CHAPTER – III

The Educative Role of the Family: The Novels of Anne Bronte

Anne Bronte the youngest of the Bronte sisters was primarily known because of her relationship to her more famous sisters, Emily and Charlotte Bronte. Critics have been more interested in the elder two and Anne’s work has suffered in comparison. In the vivid Bronte canvas, Anne is a pale figure but even “these light tones have their value, if only as a relief”. (Harrison & Stanford 11). Contemporary critics have demonstrated an ability to overcome traditional prejudices, and subsequently discovered a number of modern ideas in her works. Recent studies like Elizabeth Langland’s Anne Bronte: The Other One (1989) and Arnold Craig Bell’s The Novels of Anne Bronte (1994), have reiterated Anne’s place in the literary world. Her didactic aims distinguish her from Charlotte and Emily, and align her more with 18th century Neo-Classicists. Anne seems to follow the Horatian edict, that art should instruct, as well as delight, and she approaches this end with Evangelical fervour. Within the Bronte corpus, Anne’s fiction is linked closely with the writing of their father Patrick Bronte, whose main aim was to establish certain truths. Anne Bronte seems to echo him, when she writes in the Preface to the second edition of, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall in 1848:

My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself within the Press and Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it”. (13)

The worlds of her novels are real, resembling at many junctures the world in which she grew up. Her interest in the family, lay party in the Victorian idealization of the
family, its close relations to the emerging concerns of the Victorian fiction, and partly, in the bitter experiences of her personal life. The immense solitude of the Parsonage imposed upon her a gravity, which exercised a powerful influence in shaping her mind. Both her novels *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* take as their subject, moral education as directed by the family. They reinforce the Victorian view of the family, as the institutional locus of morality, and also reveal the formative power of the family over its members.

Anne’s aim is to expose and reform the errors present in the Victorian family. Through her heroines, she criticizes the misuse of family power, with the hope that it would be a lesson beneficial to the Victorian family. Anne’s female protagonists Agnes and Helen are voices of moral judgment in materialistic families stressing the damage of misguided lessons passed from parents to children. In the course of the narratives, her protagonists are educated by family experiences. Both novels portray a pious heroine flanked by a morally lax upper-class hero on one hand, and a principled middle-class hero on the other. Both books end with the extrication of the protagonist from the former, and her embracing of the alternative values offered by the latter. *Agnes Grey* is saved from her enslavement as governess to the boorish Bloomfield’s and insufferable Murray’s by marrying the upright young curate Weston. Helen Hutingdon, the mysterious tenant of Wildfell Hall, deserts a profligate aristocrat husband, to find happiness with the novel’s honest gentleman-farmer hero, Gilbert Markham. Anne Bronte’s novels do not have the intriguing ambivalences of Charlotte, or the tragic contradictions of Emily. Her novels reveal the truth of lessons learnt and given in the domestic sphere, and aim to benefit the Victorian family itself.

*Agnes Grey*, her first novel is an autobiographical and episodic work based on Anne’s grim experience as a governess. It is a story of wish fulfillment and “tells the
story of female development” (Langland 96), *Agnes Grey* is different from other contemporary novels, because Agnes follows a different pattern of development. She is distinctive in the 19th century novel. She (Agnes) is a female protagonist, seeking to become educated and knowledgeable about the world. Agnes cannot simply take to the open road like a male hero, she nonetheless longs to see a little more of the world. She wants “to go out into the world; to enter upon a new life; to act for myself; to exercise my unused faculties…” (AG 10). These aims herald the arrival of a new heroine to fiction.

Elizabeth Langland in her book *Anne Bronte: The Other One* remarks:

> Although Anne Bronte seems to have been oblivious of any feminist or ideological agenda her commitment to women’s activity and influence in the world and her suspicion of men as providers led her to promulgate a feminist thesis; that woman must look for self-provision. (98)

Anne Bronte’s first novel is a commentary of the life of a governess and a commentary on the upper and rising middle class Victorian family, focusing on the direct experience of daily life in a constrained environment. The novel deals with the noveau – riche and working class families. It is the only Bronte novel where the protagonist can think of “home with unqualified affection” (Pinion 237).

On the metaphorical plan *Agnes Grey* is a journey of a soul in search of freedom, friendship and acceptance in an alien world. The importance of home and family, which is the pivot in the society, is highlighted when Agnes takes up the job of a governess. Through this role the novel charts the development of Agnes from a naïve and inexperienced girl, to a mature and seasoned woman, with an identity of her own. It is in the realization of the self, that she provides the key concept of Victorian society – the family as a micro-unit solid and integrated. Her decision to become a governess in a moment of crisis is a genuine filial gesture and “without any trace of chafing ambition”
(Eagleton, 126). But hidden behind this need to help the family is an urge to explore the world and find her own identity, apart from being the ‘child’ and ‘pet’ of her family. In the Victorian age it was not unusual for a daughter of a middle-class family, to take up work due to death of the father or ruin of the family. So withstanding all opposition, Agnes sets out eagerly to a new life in an unknown terrain. This quest-plot sends the female protagonist on an exploration to self-discovery:

But, Mamma, I am above eighteen, and quiet able to take care of myself and others too. You do not know half the wisdom and prudence I possess, because I have never been tried... How delightful it would be to be a governess! To go out into a new life; to act for myself; to exercise my unused faculties; to try my unknown powers; to earn my own maintenance, and something to comfort and help my father, mother and sister, besides exonerating them from the provision of my food and clothing; to show papa what his little Agnes could do; to convince mama and Mary that I was not quite the helpless, thoughtless being they supposed... (AG 26-27)

With an optimistic vision Agnes tries to find her identity in an upper-class family, where neglect and cruelty reign supreme. This search for identity is not the only concern of Anne Bronte. Through this search she also deals with class distinction that existed in the Victorian age. This clash between classes is an intrinsic feature of Agnes Grey and determines the social ethos of the novel. In her depiction of the family, Anne Bronte’s pre-occupation with class is a matter that points to her own impulses of delineating a self constrained by class.

