THE FEMININE SENSIBILITY

Introduction:

The feminine sensibility in the chosen novels responds to the diverse cultural configuration of woman’s oppression, passion, and resistance. The novels show how living on the edge developed a particular way of facing and perceiving reality. The fiction of Hardy, Braddon, Grand, display few of the feminine traits. Their novels insinuate woman’s deliberations and rendering that are regulated by the male world and how she is impelled to scrutinize herself in terms of the societal expectations. Their novels depict pleasure and pain, arousal and anxiety, frustration and fascination, subjugation and transgression. The feminine traditions developed in the novels provide one set of answers as to how the tradition might be understood. The novels depict the feminine sensibility where a woman strives to equal male achievement. The primary embodiment of woman was to describe her as soft, docile and silent and these traits are attributed to women by the chosen writers. Women also exhibit virile nature that enhances woman’s artificiality and also feature criminal femininity. Such depiction displays woman’s dilemma and dual nature, and woman caught between desire to submit and resist in the fin de siècle society. Portrayal of woman in the chosen novels show that they reject Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan’s analysis of the symbolic order as it demanded subjectivity and is essentially phallocentric which corroborates masculine dominance and feminine inferiority. But the root of the plot is set in the feminine soil and there may be instances to show femininity as a non being, absence of meaning and irrational. Men are identified as male and true within the symbolic order and
women are relegated to the space of the ‘other’. These men adhere to Lacan’s ideal of men and experience the phallus power. The feminine sensibility in the chosen novels shows how women demand change because subjectivity is a process not a fixed identity. The novelists in projecting primary importance of man are not favoring the political notions of women as the ‘other’ or the estranged self but exemplify the rigidity of the moral code where aspirations for liberations or deliverance from such rigidity are frustrated. They are not passive; they struggle for liberation and self knowledge and the novelists in presenting such an image of women come closer to Irigaray’s assertion,

How can we accept the idea that woman’s entire sexual development is governed by the lack of and thus by her longing for the male organ?...all Freud’s statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own specificity. (Irigaray 69)

The chapter also evinces how novels figure out the overbearing influence of cultural, ethical and gender discourse and cast a new light on Victorian feminine practices.

**Feminine –a cultural construct**

Understanding of the feminine in the Victorian context facilitates to understand the depiction of femininity and the compulsion on the authors to present such an image. ‘Feminine’ represents nurture and care it also refers to the search for women’s unique voice. The Feminine is germane, incorporates the right and the responsibility for creating a community. Feminine principle does not trade on the idea that women are morally and mentally inferior to men. Do the chosen novels support this concept? But the patriarchal society in assigning specified social ethics of femininity on women was thrusting its
autocratic view which is designed to subjugate women. Femininity in the Victorian era was
viewed as the hallmark of a lady, invoking images of love and warmth. Feminine revolves
around domestic responsibility, motherhood, beauty, demeanor and marriage. Beverely J.
Rasporich quotes Susan Brown Miller’s description of femininity,

    Brilliant subtle, aesthetic that was bafflingly inconsistent at the same time
    that it was minutely, demandingly concrete, a rigid code of appearance and
    behavior defined by do’s and don’ts (Rasporich XVI)

Beverley finds that such description provides a general understanding of the feminine that
is rooted in sociology of gender. Women were described as the angel in the house, the
church and society nurtured this view. The term angel in the house was ironical, as women
in the Victorian context scarcely relished deliberation. The Victorian cult of the angel
woman conceived ideal femininity as comprising qualities of lightness, passivity and
submissiveness. Victorian writers such as Sarah Stickney Ellis an influential conduct
literary writer upheld the feminine ideal. John Ruskin in his letter – Young Girls and Young
Ladies Mrs. Eliza Farar, author of The Young Woman’s Friend Coventry Patmore’s, Angel
in The House served to inculcate in woman wifely duties and domestic responsibility
thereby indicating that they were writers who upheld the feminine virtues. Instructive
novelettes and prominent writers, believed the home to be the ideological territory for
women and they expounded the need for women to accept their social and intellectual
inferiority to men. Compulsion to accept male superiority was termed as duty which both
men and women could not resist. Women’s physical inferiority was based on the
observations that they were physically weak, because they menstruate; menstruation was
regarded as a periodic illness and could cause insanity in women. Women were believed to
be intellectually inferior which was supported by scientists who measured the cranial
capacity, and brain weight and correlated the findings with intelligence. Much of this type
of understanding came out of a pseudo science called phrenology. Positivists like August
Comte and Fredrick Harrison supported the feminine ideal of woman, denying her
autonomy. Victorian feminine ideal haunts the Victorian fiction to some extent. The
recourse of biological explications served to interpret feminine attributes which supported
women’s subjugation. Many thinkers viewed that the feminine is structured according to
masculine desire and knowledge. Drucilla Cornell opines, when Lacan says “Woman does
not exist” he means that the meaning of femininity is left to float precisely because ‘it’
cannot fit into the symbolic order.” (47)

The early and mid Victorian fiction was essentially domestic it endorsed the ideals of
motherhood and marriage. George Eliot, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, depict little signs
of change in the political and social order. Phallocentricism dominated the early 19th
century which prevented feminine texts from getting critical readership; phallocentric
critics’ view that literature like any art is phallocentric. The novelists’ depiction of women
involves positioning the female sexuality in a new way and liberating its representation
from masculine domination. Phallocentric discourse misrepresented women by describing
her as lack, non-being, weak and intellectually inferior and these representations were
presented as real. Late Victorian fiction concentrates on showing the falseness in such
representations. Showalter responding to the bias in Phallocentric critics’ enquiry
comments “If the pen is a metaphoric penis, from what organ can female generate texts?
(“Feminist Criticism” 313) the chosen women novelists write about women’s experience,
they make their women adopt many strategies and alternative terms to appropriate the
female body and keep patriarchy at a distance. The creation of women artists Beth, Ideala, Ethelberta, Elfride prove women like male artists use their intellect and they are what Showalter observes elsewhere; women who,

Can generate texts from the brain…with its compactly coded microchips, its inputs and outputs, […] a metaphorical womb… the women novelists also illustrate as Virginia Woolf says “woman’s writing is always feminine”…

(“Feminist Criticism” 314)

Phallocentric criticism of the novels concentrates on illustrating how these women negotiate the social positioning of women, and to evince how the novelists redress the exclusion of woman from phallocentric discourse and how they try to correct masculine projections of femininity. Hardy, Braddon and Grand like Irigaray give space for feminine specificity. The chapter illuminates the variability of feminine identities in doing so; it becomes clear that the novels address tensions between identities and essences, which are sometimes imposed, sometimes embraced, and sometimes re-casted. Women characters in the late Victorian novels figure differently from the early Victorian novels; the passivity that dominates the early Victorian novels is fairly absent in the late Victorian novels. Impediments, reassurance and avidity are part of the late Victorian fiction and these attributes make it distinct. The chapter shows how the ideal of femininity is challenged by women characters it does not mean that they aim to attain equality by subverting the family and the male power but aim to transform phallocentric society.

