Victorian Sensational Novels

Introduction

The chapter focuses on the Deliberations about the sensational novels because they mark a new history in the Victorian cultural and literary scene. The transitional era signaled the advent of the new woman with a questioning mind and a challenging spirit to demystify and deconstruct the traditional beliefs of the feminine. These aspects arouse interest to comprehend the reasons behind deviation from the proper feminine the much lauded virtue that was upheld by the Victorian society. It is necessary to comprehend the birth and growth of genre, as it serves to give validity to the title of the thesis. The advent of the genre coincides with the initiation of a new female voice that is the feminist voice which articulated varied interests contrary to the feminine image. The adoption of the transgressive and subversive modes attempted to erase the dominant ideology that served to curb women’s autonomy.

The 19th and 20th century literary world recognized the sensational novels as trash and credited it as non canonical. Such appraisal curbed the possibilities to enter the academic arena in spite of its popularity. This is proof enough to show how among some sentinels of the Western canon the genre is still considered as non-canonical, inferior in comparison to the canonical text. What makes a novel include in the canon? Terry Eagleton says “Literature is a vital instrument for the insertion of individuals into the perceptual and symbolic forms of the dominant ideological formation.” (52)

Recent studies on sensational genre show the celebration of the genre and their endeavors to situate the sensational novel within the 19th century critical debate. The failure to recognize the social and political implications embedded within the text
calls for critical inquiry. Understanding the motifs and rationale of the sensational novels assist to discern the sociopolitical conditions that serve to recognize the emergence of the feminist from the feminine. Reading sensational novels today enables woman to engage in a process of self representation that the 19th century did not provide.

**The Romantic Poets Relished Sensation.**

The exact definition of the sensational is difficult as there is a certain ambiguity surrounding it; this vagueness elicits varied interpretations on the genre itself. It is unclear as to when the sensational novel first appeared, as sources differ in this but it is assumed that the genre existed during 1860-1880. A careful scrutiny of the literary history leaves us with a reply that sensation fiction did not enjoy a secure place in the canon. P.D. Edwards (1971) notes that the term sensational novel was originally applied disparagingly to a wide assortment of crime, mystery and horror novels written in early 1860’s. A writer in literary budget asserted that the term originated in America and it was seen as symptom of the declining standards ushered in by modernity by many conservative critics. It was feared by them that the novels might authorize, or may lead to a rising approval of crime and vice as a customary element of modern English life, even among the middle and the upper classes.

Lurid reports of crime and criminal trials in the newspapers were seen as one source of this acquiescent attitude, and were almost certainly the immediate source of the epithet ‘sensation’ itself. (Boyle 37)
The term sensation reminds us of the Romantic poets understanding and use of sensation. Is there a resemblance to the Romantic’s perception of the sensation? How does Victorian sensational novel differ?

Noel Jackson in *Sense and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* (2008) claims that Sensation was important to the romantics; they understood sensation as a mode of encountering the world. The fact that the Romantic poets relished sensation is evinced in the use of sensational language by Keats or Rimbaud to create pleasant sensations which transform the earth into a fairy place. Wordsworth practiced the poetry of sensation and hence describes poetry in preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* as a “spontaneous over flow of powerful feelings” (236) English romanticism was influenced by continental authors like Jean Jacques Rousseau and J.W. Von Goethe. The cause of sensations is difficult to perceive, Immanuel Kant states that the mind receives sensations but must be organized inorder to make it intelligible. The poetry of Shelley, Keats, and Byron is alive with sensations their poetry shows thrilling and sensational elements to appease the mind. Coleridge’s language would proceed from the senses, from the concreteness of physical sensations. The romantics’ view sensation as a central component in the experiences of the poet; it is an essential reserve of cultural illustration and an imperative medium for articulating ethics and social change. Keats’s comment “O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts” (John Keats ‘Letter to Benjamin Bailey’ 22 Nov.1817) shows the impact of sensation. When Coleridge talks of “Willing suspension of disbelief,” (chapter XIV, 232) it means we regard it not as an objective fact, but as a poetic fact. It also means the involvement of the reader in the narrative, such an involvement affects our reading but not
our actions, critics have also considered “Sensations [as] Feelings or intuitions, the pure activity of the imagination.” (Thrope 64)

The Victorian sensational novels crafted violent scenes, scandalous narratives that sustained the popular interest. It was not the pure activity of the imagination but the wild and turbulent imagination that showed the disgruntled and desirous emotions. The representations of the disruptive forces of crime and secrets upon genteel domestic life made the literary sensationalism of the Victorian era controversial. The sub genre was effectively defined by the novels of Ellen wood, Mary Braddon, and Willkie Collins. It was the literature of the restless age, an expression of the self –consciously itinerant modernity at the center of an intensifying world. What made the new type of literature elicit contempt from reviewers? Why was it called adultery or bigamy novels? What made the sensational novels a legitimate reading for the middle classes? The inclination to cater to self indulgence might have been responsible for describing the genre as controversial. This arouses one’s curiosity to understand the novelist’s purpose in choosing to write sensational novels. Patrick Brantlinger observes Kathleen Tillotson’s comment on the sensational novel as “The novel with –a- secret” (30) in her article “The Lighter Reading of the 1860’s” (1969) her view kick starts various critical interpretations. The genre’s subversive content, characterization, anxieties surrounding class hierarchies, financial insecurity, the stance of a single woman, failed and illegal marriages, insanity, and the discernment that modernity was hampering domestic life, are factors that arouse critical interest. The sensational novels defied the tradition of the mainstream novels by including disguise, drugs, bigamy, romantic triangles, and mistaken identities. The fusion of opposites- reality and fantasy, probable and improbable, refined and violent, rational and
absurd went against the traditional ethics and was termed unrealistic by Anthony Trollope in his autobiography, (1870) but one is left to reckon that it is such strategies that stole the attention of the readers. The age of the masses was also the era of the decadent movement and of the British modernism that is echoed in Charles Baudelaire, Stephanie Mallarme and J.K. Huysmans works. Early modernisms articulated critical reactions to the new forms of communication and mass fiction. George Augustus Sala in his work on The Sensational in Literature and Art (Belgravia 1868) attributed the founding of sensational novel to Charles Dickens, his novel Bleak House (1853) exhibits streaks of sensational elements but they were used to delight and horrify not instruct.