On the literal plan the novel is a journey of a member of the middle-class family to an upper-class family. The Bronte’s “put heavy accent on good breeding as people in
weaker positions often do.” (Harrison & Stanford 62). The story revolves around a contrast between the vain, shallow, unprincipled, artificial, egoistic, aristocratic family, and virtues of compassion and integrity displayed by Agnes, who belongs to a middle class family. Agnes recounts domestic altercations between husband and wife and points out the mutual hatred that substitutes love in the upper class. In *Agnes Grey*, Anne Bronte reverses the ruling class conceit that the lower classes are like beasts, whom they may burden at will. She repeatedly compares the Bloomfield children to animals who quarrel over food “like a set of tiger cubs” (AG, 10). Those of high social rank in *Agnes Grey*, also acquire a sense of superiority by envisioning themselves as civilized and Christian, in relation to the ignorant ‘savages’ beneath them. The novel reveals the un-Christian behaviour of these professed Christians, and represents Agnes in the homes of the wealthy, as a civilized person. Anne here uses the concept simply to question class hierarchy. Life in these families is at complete odds, enveloped by a chill. Relations between members are very formal with parents addressing their own children as ‘Miss’ and ‘Master’. This “chilling piece of punctilio” (AG 99) often led to a remoteness in relationships between parents and children. The head or the father was often absent for long periods due to business and work. Anne Bronte’s obsession with the symbol of the family in this novel leads her to develop in her narrative, a critical awareness of the limitations imposed by this sense of a family – she looks at it from the point of view of class conflicts, husband/wife relationships and parent/child relationship. In each of these Anne portrays the underlying tensions that exist and disturb the myth of the Victorian ‘happy family’.

The ideal of middle class family and relationships was defined in terms of subordinance and dominance, where the elder controls the younger, the male the female. This patriarchal nature of the family helped to analyze women’s oppression and also gave
an idea of male dominance in society. This is illustrated in Mr. Bloomfield’s attitude to his wife. Finding the dinner not up to his taste, he bursts out in anger “in future when a decent dish leaves the table, they shall not touch it in the kitchen. Remember that Mrs. Bloomfield” (AG 47). Catherine Beecher in her *Treatise on Domestic Economy of 1841* remarks that a woman must be subordinate to man in society. This aspect has been beautifully epitomized in Tom, the eldest child of the Bloomfield family. When Agnes reprimands him “Surely Tom you would not strike your sister! I hope I shall never see you do that”, he replies “You will sometimes: I am obliged to do it now and then to keep her in order.” (AG 89). Tom believes his father and Uncle Robson epitomize manliness. They demonstrate a rough physicality and verbal authority before which his sister cowers, and to which his mother submits, clearly delineating both men as masters. Tom is encouraged by his guardians to drink spirits and hurt innocent animals, to establish the relative superiority of a man. Children, Anne suggests are products of families, and they define the individual values and social attitudes.

This aim is fulfilled by an Evangelical emphasis on the importance of lessons learnt at home in determining an individual’s character. Anne here seems to convey the same idea as Maria Edgeworth and Harriet Martineau, that family habits become individual habits. Tom’s parents approve of his actions, as such he cannot conceive of them as cruel or morally wrong. His notion of morality is entirely dependent upon familial example and approbation. Family according to Anne is the primary focus of education. All subsequent influence cannot wholly eradicate the deficiencies produced by early indulgences and insufficient guidance. With Anne Bronte family is a refuge, a symbol to focus on the repressed self. The male figures remain constant reminders of tyranny of the male ego. Thus the self and class are major aspects that Anne Bronte seeks to explore and define through the theme of the family in *Agnes Grey*.
The novel also brings forth the message that those with social power inflict hardships on the powerless. When Agnes begins her work as a governess, she encounters many obstacles, as she is bound to work under a lot of pressure and restraint. In the course of the novel Anne Bronte “subtly criticizes as well as resists the unjust silencing and disempowerment of the poorer classes by an autocratic and immoral British ruling class” (Meyer 133). The novel also points out, that the problems characterizing the relationship between classes, also characterize the relationships between men and women.

As a condition of her employment, self-repression and suppression are continually required of Agnes. When she joins as a governess, Mrs. Bloomfield warns her that she is to tell no one but herself of the children’s defects. When she is reprimanded for her negligence, Anne wishes to protest but her voice falters and she chooses “to keep silence and bear all” (AG 107). This story of silencing has a larger resonance and according to Susan Meyer represents “the kind of verbal suppression to which girls and woman in this era are disproportionately subjected”(135). Unlike Charlotte who gives a highly romanticized picture of the governess’s life in Jane Eyre, Anne’s portrayal is a contrast. Agnes Grey finds her job endless and exhausting. A governess by virtue of her position is lonely and this loneliness marked the social distance between the employer and employee. She is not a servant but a lady. However no other ladies belonging to her status are present in the family set-up. Her position can be compared to the chaplain of older days, who left the table before the pudding. She is like a mother in the work she performs but like a working-class woman in the wages she earns. She threatens to disturb the boundaries between family life and the public world of work and relationships within the family. Because of the governess’s likeness to the mother in her educational charge, she threatened to displace the figure (mother) around which the ideology of the family revolved. The resident governess was an unnatural burden on the nuclear family, and both
employer and employee often felt her physical and emotional isolation within the home. There was always a need to mark the social distance between the governess and the ‘ladies’ of the house, even though the governess herself was a ‘lady’. This demarcation was evident when the family went out in public. Agnes recognizes her predicament in accompanying the Murray girls on their outings, finding it awkward to walk beside them, ignored by both themselves and their companions. The governess had to depend on mistresses who were usually not sensitive to this sort of dependence.

