Introduction

Beyond Domesticity: representations of working women in Victorian fiction

The Victorian domestic ideology, with its sharp segregations of the private/domestic sphere and the public sphere, dictated that women position and restrict themselves to the sphere of domesticity, their ‘proper sphere’, and not concern themselves with the economics, the development, and the coarseness of the ‘masculine’ public sphere. The ‘cult of true womanhood’ and the ‘canon of domesticity’ rewrote the fundamental virtues for women – piety, purity, submissiveness and devotion to domesticity – placing her firmly in the secure and cushioned environs of the home and distancing her from the brutal, competitive, public world of paid labour. The much cherished notion of domesticity and the concept of domestic feminism were placed in opposition to the culture of consumerism and of consumption. Much as the Victorians would have liked to believe in a woman’s primary and perhaps only acceptable role being that of an obedient wife, a ‘help meet’ to her husband, occupying herself with wifely duties of household supervision and household management, the social reality belied such convictions, creating deep fissures and challenging Coventry Patmore’s idealisation of the ‘angel in the house’.

Sudden deaths, bankruptcy, overstocking of the marriage market, were some of the reasons which forced women to fend for themselves. Faced with the prospect of self-dependence, ill equipped and ill trained for any ‘profession’, mostly without guardians and without friends to depend upon, women were obliged to go beyond the protective confines of domesticity and step into the public/‘masculine’ sphere of work. The examples of women choosing career over marriage or combining domesticity with consumerism do exist but they
were exceptions to the norm. Inquiring into the stereotypes associated with Victorian domesticity, this study aspires to read the lives of fictional working women, gauge the circumstances of their going beyond domesticity, analyse their remuneration, hours of toil, nature of work, conditions of employment, prerequisites for the occupation, the women’s response to work (which was often guided by society’s attitude to that particular employment), the work hazards or the physical, psychological and moral effects of exertion on women, and the social position of these women workers.

The study is arranged hierarchically. The first chapter describes the plight of the gentlewoman. Educated, refined and reasonably accomplished, she could become a governess to her employer’s children. Usually residing in her employer’s house, the governess often was precariously placed, within an undefined category, and almost like an ‘upper’ servant in the house. The distressed gentlewoman’s response to her profession often resulted from this status incongruence and sometimes her intellectual superiority to her employer’s family and the employer’s disdain for their paid employee accounted for much of the governess’s misery. Impoverished gentlewomen could also take up the companion’s role if such a vacancy appeared to them. However, the companion’s work entailed endless monotony with little respite or variety.

The second chapter continues with the evolving career options for educated gentlewomen: some preferred school teaching to becoming a governess – with the prospect of living in the employer’s household and facing the whims and caprices of the children, the temper and irritation of their parents, the contempt of their servants and the indifference of their social circle – as school teachers apparently enjoyed more autonomy and less interference in their work. Literary women like writers and journalists could work in the
privacy of their homes and even under the protective anonymity of a (usually male) pseudonym.

The third chapter persists in the quest for white collar job options. A few exceptional and fortunate women could storm the male bastion of medicine and qualify as ‘medical women’ or doctors. This chapter scans the fictional representation of a woman doctor, revealing the nature of her work and its effects on her. Though professionally qualified nurses were rare, Victorian fiction is replete with images and stereotypes of ‘professional’ nurses, meaning those who engaged in nursing as a profession. Along with doctors and nurses, this chapter surveys the work of women as professional storytellers, actresses, painters, office workers, entrepreneurs and manageresses in Victorian fiction.

From the fourth chapter onwards, the available work options for the poorer working classes come under purview. Dressmakers, seamstresses, milliners, slop workers present before us the women with the needle who had to stitch for survival. The excessively long hours, dismal work conditions, starvation diet, limited leisure not only bring out the extreme poverty but also reveal why many dressmakers doubled up as ‘dolly mops’, that is engaged in secret and casual prostitution.

The fifth chapter examines the option of heavy manual labour as the life and toil of general servants, dairy maids, and field labourers demonstrate. The occupation of wet nursing did not exact hard labour, nor was the wet nurse food-deprived or robbed of rest but wet nursing came with its own set of problems. It explores why the infants of wet nurses were at risk and why wet nurses found the job menacing. The exploitation of the working class labourer is glaringly obvious.
The last chapter scrutinizes the fictional representation of prostitutes. Brutally stigmatized and cruelly ostracized by society, these ‘fallen women’ seemed to have found a sympathetic portrayal in fiction with novelists propagating for their reform and reinstatement in society. Attitudes to prostitutes vary from the scorn and derision hurled at them for the disgrace of their ‘profession’, to the – mistaken – assumption that they led a luxurious life full of feasting, dressing gorgeously and engaging in shameless profligacy.

This study proposes to look at the assumptions, the demands made of, and prejudices regarding working women in Victorian society as well as to focus on their representation in fiction. Intending to avoid generalizations, this thesis hopes to explore the similarities between these fictional working women and their real life sisters. Though each profession has been categorized, in part, according to the class to which most of its members belonged, many professions like dressmaking, acting, domestic service and dairy farming included members from a diverse social background ranging from the ‘respectable’ to the poor and ‘lowly’. Curiously, even governessing drew women from a mixed class, from the distressed gentility as well as from members of merchant class who aspired to better their social position by training their daughters to become governesses.

The topic of my research is of interest to me for a number of reasons beginning with the plight of women who work, the stark contrast in the Victorian and the modern response to work (the typical Victorian response seems to be one of compulsion, sorrow, misery, and bleakness while the modern response is typically associated with choice, emancipation, independence and self-worth), the oblique references to women workers (the Victorian woman worker was characteristically relegated to the margins, a fringe character; even when presented as the heroine, it was usually the woman and her romantic concerns which formed
the focus and not the woman’s work), and the tendency to obscure the significance of their work. In tracing women’s overstepping of the checkered confines of domesticity, this study hopes to re-think and to revise the established perception of Victorian domestic ideology. The woman worker, frequently a minor or fringe character in the Victorian fictional canon, employed regularly as an agent in advancing the plot, or forming the backdrop of the social setting, or used to mirror social reality, or voice the novelist’s concern about social reform, is the point of focus in this study. This thesis hopes to inspect her primarily as a worker, not as an authorial device, nor a victim, and tries to refrain from the attempt to typecast her.

To address the issues of representation, a cursory look at documentary evidence regarding women’s labour was indispensable. The primary fact-finding data about Victorian women forms the backbone in analysing their representation in fiction. Keeping in mind the ‘politics of representation’ – choosing what to reveal and what to conceal, selecting which aspects to lay emphasis on and which to neglect, filtering the poetic from the horrific, painting the popular, downplaying the deplorable – and scanning the ‘modes of representation’ – convincing the others to support their perspective, or silencing the challengers by assailing their positions – this thesis aspires to outline how working women have been represented in Victorian fiction. What the writers like the Bronte sisters, Dickens, George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, Gissing, Hardy, Hawthorne, Meredith, Moore, Thackeray, Trollope and Charlotte Yonge have chosen to focus upon, and what they have chosen to either gloss over or thrust into the darkness of history, make for an interesting study.

In continuance of the path-breaking examination of Victorian domestic ideology by Nancy Armstrong in Desire and Domestic Fiction (1987) and Mary Poovey in Uneven Developments (1988), this study underscores the altered view of Victorian domesticity by
treating fictional representation as the basis of improved understanding of Victorian principles and concepts. Issues of class, gender, sexuality, and paid labour control the readings of the alienated separate spheres. This study focuses on the crossing of the domestic boundaries, its reasons, implications, methods and its palpable results.