**Attempts to Deconstruct the Center**

The revisions in plot, character, and the depiction of the feminine, challenging the myths of the proper wife, and of female self sacrifice welcomed harsh criticism from the Victorian critics terming it as trash. Did the genre attempt to critique theories of subjectivity? But one can see that it is precisely such strategies that draws the attention of the contemporary critics and has been responsible for the revival of interest in the sub genre. Sensation to Ann Cvetkovich is constructed and it represents both female transgression and its containment (1992.) Mary Poovey (2004) has endeavored to explain the ramifications of the productive power. Today we read sensational novels as novels that have a serious appeal and this has been possible because of modern critics’ evaluation of the genre. Two prominent works that serve to re-evaluate the sensational fiction are worth quoting Nicholas Rance (1991) analyses the sensational novels from Marxist perspective, Jenny Bourne Taylor (1991) explores the psychic and social contradiction that work in sensational fiction. What made the genre popular? No one can disregard the fact that the
hair rising incidents created ripples’ among the audience, which is a notable feature that brought the novelists and the genre into prominence. Class and gender transgression appealed to the masses but also shook the very foundations on which Victorian society was built. One cannot ignore the fact that the charm of the sensational novels lies in its exposure of the lurid secret hidden in the ordinary. The novelists seemed to debunk traditional tales attempted to re-work narrative archetypes to launch their plots.

To the Victorians, sensational novels seemed an artfully crafted version of …scandalous narratives that surround the popular press: illegitimacy, fraud, false identity, the imprisonment of sane in mental asylums, bigamy, murder. However today’s scholars are fascinated by the way they ambivalently undermine and reinforce mid Victorian views about the stability of identity and social boundaries. (Moran 62)

Their criminal plots, with scandalous portrayals of devious women, an independent self assertive woman somehow threatened the age old belief in the proper feminine. Lyn Pykett calls the deviant woman the ‘improper feminine’ which is not derogatory but a qualification which speaks of the deviant women’s power to deconstruct. The plot often focused on female protagonists who try to rise in society through advantageous marriage. It was a common feature to juxtapose dangerous woman and the angelic woman while the angelic woman flourished, the devious woman was subdued by the male regime. They were called dangerous as they nurtured secrets that destabilized the fabric of rigid Victorian society and threatened the decimation of the symbolic order. Such depiction was a stylistic device to portray the two polarities of the moral and the ideological spectrum. Such a model was followed both by the canonical and non-canonical texts. But where did the non-
canonical texts deviate to be called so? Cesare Lombroso: 19th century scientist’s theory of biological determinism recognized a classification system of deviant conduct that was widely received. He characterized the personality and body politics of women and insisted that the absence of free-will in the deviant was due to the belief in biological determinism. His findings showed the complexity in understanding the psychology of vicious women. The disparity in physical appearance made him characterize the body politic of the lower groups, women and blacks as inferior to that of the white man. Bernadette Wegenstein states “for Lombroso crime was a result primarily of biological and only secondarily of psychological and social factors.” (30) A survey of the nineteenth century world made him conclude women, children and non white as inferior. The fear of the bad woman must have haunted Lombroso and the patriarchs, as they believed that these deviant women were exposing the irrationality of the patriarchal system. The dispersal of the proper by the improper and the heroines indulgence in crime excited readers but it also horrified Victorian moralists. Toril Moi observes what psycholinguist Julia Kristeva opines In Power of Horror, (1982)

Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. (qtd.Moi 187)

Studying sensational novels one can understand that the novelists intended to trigger the pure notions of woman and home that was accepted without any dispute. Their purpose can be comprehended if viewed through the lens of feminism. The transition did pose problems for the complacent patriarchal society that had administered its supremacy in keeping women in seclusion in the name of religion and culture. What then was the agenda
of these writers? Sensational novels by displaying abject crime within the private sphere enhance the fragility of the Victorian order. The fallen woman unsettled the guardian of social order who relied on unavailing and restricted image of woman. What is so unique about this fallen woman? The fallen woman is seen as a rebel, a challenger of norms, who occupies the center pushing man to the margins. This strategy earns her the title an ‘improper feminine’ such tagging barred her from challenge and reform of the existing conditions of woman. But the agenda of the ‘improper feminine’ could not be curbed and women used fiction, media and feminist activities to illustrate that such imaging would not stop woman from demanding her rights. Sensational novels are an instance to depict the dilemmas of the women in transition which include woman in fiction, the woman writer, and the woman involved in suffrage activities and they symbolize the new woman or the ‘improper feminine’ or the feminist. Patrick Brantlinger (1998) observes that sensational novels do not transform or subvert their society but they tend to exploit public interest. Such an assessment may partially be true but not entirely. Enticing the audience was important and one of the primary concerns of the novelist’s but it is also a space where incongruity between cultural constructions of gender and the expression of individual selves and lived experiences can be scrutinized. Modern critics fail to grasp the moral (the need to defy a rigid society) preached in the immoral subject. The construction of the novel shows tensions between what is felt and what is merely thought, between what is believed and what is experienced. The law and the novel depicted the image of the dangerous woman as murderous; the colonial rhetoric orientalised her, offering her a context for her recuperation. The failure to observe notions of gender, race, religion and the absence of moral credible weaving, give its characters freedom to invent their own lives. Loss of
identity and the fragmentation of identity bring it closer to the features of modern fiction if post colonial notions are applied. One can discern that Victorian society’s emphasis on male supremacy produced an unbalanced standard of morality, duty and gender identity. Victorian notions of Duty, morality, gender identity prioritized men subjecting women to secondary position in the hierarchal structure. The understanding of identity was a result of the romantic interpretation of the self as the inner reality of a given subject. Like the post colonialists they question the dominant order by attempting to restructure the hierarchy, for instance, centering the margins. The interweaving of cultural and literary influences does not result in loss of identity rather multiple planes are constructed where possibilities that have been inactive, interact and merge. How does the genre interrupt the popular views? The subversive content invites various critical interpretations. Victorian critics considered the sensation fiction an illegitimate child of Victorian realism, a book that could arouse one’s curiosity but could not excite any thought provoking discussion. But recent studies have thrown much light on the genre recognizing the merit of the sensational writers their themes, motifs, which comes closer to modern thinking. A new kind of Collins, Braddon and Ellen Wood appear as literary scholars. With the impact of cultural theory the genre saw the abundant social import through its illustration of sexuality, gender, class, and race. Winifred Hughes (1980) has been responsible for the revival of the genre. What was termed as scandalous, controversial, violently opposed to the moral sense of the Victorians (churchmen and Victorian critics,) is accepted by modern critics as thought provoking as they find much material in sensational novels to engage themselves in an intellectual debate. The new genre and all its pervading influence were notable features that saw meteoric rise. Profound economic changes influenced the sales of the book, with the
introduction of railways travelling became a democratic advantage and the telegraphic communication linked many countries and continents, all these factors prepared a new platform for new identities. Hidden secrets and scandals became the world of sensational novels. Mansel in “Sensational Novels” (1863) comments “Sensational novels catered to the demands of the circulating libraries and railway book stalls” (qtd Regen 45) which probably increased the popularity of the novels. Such was the animus against retaliatory novels that Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood, among others were driven to renounce any means other than interesting the reader. The reading population facilitated production and created unrestricted consumers from all social classes and this resulted in the sporadic influence of sensation mania everywhere within the country.