Agnes’ cup was of this mixed sort. Her wards were unmanageable like “wild unbroken colts” (AG 47) and her powers to discipline them were restricted, as punishments were privileges of parents. Agnes had to suffer interruptions and unwanted supervision from her employers who never failed to find fault in her. She submitted quietly because her home and family inspired her to carry on with devoted diligence – “They may crush but they shall not subdue me. Tis of thee that I think, not them” (AG 60). Her patience shows positive results, and towards the end we find Agnes changing from a governess to a very good friend of Rosalie Murray. She invites Agnes to Ashby Park:

I want you to visit me as a friend, and stay a long time. There is nobody with me, as I told you before; but Sir Thomas and old Lady Ashby... I forget if you like babies: if you do you may have the pleasure of seeing mine... if you will only come, I promise you shall be its governess as soon as it can speak: and you shall bring it up in the way it should go, and make a better woman of it than its mamma... (A.G. 265)

Agnes Grey not only plays the role of a friend and confidante of Rosalie, but also takes up the responsibility of rearing her child. The governess here dons the garb of the mother. It is interesting to note that in crucial moments Rosalie remembers not her mother, but
Agnes her governess and also realizes that Agnes would be the best person to nurture her child into a perfect woman. Anne Bronte here highlights the important role played by the governess within the family, inspite of the fact that she was an outsider. The governess was a testimony of “conspicuous leisure— an indicator of the economic power of the mistress” (Veblein 35). Middle class Victorian families depended on the governess to keep the home front running smoothly. With the lady of the house busy in social engagements, the role of the substitute mother vested on the governess. It was her responsibility to attend to the needs of the children when the mother was away. The Victorian family was thus incomplete without the governess. Though a marginal figure, the family needed her support and help to stand in society. The governess heroine, a fictional type who emerged in the late 1830’s and 1840’s alongside the spoilt lady of fashion, was one whom these writers could readily re-create in their own images. Lady Blessington’s *The Governess* a society novel turned social tract spoke about the governess as a human back way back in 1839. Elizabeth Sewell’s *Amy Herbert* (1844) Harriet Martineau’s *Deerbrook* (1839) and Mrs. Sherwood’s *Caroline Mordaunt* (1835) all deal with the complexities in the life of a governess.

*Agnes Grey* too succeeded in rousing public opinion for in 1848 Lady Amberley noted in her diary – “read *Agnes Grey*...should like to give it to every family with a Governess, to remind me to be human” (27-28). Anne Bronte highlights this concern and it is this quality that she draws out in her portrayal of Agnes as daughter / governess / and woman. It is through this three-fold role that Bronte skillfully portrays Agnes’ search for an identity. These trials and tribulations plumb her strength and develop her understanding. Agnes as a narrator focuses on these episodes, in which her education is being forwarded. She remarks, “I still preserve these relics of past suffering and experiences, like pillars of witness set up in traveling through the vale of life...”
In telling the story of the travails of Agnes Grey, of one woman obliged to live in homes of wealthy families, Bronte "obliquely comments on the larger problem of the unjust distribution of the power of language by gender and by class" (Meyer 137). Anne Bronte considers the role played by the governess to be a reflection of the unfortunate state of families that Agnes serves. The governess’s duality (insider and outsider) allows Agnes (narrator) to regard the family with an intimate as well as a critical eye. The story of Agnes’s maturation as a governess thus widens Anne Bronte’s critique of family-conducted education in *Agnes Grey*. Although Anne details the sufferings and unhappy condition of the Victorian governess, *Agnes Grey* is not primarily a critique of the Victorian governess. Agnes is the medium through which Anne Bronte exposes the flaws of family relations and values.