**Feminine Sensibility**
The feminine sensibility in the late Victorian novels show how women are preoccupied with the difficulties of fulfillment and self definition in man’s world, the conflicting claim of selfhood and wife hood. The 19th century world was awakened intellectually, the novels depict female beauty and sensibility, it awakens fully to their needs, it also illustrates that the actualization of such needs were difficult. Wollstonecraft’s view of feminine sensibility is reflected in her first novel Mary, (1788) where she enthusiastically hailed sensibility as the base of all happiness. Rousseau’s Emile had influenced Wollstonecraft’s view of the value of feminine sensibility but later in A Vindication of The Rights of Woman she disparaged feminine sensibility arguing that women succumb to sensibility because they are prey to senses hence unable to be rational. Her description of sensibility thus provides a clear understanding of the term. Maximillan Novak and Anne Mellor describe feminine sensibility as,

Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they became the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling. (15, 16)

Diane Price Herndl quotes Ian Watts’s observation in The Rise of the Novel (1957,) “Feminine sensibility was some way better equipped to reveal the intricacies of personal relationships and was therefore at a real advantage in the realm of the novel.” (12) Watts in his work claims that in the 18th century most novels were mainly feminine in pursuit. These popular views prompt us to consider woman as the centre or the subject matter of the novel, and such understanding enables one to evaluate feminine experience not as weak and timid. Stephanie Mathilde Hilger states Watts declared “Feminine sensibility made women like
Jane Austen, Fanny Burney and George Eliot more skilled at revealing the intricacies of personal relationship in fiction than men.” (27)

A careful analysis of the feminine in the chosen novels bear out that intricacies of personal relationship that are revealed not only by women novelists but male novelist as well which shows their innate talent in depicting the evocation of the feminine sensibility. The novelist’s insistence on female autonomy shows their disapproval to represent woman as the repressed. Their novels show how she is a woman of ambition attempts to hide her own past, subdues demons of her past by deceiving herself. Feminine sensibility has its own appeal, a solipsistic or embattled voice to these novelists, (recognized in Grand and Braddon’s relative emotional qualities.) Feminine sensibility is also seen as certain lack of assertiveness in certain situations which is seen in their speech and actions. It’s interesting to distinguish if the chosen novels represent such hesitation in woman and observe if the late Victorian novelists concede or defy what Watts implies that woman’s writing is feeble and constrained, hence narrow in purpose. Feminine sensibility also meant concealing woman’s true emotions under the guise of cordiality. Woman’s internalization was encouraged by society and man, such promptings were a major hindrance to woman and realization of it made woman articulate without faltering and the novelists in making their woman speak show how woman endeavored to come out of the constraints and their struggle to fight their way out of representative ideas. Ian Watts’s analysis of feminine sensibility throws fresh insights into the understanding of the masculine and the feminine, but Watts has refused women any active role in culture and his analysis presents women as literary objects which restrict them to playing the role of literary objects. Hannah Moore like Wollstonecraft responded to feminine sensibility as the very basis of morality and that
women have the ability to feel what others feel because they are endowed with sensibility. “Victorian gender ideology...defined feminine passivity, as a moral and a spiritual sensibility” (Owen 7) the emphasis on sensibility served to reinforce domestic virtues and further associated sensibility with vulnerability and delicate sensual beauty. The varied responses to feminine sensibility acknowledge feminine desire, which breaks free from the patriarchal order. The aesthetic sensibility depicted in the novels makes us comprehend women as thinking individual. Gradual evolution of the heroine from the domestic realm to social and political realm is intriguing. Late Victorian writers give a survey of the social world and also give an insight into character and events. The political and social forces that led to the transforming of society as a whole are subtly hinted in their works. Their novels decry varied miens and in a widely diverse situations like that of the wife, the mother, the society girl, the literate woman, the woman worker and so on. The stories narrate peculiar situations of the woman in association with man, i.e. father, husband or some other male member at the level of family and a male employer at work place. The novels hint at women’s debate and rendering that are regulated by the male world, and also show how she is impelled to scrutinize herself in terms of the societal expectation.

The Passive Feminine Ideal in A Pair of Blues Eyes.

Elfride Swancourt’s place in A Pair of Blue Eyes is precarious, as she is caught between the desire of the two men, Stephen Smith and Henry Knight. The rigid moral schemes are vocalized by Henry Knight in his insistence for pristine and prude woman. The dire instance of Elfride endorses the impairing of inflexible moral codes to a transitional young woman’s conduct. The baffled scheme of relationship, two male protagonists-Stephen Smith and Henry Knight- two obscure male rivals, desirous of Elfride, Felix
Jethway, dead in the grave and Lord Luxellian a widower, illuminates the patriarchal structure and social politics that picture in the novel. Hardy by placing the male in a kind of social order that aids to define the male position is subtly hinting at the supremacy men have in the patriarchal world. Elfride’s acquaintance with these men, define their position and their relation with the heroine. Her progression from a farmer, to an architect, to a Knight, to the Lord, marks her catastrophe. A careful scrutiny of the eponymous heroine corroborates that Hardy has depicted her not as powerful but as docile and feminine.

She had lived all her life in retirement the - *monstrari digito* of idle men had not flattered her, and at the age of nineteen or twenty she was no further on in social consciousness than a urban young lady of fifteen….As to her presence it was not powerful; it was weak….Elfride was no more pervasive than a kitten. (1)

Her manner, thought and attire were overbearingly feminine; femininity was inferred in the dress a woman wore. A discerning insinuation of the import that awaits feminine passivity and sublimity is evinced in the opening chapter. The Victorian woman was clad according to the dictates of the male and woman was still an articulation of obvious consumption and leisure. Dress was an indication of gender inequality, inevitably subordinated to the male gaze. Elfride’s dress is depicted as conservative that endorses a Victorian ideal. “She appeared in the prettiest of all feminine guises…to Stephen Smith” (11) The feminine sensibility is evoked in her innocence, her inclination for passionate tenderness, her uncrystallised nature which serves to buttress domestic virtues that attract Stephen Smith. The description also affirms that femininity is the source of physical existence; and it seeks eternal involvement. Feminine, is ubiquitous it is both invisible and unknowable; the
allusions to Madonna Della Sedia, the mortal and immortal Rubens are allured to render the rumination and deliberations of Elfride.

Elfride exhibits the tensions and conflicts of bourgeois women; her condition gives insight into the construction of women, male identification of women and the middle class social hegemony during the 19th century. “These eyes were blue; …A misty and shady blue that had no beginning or surface.” (1) The picturesque descriptions enforce one to apprehend Elfride as an artificial construct. She has not been authoritatively or strongly framed as Ethelberta or Bathsheba, she is denied the authoritative construction. Most Victorian novelists (Charles Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot.) enhanced the beauty of their heroines to encode a patriarchal ideology. The heroines’ beauty attracts the male to involve her in marriage, which echoes Ian Watts’s focus on heterosexual relationship when he defines feminine sensibility. He postulates sensibility as more apt at dealing with the intricacies of personal relationships which according to him served to be a great plus point in the realm of novel. Braddon, Grand, Hardy have adhered to the norm and made their women deal with such intricacies. The search for the appropriate husband becomes a prerequisite for the heroines as it was the only way woman could free herself from the precarious condition of being a single woman. Elfride’s allurement to Stephen is the attraction of any young girl whose acquaintance had not gone beyond Endelstow village. This does not make her less enticing than Bathsheba Everdene, (Far From the Madding Crowd) Grace Melbury, or Eustacia Vye. Her innate talent for creative reproduction shows her adept at writing; her pride in writing sermons for her father, her creation of romance novel makes Hardy comment about her creative deftness.
She has a certain versatility that enables her to use with effect a style of narration peculiar to herself, which may be called a murmuring of emotional trifles, the particular gift those to whom social sympathies of a peaceful time are as daily food. (119)

The feminine sensibility in Elfride is perceived in her submissive and progressive phase. The submissive phase is marked by freedom and bondage, the progressive phase project progressive ideals, like women characters choosing their vocation and their man. Elfride nurtures her behavior, her desires according to the patriarchal dictates; the subtle display of surveillance and defiance show the inconsistency in Elfride which is a display of feminine beauty and sensibility. She is gifted with the spirit and the power of deciding for herself but Mr. Swancourt impedes her individuality. Her dominance and power on Stephen demonstrates her superiority and power on men. Her decision to elope with Stephen is a daring attempt made by a village bred girl of nineteen and Hardy gives her the power to choose and the power to defy the male order. If feminine means emotion surely Elfride is a victim of passion and it is this passion which gives her courage to elope. But the brevity of her conviction, her vacillation may confirm to the Victorian ideals of femininity. Hardy has done much harm in reducing the valorous and mettlesome Elfride to a mere recreant whose courage to elope with Stephen is unconsummated because Elfride’s oscillation bids her to the next train. The female protagonists also internalize the discourse about women in terms of what the male protagonists perceive them so that no character is able to escape the tyranny of the Victorian sexual and social hierarchy which makes up his or her own world. Such internalization to Wollstonecraft was an impediment which hindered freedom and Luce Irigaray opines that the concept of female sexuality is derived...
on the basis of masculine parameters. Elfride’s desire to think and choose is clogged by her father; Mr. Swancourt’s emphasis on genealogy and patrician reminiscences changes his estimation of Stephen. She is forced to sacrifice her love to fulfill the paternal desire, illustrating how the inflexible moral codes rule the transitional young woman. However her comparative immunity from further risk and trouble had considerably composed her.