The politics of publication offers a new kind of historicist criticism, one that investigates the contemporary reception of the Victorian novel and factors that went to term the work as canonical and non canonical. The modern language of risk, accident begins to take its place in the 19th century novels which shows the transition from orthodox and religious set up to a secular or Darwin’s universalisation of chance and accident. The genre investigates issues surrounding modern marriage representing it as a market and foregrounding women who artfully turn themselves into objects. Marriage is portrayed as a risk for both men and women but more so to women but this cannot be the precise representation for there were many who saw marriage as a bringer of joy (Queen Victoria) By presenting marriage as a debacle the novelists stimulated widespread discussion among critics. Like the conventional novels marriage is described in traditional ways, depicts the woman as a wife, a mother and a loyal companion to her spouse but there is a hidden secret behind that proper feminine (deception, bigamy, crime) According to Derrida all western
thought is based on the center which is fixed. If Sensational novels are read applying Derrida’s subversive mode of reading we perceive the genre’s attempt to deconstruct the center. They evoke the older forms to parody and subvert the hierarchy of the elite. The novels adhere to the role model that impede female undertakings and define women from the perspective of men (sex objects) or in the context of family (as wife and mother) The novels depiction of women emphasizing the angelic and the sexist traits of women, show the deviations worked out. In exposing the inadequacies in marriage the novelist’s awakened the public to harsh realities. Their purpose was not to launch a comprehensive assault on the institution of marriage but to show how marriage positioned ideological snares for men and women. Spousal neglect, women’s space, marital relationship, love are some aspects dealt to unravel the secrets of marital life. Braddon, Collins, Ellen Wood made women see beyond their separate spheres, beyond the garden of domesticity, unhappy wives do not escape disastrous circumstances through divorce, (though divorce laws had come onto force) but abandon their husbands to seek fortune elsewhere, (Aurora Floyd, Lady Audley) Culture is a means of domination, cultural memory contains a number of cultural messages that are addressed to posterity and is proposed for constant reclaim. Works of art are revisited to comprehend, appreciate and comment. The 19th century cultural notions may have lost current addresses but they are not unmediated. As a part of the archive they are subject to new contexts which allow new interpretations; the genre in this sense attracts varied interpretations. Janice Radway, (Reading the Romance 1987) examines the romance novels and construes them as offering a way for women to resist the powerful structures. It allows the women to refuse momentarily their self abnegating social role. Radway’s analysis may be applied to interpret why sensational novels stole the
interest of women. Braddon’s and Collin’s women subtly present their dissatisfaction about heterosexual relationship because it fails to create a fully satisfied female subjectivity. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002) argue that mass culture is a tool of domination. The genre’s fusion of disparate genres, (romance, gothic) middle setting and low class origins, mass popularity evinces the introduction of a new culture which enthralled the masses, (seeing culture from below,) It also presents the possibility of an alternative image of reality and such methods enabled the genre to gain mass appeal. The novelist’s critique of marriage was based on the view that man is the perpetrator of the doctrine of separate spheres, architect of dual standards of sexual morality and enslavement of women. Marriage conflict was chosen as a popular theme which gave them impetus to expose the hidden secrets of marriage and the harsh realities of the seemingly perfect home. Such representations earned the distrust and wrath of the critics, as it was too cumbersome for the Victorian middle class culture which was imbedded with strong notions of the ideal woman and marriage as a sacrament to accept such realities. Complex web of coincidence and details appealed to the audience, the merging of the respectable and scandalous made the literary sensationalism controversial. Their plots were designed to explore the salacious and shocking hidden mysteries of middle and upper class English life. They drew specific crimes for their material and tackled public concerns (Lesbianism, commoditization, philandering husbands, fallen woman, unworthy servants.) Such stories give insight into the conditions that prevailed in Victorian society which informs us that the era was not wholly glorious. Crime and devious conduct are a norm, the act is committed by women, and men perform judiciary function investigating and pronouncing judgments. In Ellen Wood’s East Lynne, Braddon’s Lady Audley Secret and Aurora Floyd men cast judgmental
gaze on the woman’s secret of illicit behavior, conservative forces in the novels work to expunge the dangers that deviant women pose to the dominant social ideology. Their rejection of autocratic men was coupled with accepting men’s control which showed the precarious condition of women. It stands well to state that sensational novels subverted gender roles by pushing women to the center and bestowing her with power to undermine the feminine image but critics feel that it could not bring radical reforms. The proper feminine in the canonical fiction became powerful and evil in the sensational novels. The sensational novels tried to show as Drysdale (1860) interprets,

In woman exactly as in man, strong sexual appetites are a very great virtue; as they are the signs of a vigorous …healthy social organs and a naturally developed sexual disposition.” (170)

Such an observation reverses the existing notions about woman’s sexuality; Drysdale affirms that sexual act helped in the general and physical well being of women. To view sexuality as natural not ‘improper’ was a new finding which the sensational novels responded to, Aurora Floyd, in Braddon’s novel, Magadelon in Colllins’s, No Name, (1862) Marian Halcombe in Woman in White show that sexuality is natural in woman. The sensational novels presented woman who were termed as unwomanly for their daring ventures, Kate Mitchell observes, “The subversions are also discerned when such novels carried with them the taint of a corrupting feminization and threatened a kind of class destabilization.” (124.)