The image of the mother was an important concern of Anne Bronte who lost her mother when she was a small child. She highlights the important role of a mother in the family. According to Anne Bronte, the mother plays a major role in the education of children. In *Agnes Grey*, Bronte criticizes mothers for relinquishing the responsibility to educate their children’s minds as well as mould their characters offering examples from the fictional Bloomfield and Murray families. *Agnes Grey* describes the children of two families who lack mothering though normally they have a mother. “Anne exposes a nightmare of family life, which fails to embrace and guard its young by setting boundaries” (Davies 87). Family relations and values are revealed through the images of the ‘lady’ of the families. Alice Grey, the mother of Agnes, conforms to the Victorian ideals of a wife and mother. She is a key figure in Victorian society amidst upheaval and ambivalence. To her two daughters, Mrs. Grey was always a thoughtful mother, clever, active and strong. Even when the family loses every thing in a shipwreck, she is particularly careful not to make her daughters aware of the difficulties in the family. She
puts up a brave front and manages family expenses without a word of complaint. Mrs. Bloomfield and Mrs. Murray are a total contrast to Mrs. Alice Grey. They are more interested in other matters, and regard mothering as a burdensome trouble, unlike Evangelical mothers who held it is a supreme duty and delightful task. When Agnes joins the Bloomfield family as a governess, Mrs. Bloomfield declares, “You will find them (the children) not very far advanced in their attainments, for I have had so little time to attend to their education myself...” (AG 36). She is least interested in her children, and is glad to transfer her responsibilities on Agnes – “if you will be so kind as to overlook their washing and dressing and take charge of their clothes ...” (AG 37). Mrs. Bloomfield is also not interested in household matters and her vagueness regarding the food testifies this. Mr. Bloomfield bursts out in astonishment “You don’t know! Well that beats everything. A lady professes to keep house and does not know what fish is for dinner...” (AG 48). Mrs. Murray on the other hand is a loquacious lady interested only in refining her daughters for rich aristocratic matches. Vivacious and attractive she lives in a world of social rivalries, her chief enjoyment being parties and fashion. She advises Agnes on her role demanding, “Who is to form a young lady’s tastes, I wonder, if the governess doesn’t do it!” (AG 235). She charges Agnes to impress upon her daughter what is ‘proper’ conduct, again relinquishing her own part in this responsibility. Agnes is expected to alleviate the trouble of mothering. Anne Bronte here wants to point out that even when the governess has the best intentions, parental examples prevails and the family proves to be the most effective teacher. Mrs. Murray is determined to marry her daughter to the wealthiest possible man. Rosalie Murray, her elder daughter is shocked to hear that Mary, the sister of Agnes is getting married to a middling Vicar – “How can she think of spending her life cooped there with the nasty old man, and no hope of change” (AG 28). Through the portrait of Rosalie, Anne explodes the myth of domestic happiness.
Rosalie portrays a selfish and frivolous butterfly whose self-love mars the blossoming of love for her little daughter:

> What pleasure can I have seeing a girl grow up and enjoy the pleasures that I have been debarred. I can't center any hopes in a child that is one degree better than devoting oneself to a dog.

(AG 283)

Her upbringing leads to this self-centeredness. Rosalie has always seen her mother absorbed in other duties and has never been taught lessons of self-sacrifice. Rosalie will no doubt neglect and misdirect her daughter just as her mother did her. The child will be handed over to a governess, but she will have already learned her lessons. Rosalie's dream world is shattered when she finds the placid, somber rhythm of a secure married life turning to boredom—"Oh! I would give ten thousand worlds to be Miss Murray again" (AG 281). Her destiny is an incompatible marriage, as in her search for existence within the conventionally ordained relationship; she realizes how different she is from her husband:

> That's not my idea of a wife. It's the husband's part to please the wife, not hers to please him and if he isn't satisfied with her as she is – he isn't worthy of her that's all. (AG 278)

Like Catherine Earnshaw of *Wuthering Heights* Rosalie envisions the transfer from home to her husband's as liberation, but this metaphorical movement from daughter to wife signified by marriage marks imprisonment in her case. Rosalie is a total contrast to Mrs. Grey who stands by her husband in moments of crisis, and performs household duties cheerfully, trying her level best to make amends. Through these varied images of mother, wife and daughter, Anne Bronte presents the skewed value system, which places wealth and social prestige over mutual love. The family here upholds conventional values but there is an element of irony in Anne's attitude to these women characters. She questions
the validity of these institutions itself — marriage, society and family, and challenges the hierarchy implicit in the notions of class and gender, and it is this that makes the novel disturbing.

Through this ambivalent portrayal of families in *Agnes Grey*, Bronte is perhaps voicing her protest at the Victorian concept of a family. Anne communicates more accurately than most of her contemporaries, the lassitude, the emptiness and the boredom of Victorian married women. Anne deserves recognition for the clarity with which she details men’s contempt for women in Victorian society, and for “the corollary recognition that given this contempt and power men hold in marriage women are likely to suffer in that relationship” (Langland, 112). Like Gaskell, Craik and Eliot, Anne seems to convey the message that marriage while at best the supreme source of female happiness may “prove a delusory paradise” (Forster 18). Rosalie Murray is torn between two antagonistic identities — her culturally conditioned sense of herself as a women and her aspiration for self-hood. The ‘home’ here does not offer the kind of life craved for by Rosalie. She becomes an embodiment of rage and helplessness. But this is not the case with Agnes. For her, a home and family are the ultimate goals in life. In a careful blending of description and characterization the novelist conveys the idea of integration of the female figure. The belief that marriage is indeed the happy culmination of a girl’s life is instilled by one’s upbringing. Her journey in search of an identity offers her a moment for reflection, understanding and acceptance. Agnes recognizes the importance of passing beyond the family boundary as part of development of the self. She thus disengages herself from the aristocratic world, as she realizes that for a woman like her who aspires to find fulfillment, marriage is the only appropriate social status and she accepts this — “After a few weeks I became the wife of Edward Weston and have never found cause to repent it and am certain that I never shall” (AG 301). In marrying a clergyman, Agnes re-
enacts her parent’s settlement and returns to the spiritual base rather than progressing up the social ladder. By returning Agnes to a modest middle class home, the novel does restore a more secure status. The end of the novel holds up as an alternative, the middle class domestic sanctity of the marriage between Agnes and Weston, one in which a mother educates the children herself, and in which the family is able to subsist happily on their modest income. Agnes finds herself in the role of a mother and a wife, and once again the importance of ‘love’ and ‘family’ comes to the fore. The novel concludes with a balance of moral education in the family with the chance of self-determination beyond it. Agnes has finally found an identity that can transcend differences. The novel ends with a sentence that is ambiguous – “I think I have said sufficient” (A.G. 302). Anne Bronte may be conscious that she has solved the problem of unjust class hierarchy, but she has not done so with the problem of gender equality, which remains unsolved. This remains an issue, which, she will pursue, in her next novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Her achievement must be measured by her success in transforming a radical theme of women’s education and independence into a subject matter so wholly reasonable. *Agnes Grey* reiterates the novelist’s yearning for home and a family, which is a tragic outcome of the novelist’s, own passionate yearnings for a family.

