CHAPTER 4

The Concept of Womanhood in the Novels of W. M. Thackeray
The Concept of Womanhood in the Novels of William Makepeace Thackeray

This chapter throws light on the concept of womanhood from a man's point of view. Thackeray is one of the most celebrated writers of the nineteenth-century. Robert Fletcher, in his essay, entitled "William Makepeace Thackeray: A Brief Biography", writes about Thackeray to the following effect:

Thackeray was given the "education of a gentleman" at private boarding schools (so called "public schools"), including six years at Charter house, and the canings and other abuses he suffered in these institutions became the basis for remembrances in essays, such as The Roundabout Papers, as well as episodes in novels (Vanity Fair and The Newcomes), again, offer important examples.¹

While at school William was fond of sketching and reading novels. He was also a caricaturist. He was familiar with French culture and politics. He started his career as a Newspaper and magazine reviewer for many periodicals. Thus he became known in the literary world.

Thackeray earned fame with the publication of Vanity Fair in 1846. Besides miscellaneous writings he became conspicuous in the field of fiction. He also wrote Pendennis in 1850. In 1852, he published The History of Henry Esmond, which was followed by the publication of The Newcomes. And finally, in 1857-59, Thackeray published The Virginians, as a sequel to Henry Esmond. These novels brought him fame and recognition. Thackeray's private life, however, was miserable and tragic.

As opposed to Romanticism, Thackeray was more inclined towards realism and was therefore true to life both in style and characterization. In his novels, Thackeray presents a world that is real and familiar to the reader. Donald D. Stone, in a review of Thackeray’s *The Newcomes*, quotes Edward Burne-Jones’s assessment of this novel, of which he writes: “a wonderfully faithful picture of the great world as it passes daily before us, many-sided, deeply intricate.”

Thackeray’s contribution to English fiction was that he brought back sober actuality and solid realism to it. Charles Dickens, also a realist, does not excel in realism like Thackeray. According to Robert Fletcher, again, Thackeray surpasses Dickens due to his critical intellectual quality and his closeness to life and society.

Though most of the nineteenth-century novelists were followers of Henry Fielding yet Thackeray’s realism is finer both in spirit and manner. In most of his novels, Thackeray depicts the life and manners of the upper-middle class English society. As Thackeray succeeded in establishing the realistic tradition in English fiction, he was regarded as nineteenth-century Fielding. In *Pendennis*, Thackeray’s indebtedness to Fielding, the master of realistic fiction in English Literature, is evident. He confessed the truth that in Tom Jones, Fielding depicted the concept of a perfect man through the character of the hero. No one else could excel him in this regard. The hero also shares human weaknesses and therefore the portrayal of the hero is realistic.

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Thackeray could not portray a complete man as Fielding’s Tom Jones, but he also has his contribution in that art of character delineation. Thackeray’s deep knowledge about human psychology and his awareness about all sorts of men made him excel in the art of characterization. Gordon N. Ray (1977) comments on Thackeray’s realistic presentation of life and characters to the following effect:

It was his endeavor he said in a rare statement of purpose, “to work as an artist telling the truth and morbidly perhaps eschewing humbug.”

He further writes:

Telling the truth to Thackeray meant describing life as he has seen it during the bitter years since he came of age. “He was created”, he told Dr. John Brown, “with a sense of the ugly, the odd, of the meanly false, of the desperately wicked; he laid them bare; them under all disguises he hunted to death.”

Thackeray also depicted the seamy side of life relating to men and women in his novels. He believed that the novelist should reveal with great truth the inner soul and character of both his male and female characters. This in his art and also realism enabled him to acquire a prominent place among the novelists of his age. Gordon N. Ray (1977), quotes Charlotte Brontë’s views about Thackeray’s Vanity Fair thus:

There is a man in our days whose words are not framed for delicate ears; who to my thinking, comes before the great ones of society, much as the son of Imlah came before the throned Kings of Judah and Israel; and who speaks truth as deep, with a power as prophet like and as vital...I see in him an intellect

4 ibid.
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profunder and more unique than his contemporaries have yet recognized, because I regard him as the first social regenerator of the day—as the very master of that working corps who would restore to rectitude the warped system of things.5

Thackeray’s art of writing and realism is unrivalled. Saintsbury, comparing him with the Victorian novelists, writes: “Thackeray is placed in another tradition, with his roots in the eighteenth century”, a statement upon which C.O. Gorman comments in the following way: “...Thackeray’s mixture of domestic incident and drama (exemplified in Vanity Fair) strikes Saintsbury as the chief element of yet another generic strand of Victorian fiction”.6

The world that Thackeray portrays in his novels is peculiarly Victorian. His works also reflect upon the customs and concerns of the Victorian age.