Subversion was discerned not just in fiction but also in reality. The transitional period transformed the very image of men and women in both spheres which called for
circumstances that required re-thinking and redefinition of woman’s identity and position. 
The genre subverted the domestic sphere, representing it as a site open to crime and hence 
monitoring was essential. It privileged the transgressive female men like Aurora Floyd or 
Magdalene, or Lady Audley. Sensational novelists lived their lives outside the parameter of 
the nuclear family, for instance, Collins chose to live with another woman when his wife 
deserted him to marry another, and Braddon lived with Maxwell while his wife was alive. 
It was easy for these novelists to show defiance and rejection of rigid norms. 

The genre cannot be termed unilaterally as subverting or authenticating the domestic 
ideology but rather as interrogating the framework of values in a shocking way. To cross 
the threshold of morality and debunk the traditional notion of marriage involved risk. The 
novelists welcomed such risks by including a flurry of bigamy novels, which presented a 
new image of woman. The depiction of a true picture of society beyond the idealistic 
façade made readers and critics think. Sensational novels were called bigamy novels for 
their immoral content, for featuring a woman with an errant past. Her attempts to 
destabilize the power of the male and endeavors to victimize the male earned her the title 
deviant. Braddon’s, Lady Audley is married twice and it is not love that binds her but material gain, so marriage is a gain, a profit to them. They were condemned as trash 
because their themes did not have a universal appeal. The Victorian critics like Mansel, and 
novelists like George Eliot assessed the sensational novels as trash, today they are 
perceived as stories that help to gain insight into the previously silenced voice of the 
violent woman and reckoned as stories that throw light on the ideological complexities 
generated by the authors. Lady Audley transgresses the class and gender boundaries which 
instilled hope in the woman of the lower classes. Aurora chooses a partner who is passive
and docile. Collins, Magadelon in *No Name* (1862) presents marriage as a risk and interrogates Victorian gender politics. The novels conflate resistance to dominant, aesthetic and sexual ideologies. It undertook a daring risk of unveiling the secret of a respectable society; such plotting went to reflect the duplicities of social reality. Deborah Wynne states,

> The sensational novels…addressed common anxieties about the difficulties regulating a rapidly expanding urban society whose wealth was dependent on the mysterious processes of an anonymous capital market place…life was usually made by the investments in stocks and shares, and could be drastically undermined by criminal activities in the financial markets. (51)

Crimes, mysteries are often found in sensational novels whether these aspects define sensational novel is vaguely answered. To Oliphant (1862) the excitement and the instability of the era are reflected and captured marking it as sign of the times. 1860’s was a decade in which sensational became the modifier of the age. Mansel (1863) condemns the genre for its mass appeal and lower class origins; he opposed the inclusion of mystery and shocking episodes, as it evoked corporeal rather than intellectual responses in readers. These critics recite 19th century response to the genre; the revolutionary zeal was met with hostility and rage because the novels explore the injustice and hypocrisy that dominated the Victorian society. Modern critics praise the novels effort to depict truth and realism. They blame the Victorian society for attacking the masculine female behavior (Natalie Schroeder 2006, Samantha Graves, 2007) Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland point out in their article what Judith Butler states, “Woman is neither a ground nor a product, but an accomplishment a possibility” (209) Sensational heroines more or less fulfill this view. Magadelon’s (*No Name*) Lydia Gwilt (*Woman in White*) Lady Audley, Aurora Floyd, are
independent which prompts them to create their own destiny despite the patriarchal oppression and secrecy that surrounds these heroines. Magadelon, Lady Audley, Aurora, are stereotypical angelic woman but they are responsible for crimes, the beautiful angelic woman appears to be rather ironical. The sexually aggressive woman traps men who fail to understand their devious intention subvert the gender stereotypes to promote new icons. The threatening woman is punished, the official forces (a detective, an attorney,) solve the mystery. Ineffective men are altered into an apparatus of discipline the heroes are in émigré only to return as a changed man upholding a certain level of masculinity. Men perform the judiciary function investigating and pronouncing judgments. The genre allows man to cast a judgmental gaze on the women’s secret (bigamy). They use detection as one of the devices used by men to ascertain their masculine distinctiveness. Man is given the power to find the deviant and punish which affirms male hegemony. Were women given the power to investigate and punish the deviant men? Their investigations about the sinister heroine is to avow their certainty that she is either mad or aberrant, the degradation of women was essential to augment their masculinity, and present themselves as male speaking subjects. Why was such a mode adopted? Why was the dominant force allowed to edit them? Such questions stimulate one’s curiosity to scrutinize the woman’s stance and identity within their symbolic order and also to discern the motive and constraints of the novelists. Collins, (Woman in White) presents sinister aristocrats plotting against a beautiful heiress, Ellen Wood, (East Lynne) presents a murder mystery plot complicated by the action of an adulterous. Braddon’s Lady Audley pushes sensationalism further by focusing upon the crimes of the beautiful Lady Audley. The revolutionary project undertaken by the novelists is seen in the depiction of women; they might have desired to show woman not as the
preserver of moral sanctity that was important for the Victorians but to show why women were forced to be immoral. The novels also show how women internalize patriarchal values and norms; they are integrated in the cognitive emotional structure of the self. The inculcation of such notions in the psyche stimulates her desire. Clara Talboys, Alicia Audley’s assertions are subdued by their inner desire to adhere to the patriarchal values. Did the sensational genre challenge the patriarchal canons? In describing woman’s sexuality and voluptuousness the genre aimed to challenge the disembodied, ethereal Victorian ideal which bothered 19th century fiction. These female figures rewrite the construction of femininity not as the stereoscopic sweet natured woman but as the angelic woman who turns devious, for instance, the Pre Raphaelite painting of Lady Audley exposes the devious lady. Visual clues, painting and postures all signal how female aesthetization and commodification marked the literature of the second half of the 19th century and molded a picture of femininity denied by mainstream realism. Michel Foucault (Discipline and Punish 1995) and Bakhtin’s theory of Monologism comes to aid to develop a theory of the sensational novel. Victorian society is viewed as society under surveillance and discipline, the society has the power to punish and its functions are distributed throughout the social space which illustrates the all pervading influence of power. Foucault’s Panopticism is a state in which everybody adheres to pan societal rules and mechanism. Foucault believes that Panopticism constitutes,