Anne Bronte clearly intended *Agnes Grey* to be instructive, exposing the harm of misguided family lessons and irresponsible parental examples. Her second book *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is more sensational and ambitious. “Anne achieves a dramatic narrative and philosophical advance from *Agnes Grey*” (Langland 118). The novels are different in tone, but *Agnes Grey* carves the domestic situation, that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* develops as its critical focus. Her second novel gives an extended portrait of an imprudently made marriage, similar to Rosalie and Sir Thomas, and exemplifies the ways in which domestic reality is obscured by layers of conventional ideology. Family
here is presented as a site of primitive passions, struggle and control, and continues Anne's concern with the family in directing individual morality. The architecture of Bronte's narrative calls attention to alternate forms of domestic containment, and stresses the disjunctions of these forms. Through the theme of the family, the novel revolves on a simple binary opposition between immoral gentry and righteous protagonist. "One might think it less a transcript from life, and a revelation of considerable inventiveness and creative power" (Pinion 242). In the early reviews the novel was discredited by the very notion of gendered morality that it sought to overthrow. But such injunctions did not curb its popularity, and when the second edition was released in 1848, Anne wrote a Preface in defense:

When we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than, as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light is doubtless the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but it is the most honest or the safest. (13)

Anne objected to the notion of gendered censorship insisting that "all novels are or should be written for both men and women"(235). She felt it was her authorial duty to reveal the facts recognizing as she had in Agnes Grey, plain discrepancies between Victorian mythos of family and family realities. She depicts drunken brawls in the drawing room, the slamming of bedroom doors, a husband who curses his wife and engages in moonlight liaisons with the wife of one of his guests. These depictions provide some of the most harrowing moments in Victorian literature, which explode the idea of home as a place of peace. The Tenant of Wildlife Hall has a way of exploding Victorian myths about gender roles revealing a marital discord full of suffering, agony and ugliness. Arelene M. Jackson in her essay "The Question of Credibility in Anne Bronte's The
"Tenant of Wildfell Hall", points out the unique manner in which the novel asks bold questions about power structures that define relationships in the Victorian period:

Anne Bronte also answers a question that other novels of her time do not ask. What happens to a marriage and to an innocent partner when one partner (specifically, the male) leads a solipsistic life, where personal pleasures are seen as deserved, where maleness and the role of the husband is tied to the freedom to do as one wants and femaleness and the role of wife is linked to providing service and pleasure including daily praise and ego boosting and simply constant attention. (203)

There was little domestic peace when Anne was writing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and Charlotte’s attributes this disturbance to Branwell. Charlotte’s statement in the Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell intimates that Branwell’s downfall was the driving force behind her sister’s second novel “She had in her course of life, been called on to contemplate near at hand and for a long time the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused” (C. Bronte 8). The picture of Huntingdon’s degeneration does seem to echo Branwell’s disgrace. The truth may have been different but to the sisters, there was an adulterous relationship between Branwell and his employer, and adultery is the most common feature of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which brought violent condemnation from prudish contemporaries. “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* rewrites the story of the Fallen Woman as a story of female excellence. In doing so it takes on a radical feminist dimension” (Langland 119).

Similar in construction to *Wuthering Heights* the preliminary chapters of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* create a mystery, the explanation of which is unfolded in the journal narrative of the main story. Anne Bronte here deals with the aristocratic and yeoman classes, emphasizing the patriarchal nature of the Victorian family with the sole
aim of exposing and highlighting the harsh aspects of Victorian chauvinism. The novel’s contrast is between the civilized world of the gentleman farmer’s family around the tea table, and the bitter human tragedy with which Gilbert is brought into contact by the arrival of Helen Hutingdon at Wildfell Hall. Helen (sister of local squire) represents a bleak world of mental torture unlike Wuthering Heights, where it is the other way round. Early chapters open with Gilbert Markham’s meeting with the protagonist Helen Huntingdon and his love for her, receiving a setback, when scandalmongers suggest that Helen is the mysterious mistress of the local squire Mr. Federik Lawrence. Coming upon Helen and Lawrence talking to each other, Markham strikes Lawrence, and Helen is left with no alternative but to reveal five years of her past life. Her journal begins with a young and idealistic woman who marries a man in need of reformation, against the wishes of her guardian. The Tenant of Wildfell Hall warns readers about the hazards of passion unchecked by judgment. Believing herself called to the task of reforming her husband, she begins optimistically only to discover that she is powerless to effect any changes. “She has no legal or social leverage” (Langland 119). Ultimately finding herself sinking in the corruption and vice generated by her husband, she flees to her brother at Wildfell Hall, but she must carefully guard her identity from her inquisitive neighbors or she may be betrayed to her husband and forced to return.