Elfride’s capacity for being wounded was only surpassed by her capacity for healing, which rightly or wrongly is by some considered an index of transientness of feeling in general. (95)

Her inconsistency is proven in her choice of Henry Knight and rejection of Stephen Smith. She acts by will, follows the dictates of her mind but lacks the will to pursue her wish. Her desire for marriage is feminine, like most Victorian women she believed that it gave her freedom and dignity. The feminine desire in Elfride is frustrated by Mr. Swancourt’s regard for class structure and later by Knight’s insistence on prudery. To Mr. Swancourt it is Elfride’s degradation “…to be known as the wife of Jack Smith the stone mason’s son… It is the drawback not the compensating fact,” (69)

In a stereotypical society the entire worth of woman is judged by her physical appeal. Tradition is strong as the tie of blood and repudiation of tradition is abjured and scorned, Hardy gives voice to the marginalized by presenting them as zealous and potent. Hardy reflects the thoughts of woman in the transition, torn between the conflicting claims of selfhood and womanhood. Late Victorian novelists depicted women characters desire to break the purity bonds; this proves that the Victorian society was surcharged with revolutionary thinking alongside conservative’s coercive measures to retain the belief in binary
opposition. Late Victorian fiction is replete with examples where woman becomes an adventurous eve and this trait in her opens up new vistas which evolves desire to seek freedom from constraint. The grievous flaw of 19th century world was denying women the political and cultural power this lacuna did not deter them from articulating their views and filing their objection. Elfride’s elopement is one such instance to oppose the constraints. Defining femininity poses a problem since the temporary characteristics passivity, docility, assigned by patriarchy is arbitrary and hence not the standard definition. Toril Moi rejects every effort to define femininity she states that “Feminine’ represents nurture and female nature’” and hence affirms that “femininity is a social construct.” (204) Christianity concentrates on the feminine as a symbol of consciousness and spirit. It affirms that the feminine is the primary attraction which signifies all the attraction of which psychic wholeness is constructed. Jung asserts the existence of the feminine as a leading element in women. Woman according to Lacan, does not exist because man desires, and woman submits. Psychological analysis by Freud swept the western world to believe women as passive and that female submission arises due to the physiological conditions.

The Biblical text portrays woman as temptress eve, who God created with Adam’s rib. The application of varied substances that went to create man and woman, disclose God’s reluctance to bestow Eve an identity of her own, hence she is fashioned from a male factor. “When God created man he felt that it is not good that man should be alone.” (Bible Gen. 218) Diane Jonte observes Julia, Kristeva’s view to unveil the bias that religion nurtures. “Christianity too …is founded on the narcissistic mother fantasy and its denial, but in the Christian context ‘the other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed.” (10)
The chosen novels tackle this aspect, the feminine as synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed. They show how creativity in a woman and intellectual challenge by woman was deemed to be evil but by presenting women’s strivings to compete they were espousing the true portrayal of women at the fin de siècle. Feminine qualities incorporate moral values and Simone De Beauvoir, says, (1953)

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental … He is the subject, he is the absolute – she is the other. (qtd Farganis 5)

Elfride’s adherence and surveillance to Henry Knight is to show how in spite of her advanced, vital and zealous gradation she is the incidental and the ‘other.’ Hardy is echoing the social and religious structures that are largely responsible for the perception of the feminine. A book on woman is more about the notions we have about the ideal woman and not on what she actual is or desires to be. The authorial comment states the ideological construction of woman and people’s outlook about woman. That Woman was averse to the traditional image of the feminine found expression in choosing their vocation and companion. Elfride’s volition to construct a Romance novel articulates her avidity to enter the public arena. Her knowledge about the literary masters and her inclination to fulfill the artistic pursuits exhibits her competence and skill. But Nietzsche’s view about scholarly intentions in woman might have been the opinion of many patriarchs so women withdrew from exhibiting their intellectual capabilities. “When a woman has scholarly inclinations there is usually something wrong with her sexually. Servility itself disposed one toward masculinity.” (qtd Burgard 10)
Elfride adopts a masculine pseudonym because of the fear that it would be impetuous to publish in her name. Women writers in the early 19th century had to either remain silent or articulate in male gendered language. Her conjunctive contour hints at the inhibitions of Victorian women writers. Her artistic rendition is frustrated by the harsh sarcasm, Mr. Swancourt who dismisses her work as flat copies. “Your book is good enough to be bad in an ordinary manner, and doesn’t steady itself...merely something put in to fill up.” (119) His sarcasm and contempt for woman’s work display his biased notions. Women in the past and in the present are grappling to break free of the notion that women are intellectually inferior to men. These notions are largely responsible for women’s secondary positions. Hardy endows Elfride with female genius a contrast to Samuel Richardson who subtly criticises Clarrisa (Clarrisa 1748) as the fatuous, insipid romantic heroine.

Elaine Showalter, Gayatri Spivak, Virginia Woolf, Kate Millet have condemned the male sexual politics. The sexual difference assigned by societal norm defines woman as darkness and chaos and positions them on the margins of order, consulting them as the limit or the borderline. Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique attempts to prove that the feminine mystique denies woman the opportunity to develop her identity as she presumes that this can deter woman’s freedom. Henry Knight a hardcore Victorian cannot resist the verity of Elfride’s artistic pursuance, advises Elfride to end her artistic desire, as he can associate with a woman in print not in reality advises, “…confine yourself to ‘domestic scenes’…..That a young woman has taken to writing is not … the best thing to hear about her.” (117)

A staunch patriarch who detests woman’s intellectual competence “Elfirde …don’t ever listen to the fashionable theories of the day about a woman’s privileges...” (217) Elfride fails to display defiance, she is mesmerized by Knight’s advice. It’s probable that Hardy
hints at woman’s flaw in allowing men to rule them, skillfully inquiring if man is solely responsible for women’s subjugation. The possibility of a fair reply is difficult, Feminists can attack men for their chauvinistic mind-set but they may fail to convince women not to be a victim of male autocracy. Knight’s conception of woman exists in fantasy his attempt to find a woman pure in body and mind is a failed venture. He in demanding adherence to veracity and candor is voicing the age’s expectation of woman. His advice echoes the insecurity of man and jeopardy of the patriarchal set up owing to the ongoing women’s movement that had cautioned women and threatened men’s complacency. Feminine for Elaine Showalter is taken to signify the cultural construction of femininity in relation to masculinity describing woman as docile and silent which is considered as the primary embodiment of femininity. Man’s supremacy is glorified in mythical, literary and religious text, though variations are witnessed from time to time yet his dominance is found in every era and Henry knight is no exception. Geoffrey Harvey affirms,

Hardy replicates the Victorian sexiest ideology of woman as the weaker sex, and as the mysterious other. At the same time, he puts this ideology into contradiction by the way each of his women is trapped within the male gaze, with resulting complex vision. (148)

Harvey’s comment shows how Elfride is broken on the wheel of man’s egotism. Stephen her equivalent in everything except in social status, is marginalized, rejected on the basis of class by Swancourt, and Elfride’s desire to be dominated and controlled by the scholarly Henry Knight. Hardy’s heroes are blessed with some devices to lure women and induce passion in their heart. Manston in Desperate Remedies (1871) used the piano, Troy entices Bathsheba in Far From the Madding Crowd by his sword, and Knight employs his
ruthless superiority in chess to outplay Elfride. Her loss to Henry Knight is her willing submission to Knight’s rigidity. His demand for confession incites Elfride to perceive herself as a subject of sexuality as Joanna Devereux states.