A disciplinary society where deviance demands ‘power to punish that [runs] the whole length of social net work’ and cause ‘an immediate reaction’ of all in relation to the individual. (209)
Foucault hypothesizes a social space which demands unwavering scrutiny, and the whole society is aware of deviance and is directed to punish the erroneous. Mainstream novelists follow the same norm with the deviant woman for e.g. Dickens in *Bleak House* Lady Deadlock is punished by the police, Mr. Bucket is a panoptic mechanism of social discipline, Collins’s heroines Magadelon in *No Name*, Laura in *Woman in White*, Braddons’ Lucy Grahams in *Lady Audley* and Aurora in *Aurora Floyd*, East Lynne, in *East Lynne*, are all punished. Laura and Lady Audley end up in the asylum, Aurora is tamed to be the submissive wife, Magedelon who is unable to meet the powerful force meets her end. We see how the official forces (lawyers, detectives) are seen as trouble shooters. The novels encourage deviant women and give scope for erroneous conduct, but the wronged is constantly put to fear owing to which she commits flaws that are exposed by the disciplinary gaze invariably the men. The errant woman is punished this is one of the morals that patriarchal society believes but the morals that men have to observe goes unquestioned. The patriarch stands as the judge performing a judiciary function within the family. Man is a panoptic mechanism of social discipline and such measures were used by the novelists as they wrote with constraint. System of inspection results in monologism which is a dominant ideological awareness. Monologism according to Bakhtin is a brand of idealism that insists on the unity of a single consciousness. Graham Collin’s analyses,

Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (thou) with a monologic approach another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness and not another consciousness. (85)
A work of art cannot be free from societal norms or dominant ideology but it cannot be dissolved in them either, it is precisely such a situation that encourages critics to understand the hidden realities which the novelists subtly depict in the novels. The novels disrupt the conventional discourse in the process of interrogating Victorian gender politics (the heroines set new standards) Lady Audley, Laura in *Woman in White* are sent to mad house with the label insane. This demonstrates the male power and the punitive measure undertaken. The sensation genre is a lesson in Foucauldian criticism as Victorians theorized questions of power and submission. The novelists mock at the sentimental vein and indicate that their novels move in a different direction. The opinionated topography of England in the 19th century was responsible for the sensational novels to gain momentum. The sensational novelists like their heroines manipulated the popularity their works gave, as this medium was one of the easiest ways to reach the masses and also the elitist. Among the masses they would create a sense of awareness; the elitist and conservative critics would only be shocked at the exposition of harsh reality under the title sensational. Newspapers wrote on crime and sexuality such reports excited public enthusiasm which was tapped by sensational novelists. The perception of the cultural and social context enabled them to evolve feminist texts. Patrick Brantlinger, states that the artist’s inability to free the woman from the patriarchal constraint was conditioned by publishing convention. “Publisher’s, readers, became a powerful and prominent figure in the final decades of the century.” (25).

The late Victorian era saw some drastic changes which showed the change in the interest among the readers, the social niceties of Thackeray, the moral power of George Eliot bored them. The switch to gothic horror stories, crime, real life horrors, sold and publisher’s
profit motif agenda urged them to publish popular works. The era boasts of many different forms of fiction – multi volume publication, part publication, magazine serialization and so on. The press, the proprietors of libraries (Mudie Salisbury and William Henry Smith) encouraged adherence to conventional values and such censorship was a serious handicap to authors who desired to present an authentic picture of the moral and religious problems. Social and economic forces endeavoured to change the conditions of women from the dependent type depicted by Jane Austen to the powerful and assertive women depicted by Braddon, Grand and Hardy. Mudie’s moral screening infuriated the authors, George Moore’s article Literature at Nurse or Circulating Morals (1884) George Gissing’s New Grub Street (1891) portray the trauma of writers who were subject to the politics of publication. “Sensational fiction was a commercial product that fits a commercial demand.” (Phillips.27) Winifred Hughes in Maniac in The Cellar, (1980) observes that the monotony of English urban life was responsible to a great extent for the popularity of sensation fiction. Entertainment was a requirement which the novelists had to observe, and Braddon says in her preface Run to Earth (1868),

The author who provides his readers with a rapid narrative of stirring events will be more popular with the millions than the more profound writers whose greater depth of thought enables him to anatomise character and to depict the subtle emotions of the mind. (qtd Edwards 21)

Braddon’s position as the editor of Belgravia gave her autonomy to signal the feminized kind of London to its readers. It provided a broader platform for Braddon to defend the genre and experiment with different generic forms (gothic, romantic) including realism. Periodical journalism and newspapers came to the aid of reformers and women writers. The
formula prescribed to sensational novelists to “make them laugh, cry, and wait” (Tucker 292) which demanded the artists to bring in curiosity, suspense and thrilling incidents, as these were aspects that decided the sales of the fiction. Novelists adhered to these demands but also interspersed subversion and transgression of traditional beliefs. Journalistic and literary media facilitated artists, thinkers and writers to develop a broad variety of intellectual interests. But creative writers wrote with restraint which substantiated the fact that poetic license was a mere saying. John Sutherland points out,

