her new born. Cicely Hamilton in *Marriage as Trade* (1909) and Elizabeth Robins in *Ancilla* (1924) critique marriage and motherhood which in a manner similar to Betty Friedan who believes, "Motherhood like a suburban wasteland is a trap...the comfortable concentration camp." (16) Caird like Friedan voiced her radical views in one instance to indicate the relevance of the new woman thoughts.

The 1890's, according to Showalter was the "Starting point of the wider modern movement...still in the process of becoming worldwide and all inclusive." (66) The novelists wrote to alert readers. Ella Hepworth's *The Story of Modern Woman* (1894) was a plea to form a union among women to oppose the specific abuses by man. Lucas Mallet's *The Wages of Sin* (1891) and Annie Holdsworth & Joanna Trial's, *Spinster* (1894) hint at the solidarity of wife and mistress or unity of virgin and whore, as a crucial element in the struggle against the standard sexual morality. Such works were interrupted as a political act of sexual solidarity and unification and was observed by reviewers as having the leanings of an organized school. Criticism of the Madonna / whore image is proof enough to show their contempt but not wholesale disapproval of marriage. They systematically engage in deconstructing the misogynist mythologies that Barthes postulates, "When myth reaches the entire community, it is from the latter that the misogynist must become estranged if he wants to liberate the myth." (Barthes 22) The new woman by exposing the wrongs of the patriarchal mythology provides a niche for the emergence of the new mythologies where female desire is presented as a creative force that goes to probably enunciate the term new.

Cultural concerns about gender and empire converge in new woman fiction; it proclaims male superiority and the right to dominate. It revolves around the 'other' which works under the spell of ideological constellations. Empire builders speak of territorial expansion and create a broader sphere of action; new woman fiction uses the same metaphors to move out of the domestic sphere to enter a larger domain that is proclaimed as man's territory. They, like the imperial masters, cross the boundaries to claim their right. Fiction shows how imperialism is a phallogocentric ideology that subjugates woman and an escape from the clutches of such power was tricky. The woman like the colonized subject is defined by the intrusive dominant gaze, though attempts to break the influences have been made by the novelists in making their women question the male centered ideas. In feminist discourse the vulnerable female body suggests woman as fertile, a productive body who has the power to produce. Caird, (*Morality of Marriage*), Schriener, (*Story of an African Farm*) criticized imperialism as a form of patriarchy that diminishes any opportunity for identity formation in its subjects.

CONCLUSION

Varied perspectives show how these writers have internalized the lessons of women's movements and are sensitive to social oppression of all kinds. New woman fiction has given expression to a self-assured critical voice that investigates all aspects of living from an all-encompassing social

perspective. They move towards new equality where men and women are not restricted by gender roles. Their fiction shows feminine and feminist tradition not as chronological but as a kind of simultaneity in which men's marginalization of women and the stress on women's consciousness and tradition can be set forth at the same time. Hence it has gathered attention in current academic arena because it steers the complex vibrations between imitation and ridicule of the hegemonic structures in culture and literature, and as Sally Ledger, (1997) says it is appropriate that the new woman is a legacy to any number of 20th century feminist thinkers and writers. New woman writers perform the act of giving voice to the subaltern and have resorted to form coalitions as to make a greater impact in their challenge against dominant force.

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