The Freudian phallic gaze works to fix its subject; it is one that pre-empts, encompasses, subsumes, and controls, enforcing and re-enforcing male power by precluding all alternate visions, claiming insight, and suggestion, indeed insisting upon mastery. (2)

Knight’s envy and emotional perturbation over Elfride’s conduct proves his inability to accept a woman with a faded past thereby justifying that his love was weakening. He like Angel Clare in (Tess of D’Urbervilles) rejects his lover because of her fallen status. The society bestowed man with the power to correct an erroneous woman and also accepted their rejection of woman who failed to fulfill the proper feminine. What about the improper man? Is he castigated by women? Who is the proper man? Her confession elicits Knight’s contempt as she fails to be the apotheosis of femininity. She who had the charm to activate the church is shunned away by Knight ignoring her love for him and the advantages that such love would entail. Elfride presents reality to him which is remote from paper theory her display of deviance marks his defeat. There is much reason and sense in her request to consider the past as inconsequential Elfride’s observation of the world is limited; her lack of acquaintance with a male chauvinist makes her accept Knight as the right husband, “Ordinary men are not as delicate in their tastes as you;… I fancy- as far as I have been able to observe the world.” (241) she voices her dream of an ideal husband whose demeanor and conduct are beyond ordinary men. Her views subtly reflect the Victorian
woman’s expectation of an ideal husband and the narrator prepares woman against such
docility in saying,

Elfride’s docile devotion to Knight was now its own enemy. Clinging to
him so dependently,…a slight rebelliousness occasionally would have done him
no harm, and would have been a world of advantage to her. But she idolised him,
and was proud to be his bond-servant. (246)

Hardy hints at the paradoxical situation of the feminine; the feminine traits that Victorian
society expects of virtuous woman (docility, adherence and devotion to man) marks her
downfall. Her devotion towards Knight stops her from retaliation she suffers from the burden
of an over-evolved sensitivity. Her condition echoes Catherine Belsey’s, findings,

Femininity is the criterion which Cixous uses to define ‘othernesses’ and
femininity is not gendered in anatomy. On the contrary, it is situated in language
and culture. The difficulty, then, is not with individual men or women but with
patriarchy. It is patriarchy that imposes male privilege… (10)

Probably it is this privilege which makes thinkers, philosophers and psychologists claim
supremacy over women but these thinkers lack objective assessment of the feminine.
Knight like the other patriarchs prefers the saintly woman (Virgin Mary) who keeps the
vital energy of the female out of men’s lives and rejects the evil woman (Magdalene the
whore) who is full of virility and feral. Julia Kristeva talks of the limited offerings that
Christianity extends to woman, to participate in the symbolic order. Aurora Floyd, Elfride,
Lady Audley, Beth, cannot be called saintly because they are sexual, have orgasm and they
give birth. To the Victorians there existed two types of women the pure and the fallen.
Elfride’s elopement with Stephen goes against the ideal of femininity makes her unfeminine or the fallen which Knight refuses to accept. Knight’s reaction reminds us of Nietzsche’s belief that the feminine power submits to the will and desire of the masculine. Nietzsche restores the image of the cat to define the feminine trait, he says,

Woman’s great art is lie; her highest concern is mere appearance and beauty…..Woman has much reason for shame; so much pedantry, superficiality…petty licentiousness and immodest lies concealed in woman. (qtd Burgard 1)

To nurture such beliefs would certainly create much harm; they are the most discredited aspects of his thought not apt descriptions of the feminine. Knight’s rejection of Elfride only affirms that he evaluates her act as petty, licentious and immodest. Elfride by not confiding her past mistake goes to substantiate Nietzsche’s view that woman’s great art is lie but her fear of society and fear of losing Knight makes her conceal her past deed. It is interesting to observe Edward Neill’s comment on Henry Knight’s reaction to Elfride’s manner which goes against the grain of Victorian morality.

In a sense, Knight falls foul of sexuality, slips up on its slop. His emotional intelligence is well to the rear of his theoretical lore, given his vulnerable awareness that he is no graduate of cupid’s college. (27)

Victorian novelist’s examination of women is altered by their acquaintance with men. Margaret Oliphant, Eliza Linton, George Egerton, assign feminine qualities to woman. Oliphant’s Miss Majori Banks (1886) is concerned with the limitations placed on the lives of Victorian women. It is about the struggle for power in a world that places several
limitations on female ambition. Eliza Linton’s antifeminist essays *The Girl of the Period* (1860) were considered as conservative and daring because such writings showed the inconsistencies and ambiguities that bothered women in the transition period. Their writings show woman’s struggle for survival as she is both within and outside the patriarchal structures. The novel explores the construction of women by men identified with the middle-class social hegemony. The rigid moral schemes are stated by Knight in his preference for the ideal woman, his disillusionment, his doubts and verbal abuse are signs of Victorian male autocratic conduct. Enraged by Elfride’s confession he exhibits mere display of patriarchal inclination and phallocentric preemptor. Elfride’s slips with Feliz and her elopement with Stephen are unfairly punished by Henry Knight’s stern retort, “And remember this, no more fibs, … Heavens! That I should come to this, to be made a fool of by a girl’s untruth” (255, 257). Elfride’s condition to the modern reader may seem irritable but not a rarity even in the modern world, and Edward Neill analyses her condition envisaging on the lines of Julia Kristeva,

> A master of hand square sentences’ Knight is set on linguistic victory as a kind of anti Pgymalion bent on petrifying the once dashing and apparently uncontrollable Elfride. (21)

The lack of elegance or virility to influence him is due to her limited acquaintance. Hardy admits “She was no further in social consciousness than an urban young lady of fifteen.” (1) The narrator comes to her aid stating that she trusted fate to bestow kindness upon her than to argue. Elfride’s sobbing; her helpless cries are typically feminine, she adopts timely strategy to convince a hardened egoist like Knight but her purpose meets its defeat. In her plea, Hardy demonstrates the nervousness and trauma of a bourgeois woman.
Am I such a mere characterless toy-as to have no attraction in me, apart from freshness? Haven’t I brains? You said –I was clever and ingenious in my thoughts … you have praised my voice, and my manner…yet all these together are so much rubbish because I- accidently saw a man before you! (257)

Her assertion though commendable falls on deaf ears, her condition articulates the desperation of a woman obliged to prove her chaste love. Paranoid by Knight’s linguistic dexterity: the once flighty, vibrant, loquacious, Elfride is smothered and trampled by male atrocity. Edward Neill appraises her decline and precipitation as similar to what Helen Cixous terms as a ‘Personne’ that is to say declined from a ‘person’ who was ‘so living’ ‘to nobody’ (21). Her reverberating impulse is rescinded by Knight’s appalling notions of what is pertinent to femininity. Elfride is exceptional, tantalizing, for the inflexible and resolute Knight. Her daring act at saving Knight trapped on the cliff is ironical for it reflects Knight’s insecurity and reliance. She ventures to lift Knight from falling into the abyss, but the same Knight lacks the verve and open handedness to exonerate her from her fallen status. Feminine sensibility is displayed in her act of diffidence and boldness, subdued by the passion and power of man. Her act of saving constitutes perdition for her, as it penalized her but gave no credit for being the savior. The ideals of femininity formed by patriarchy instead of ensuring security brought discontent to woman.