Many of the great novels of the period which appear to be the unaided product of creative genius were often …the outcome of collaboration, compromise or commission. (6)

Publishing for mass education became a major industry in the 19th century; radical periodicals of 1830’s and 1860’s helped to develop proto feminist consciousness. ‘Women question’ debate saw the replacement of gender by class which was inspiring for women’s social radicalism. The sensational novelists seized the working class readership to become successful; their works relied on publishers demand, and the preferences of the readers appeasing such demands brought them fame. Their novels were more of literary construction which centers on addressing issues of subjectivity and their place in the public and the private domain. Writing for the popular press enabled the novelists to make their oppression known and also gave them an occasion to critique the society. A candid discussion of subversive topics without requisite evasiveness would not fetch a publisher for non canonical authors, so under the pretext of the sensational, the novelists subverted the well accepted norms. Braddon used her marginalized experiences to reclaim the woman’s novel from its exclusive concern with the world of lady like community. Her aim
might have been to enlighten the readers in an unconventional way. The sensational novels as Braddon redefined it are immensely dispensed with Dickensian grotesques, artistic pretenses, and intricately convoluted storylines favoured by Collins and the sensational emotionalism, pietism and exaggeration - derived from Dickens. Their women (Lady Audley, East Lynne, Magadelon) permanently established themselves as the quintessential example of the new genre.

**Sensational realism**

Critics analysis of sensational realism made the critics term the novel as disrupting.

The critical neglect of the sensational fiction has thus been seen as a result of the oppressive, patriarchal ideologies of realism; as a corollary, sensation novels have recently drawn critical attention looking at ways in which they subvert these same dominant ideologies. (Gilbert 101)

Ellen Wood, Braddon, Collins bring out domestic realism with elements of gothic romance-and also infuse romantic elements in realism. Realism of the sensational aimed to destabilize realistic rationalism, as Patrick Brantlinger says (1998) the hybrid form (mixing the gothic and the realistic) was made to present its events as possible. The everyday world of realism is interspersed with mystery that deals with crime, and solutions are offered thenceforth. Henry James (“Miss Braddon”, The Nation 1865) recognised the normalizing and domesticating crime and vice as the distinctive feature of the genre which aimed to focus on the mysteries that may be present in many homes. A realistic novel may miss out on what happens below the veneer of society, as it did not resist the Victorian ideology. Braddon’s purpose in writing the sensational novel was for the delight they afford (preface
to Run to Earth 1868). She like Dickens, Reade and Collins rejected the tag sensation as an antonym to the domestic which for contemporary critics connoted all that is wholesome, and socially positive. The concluding description of Aurora Floyd “This simple drama of domestic life” (457) asserts the interdependence of the domestic and the sensational in the same way as Charles Reade and Collins do in sub-titling their melodrama fiction as A matter –of –fact Romance (Read’s Hard Cash 1814) and a domestic story (Collins Poor Miss Finch 1872).

French realism influenced sensational writers; the French styles of Balzac and Flaubert in particular were admired for its grim humour. “French realism has had its impact on British sensation fiction, which borrowed its commitment to clinical description of “low” human behavior in the service of its scarcely more melodramatic plots.” (Gilbert 8) The lacuna in English realism, prompted sensational novelists to lean towards French realism; this frailty made Braddon choose French authors Balzac, Flaubert, and the Pre- Raphaelites. The Pre Raphaelites transgressed, aesthetic, gender and social boundaries which appealed to the sensational novelists as it served to expose the unconventional beauty in a conventional way, masculine strength in femininity. Such a technique also meant that it allowed artists to depict what they thought and felt it may also mean exposing the truth by breaking conventions. Can this technique be termed as sensational realism? Lady Audley’s portrait aligns with the Pre Raphaelite modes of perception which made the spectator see the world from a new angle. Samantha Graves, quotes from Braddon’s letter in which she admits to Bulwer Lytton about her preference,

The Doctor’s Wife founded on Emma Bovary, the style of which struck me immensely inspite if it’s …hideous immorality. There seems an extraordinary
Pre-Raphaelite power of description—a power to make manifest a scene and an atmosphere in a few lines—few writers possess—a grim kind of humour equal to Balzac... (Graves 667)