Thackeray’s cynicism is also revealed through the characters whose weaknesses are exposed by him. In Vanity Fair, for instance, the characters are worthless or weak and absurd, so that the impression of human life formed is that of hopeless chaos, of selfishness, hypocrisy, and futility. Yet, Thackeray does not condemn his characters. He often mocks at them, but he is also sensitive about them. Being a realist, if not a moralist, he aims at drawing attention to their faults. He highlights the relevance of courage, honesty, kindness, and selflessness in human life.

Early nineteenth-century England was marked by great snobbishness in all spheres of life. The sense of superiority found in Thackeray’s contemporaries also made

5 Ian Watt (ed.), 256-257.
them ambitious. There was so much of jockeying for social position that Thackeray could not help satirizing it in his novels. He exposed the vice of people and condemned snobbishness in all its forms. In his novels, the characters appear to be very conscious about their status.

Human life, in Thackeray's view, is both virtuous and vicious. The men and women who inhabit this world are guilty of weaknesses. There are very few virtuous men and women in this world. These apostles of goodness are not like the heroic beings as Major Dubbin, Col. Newcome and Henry Esmond seem to imply. The good women are rather dull and weak-minded like Amelia Sedley and Helen Pendennis. The most dazzling of Thackeray's female characters, Becky Sharp and Beatrix Esmond, are ambitious women determined to get on in the world and thoroughly heartless and selfish. It is on account of it that he is regarded a cynic.

Besides realism, Thackeray achieved distinction in character-creation. His characters appear to be life-like. Unlike his contemporaries, Thackeray deviated from the concept of the hero. His characters, both male and female, have their own faults and weaknesses unlike the conventional hero who is perfect. This led Thackeray to entitle his first novel, *Vanity Fair*, 'A Novel Without A Hero'. Both titles very well describe the world of his novel and the others as well. It is so because in this novel he reveals the vanities of his times.

The above-mentioned facts reflect upon the art of the novelist. The various themes dealt with by the writer in his novels are also brought to light. One can therefore know
Thackeray's concept of womanhood; his portrayal of female figures; their relationships with their male counterparts; their position in society within its various domains.

Thackeray's novels are concerned with the problem of the position of women in society in relation to men. He was very well aware of the plight of women and their miserable condition in Victorian society. Also he knew the superior rank in which men were placed; while women were confined to their homes. This awareness was possible on account of his keen sense of observation and his sensitiveness about the problems raised by sponsors of the feminist movement in 1848.

Thackeray, in fact, knew of the suffering, subjection, and victimization of women at the hands of their tormenting partners. He therefore repeatedly highlighted their miseries in a variety of ways in his novels. He has also presented weak and dependent female characters to show their deplorable condition. Even intelligent, outrageous and courageous female characters, like Becky Sharp, are selfish, snobbish, and hence prove to be powerful and rebellious women. It is true that Becky's class and social position determine her personality as well as her fate, but many of her contemporaries; like Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, Caroline Hellstone, Villette, Frances Henrie, and Anne Bronte's Agnes Grey were worse than her as far as their social position is concerned. Yet, all of them lead a virtuous, independent life.

From a feminist perspective, Thackeray is regarded as an advocate of the women of his age. The themes he dealt with in his novels are related to the problems of women in
all domains of social life. In *Vanity Fair*, the narrator comments on Amelia Sedley, who is blaming herself for her selfishness in not letting her son, Georgy, go to his grandfather and thereby denying him education pleasures and luxuries of life in the following words:

I know few things more affecting than that timorous debasement and self-humiliation of a woman. How she owns that it is she and not the man who is guilty, how she takes all the faults on her side; ...how she courts in a manner punishment for the wrongs which she has not committed and persists in shielding the real culprit. It is those who injure women who get the most kindness for them—they are born timid and tyrants and maltreat those who are humblest before them (50, 557).

The use of pronouns in this passage shifting from 'she' and 'her' to 'they' and 'them' shows how Thackeray while commenting on a particular situation and a particular woman is referring to women in general. He is also truthful in his comment as Amelia, who is weak by nature, is blaming herself though she is innocent. The grandfather, Osborne, opposed George to marry Amelia and disowned him for Sedley's social position is no longer the same.