**Feminine Receptiveness in The Woodlanders**

Grace Melbury the heroine of The Woodlanders is caught between modernity and tradition. George Melbury’s sole ambition was to educate his daughter but education did not deter Grace from being less passionate about GilesWinterborne. His social shortcomings did not
erase her liking for him; she like Elfride is a victim of patriarchal power. Patriarchal disposition about class monitors women’s choice of her partner. Is Grace given the power to choose? Melbury transcends the Hintock culture by educating Grace but his obsession about class does not alter. So Grace is caught between modernity and tradition which shows women’s confusion. Edred Fitzpiers social background, education and refinement make him the rightful husband for Grace. Grace is unheroic, lacks the radical verve of Hardy’s later heroines. The novel gives an insight into the construction of women, an insight into male identification of women and the middle class hegemony during the nineteenth century. Grace a beautiful educated refined young lady is admired for her manner and decorum but is victimized by her father’s social class obsession; her absolute docility to her father’s whims implies her tractable partisan to Victorian code of conduct. Hardy focuses the happenings of his time and the state of woman cautiously, Grace is married to Fitzpiers an outsider who lacks the Hintock village culture; she enters the middle class through marriage which elevates her status. This evinces that woman’s aspirations were strictly monitored by Victorian morality. It’s no exaggeration to state that women found it difficult to shed this mental block which confined woman barring her from being rational and skeptical.

The juxtaposition of the strong and the weak, the passionate and the sublime is a unique facet in Hardy’s novel which helps one to get an authentic representation of women in the transition era. Marty South is like Tess a pure woman, selfless daughter of the soil, her selfless endeavor to survive without the male allegiance is stronger than Tess. Marty a silent bearer of the misery is more virtuous than Tess for she is pure in body and mind but is unfortunately not subject to critical reception. Her love for Giles is unostentatious; she
exhibits the finest traits of the feminine sensibility, enjoys working with Giles Winterborne; exhibits the feminine ethics of care and concern; she is individualistic and independent than Grace. Her loyalty towards Giles goes unrecognized; she is his equal at work, her physical and mental strength is indicated through her work. The novel has instances to show how Marty displays emotional and physical strength that disclaims the dominant view that women are weaker by physical constitution and psychological temperament. This lacuna makes them less productive as workers, less rational and more emotional than men. Marty could withstand the rejection of love while Giles withers, fades, and ultimately meets his end. Is woman emotionally weak women? Feminine beauty was meant to be appreciated, men of letters have praised feminine beauty, (Dante’s Beatrice, Shakespeare’s Cleopatra) but Hardy writing in the latter part of the Victorian era shows the change in the perception of feminine beauty this may be due to the advent of industrialization and urbanization which fostered interest in popular taste which made men and women assess things in terms of profit and gain. The whole concept of interpreting beauty changed women’s beauty was considered profitable and Victorian women drew on this to fulfill her womanly aspirations. Hardy refers to such commoditization of feminine beauty in the novel, for instance, Marty’s hair is sold to appease the aesthetic sensibility of Mrs. Charmond’s sensuality and her passion is implied in her eagerness to entice men through her looks. The large size of Grammer Oliver’s brain prompts Fitzpiers to pressurize her to sell her brain as he finds it an apt subject to pursue his research. Both Marty and Grammer Oliver are exploited for material gain. Hardy is probably attacking the evolutionary anthropologist’s findings that the differences in cranial shape showed the inferiority in women. Marty’s reply to barber’s request displays the priority she gave to her looks, to appear adorable and charming, to
please men was again feminine in desire, which most Victorian women high and low resorted to. Here we see how feminine sensibility is associated with vulnerability and delicate sensual beauty. “I value my looks too much to spoil ‘em. She wants my curls to get another lover with; … she’s broke the heart of many ” (14) Marty’s analysis of Mrs. Charmond gives an insight into the passionate Mrs. Charmond even before her presence in the novel. Marty’s sole interest in not selling her curls is to entice Giles by her looks. Marty’s hair equates the upper class and lower class feminine yearning for beauty. Both Mrs. Charmond and Marty desire to please the male through their looks. Marty’s hair is the prime expression of sexuality and she trades on her femininity. Her hair is the focus of observation for both Mrs. Charmond and the barber; she is evaluated by the barber in erotic, social, and economic terms. “Her hair…Its abundance made it almost unmanageable; …its shade was a rare and beautiful approximation to chestnut.” (11) Femininity is marked by Marty’s hair; historically hair is associated with feminine beauty. Giles love for Grace disillusions Marty it is marked by her act of cutting her hair she symbolizes both feminine self sacrifice and feminist defiance. It is seen as the rape of the lock, accepting her state as sexless, bodiless creature.

Mrs. Charmond represents the consumer society that thrives on artificiality, on beauty aids, and miraculous cosmetics. The naivety of Marty is juxtaposed with the sensuality of Mrs. Charmond and both enter a system in which they are subordinated to the male appraising gaze-and which in turn represents the feminine as empty signs. The sensuality of Mrs. Charmond is marked by the forces of modern life because she emerges as a fashionable artifact intended for visual stimulation. She is depicted as an attractive object to
seduce men; whereas Marty turns out to be an angel, an ideal of femininity, an embodiment of purity and chastity.

Marty trades in her feminine power to assume a mystical, classless and sexless identity tested by unfulfilled love and unrecognized labor’… The treatment of Marty is more severe than Tess, for Marty works for no reward, from any character, while Tess, at least enjoys two ecstasies-at Talbothays and in the honeymoon. (Elvy 103)

Marty is left alone without a lover, without her hair to give her the feminine identity, without her father to protect her. She at the end is seen as a lonely form without the aid of the dominant force (man and class) which illustrates economic and social marginalisation of Marty. Grace shares some of the traits of Hardy’s later heroines Sue Bridehead and Bathsheba Everdene but lacks their rebellious spirit. Education did not foster Grace to be emancipated in her views about marriage she still adheres to patriarchal notions of marriage. Grace is identified early in the novel as one who has “fallen from the good old Hintock ways” (42) but she spends much of her time redeeming that fall. The past cannot be wholly undone; she is now an educated woman of refined tastes, genuinely disconcerted by the homely inn to which Giles takes her. Grace is attracted to Fitzpiers by his family connections, his charm, intelligence, his talent for quoting from the poets, and his sexuality. The feminine sensibility responds in a certain way to masculine charm and authority. Hardy’s women behave in an approved and disapproved manner. Margaret Elvy observes,

Grace is framed by the patriarchal characters (principally Melbury, Fitzpiers, and Giles) in terms of materialism and sexuality. For Melbury, Grace is
not only an ‘emotional investment’, in the Freudian sense; she is also a financial investment. Melbury expects real, palpable returns from his financial outlay on Grace. (105)

Grace in spite of her advanced views, suffers from too rigid a restraint, at times she is empty, passive, a mere reflector. Her fascination to Fitzpiers solely reflects the unknowing gaze of desire which she intercepts in the mirror. In her Introduction to Lacan in Feminine sexuality, (1983) Jacqueline Rose states that man constitutes fantasy through woman and woman is the basis of his fantasy. Grace identifies her father as male; therefore he symbolizes truth within the symbolic order, in turn classifying herself as female so, false. It is observed how,