Her brother Federik Lawrence plays an important role in the revelation of Helen’s unhappy life history. He serves as a buffer between her and the rest of the world during her period of disguise. This brother-sister relationship is peculiar, as they have grown up with minimum contact. Helen’s alcoholic father abnegated his responsibility towards his daughter after his wife’s death, turning her over to relatives while keeping charge of his son. Bronte’s novel foregrounds the sibling relationship which is built by Helen’s problematic relationship with her husband. Tess’O Toole in her critical essay “Siblings
and Suitors in the Narrative of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" remarks that "The idea of closing family links for protective and restorative purposes can be applied to Helen’s return to her brother"(244). The siblings reconstruct family life denied to them as children. These brother /sister plots originate as means to combat the sister’s own “devaluation within the family and society”(245). The problem of sibling relationship within a nuclear family is called to attention, and exposed through the rivalry between Gilbert and his younger brother and Rose and her brothers. Bronte differs from other contemporary writers, who privileged sibling bonds. Anne seems to juxtapose rather than collapse kinship relationships. “This makes *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* a most unusual example of nineteenth century domestic fiction, a fact that may account for the relative marginalization of Anne’s masterpiece within the Bronte corpus.” (O’Toole 247).

Interwoven with sibling relationship are the twin themes of character and education, reflected through the various families portrayed. Anne Bronte here deals with the preparation of marriage, an issue that occupied prime importance in the patriarchal Victorian society. Members of the Hargrave family have an interesting function in the novel with reference to marriage and family. Millicent Hargrave, the elder daughter agrees to marry Ralph Hattersley, a rich banker only to please her mother. On the other hand Ralph marries her because she fulfils his ideas of a weak submissive wife. Millicent writes to Helen:

> I dread the thoughts of marrying him ... but I did not like to give him a flat refusal for fear mamma should be grieved and angry.

> Mamma is delighted with the match. I cannot bear to disappoint her. (TTOWH 179)

Millicent here portrays the picture of a Victorian daughter, ready to sacrifice her personal emotions at the altar of the family. She fits into the role of a traditional daughter/ a wife and then a mother.
From her initial family upbringing throughout her subsequent development, the social role assigned to the woman is that of serving an image, authoritative and central, of man: a woman first and foremost a daughter/a wife/a mother ... (Felman 8)

Ester the younger daughter however refuses to be bullied and sacrificed like her sister. She withstands her materialistic mother, and threatens to leave home and finally makes the kind of marriage that Helen ought to have made. Its disclosure is a most delightful surprise, the most enchanting scene in all Bronte novels.

Anne is also concerned with the preparation of young boys for adult life, another salient concern of the Victorian family. The novel stresses the importance of experience, when Helen justifies her rather peculiar aversion – therapy to alcohol for her son Arthur. Helen is adamant that experience will not be her son’s only teacher. Unlike the Bloomfield and Murray matriarchs of Agnes Grey, Helen takes her role as Arthur’s mother seriously. On his birth she rejoices, “God has sent me a soul to educate for Heaven” (TTOWH 91-92). Her view of a mother is typical of nineteenth century Evangelicalism. Helen understands her role as a mother. When Mrs. Markham and Gilbert remark that boys should not be brought up in an atmosphere of cloistered virtue, Helen pointedly argues as the Bronte’s must have done, and makes a bold plea for both boys and girls being educated in the same way. Charlotte Bronte had written to Mrs. Wooler on 30th January 1846:

The mode of bringing [men] up is strange, they are not half – sufficiently guarded from temptation – girls are protected as if they were something very frail and silly indeed while boys are turned loose on the world as if they – of all beings in existence were the wisest and least liable to be led astray. (142)
Taking the cue from Charlotte, Anne’s heroine makes a bold statement:

You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others. Now, I would have both as benefit by the experience of others. (TTOWH 35)

Anne Bronte suggests that male-indulgence is instilled as habit by the family resulting from prominence and license guaranteed to boys, and self-sacrifice expected from female members for their comfort and promotion. This gender differentiation is aptly illustrated through the Markham household. Gilbert’s sister Rose complains, “I am told I ought not to think of myself but only to consider what’s most agreeable to the gentleman of the house” (TTOWH 52). Gilbert like Arthur, has been spoiled and pampered by his mother and has an inflated ego. Similarly, indulged by his mother, Walter Hargrave becomes too selfish to consider the financial comfort of his mother and sister. Walter in fact pushes his sister Millicent into a lucrative but imprudent marriage with Hattersley. Anne Bronte here points out the injury in early indulgence, and neglect of moral guidance on both men and families.

This condemnation of male indulgence on Anne’s part furthers a concern of domestic writers of 1830’s and 1840’s. Bronte here may be revealing her own frustrations and limitations as a girl born into a patriarchal Victorian family. The education Branwell (her brother) received at the Royal Academy was of a higher stature, than what she and her sisters received in the Clergy Daughter’s School. That she believed in the equality between both sexes is evident right from the beginning. It is unlikely that Anne Bronte would have read Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of Women’s Rights* (1792), but the arguments are similar. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft argues:

Gracious Creator of the whole human race! Hast thou created such a being as women ... for no better purpose? – Can she
believe that she was only meant to submit to man, her equal, a
being, who like her, was sent into the world to acquire virtue?
Can she consent to be occupied merely to please him, merely to
adorn earth, when her soul is capable of rising to thee? (67)

Helen like Wollstonecraft asserts women’s capacity for virtue and in debating with
Gilbert raises points reminiscent of those in *A Vindication of Women’s Rights*.

It must be either, that you think she is essentially so vicious, or
so feeble minded, that she cannot withstand temptation — and
though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in
ignorance and restraint…. yet the greater her knowledge, the
wider her liberty … (TTOWH 35)

For Helen and Bronte as for Wollstonecraft, virtue must be educated and the capacity of
women for education equals that of men. Bronte is concerned with the question of male
power and privilege. Comparing situations of men and women in families, the novel
offers a sustained consideration of issues such as domestic abuse, marriage and custody
law. Her grasp of the legal inequities that women suffer in marriage might be possible for
a woman who values her independence and integrity. The novel reveals that we all live in
compromise and imperfection.