Amelia is aware that her husband, George, is selfish, shallow, and superficial and does not pay heed to her. Yet, she remains loyal to him during his life-time and even afterwards. She quietly suffers his negligence and selfishness. The narrator comments on her weak position thus:

Her heart tried to persist in asserting that George Osborne was worthy and faithful to her, though she knew otherwise. How many a thing had she said, and got nor echo from him. How many suspicious of selfishness and indifference had she to encounter and obstinately overcome. To whom could the poor little martyr tell these daily struggles and tortures.
Her hero himself only half understood her. She did not dare to own that the man she loved was her inferior, or to feel that she had given her heart away so soon. Given once, the pure bashful maiden was too modest, too trustful, too weak, too much woman to recall it. (18: 191-92)

Thackeray pities women, whose miseries are confined to domestic life whereas men enjoy freedom outside. He expresses his attitude towards the Victorian construct of gender roles and the male-female relationship in the following way:

We are Turks with the affection of our women; and have made them subscribe to our doctrine too. We let their bodies go abroad liberally enough, with smiles and ringlets and pink bonnets to disguise them instead of veils and yakmaks. But their souls must be seen by only one man, and they obey not unwillingly, and consent to remain at home as our slaves--ministering to us and doing drudgery for us (18, 192).

The narrator comments on matters relating to women and their sufferings in situations in which Amelia Sedley is placed. Hence, Amelia is a representation of the good woman, unlike Becky Sharp, and is a weak, simple and real sufferer. When she gives her child to his grandfather and accepts money from Osborne in return, the narrator comments on her lack of courage and misery thus:

O you poor secret martyrs and victims, whose life is a torture, who are stretched on racks in your bedrooms, and who lay your heads down on the block daily at the drawing-room table; every man who watches your pains, or peers in to the dark places where the torture is administered to you, must pity you-and-and thank God that he has a beard...if you properly tyrannize over a woman, you will find a h'p'orth of kindness act upon her and bring tears into her eyes, as though you were an angel benefiting her (57: 638-39).
Women's problems and concerns attracted the attention of Thackeray. In *The Newcomes*, the leading thread of the story of this novel is Clive Newcome's love for his cousin, Ethel. Their story is so meandering that any kind of an epitome of it will be difficult to make. Though Ethel belongs to a wealthy family, she is destined to suffer and becomes a victim both of patriarchy and greed, love for money and social position. Ethel, like many others of her kind, is destined for a better match by her grandmother; the countess of Kew, a worldly-wise woman and a symbol of patriarchy. Clive, a frustrated person, condemns and bemoans the state of women and attacks the patriarchal forces that suppress women and do not give them the right to choose freely in matters of love: “for our women, who are free, why should they rebel against Nature, shut their hearts, sell their lives, for rank and money, and forgo the most precious right of their liberty?” This is an expression of Thackeray's sentiment about women's position in Victorian society which is basically patriarchal. One can notice the sarcastic tone of the passage and Thackeray's criticism of the dominating laws, including those of Nature, that prevent women from indulging in freedom of choice. Thackeray reflects both on the gender problem and class conflict.

Thackeray's world is the same in almost all his novels. It is a world of vanity, hypocrisy, snobbishness, selfishness, and greed. There is oppression and domination in which human passion and love are curbed. It is wealth and social position, about which many of the characters care and are crazy about it. Women, according to Thackeray, have no value in this patriarchal society. They are no better than
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slaves. Thackeray protests against the painful condition of women through Ethel Newcome, who is a sarcastic, passionate and wise woman. She tells her grandmother, Lady Kew: “We are sold,...we are as much sold as Turkish women; the difference being that our masters may have but one Circassian at a time. No, there is no freedom for us. I wear my green ticket, and wait till my master comes.” This is the reality that neither Ethel nor any other Victorian woman can escape. Donald D. Stone, in his review, comments on the power of the novel, the Newcomes, to the following effect:

Thackeray's novel minutely and devastatingly invokes the world of the 1850s, with its enterprising spirit, its mean spiritedness, its worship of ego and of success at any price. In other words, the book is about any period of time, including our own, in which a scoundrel like Barnes Newcome can rise to business and political prominence on the strength of self-love and image making.7