Lacan inscribes the women’s world through linguistic interpretation of the ‘penis’ as the phallus and by not referring to the male organ but by rendering it linguistically as the signified. Lacan thus divides the world into imaginary and therefore the unconscious….the fundamental problem remains women are associated with the unconscious. (Khasnabish 44)

Femininity is marked with a negative sign owing to this she is assigned some traits that are contrary to men. Grace remains a banal person till the end, it is impossible for her to mollify the interests of men in her life. Mr. Melbury bungles with Grace’s marriage he realizes his mistake, desires to get his daughter a divorce but his attempts fail. This makes him understand that no law could undo her marriage without her appearance in public which explains women’s difficulty in procuring a divorce. The matrimonial act of 1857 enabled ill sorted husbands and wives to part. But in denying Grace the freedom from
marriage bond, law proved to be arbitrary in its dealings. “I don’t mind at all what comes to me.’ Grace continued; ‘whose wife I am, or whose wife I am not! I do love Giles I can’t help that.” (275)

Grace leads a dual life being one thing to her father and another to Giles. She desires to be the rustic woman at the same time intends to obey the demands of education which subtly hints at her artificial manner different from the chaste behavior of Marty. Feminine sensibility is seen in Grace’s dilemma to make a final commitment to either Fitzpiers or Giles. She stands undecided as she is torn between modernity and tradition, her urge for a companion is not sensual but emotional, and though she desires Giles she is passionless. Her attraction for him transcends the limits of the mundane and profane love. Both Giles and Grace yearn for one another which need not be sensual but sadly both find it difficult to make the society understand. Temporary estrangement from Fitzpiers leaves her in a state of suspension and her condition is well stated by Mr. Melbury. “I don’t like this state that you are in- neither married nor single. It hurts me,” (278) the law of ‘covertures’ meant that husband and wife publicly existed as one. The anxiety in Mr. Melbury is understandable his daughter’s single status marginalizes her both figuratively and literally from the marriage circle. This hints at the Victorian legal disability which framed wives relationship to the material world. One cannot ignore that Grace fails to articulate her anxieties and subtlety of her feelings as intuitively as her father and Diane Price Herndl says, “Feminine language does not assume the authority of logical discourse and, therefore, escapes the hierarchy of the official language.” (11) Luce Irigaray remarks Women’s lack of verbal dexterity aptly
When a girl begins to speak she is already unable to speak of/to herself. Being exiled in man’s speech, she is already unable to auto-affect. Man’s, language separates her … and she speaks without speaking in it…. (“The Poverty of Psychoanalysis” 101)

Grace’s flippancy and inconstancy is a contrast to Marty’s determination and resoluteness. Grace lacks the strength and power to battle the affronts whereas Marty displays power without losing the feminine qualities, an extraordinary country woman; she ascends from the ridiculous (losing her hair) to the sublime. (Her loyalty to Giles) ‘Now my own love,’ …you are mine and only mine; for she forgot you … although for her you died! But –whenever I get up I’ll think of ’ee again.” (344) Feminine sensibility is displayed in her selfless love for Giles, her non-complaint attitude and her spirit to survive the harsh condition. Hardy’s women tease us, perplex us, for each character is unique which pits one against another estranging the possibility of assigning a particular trait to a single character. Probably Hardy’s intention is to depict life in all its complexities and diversity elusive of a decisive assessment. Mrs. Charmond’s pride and heartiness is humbled due to her forced living in Hintock. “I am the most inactive woman when I am here, she said … and I must struggle against such fancies.” (57) She like Eustacia is a misfit in Hintock. Her intemperance her perfunctory acts are understandable; her illicit relationship with Fitzpiers depicts her sensuality and her audacity to defy the Victorian notions of chastity and purity. The women characters express envy, rage, compassion, and receptivity; feminine sensibility is revealed in their expressions and retribution which suggests that “Women feel just as men feel, they need exercise for their faculties, and a field of their efforts as much as their brothers do,” (Jacobus 16)
The Feminine in Lady Audley’s Secret.

Braddon’s Lady Audley Secret a racy sensational novel, a mystery featuring a country house setting, a strange disappearance, duplicity and murder it has all the ingredients that defines a sensational novel. But it is interesting to investigate the feminine sensibilities that women characters evoke which makes us reconsider the novel for its feminine claims which is not feminine in the traditional sense. Lucy Graham the assumed name of Helen Maldon married to the highest bidder George Tallboys, who eventually abandons her goes to Australia to seek his fortune inorder to protect his wife but Lucy is left to fend for herself as an impoverished governess who performs the feminine task assigned to woman. Her ineffable beauty and daintiness attracts the denizens, her radiance, solicitous and generous traits are her assets through which she wins Michael Audley. Lucy marries the second time suspecting her husband to be still living; becomes an object of decoration awaiting Robert Audley’s barrister skills to reveal her treachery and confine her in an asylum. Her innocence, beauty and childishness are weapons to conceal her virile intent. Braddon’s novel proposes a different view, a different standard it uncovers the conflict of a woman who aspired an identity in a male set up. The novel grapples with the complex layered theories of subjectivity. Braddon shows how the female role was defined and constricted by the social system. Her novel sharply focused on the way Victorian society marginalized women. Lucy Graham’s dream of a happy home, her desire to be a good wife to a man blessed with wisdom, courage, strength and endurance are feminine. Marriage is seen as a means to overcome her financial instability and the precarious condition of a single woman. Her situation defines framed wives relationship to the material world. Lucy manages a domestic empire and its various slaves and she like most upper class women
enjoys the benefits that were entitled to a rich wife. Through her flippant acts and innocent laughter she manages to conceal her hideous past and fulfill the Victorian notions of femininity at the novels start. Feminine sensibility is seen in Lucy pursuing the goals of spousal equality.

She was so used to admiration from every one, high and low….….her grace, her beauty and her kindliness…For you see Lucy Graham was blessed with the magic power of fascination.   (6, 7)

These traits qualify her as virtuous, and people in the elite circle regard her as charitable, noble, kind and benevolent. She is endowed with all the qualities that go to suit the patriarchal society, and Lyn Pykett (1992) says she is defined as the domestic angel in the house. Femininity is marked by innocence, passionless and lack of legal identity. The feminine provides the means to be ethical first in the house, in which the feminine is defined as gentle and caring. Braddon fashions the stereotype of the Victorian angel as a domestic fairy and the painting presents her as a fair domestic angel. She is a spectacle for the male gaze and a suppressed being, desirable but structured as the ‘other.’ The lady’s portrait painting by the Pre-Raphaelite artist focused on how woman in art is just a sign. Thus co-relating between art and real life, if in art woman is a sign so is woman in real life. She is merely a sign as the rigid morality and stringent conditions incapacitate a real woman.

Tender fascination of those soft and meeting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering
flaxen curls; the low music of that gentle voice the perfect harmony which pervaded every charm, and made all doubly charming in this woman… (7)

The delicate features exemplify her feminine virtues; these feminine traits are meant to attract and Lucy uses it tactfully to lure men, Braddon subtly hints at the acquiescence of woman inspite of her talent and tact. The feminine depiction mirrors a society thriving on hypocrisy, on beauty aid and glamour. The novel displays the formation of feminine autonomy and she enters a system in which subordination by male becomes inevitable.

Lucy Audley is a woman in colour, and the colour of her appearance is bound up with her “secret”- a secret contained in Braddon’s images of her, images closely allied to pictorial sensation of the period. (Hughes 71)

Lady Audley’s glamorous dress, her lavish life style reflects her superficial existence her altered social marital status; her attire, manner, honor and place befits the feminine ideal. Marriage as a materialistic move denudes women as products in the market place in doing so it interrogates the Victorian institution of marriage and recites marriage as a commercial treaty between husband and wife. Michael Audley’s proposal to marry Lucy fabricates the language of fantasy and romance, aids the language of the market place.