Looking at the novel from those angles, Helen arouses our sympathy if we equate
her with those women sent out into the world unarmed against her foes, ignorant of the
snares that beset her path. Helen however is not unarmed. Her aunt does explicitly warn
her against the superficial attractions of Huntingdon who is a ‘bit wildish’, but perhaps
she guides her too little or too much. By pressing the unattractive and unwanted claims of
Mr. Boarham, her aunt drives her into the arms of his younger rival. Mr. Boarham, Mr.
Wilmot and Annabella all act as catalysts in building romantic allusions between Helen
Tees O’Toole remarks that the novel’s relationship to domestic ideology is a named one:

In presenting Helen’s attraction to her first husband, Bronte daringly implies that her heroine’s culturally sanctioned role as the would be reformer of a sinful man serves as a cover for her sexual attraction to him, but a hellish marriage punishes Helen for succumbing to her desire for Arthur. (136)

Helen is aware of his sins, but gets married to him. In course of time his frivolous nature and distasteful friends disillusion her, but she goes on loving and caring for her husband. Helen realizes that her “cup of sweets is not unmixed; it is dashed with a kind of bitterness that I cannot hide from myself, disguise it as I will ... I cannot shut my eyes to Arthur’s faults” (TTOWH 151) Seeds of dissidence are sown and the initial glitter of the connubial chain is well and truly tarnished. Arthur continues to remain absent for long periods. Through this endless wait of Helen, Bronte deals with the turmoils of the wife whose life becomes nothing but a long wait. “He is gone – we are to be separated for more than two months – above ten weeks” – a long, long time to live and not see him” (TTOWH 163). When she discovers the real relationship between Arthur and Annabella, she is in for a rude shock. Her efforts and attempts to overcome the degradation in a man-woman relationship within marriage have been futile. Through Helen’s inability to convert Huntingdon, Anne Bronte stresses the difficulty of reforming habits established in youth thereby reinforcing the vital responsibility of parents to direct their children’s moral upbringing emphasized in Agnes Grey. The wife in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, like the governess in Agnes Grey proves unable to undo the early lessons of the family.

Her son Arthur is the only saving grace. She now transfers her salvational mission from husband to child. Being a mother to Arthur her son becomes her primary identity, and in contrast to Rosalie of Agnes Grey, she centers all her hopes in her child whom she
considers a gift from God. Marriage now becomes a “delusory paradise” (Forster 18). Having been married for two years the wife sees how life has become monotonous. The brutal honesty of the wife’s private thoughts and the language conveyed effectively captures the female mind:

God help me now! I murmured sinking on my knees. My burning, bursting heart strove to pour forth its agony to God, but could not frame its anguish into prayer, until a gust of wind swept over me... I breathed more freely; my vision cleared... I knew their God was mine... I should have strength for all my trials and win a glorious rest at last! (TTOWH 236)

She lives with her husband in mutual hatred, donning the garb of a housekeeper. The story moves on with this limited mobility self-assigned by Helen, and her constant desire to break away from it. The vision of distant possibilities is dimmed again and again, by the sense of commitment to the family especially to her son Arthur. Her urgent desire to leave the madness of domesticity and the degree of triviality the outside world attaches to it, sums up the traditional concept of ‘home’ being the destination of a married women. The ideal of a mother even adds to the restrictions, as it shackles the women to her position within the family. Anne Bronte’s method of privileging Helen’s maternal role over the wifely one essentially challenges the fusing of wife and mother into a single unified state of domesticity. Huntingdon’s engagement of a governess motivates Helen to take the crucial decision to leave Grassdale Manor. It is here that Rachael; her maid helps her take this vital decision. She is a solace and comfort and accompanies her to Wildfell Hall- “I have no home madam, but with you... Do you think, I can’t bear what my misses can?” (TTOWH 226) The Victorian servant played a vital role in the intimate areas of families. They were well trained to maintain a strict code of secrecy. Her other servant Benson cords her boxes and arranges a coach when she flouts all conventions and leaves
her husband solely for her son — "Thank God! I am free at last, never will the innocent 
lips of the child be defiled by the contaminating kisses of his father". (TTOWH 299). It 
was for this daring step that Anne Bronte's novel was severely criticized. Charles 
Kingsley considered it "Utterly unfit to be put into the hands of girls"(120). This act of 
Helen was another blow for sex equality on Anne's part — it was almost "one of lese-
majesty and decades ahead of its time" a bold double challenge to the whole Victorian 
code. (Bell 117)

The novel challenged existing legal and social structures. In May 1913, May 
Sinclair remarked, that the slamming of Helen's bedroom door against her husband 
reverberated throughout Victorian England. Inspired by Bronte's eloquent and compelling 
defense of a wronged woman, and her invention of a heroine who heroically fights back, 
Juliet McMaster, Elizabeth Langland and Tess O'Toole have all provided insightful 
readings of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall as a pro-feminist text. "The counter hegemonic 
project of the text is not merely to expose bad marriage but to teach patriarchy the value 
of female rebellion". (O'Toole 239). Bronte's heroine symbolizes the seed of feminism 
that was in the initial stages. At a time when a married woman had no independent legal 
existence apart from her husband, Helen's decision to leave a secure home and support 
she herself by painting while living in hiding, created sensational ripples in both social and 
literary circles. Caroline Norton in her book English Laws for Women remarks that a 
married women could not own her own property, sue for divorce or have control/custody 
of her children. If she attempted to live apart with her children from him, her husband had 
the right to reclaim her and charge her for kidnapping. In living off her own earnings, she 
was held to be stealing her husband's property since any income she made was legally 
his. Helen the heroine of Anne's novel violates social norms as well as English laws. The 
dormant feminist in Anne is also evident in her sharp castigation of reviewers who
speculated on the sex of authors and the appropriateness of their writing to their sex. This does little to reinforce the stereotype of Anne as weak and gentle. She writes in the Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*:

> I am satisfied that if a book is good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for man.