According to Donald Stone, the world that Thackeray depicts is one in which the spirit of commerce infects everything: marriage, politics, art, even religion. This statement is applicable to Thackeray’s novels, because it is, in essence, the world of Vanity Fair. Thackeray draws a painful picture relating to the oppression of women in the Victorian society. He also shows how a woman is victimized both by her oppressor and the entire society. In this vividly-drawn portrayal, Thackeray narrates the story of Barnes Newcome, who, according to the narrator, is capable of giving a public lecture on ‘The Poetry of Womanhood’, while he himself beats his wife, Clara Newcome. Clara, a product

7 Donald D. Stone, p.3
of this oppressive society, sells herself in the marriage market and then becomes a victim of her wrong choice. This patriarchal society does not allow her to raise voice against injustice for she is expected to bear everything without any protestation. When Clara flees from her oppressor, the jury of ‘respectable men’ stands by and sympathises with the husband, “Let us console the martyr...with thumping damages; and as for the woman...the guilty wretch!...let us lead her out and stone her.” This story depicts Thackeray’s concern about women of his times. Dan Callahan (2003), in a review of *Vanity Fair*, states that:

Thackeray has little use of the men--his subject is women, and his general comments about them take up many pages of the text. There is a lot of pandering as far as this goes. You can tell exactly whom he thinks his audience is: roughly 60% women, 40% men. Every time he launches into one of his treatises on the fair sex, he is torn between feeding men’s prejudices, flattering women’s vanity, putting women in their place, and, only occasionally perhaps, airing his own feelings.8

Thackeray has rightly criticized the Victorians as far as the male-female relationship is concerned.

In *Vanity Fair*, the author depicts the materialistic concern of the social set-up. It makes people snobbish and careless for ethical values. In the novel there is class consciousness shown in a variety of ways and one is judged according to one’s social status. Becky Sharp, for instance, is a gifted person and yet, at Pinkerton’s School, is looked down upon and humiliated by other girls and the headmistress, Miss Pinkerton, on account of her inferior status. She tells Amelia Sedley, her close friend, about her

unhappy experiences at school: "For two years I have only had insults and outrage from her. I have been treated worse than any servant in the kitchen. I have never had a friend or a kind word, except from you." (2, 23). She hates the unjust rules of society where the girls from affluent families are given preference: "what airs, that girl gives herself; because she is an Earl's grand-daughter!", she said of one; "How they cringe and bow to that Creole, because of her hundred thousand pounds! I am a thousand times cleverer and more charming than that creature, for all her wealth" (2, 27). Miss Pinkerton also shows partiality to girls, who are well-off; and she feels delighted to get rid of Becky and does not give her a copy of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary, which is presented to every student.

Though she acts as a governess of Sir Pitt Crawley's two daughters, Becky feels that this is not the real goal that she aspires to achieve. The years of humiliation filled her with the determination to become a respectable woman and take revenge from society. She firmly believes that to succeed in her mission, she should be rich and for that she must marry a rich man. As she is quite attractive she hopes to succeed in her mission. During her stay with Amelia, before she joins the Crawleyes, Becky spots a prospective victim in Jos Sedley, Amelia's brother. She is wise enough to flatter the boy and entrap him. Though she succeeds in this regard yet has to leave for she is disliked by George Osbourne, who conspires against her for he dislikes the idea of having a governess for a sister-in-law,

Osbourne pursued his advantage pitiless. He thought Jos a milksop. He had been revolving in his mind the marriage-question pending between Jos and Rebecca, and was not over well pleased that a member of a
family into which he, George Osbourne, of the -th, was going to marry, should make a *mésalliance* with a little nobody-a little upstart governess (6, 72).

It highlights the indifference of high-class people towards lower classes and especially a governess who was given no place in Victorian society. Yet, Becky Sharp is never bogged down by failure, which enables her to bounce back with more intensity and determination. Regarding this quality in Becky's character, Dan Callahan, in his review of *Vanity Fair*, writes to the following effect:

> Becky is in many ways a female Julien Sorel. Unlike the protagonist of Stendhal's *The Red and The Black*, however, she is not 100% calculating. She is blunter than Julien, bolder; she makes mistakes. If her plans fail, as they often do, she usually laughs and moves on. "Where there's life there's hope", she announces, after a particularly bad blunder. She ascends the social ladder slowly, but she does reach the top.9

In fact, Becky uses all the possible methods to achieve her ends. Moreover, she disregards virtue and indulges in deception and hypocrisy, because this is the way of the world. She feels that she should be challenging to gain a place and respect in high society. Her concept of being a gentleman's wife is based on external aids, such as wealth and socially acceptable behaviour without which she cannot hope to succeed. "*It isn't difficult to be a country gentleman's wife*", Rebecca thought

> I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year. I could dawdle about in the nursery and count the apricots on the wall. I could water plants in a greenhouse and pick off dead leaves from the geraniums. I could ask old women about their rheumatisms and order half-a-crown's worth of soup for the poor. I shouldn't miss it much, out of five

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9 Dan Callahan, p.1-2.
thousand a year. I could even drive out ten miles to
dine at a neighbour's, and dress in the fashions of
the year before last..., if I had but the money...(41:
471-72).