Well Lucy, I will not ask too much of you… but if you do not dislike me, and if you don’t love anyone else, I see no reason why we should not make a very happy couple. Is it a bargain, Lucy? [To which Lucy replies] ‘Yes’ (12)

And the narrator comments that Michael Audley, “Must be contented, like other men of his age, to be married for his fortune and his position.” (13) Rhoda Broughton’s heroine in Cometh up as a Flower (1868) describes marriage as a trade. In a number of sensation
novels women’s physical beauty goes on sale, characters contemplate the approbation of a pretty face. The ravishing yellow hair enhances their sensuality; women’s hair in the mid nineteenth century was not just a sign of sexuality but also a sign of commodity. To Lucy Grahams her enticing yellow curls are her assets which she uses, to entice George Talboys and later Michael Audley. She serves as a living advertisement pledging her beauty which presents her as a fashionable artifact. It is through fashionable intelligence that her whereabouts are recorded. Lucy follows the conventional norm to attain social success, to propitiate her prediction for material success and to prevent her straightened circumstances, “No more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations.” (13) Her marriage to George Tallboys failed to give her material prosperity; did not release from her father’s penury. Lucy may be called virile, an ‘improper feminine’ but her longing for a man to give her security is feminine in that sense she befits the proper feminine. Her enragement and remonstration at George’s failure to elevate her exposes her improbity. He fails to be her proper man the hypocrisy of men forces her to defy the role of the accepted woman, she plans her living. As George puts it, “I left my little girl asleep … with nothing but a few blotted lines to tell why her faithful husband had deserted her?” (19) Her answer to such desertion is choosing a rich man through prevarication and deceit. Woman’s intentness at domestic needs is in accordance with male’s expectation of the proper woman different from the pursuits of the thinking woman handling a pen or a sword. Lucy articulates woman’s experience and gender anxiety of the 19th century society. The novel focuses on the parochial thought of Victorian society which gave prominence to marriage that sanctioned woman’s subjugation. Marriage suggested that Women had liability not rights, it begins by precluding the emblematic English country house which was once a convent is
now a respectable aristocratic house. “A glorious old place—a place that strangers fell into raptures with; … a house in which no one room had any sympathy with another, …” (2) It is the designated place which repudiates violation of the ethics of the traditional and orthodox society. Braddon specifies two possible options for women to choose the house or the asylum both signify confinement. Lucy strives between the veritable female (desiring for identity and place of her own) and domestic feminine ideal.

Her living quarters define the space in which she will be confined …they also represent the very crypt in which male power has chosen to entomb her…they are literally Lucy’s - women’s “separate sphere”, decorated to appear “stately”, but in actuality characterized by ‘wretched mockeries’ of genuine splendor. (Schroeder 59)

Marriage sets ideological traps for women and women appear subservient to its rules and such feminine modesty appears superficial, it may suggest the strenuous endeavors of woman to remain innocent which they may lack. All the women characters Phoebe, Alicia Audley, Lady Audley and Clara Talboys (George’s sister) are caught between the domestic ethics that society ordains and the dream of misdemeanor (transgressive) that the inner consciousness aspires i.e., the dream of transcending the cabined and cocooned existence. Such tendencies reveal the feminine sensibilities that Braddon’s women exhibit; it also hints the thoughts and motives of women in the transition. Alicia moves from the bouncy girl who Robert finds it ineffectual to imagine the impulsive, rash, judgmental Alicia marrying Henry Towers. She changes from an impetuous girl to a refined and matured woman and marriage gives her refinement and dignity ironically suggesting her subjugation. Her astuteness is best revealed when Lady Audley’s portrait fails to make a
great impression on her. “…sometimes a painter … is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it,” (77) She highlights the alternative side to aestheticism in giving free reign to emotions. Clara Talboys shuns her reticence her suave demeanor outside the country house. Robert Audley’s attraction for Clara is due to her resemblance to her brother, her docile, dolorous and decorous stance is indicated through the feminine task that (needle work which was woman’s domain) she performs when she is introduced. The late 19th century novelists highlight dress culture in their work to show the place of woman. In Sarah Grand’s The Beth Book, Beth Designs, works on artistic embroidery and George Eliot makes Silas (Silas Marner 1861) take up the feminine task of weaving and designing embroidery. Eliot was probably hinting that the concept of feminine and masculine task must be erased. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth, (1853) Mary Barton works as a fashion designer to save the family from financial crisis. It also stated,

In the nineteenth century women were expected to exercise dual literacy… the language of print and the language of cloth and women novelists used dual literacy for a variety of purposes….New women writers…Olive Schreiner, Ella Hepworth Dixon, George Egerton, Sarah Grand and Gertrude Dix all employed dual literacy for seeming cross-purposes. (Bayles 24 )

The needle to these novelists signifies pain and trauma and restricting women to domestic sphere. Hence Clara is performing an exclusive activity which is solely woman’s priority. Clara’s tacit and reticence indicates her lack of mobility and stoicism, her passive observance of the dialogue that ensues between Robert Audley and her father justifies the secondary role assigned to her. Her slight gesture or movement is thwarted by her father
who demands “Sit down Clara and keep your cotton in your work box.” (202) Clara plays the role of proper feminine in the presence of her father by exhibiting total surveillance to his order. In the absence of her father her recalcitrant nature is visible. Robert’s refusal to pursue his search for George ignites her she is avid to continue the search “Then I will do it myself” she exclaimed,…find the secret of his fate,…for I have money left by one of my aunts.” (215) Robert Audley understands by her tone that it was no “transient woman’s enthusiasm” (215) he finds complete transformation in her manner and stance. Clara’s condition could be the condition of any woman confined to the rigidity of patriarchal notions. As she says,

I have grown up in an atmosphere of suppression”, she said quietly; I have stifled and dwarfed the natural feelings of my heart, until they have become unnatural in their intensity. …. My father has always been to me what you saw him today. (215)

Its woman’s experience recited by a woman hence her articulation may fulfill Showalter’s ‘gynocriticism.’ Her smothered state in spite of her potential to be agile resounds in this poignant dialogue. Braddon subtly hints at the subjugation of women by men, (Father,/husband) beneath the complexities and intrigues of the plot the novel exposes the marginalisation of women in the Victorian society, presents femininity as defined and constricted by the social system. Middle and upper class women were expected to play their allotted roles in the marriage market; primogeniture was more strictly adhered to in English law than elsewhere in Europe. Single woman owned property at will; while male heirs received real property, (clothing, land, property and moveable commodities) Clara mentions money that is left to her by her aunt not her father which she desires to use to
fulfill her purpose. Clara wins the admiration of Robert Audley a hard core chauvinist whose estimation of women was whimsical. He hated bold, vibrant, vivacious and vibrant woman, blames woman for George’s downfall, calls woman self centered. Robert’s analysis of woman clearly describes the feminine sensibility in woman.