Gustave Flaubert’s Pre-Raphaelites’ power impressed Braddon; it was a mixture of beauty, poetry, and intellectual challenge which spread to all aspects of Victorian Popular culture and High culture including the novel. This art was reconfigured in diverse forms in the sensation novels. *The Doctors Wife* (1894) a rewriting of Madame Bovary evinces Braddon’s desire to earn critical respect. Isobella a voracious reader keenly interested in the romantic literature is a contrast to realism. The realism of sensational novels is factual when compared to English realism. French realism helped to mediate between the sensation (that appealed to the masses) and the aesthetic value. Such negotiations helped to construct character driven novels, French realism appealed to sensational novelists because it helped to appease the readers and also served to satiate their wish to get critical acclaim. Braddon’s acting career gave a strong rhetorical dimension to writing for instance; she presents the illegitimate world of popular culture to her readers. Her edifying obligation was to teach readers to appreciate the popular cultural form. The sensational novelists used popular and expressive forms that gained momentum, it also shows the novelists interest in the popular taste which was similar or sensitive to comprehend the taste of the masses. In describing woman’s sexuality and voluptuousness the genre aimed to challenge the disembodied, ethereal Victorian ideal which bothered the domestic fiction of the 19th century. These female figures rewrite the construction of femininity not as the stereoscopic, sweet natured woman but as the angelic woman who turns devious, for instance; the Pre Raphaelite painting of Lady Audley exposes the devious lady. Visual clues, painting and
postures all signal how female anesthetization and commoditization marked the literature of the second half of the 19th century and shaped a picture of femininity that was denied by mainstream realism. Many critics assess that Victorian realism might have defined itself against the tenet of sensation fiction and that Antony Trollope preferred English realism as it was anti-sensational and realistic. Jenny Bourne Taylor quotes Trollope’s ironical views about sensational novels. “The novelists who are considered to be anti-sensational are generally called realistic. I am realistic.” (Taylor 85) He considered himself as realistic and Willkie Collins as sensational, but realists of the era George Eliot (Felix Holt 1866) and Hardy (Desperate Remedies 1871) and Antony Trollope (Eustace Diamonds, 1873) Oliphant (Salem Chapel 1863) blend realistic and sensational plots to show how such a blending can expand the instructive ability. The merging of realism with gothic, the blend of the ordinary setting from realistic fiction and domestic fiction and interspersing it with extreme passion illustrate the genre’s departure from established novelistic conventions which marks sensational realism as something unique and varied. They deconstruct class and gender boundaries which evince the restructuring of the social world. But conservative critics considered the subversive trait of the sensational as contributing to national crisis. The house as a place of security was losing its importance with the novelists’ intention to focus the dangers of the well protected house; this according to the conservatives was unreal. So the novel was scandalous, depicting falsehood and the woman signaling the devious purpose of breaking the well protected house was named as the ‘improper feminine’. Today readers understand the importance of sensational realism for its candour and unbiased portrayal of situations and characters in the fin de siècle world. “The insistent focus on the underbelly of respectability and domesticity was immoral.
Sensation was a form connected with the market place, rather than high culture.” (Graves
3) Like its gothic predecessors, the sensational novels appeal effectively to its readers,
because it engages them in a fantasy of being acquainted with suspense and exploration.
The novel shows the paradoxical pleasure of being simultaneously in the text and outside
the text which the romantic poet Coleridge, calls “Willing suspension of disbelief.”
(Biographia and Literaria, xiv) The Victorian reader could correspond to the mysteries
following the clues and critically savvy readers of today with the benefit of hind sight, can
evaluate the hidden agendas of the genre. The genre appears as a reaction against the
Victorian trend that gave prominence to domestic novel. The extravagant emotionalism and
criminality were conceived with a particular aim in mind and made a powerful appeal to
the female audience. The sensational novels inhabit a world that is cynical or hysterical at
times and at times loaded with hope, but most times brooding with darkness, dimness that
is frightening. It shows how systems are loops that people get caught up in but cling to it in
times of crisis. Jean Baudrillard, notes that “The real is not only what can be reproduced,
but that which is always already reproduced.” (146) the sensational novels show how the
relation to simulacra is not a simple one. We do not merely disdainfully live in a world of
false things; we embrace the simulacra thrive on them similar to Baudrillard’s simulacrum
that bears no relation to reality whatsoever (1983) Gilles Deleuze (in An Introduction to
Gilles Deleuze by Todd Mann, 2005) defines simulacra as the avenue by which accepted
ideas are challenged. Sensational novelists make their women defy the accepted ideologies,
the heroines pretending to be the angel in the house evince that the simulacra is covered
(she is not the angel but the vampire.) Aurora, Magadelon, Lady Audley, Lydia Gwilt,
East Lynne, each is an enigma because they are out of the circulation of the simulacra. The
domestic responsibilities they hold as the wife is a mere simulation and not that of the authentically dangerous woman. Baudrillard says that our world of simulation, “Is infinitely more dangerous …since it always suggests over and above its object, that law and order themselves might rally, not hinge on more than a simulation.” (189)

**Female Insanity a Compelling Metaphor for Female Malady**

Recent reassessment of the sensation fiction predominantly lies on its interest in the relationship between women and madness. Elaine Showalter speaks of a Pervasive cultural association of women and madness (Showalter, 1977) home could be an ironic manifestation of insanity in domestication in the 19th century. Psychological theorists in the Victorian era understood the mind and the body as two separate mechanisms. Women were inclined to suffer from hysteria, a synonym for femininity in 19th century medical texts. It was associated with women’s rebellious nature in Victorian literature. Bronte’s Bertha Mason, Dickens’s Miss Havisham, in *Great Expectations* (1862) Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s narrator in the *Yellow Wall Paper* (1887) Florence Nightingales Cassandra exhibit their rage and Ann Heilmann (2004) interprets this as hysterical ‘mis-en-scene’ (120) that enables women to invert patriarchal power structures. Spousal neglect, subjugation of women showed women as victims and women’s aspirations were smothered and such an act gave vent to insanity. It was ironical that Victorian society which boasted of advancement and progression in all fields lacked precise knowledge about insanity which made it easy to call someone mad. Madness in Victorian era was classified as any behavior outside the accepted social norms of middle class society. The mind was still an uncharted territory in the mid 19th century. Psychology did not become a recognized science until 20th century. Psychologists in the 19th century understood the mind and the
body as separate mechanisms and disregarded the study of women. Feminist movement saw the reassessment of the entire field of psychology, which gave birth to psycho feminism. The line between sanity and madness is difficult to ascertain because throughout history madness has been a subject of much speculation. The 19th century novels evince their preoccupation with insanity. K.L. Kerber, records Germaine Greer's observation

As far as the female is concerned, psychiatry is an extraordinary confidence flick: the unsuspecting creature seeks aid because she feels happy, anxious and confused, and psychology persuades her to seek the cause in herself.

(2)

Madness in Victorian era was called a female malady women who defied the domestic ideal of woman were diagnosed as mad and unnatural. Their writing suggests an intimate appeal to those who labored and suffered in the household. Recent post colonial readings show Bertha Mason as a subaltern since her subjectivity and victimization escapes the reader because Bronte’s focus is to glorify Jane Eyre. Lady Audley suffers like Bertha; home to these women could be an ironic manifestation of insanity. Lady Audley sets fire to ward of Robert and Bertha sets fire to destroy Rochester suggesting the transgressive modes undertaken to complicate the lives of sane men. Their actions indicate their attempt to escape from the convention of femininity. The genre exposed female rage and vituperation and she administers her own code of conduct (deceit, lie) to subdue the forces that have wronged her. This enraged the Victorian critics who termed the novels as trash as it unsettled the complacent private domain. Women were not encouraged to read such novels or pity the deviant; inspite of all such restriction the genre reached the drawing rooms, entered the kitchen to apprise women of her stance. Freudian injunctions against the
dangers of repression have also produced a dangerous proclivity for allowing insane feelings to bother no matter what consequences may occur. Cora Kaplan remarks,