Becky is a strong woman and possesses an
overwhelming personality which enables her to dominate
and captivate all those who come into contact with her.
Disappointment and embarrassment never find a place in
her heart. Failing to gain Jos Sedley as a husband, she
immediately finds ways to please Sir Pitt Crawley, and then
his son, Rawdon, whom she marries secretly. She realises
her fault when proposed by Sir Pitt, "Married! Married!
Becky said, in an agony of tears-her voice choking with
emotion, her handkerchief up to her ready eyes, fainting
against the mantelpiece-a figure of woe fit to melt the most
abdurate heart" (15:162-63). She, nevertheless, accepts the
inevitable and determines to pursue her mission towards
achieving her ultimate goal.

As a wife, Becky Sharp is equally domineering and
selfish. Being clever and intelligent, she gains full control
over her husband. In this regard, Becky frankly tells
Rawdon, after losing the hope of inheriting his aunt, Miss
Crawley,

You can't shoot me into society', Rebecca said good-
naturally, "Remember, my dear, that I was but a
governess, and you, you poor silly old man, have the
worst reputation for debt, and dice, and all sorts of
wickedness. We shall get quite as many friends as we
want by-and-by, and in the meanwhile you must be a
good boy, and obey your schoolmistress in everything
she tells you to do (37: 417).

His low financial status enables her to dominate him. He
becomes submissive and never comments or protests. When
they are in Brussels, she flirts with George Osbourne, her enemy, for she aims at taking revenge from him, but she is also ruining the married life of her sincere friend, Amelia, to whom she should feel grateful. Yet, Rawdon does not object to George’s frequent visits, for the couple understands each other well; while Becky attracts George, Rawdon will win money from him at cards.

When Rawdon is in trouble, such as being overwhelmed by the creditors, it is Becky who assists him. The narrator describes Rawdon’s estimate of his wife and her ability in dealing with creditors to the following effect:

“Rawdon, with roars of laughter, related a dozen amusing anecdotes of his duns, and Rebecca’s adroit treatment of them. He avowed with a great oath, that there was no woman in Europe who could talk a creditor over as she could” (22, 241).

The narrator continues to describe their married life which is based on nothing but debts, “Almost immediately after their marriage, her practice had begun, and her husband found the immense value of such a wife. They had credit in plenty, but they had bills also in abundance, and laboured under a scarcity of ready-money” (ibid).

She succeeds almost in all her missions; making friends, getting debts, manipulating the creditors; exploiting those who are charmed and attracted by her, such as the wealthiest lover Lord Steyne; and achieving a place in the high society by being presented to the King himself.

Becky Sharp is presented as a low characterized woman for she does not love sincerely. She is a complete failure both as a wife and a mother. When most women are concerned about their husbands fighting in the battlefield,
at Waterloo, Becky is engaged in making alternate arrangements in case Rawdon dies. Also when he is arrested and put into prison, she does not offer any money to arrange for his safe arrival. Assisted by his brother, when he returns he finds her alone with Lord Steyne and thus his suspicions regarding her adultery are confirmed. Becky asserts: “I am innocent, Rawdon”. Rawdon strikes Lord Steyne and throws him to the ground. Her plans regarding her success are defeated and she sees her husband in a new light, “She admired her husband, strong, brave, and victorious” Steyne is not ready to give her up because he has spent a lot on her.

The greatest flaw in her character is her negligence of her son, little Rawdon from the beginning. “...Mrs. Crawley made an expedition into England, leaving behind her little son upon the Continent, under the care of her French maid” (36, 409). Describing the impact of parting on both, the heartless mother and the son, the narrator writes thus:

The parting between Rebecca and the little Rawdon did not cause either party much pain. She had not, to say truth, seen much of the young gentleman since his birth. After the amiable fashion of French mothers, she had placed him out at a nurse in a village in the neighbourhood of Paris, where little Rawdon passed the first months of his life, not unhappy, with a numerous family of foster brothers in wooden shoes (ibid).