(14)

Anne Bronte's attitude to marriage is essentially an ambivalent one. While on one hand she shows where the marriage of the Huntingdon's went wrong, on the other hand she is saying that it should never have taken place. This latter theme is brought out in the parallel story of Lord Lowborough, whose second marriage is so surprisingly a success. His first marriage to the frivolous and selfish Annabella Wilmot, takes place as he thinks that she will save him from damnation. "She will save me body and soul from destruction. Already she has ennobled me in my own estimation, and made me three times better, wiser, greater than I was." (TTOWH 161). Having gambled away his fortune he has full faith in salvation through Annabelle, but everything comes to an end, when Lord Lowborough comes to know about his wife's unfaithfulness. "Great Heaven! and she duped me all this time!" He turned away with a suppressed groan of agony in a paroxysm of agitation" (TTOWH 263) The same ambivalence is evident in Anne Bronte's portrait of Ester Hargrave who is nearly bullied by her mother, into marrying someone quiet unsuitable for her. Her sister Millicent is a foil to Helen. She upholds the tradition of being a complement to her husband and struggles to save her marriage. She accepts him with his faults — "I would not exchange my husband for any man on earth."
Neither he nor I are perfect ... I desire his improvement as earnestly as my own. And he will improve. “ (TTOWH 220) Anne here conveys the idea of unquestioning integration of the female figure into the monotonous rhythm of a marriage. Considerations of safeguarding the honour of one’s family, one’s status as a wife/mother, are emphasized by the projection of female characters in passive unresisting acceptance. The difference that lay at the heart of ideological assumptions of male/female relations, that asserted moral superiority as a function of female difference – was converted into an idyllic oneness in marriage through the wife’s perfect identity of the self with her husband. Oneness in marriage was also a legal reality and the Bronte’s were aware of this legal reality. This is reflected in *Wuthering Heights* and *Shirley*. Anne Bronte exposes the legal and ideological oneness of husband and wife to be a threat to Helen’s physical, psychological and moral autonomy. Towards the end Millicent’s husband, Ralph Hattersley emerges a reformed character who resolves to live happily with his family. These contrasting examples reveal Anne’s ambivalent attitude towards the home and family. This ironical view of the two sides of conjugal life breaks down the myth of the ‘happy Victorian family.’

The concluding chapters of the novel contain some of Anne Bronte’s greatest writing. The final decline and death of Hutingdon reinforces the Victorian ideal of a woman. Helen returns to nurse him when he is ill and Huntingdon’s attitude turns from scorn to pitiful dependence. Anne Bronte here goes back to the role of the nurturing female and the status reverses. Helen once a dependent on Arthur now has full control over him, as he clings on to her, his only comfort and solace. Helen prays for Arthur’s recovery:

And oh, there lives within my breast

A hope long nursed by me ...
Bronte’s caliber can be judged in her refusal to indulge in facile repentance and didactic effusions. Anne’s ideas of love and class coincided with Charlotte’s and Emily’s. Despite its courageous treatment of issues that more than a century later we regard as social issues, the secrecy surrounding domestic evidence, drug dependency, are not the only concern of Anne. The assertion of human relatedness in Anne Bronte is what we find in the novels of George Eliot. The novel ends with the marriage of Gilbert and Helen. The mysterious tenant of Wildfell Hall becomes the proper mistress of Staningsley and finds happier accommodation in the social order. That order however is patriarchal and it is this element of patriarchy that Emily Bronte takes up through the theme of the family in her novel _Wuthering Heights_. Helen seems silenced and distanced from the reader in Gilbert’s closing retrospective. Being a female artist the predicament of Anne is similar to all women writers. Placed as she is amidst dominant tradition outlined before, her perception of the new woman can be seen to reflect in a certain sense the discrepancy between her will to produce a literature of her own and her fear of being marginalized. Her fiction manifests a strenuous struggle between society and authentic value, but the struggle of Agnes and Helen is not internalized as it is with Jane Eyre or Catherine Earnshaw. Anne Bronte’s fiction is concerned neither with submerged depths nor with few horizons but with the criteria by which man and woman should act well.

Actuated by noble motives Anne Bronte considers it her authorial duty to be a moral educator, and both her novels can be read as fiction that instructs and improves. She was aligned with contemporary Evangelical writers on family, stressing the importance of the family’s and particularly the mother’s educative charge, but she was also committed to an unconventional idea of gender equality in moral education. Her
insistence on laying bare the unpalatable facts of domestic life in her fiction was a radical approach to moral didacticism. Her purpose was simply not amuse but to benefit lessons. It was this sense of responsibility towards the family, towards Branwell her brother that prompted Anne to write *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a warning to others. Emily Bronte too tried to study Branwell, to know more about his frantic gestures, and reveal the evils of society through her novel *Wuthering Heights*. The next chapter deals with the theme of the family in *Wuthering Heights*, wherein family challenges the patriarchal society and creates a platform for revenge. If Anne Bronte stresses the importance of lessons learnt through the family, Emily Bronte generates boundless passion in subverting patriarchy through the platform of family. The next chapter discusses the theme of the family in Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*. 
Works Cited