> Anger becomes the ground of a radical new aesthetic. In retrospect we can see feminist criticism in this period developing a feminist aesthetics of anger, for which the Victorian period serves as literary and social origin. (24)

Madness was associated with licentious female whose sexuality posed a threat to the Victorian male. The novels capture the prevailing situations; mad woman becomes a recurrent character in the genre. Deviant heroine’s demeanor and manner fabricate the case against her and in favour of the male who becomes the disciplinary agent to send her to an asylum. Collins depicts the imprisonment of Laura fairly plotted by her husband to seize her wealth and in Braddon’s novel, Lucy Grahams is sent to an asylum by Robert Audley to control and tame the deviant woman, subtly hinting at the use of madhouses. Sometimes the heroines also use madness as an excuse to break away from every act of self preservation. Critics like Helen Cixous, Carroll Smith, have seen the 19th century hysteria as a defensive strategy.

**The Blend between Popular and High Culture**

The genre captured the Victorian imagination to an extent it became a standard feature of the Victorian popular culture, for instance, perfumes and bottles were named after the novel *Woman in White*. They were page turners which aroused the curiosity to solve the central mystery. The use of popular fiction medium gave impetus to sensational novelists to address social, sexual transgression and its richly ambiguous plotting of moral certitudes. The novels educate readers to appreciate popular cultural forms, for instance Braddon’s
Eleanor’s Victory, (1863) is replete with Balzac, Flaubert, Scott and also vibrates with Beethoven, and Turner. Middle class Victorians had some awareness of popular entertainment, (music, magic, secret crimes) the novelists exploit such interests and motifs to write for the masses. Such stories engaged the reader in a fantasy of knowingness wherein suspense and narration satiate the reader’s pleasure. Lucy’s dressing room, wardrobe, represents a feminized description of commodity display. The dressing room, the painting, ante chamber, are an incredible site of plentitude, confirming not only to the simulated brand of class and gender but also to the ways in which utilization produces identity as a commoditized form.

The blend between popular (the masses) and high culture (the elitist) is just one indication of the many ways in which the Victorian art provides both a mainstream and a shadow narrative of the period. (Moran 23)

Feminism in cultural studies focuses on the ways in which the woman’s body is represented as a commodity, an adjunct, to the man in a society. The cultural economic and political context enforces this unequal distribution, commoditization of women perceives woman as an object wherein its images and signs are being sold. This also hints that the workings of patriarchy and the mold of the feminine it fabricates have left women without a voice, gagged and deprived. Lady Audley, Auora Floyd, and Magadelon’s beauty successfully perform lustrous, commoditized beauty and stunning self-confidence. Edward P .D. (1971) compares the allure of sensational heroines to Skittles. Catherine Walters her pseudonym Skittles was the most notorious of the class courtesans who began frequenting the Hyde park in the late 1850’s, her portrait ‘Taming of the Shrew’ exhibited at the royal academy; made Ms. Gilbert name the portrait as the pretty ‘horse breaker’ which became a
euphemism not only for Walters but for her profession. Lady Audley, Aurora, Magdalene are not horsey heroines by profession but they are by manner. They ape the horse breakers in matters of dress, share their tastes for risk, and sometimes dabble in masculine pastimes such as smoking, but they never contemplate on selling their bodies. Sensational novelists as Baudrillard suggests, accept that culture is artificial, because the concept of artificiality requires some sense of reality against which to recognize artifice. Baudrillard associates simulacra with the industrial revolution of the 19th century, the distinction between the image and the representation began to break down because of mass production. Our most private selves surmise and illustrate that supplies are obtained because of desire and not because of real needs. The buying of novels indicated how women were enticed into overhaul themselves to match the ideals propagated by the market which may be termed as the sensational rage. Such mania also educates or creates awareness among women not only about the popular tastes but also about her stance in the ever changing world. Popular culture takes into its fold the marginalized interest and popularizes it. The sensational novels appeasing the popular taste of the masses or the marginalised illustrated not only their popularity but also the significance of appreciating what is fashionable. A change is always met with revulsion and dismissal, the rejection of the novels by the Victorian critics is a contrast to modern critics’ purpose of reclaiming the genre precisely because of the use of popular culture and it somewhat justifies Lyn Pykett’s assessment of the novels as “the modern tale.” (1992) Sensational novels are fixed firmly in marketable culture, and the edifice of perspective femininity emerges as a sequence of embellishments of goods available at the shop, (powder, hair lotion, perfumes, beauty cream.) that seem to raise duplicity. Richards observes, “ The novels, featuring female customers, highlight
femininity as a creation; and ‘woman ‘becomes a living representation …Like commodities by their ‘plasticity’.” (3) Braddon and Collins show the influence of consumer culture and expose the construction of the Victorian female consumer.

**Conclusion**

The transition period saw transformations in the very image of women which is genuinely portrayed in the novels. The subversive qualities such as the proliferation of violence and deviance, its attempt to destabilize the traditional representation of marriage and femininity, were issues that were debated then but surprisingly these issues continue to garner the focus of many modern studies. Recent theories seem to be a suitable point for both envisioning the possibilities of change and marking a moment for a reassessment of the past. The depiction of the feminine and the subtle insinuation of the feminist project of the heroines which also reflects the writer’s mission arouse interest among the modern readers to understand the advents of feminism which is sadly overlooked because of the tag sensational. Modern readers identify the progressive social views of the sensational women writers and this may be termed gynocritical, and Lyn Pykett confirms it by quoting W.T.Stead’s observation that “they are novels by a woman about women from the standpoint of woman”, (64)

The pervasive cultural concerns that are indicated within the women question and the hegemonic struggles to suppress and resolve the growing turbulence, arouses curiosity to scrutinize the transition from the feminine to the feminist. Early and recent studies help to balance varied opinions which excite researchers to regard scandalous fiction as a respectable field.
Works Cited