Though the father was concerned about his son, the mother “did not care much to go and see the son and heir”. On another occasion, the narrator describes the bitter feelings of the boy towards his mother and her unnatural behaviour to the following effect:
Here, as he grew to be about eight years old, his attachments may be said to have ended. The beautiful mother-vision had faded away after a while. During near two years she had scarcely spoken to the child. She disliked him. He had the measles and the whooping-cough. He bored her. One day when he was standing at the landing-place, having crept down from the upper regions, attracted by the sound of his mother's voice, who was singing to Lord Steyne, the drawing-room door opening suddenly, discovered the little spy, who but a moment before had been rapt in delight, and listening to the music (44, 497).

The mother was insensitive enough to punish her son "violently a couple of boxes on the ear". Becky Sharp is indifferent like a man. She is never emotional or weak. She brushes aside all those who are a barrier in her way and hence Dan Callahan writes: "The men in Vanity Fair are, by and large, a worthless lot, they are blustery, vain, easily flattered and liable to stray from their wives whenever Becky is around causing mischief." David Cecil rightly believes that one is attracted towards her because she is a wolf; not a lamb; artful, bold and unscrupulous. She also fascinated because she is active and energetic. Despite her vicious nature she is regarded as an outstanding character in English fiction.

As all relationships among the characters of Vanity Fair relating to love and marriage have material basis, Thackeray, through his narrator, comments thus:

Their affections rush out to meet and welcome money. Their kind sentiments awaken spontaneously towards the interesting possessors of it. I know some respectable people who don't consider themselves at liberty to indulge in friendship for any individual who has not a certain competency, or place in society. They give a loose to their feelings on proper occasions (21, 224).
It is confirmed by the fact that the Osbourne family who had no regard for Amelia for a long period of time "became as fond of Miss Swartz in the course of a single evening as the most romantic advocate of friendship at first sight could desire" (224). George's sisters regarded Miss Swartz, a wealthy heiress, an excellent match, better than the insignificant Amelia. John Osbourne, the father, also tells his son, "...I see Amelia's ten thousand down you don't marry her. I'll have no lame duck's daughter in my family" (13, 141).

This happens on account of Amelia's change of circumstances. Also the news of George's marriage to Amelia enrages Mr. Osbourne, who disowns his son and excludes him from the will. Gina Gora (2003) writes why the Osbournes are inclined towards Miss. Swartz and relates it to the new concept of feminism during the mid-nineteenth century, and writes thus:

Vanity Fair is concerned that money replaces morality as a determinate of value, and the way George's father and sisters value Miss. Swartz, who is like the window Miller describes, is indicative of this shift in determining value.¹⁰

Gino Gora also refers to a comment made by the narrator about the character of Miss. Swartz, who is regarded as "the object of vast respect to the Russel Square family", and he refers to her property which is the main source of attraction. She, thus, earns respect on account of monetary gains. Gina Gora, to support her viewpoint, quotes Andrew Miller:

Among the dominate concerns motivating mid-Victorian novelists was a penetrating anxiety, most graphically displayed in Thackeray's Vanity Fair, that their social and moral world was being reduced to a warehouse of good and commodities, a display window in which people, their actions, and their convictions were exhibited for the economic appetites of others.\textsuperscript{11}

There are various examples found in the novel to express the value of money in the world of Vanity Fair, which is a replica of his own society. He vividly shows how money counts for everything and that a person is valued accordingly. This is illustrated by the story of Miss. Matilda Crawley, Sir Pitt's unmarried half-sister, who inherited her mother's large fortune. Her wealth and health are her chief attractions. The members of both the Crawley families show their love for her and are keen to take care of her. They pretend to love her in her presence, though they are her enemies. The narrator shows the relevance of money with reference to the two brothers, Sir Pitt and Mr. Brute Crawley, in the following words:

These money transactions—these speculations in life and death—these silent battles for reversionary spoil-make brothers very loving towards each other in Vanity Fair. I, for my part, have known a five-pound note to interpose and knock up a half-century's attachment between two brethren;\ldots(11, 108).

Wealth engenders feelings of envy and characters tend to conspire against one another. For instance, Mrs. Brute; conscious of Becky's popularity at Queen's Crawley, where she performs the function of a governess and was making a good impression on wealthy Miss. Crawley; writes to the headmistress of Pinkerton's school regarding details of

\textsuperscript{11} Gina Gora, ibid.
Becky’s past history. She also detects the growing relationship of love between Becky and Rawdon and encourages them to get closer to each other and even allows them to meet in her house. She intends to get rid of them for it is known to everybody that Miss. Crawley will give her fifty-thousand pounds to Rawdon.