What a wonderful solution to life’s enigma there is in petticoat government! ... Women are at the bottom of all mischief …they don’t know what it’s to be quiet…they want freedom of opinion, variety of occupation… (223)

His misogynistic view echoes the male bias and intolerance at women’s assertion. The male view of the feminine (docile and submissive) denigrates her place in the social order, making her diffident with the dictum, masculinity is strong and femininity is weak. Cixous affirms that western literary thought has always adhered to endless series of binary opposition which refers to pairs of opposite such as male/female, white/black, rich/poor, and reason/emotion. These oppositions are arbitrary but its influence on women/men is stronger. Robert’s contempt for women who choose to transgress is due to his male bias which refuses to accept set of new images which attacks defenders of phallocentric thought. But he is drawn towards Clara Talboys, for he finds her different from all “His cousin was pretty, his uncle’s wife was lovely, but Clara was beautiful. Niobe’s face sublimated by sorrow” (216)

The power of the feminine banishes the pride of Robert he is enticed by her passionate energy considers her acquaintance as an “overpowering blessing” (219.) The cold, hard and unwomanly Clara is perceived as beautiful and noble makes incalculable difference in his life. And he wonders at woman’s work, her capacity to create riot, battle, murder and
clamour, quotes queen Elizabeth, Catherine, Cleopatra’s and Joan of Arcs to show the
tagant and virility of women and men’s ignorance of her sagacity and wit. He calls such
women as, “Bold brazen abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction
of their superior.” (224)

Robert’s views are contrary to the society’s general estimation of the feminine as
childlike, timid and powerless. He desires like all patriarchs to isolate women from the
world and to make the world imperceptible to them. This was one of the insidious ways by
which ideas that foster individuality could be subsumed and the stereotype maintained. The
irresistibly attractive, innocent seeming Lady Audley is subdued by Robert and sent into an
asylum, her attempts to transgress are curbed by the masculine power of Robert. Clara’s
father reminds her of her boundary and limits, and she by assuming silence is subjugated to
her father’s will. Such control refers to the irrational patriarchal power which was accepted
as rational by men. Women like Clara might have discerned such power as illogical but
lacked the fervor and support to voice it. It also displays the terrorizing consequence of the
much lauded feminine virtue that belittled and disparaged her disposition. Clara’s assertion,
hers classicism is exhibited once she is out of the domestic sphere i.e., the country house for
the house symbolizes conditioning women to the convention of home. “Oh, let me speak to
you’ she cried-‘let me speak to you, or I shall go mad!” (212) Clara’s desperation
verbalizes women’s desire to come out of patriarchal constraints, her urge, and her
exigency to expel the rigidity imposed.

The silent women Clara Talboys determines to undertake daring project to avenge the
death of her brother. This suggests her inclination to transgress but her daring project is
smothered by Robert by convincing her that he was well-suited to carry on the project. Is it
Robert’s insecurity or his underestimation of woman’s potential? But he takes pride in becoming the defender of the feminine; she by giving him the power obeys the patriarchal interest. Adventure, investigation, enquiry and search were masculine stint; Ronald Jackson reckons what George Gerbner (1999) believes that understanding texts acts as a means to understand the cultural changes.

Stories socialize us into roles of gender, age, class, vocation and lifestyle, and offer models of conformity or target for rebellion. They weave the seamless web of the cultural environment that cultivates most of what we think, what we do and how we conduct affairs. (qtd. Jackson 144)

The nineteenth century society viewed feminine as a threat to the wholeness and hardness of the bold and adventurous men. Women are marginalized as a threat to masculinity and are viewed as forces for chaos and instability. Many male texts echo this bias, Ballantyne’s heroes (Coral Island, 1858) Rider Haggard’s heroes (Solomon Mines 1885) are middle class, adventurous, ethnocentric and overtly nationalized stories. Even the mystery or detective stories of Edgar Allan Poe or Sherlock Homes adventures had men play the leading role in investigating a crime or a murder. Hence femininity and masculinity are cultural construct, and depiction of such traits in books only meant the authors approval. Women and men are socialized to acquire these qualities. Many cultures impose less restriction on male sexual behavior. Kate Millet states, (1977)

The production of ideological consent to patriarchy, through socialization into masculine and feminine roles was ‘based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves ...
aggression; intelligence, force and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility; virtue; and ineffectuality in the female. (qtd Hollows10)

Patriarchy has influenced women to subdue the wild, aggressive and opposing nature of women. Women appear as the peripheral in the Hindu epics, Puranas, Biblical texts, etc. Clara is first seen as obsequious, non resistant and sedulous daughter and later as a dutiful wife of Robert. Robert’s act can be gesticulated as suppressing the aggressive nature of Clara; hence Clara delineates the failed transgression of a dutiful daughter and sister. As Robert’s wife her importance is slenderized to a mere description of her ornamental attire. Clara becomes the quintessential domestic ideal. Braddon specifies Lady Audley, Alicia, Clara and Phoebe’s desire for marriage suggests the common desire of woman which did not demand her to rationalize. Tradition views marriage as a divine plan wherein two individuals are destined to live in harmony regardless of differences. But what happens when women critiques marriage? Woman’s adherence to the male order is exploited by patriarchy but Lady Audley uses marriage as a tool, she uses her beauty to her advantage exploits men’s weakness for beauty. But sadly meets turbulent consequences that pushed her out of the gilded frame of her portrait or the protected walls of Audley’s court to be confined in the four walls of the Bedlam. She is chastised, reattributed for defying the male order on the contrary Alicia and Clara though audacious and stormy adhere to the male order hence the stance they hold is propitious and commendatory. Lady Audley commits the worst of crimes which is virile and evil contrary to Coventry Patmore’s Angel in The House. Her belief that she acted out of necessity does not provide her freedom but bestows confinement. Braddon is cautious here not to contradict the Victorian morality though she subtly prepares woman to scrutinize her position. Showalter fails to understand Braddon’s
purpose when she says, “Braddon ensured her heroines were punished, repentant, and drained of all energy by the end of the novel.” (Literature of Their Own 28) Braddon without the aid of a feminist or a strong women’s organization, could only hint at the possible ways of transgression and its repercussions. Writers could not out rightly defy the traditional set up despite their advanced views. Showalter in her essay on The Mayor of Casterbridge, explores how Hardy could not free the monolithic model where men still occupy the primary position and women occupy secondary position. If critics accuse Hardy for transforming his novels into male document so does Braddon. Her novels (Doctor’s Wife, Lady Audley, Aurora Floyd) ultimately evince masculine power and strength and women’s surveillance to such power. Hardy and Braddon in projecting the primary importance of men (A Pair Blue Eyes, The Woodlanders, Lady Audley) are not favoring the patriarchal notion of woman as the ‘other’ or the estranged self but exemplifying the narrow exiguity and rigidity of the moral code where aspirations for liberation or deliverance from such rigidity would be frustrated. They must all live in the great self-preservation system, learn to cope with it and the novelists show the characters inability to come out of the problem. Society remains intact the individual aiming at exoneration attenuates due to fear, exhaustion and assault from all sides.

CONCLUSION

The feminine sensibility in the late Victorian fiction is seen in the women characters who present a new set of signs which subtly hints at their reaction to the situation they belong. The depiction of women and their condition describe feminine sensibility as a desire to withdraw, to move inward. The chosen novels show how women assert that sensibility does not consist in the imaginative enthusiasm and passionate love but in woman’s
acceptance and negotiation of the situations they face. Hardy, Braddon, Grand held to particular notions of femininity. “Women in their view were merely distinguishable from men through being more law abiding, conscientious, temperate, religious and tender-hearted.” (Caine 248) In portraying such traits they were describing the age’s expectation of women which is prevalent in the modern times to some extent. Does this illustrate that woman in the past and in the present find it difficult to break free from the feminine traits imposed on them? The novelists explore the consciousness of feminine sensibility with greater depth; they portray women as occupied with difficulties of fulfillment and self definition in man’s world. Germaine Greer the author of the book Female Eunuch (1970) (BBC News- Hard Talk “Equality is no Game.” Aug. 2010) expressed that women are like domestic animals, and that the condition of woman has still not improved. Her view that women do everything on the run echoes what Victorian feminists thought and felt about woman’s subjugation. Greer opines that there are no solutions to offer to the modern woman because patriarchy remains deeply entrenched and still controls the situation nevertheless modern writers can voice their views daringly because of their predecessors who prepared the ground for future artists to analyse their state. And these new set of feminine signs developed appeal to all irrespective of age, culture, society and conditions.
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