Thackeray’s ironical attitude touches all members of this snobbish society, a factor that secures him a pioneering position among the realists of his age. He ridicules the striking aspect of Miss. Crawley’s character, who despite her being a dreadful radical, turns to a typical Victorian as far as social position in concerned. Miss. Crawley as the narrator describes her:

...was a bel-ésprit, and a dreadful Radical for those days. She had been in France (where St Just, they say, inspired her with an unfortunate passion), and loved ever after, French novels, French Cookery, and French wines. She read Voltaire, and had Rousseau by heart; talked very lightly about divorce, and most energetically of the rights of women...(10:106).

This woman, with her radicality and her energetic belief in the rights of women, spoils Rawdon’s chance of inheriting her wealth for marrying Becky Sharp, who possesses no social status “what a pity that young man has taken such an irretrievable step in the world!” his aunt said,

...with his rank and distinction he might have married a brewer’s daughter with a quarter of a million—like Miss. Grains, or have looked to ally himself with the best families in England. He would have had my money some day or other: or his children would-for I’m not in a hurry to go, Miss. Briggs, although you may be in a hurry to be rid of me; and instead of that, he is a doomed pauper, with a dancing girl for a wife (33: 362-63).
Thackeray, the realist, portrays weak and miserable women who are dominated over by their male counterparts like Amelia Sedley and Ethel Newcome. There are, however, domineering women like Becky Sharp, Mrs. Brute and Mrs. O’ Dowd in *Vanity Fair*, and Beatrix Esmond in *Henry Esmond*. Mrs. Brute; clever, prudent and thrifty; exercises full control over her husband to the extent that she writes his sermons and rules his household, though she never curbs his pleasures.

Mrs. Crawley, the Rector’s wife, was a smart little body, who wrote this worthy divine’s sermons. Being of a domestic turn, and keeping the house a great deal with her daughters, she ruled absolutely within the Rectory, wisely giving her husband full liberty without...(11: 108).

Mrs. O’ Dowd, the General’s wife, is one of the most powerful and influential women depicted by Thackeray. The novelist, through the characters of Colonel Michael O’Dowd and his wife, highlights the idea that there are very strong women who can dominate even the bravest men in the world of *Vanity Fair*. This brave Colonel, under whose command the entire regiment at Madras is quartered, “smokes his hookah after both meals, and puffs as quietly while his wife scolds him”. The narrator gives a glimpse of her character to the following effect:

Her Ladyship, our old acquaintance, is as much at home at Madras as at Brussels—in the cantonment as under the tent. On the march you saw her at the head of the regiment seated on a royal elephant, a noble sight...Lady O’Dowd is one of the greatest ladies in the Presidency of Madras—her quarrel with Lady Smith, wife of Sir Minos Smith the puisne judge, is still remembered by some at Madras, when the Colonel’s lady snapped her fingers in the Judge’s lady’s face, and said she’d never walk behind ever a beggarly civilian (43-482).
Though kind both in act and thought, she is "impetuous in temper: eager to command: a tyrant over her Michael: a dragon among all the ladies of the regiment: a mother to all the young men, whom she tends in their sickness."(43:483).

Beatrix Esmond, the female protagonist of *Henry Esmond*, resembles Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*. She is endowed by nature with unsurpassed loveliness of body; such as would attract any man; and blessed with the advantages of high birth and worldly position, "with cheeks mantling with health and roses: with eyes like stars shining out of azure, with waving bronze hair...and shape haughty and beautiful". Yet, she does not want to love or to be loved. Her ambition, like Becky Sharp's, is to achieve high status. She rejects all eligible suitors including her humble kinsman, Esmond, who objects to her relations with other men and whom she repulsed thus: "I shall go my own way, sirrah...and I don't want you on the way. You might do if you had an estate...Do you think I'm going to live in a lodging, and turn the mutton at a string whilst your honour nurses the baby?" Then, the Duke of Hamilton, a distinguished Scottish statesman intervenes and she decides to marry him for her greatest satisfaction to be called "Her Excellency". When Esmond expresses his surprise and questions her, she gives a rude answer:

A woman of my spirit, cousin, is to be won by gallantry, and not by sighs and rueful faces. All the time you are worshipping and singing hymns to me. I know very well I am no goddess, and grow weary of the incense. So would you have been weary of the goddess too...when she was called Mrs. Esmond, and got out of humour because she had not pin-money, and was forced to go about in an old gown.
Beatrix's dream, unfortunately, remains unfulfilled for the Duke is killed in a duel. Though Esmond continues to adore her and joins the military to improve his prospects in life, she still condemns him and never treats him as an equal. Her next ambition is to become a royal mistress, but she does not succeed and is left to marry her brother's tutor. This end shows the consequences of the vanity of human wishes. Thackeray also shows that Beatrix's selfishness and dissatisfaction were evident even when she was small,

Beatrix, from the earliest time was jealous of every caress which was given to her little brother Frank. She would fling away even from the maternal arms, if she saw Frank had been there before her.... She should turn...red with rage...; and would sit apart, and not speak for a whole night, if she thought the boy had a better fruit or a large cake than hers.

He further shows that she was shrewd and an artful girl, who knew how to gain the favour of her parents:

She was the darling and torment of father and mother. She intrigued with each secretly, and bestowed her fondness and withdrew it, plied them with tears, smiles, kisses, cajolements; ...when the mother was angry...flew to the father; and sheltering behind him, pursued her victim; when both were displeased, ...watched until she could win back her parents; good grace, either by surprising them into laughter and good-humour, or appeasing them by submission and artful humility.

Even later she never gives up her ambition in securing a high position in the world. She makes all efforts to raise her husband to the position of a Bishop. And, after his death, she becomes Baroness Bernstien, a rich old woman, elevated in status on account of her wealth.
Unlike these affluent women, there is the virtuous and innocent Amelia Sedley, who is disregarded both by critics and the novelist. Thackeray, at times, calls her a heroine, and, then, contradicts himself by depriving her of this title and bestows it upon Becky Sharp. Even critics consider Becky Sharp the heroine of the novel simply because she dominates most of the events of the novel and also because she extracts their interest, attention, and sympathy. But Amelia Sedley still remains conspicuous for she possesses the potentialities of a conventional heroine. She is sweet, self-sacrificing, gentle, tender, and loving. As she is a foil to Becky Sharp, she is considered dull, tender, and sentimental. But, these positive traits are in her character. Despite her weakness she is a real human being who offers genuine love to all those whom she meets, including her deceptive husband. She continues to be a devoted wife till she is awakened by her supporter and lover, William Dobbin. One should not overlook her maternal love for her son, Georgy, whom she offers her unique motherly protection and love. She describes herself as a caring mother thus:

He had been brought up by a kind, weak, and tender woman, who had no pride about anything but about him, and whose heart was so pure and whose bearing so meek and humble that she could not but needs be a true lady. She busied herself in gentle offices and quiet duties; if she never said brilliant things, she never spoke or thought unkind ones; guileless and artless, loving and pure, indeed how could our poor little Amelia be other than a real gentlewoman (59: 664).

She is a gentlewoman and a loving mother, which makes her superior to Becky Sharp, who thinks that wealth
is a substitute for everything. She is devoid of motherly instincts. Thackeray describes the feelings of Amelia to the following effect:

She grows daily more careworn and sad: fixing upon her child alarmed eyes, whereof the little boy cannot interpret the expression. She starts up of a night and peeps into his room stealthily, to see that he is sleeping and not stolen away. She sleeps but little now. A constant thought and terror is haunting her. How she weeps and prays in the long silent nights—how she tries to hide from herself the thoughts which will return to her, that she ought to part with the boy (50: 551).

Her love for her son makes her rather possessive and yet she sacrifices her youth for him and rejects all proposals of marriage.

Amelia Sedley is also a dutiful daughter, who looks after her parents when they are ill and they feel obliged to her. She is very charitable and easily forgives. Becky had been unkind to her, yet she does not abhor her, but rather sympathies with her when her son is taken from her and rushes to console her ungrateful friend. The best reward that Thackeray gives to Amelia is the happy ending of her life when she is united in marriage to her lover, Dobbin.

Thus, one concludes that Thackeray has portrayed women of flesh and blood, most of whom are powerful enough to dominate men and carry out their wishes. He vividly shows them as they are in real life and are both victims of circumstances and assertive. Though they belong to various classes of society, they never fail to live up to the expectations of the reader and the novelist also achieves his purpose of improving their lot and making them the new women of the day who are conscious of their rights and privileges.