Conclusion

The Victorian society thus envisioned the home and family as a haven in a heartless world, a counter balance to an increasingly mechanized and dehumanized world of work, beyond the home. Family was a repository of home virtues, from fear of social disintegration in the face of rapid industrialization and change. Domestic dialogues sought to preserve the middle-class vision of familial order, not only to maintain the home as buffer against the anxieties of outer life, but also to serve as an example of harmonious relations, and stable values, on which society should model itself. The domestic circle provided a refuge not only for sentiments but also for Christian values – values that were increasingly under threat in the cut throat world of business and politics. Home was visioned as a secure domain, and family the institution where loyalty, honesty, co-operation, mutual affection and self-sacrifice, governed the interaction among individuals, and by mid century these virtues became recognized as basic home virtues. It was through this institution of the family that individuals entered society. The family occupied an important place in Victorian society as a formative agency. Purity and firmness in the domestic system were the key features necessary to mould a solid and secure society. The role and function of the family was no longer simply to produce economically secure individuals, but to create emotional, moral, social selves. The modern bourgeois family seems to center on the educative function of the family. The main object of this function was to prepare an individual to go beyond the family.

It was the family, which functioned as an arena for the construction of gender difference. Boys and girls developed in different ways, distinguished by toys, dress, goals and standards of behaviour, which emphasized different social destinies. Victorian families acted as the disciplinarian, imposing limits on the self. Within the families
restrictions were set, principles of subordination were implanted according to hierarchy of power relations – children to parents, wives to husbands. The Bronte sisters, Charlotte Mary Younge, Elizabeth Gaskell and Dinah Mulock Craik display these disparities in their fiction. Anne Bronte and Dinah Mulock Craik radically refute the idea of different education and promote an equal education for both boys and girls. This difference in gender is also evident in *Wuthering Heights* and *Wives and Daughters* and it is this difference that Catherine Earnshaw and Molly Gibson desire to transcend by moving out of the family circle. Even Jane Eyre’s rebellious nature is a result of this difference. She too retaliates by moving out of her so-called family circle. There is a breaking of the proper sphere of women, assigned to them by the Victorian society. All these writers cannot be said to have preached a common doctrine on the role and position of women in mid-Victorian Britain. But nonetheless, they were discerning commentators on specifically female problems. Their novels are protests, criticizing contemporary social patriarchy that kept woman confined in the home, and socially appreciated, only in terms of their familial roles. Their fiction address specific issues that affected the state of the family, particularly women within the family. These writers focus on the complexity of the domestic sphere and private life, from a female perspective. Anne Bronte felt it her authorial duty to reveal the facts and plain discrepancies between the Victorian myth of the family and family realities. Her novels illustrate some of the most harrowing moments in the Victorian family, which explodes the idea of home as a place of peace. Her presentation of families is meant to expose and reform the errors and abuses of society. The *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* clearly suggests the need for reform in divorce laws anticipating the late 19th century Married Women’s Property Acts (1870 and 1882) and Custody of Infant Act (1886). Traces of ambiguity, bitter attitudes as well as attempts at reconciliation and understanding, are seen in Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Gaskell.
They seem to see both progress in the way man regarded the position of woman, and problems in the foundations of the social system, which were so deep rooted that no change was possible.

"Innumerable Victorian women hoped to emulate Charlotte Bronte and write themselves out of the restrictions which the age imposed on their sex" (Prentis 119). Female identity in the late 18th and mid 19th century was bound to a family. Women were recognized as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers leading them to be referred to as "relative creatures" (Ellis 155). They were not permitted to move out of their domestic sphere and were destined to be dependent on others and live in containment within the boundaries of a family. These women novelists were writing in the midst of a burgeoning of the 'women question', when conservative definitions about the role of women were challenged by writers like Ann Richelieu Lamb and Mrs. Hugo Reid, who insisted on spheres of action and influence of women beyond the domestic one. The woman writer's fictional portrayal of females within and without families, involve those debates and prove that they participated in the dialogue over the nature and role of woman that was undeniably and unavoidably part of the spirit of the age. During the composition of Shirley, Charlotte Bronte admitted to W.S. Williams in 1848 – "I often wish to say something about the condition of women" – (C. Bronte The Life of Charlotte Bronte 180). Charlotte's Shirley speaks quite a lot about the condition of women. This question was in fact a complex one considering the extent to which the family defined and positioned female subjectivity. Was a female inherently domestic? Was the family a natural and ideally exclusive site for female development? Should there be opportunities for personal development and experience beyond the home? These are the questions that filtered to these writers, and stimulated their thoughts. Protests of the authors can be heard through the heroines who declare themselves stifled by or existing outside the boundaries
of approved feminine sphere. Agnes Grey, Catherine Earnshaw, Francis Henri, Caroline Helstone, Laura Edmondstone, Lady Kirkpatrick and Lady Brithwood, all voice their discontent in domestic enclosures, and their sense of paralysis and mental deterioration, in familial containment. Lucy Snowe asserts her feelings of alienation and despair in a society that recognizes a woman as a man’s daughter or a man’s wife. Charlotte Bronte explains the reasons why pseudonymous were adopted by the three sisters -- “We had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice…” (C.Bronte, *The Bronte Sisters and George Eliot* 117-18). Helen Huntingdon of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Jane Eyre of *Jane Eyre* implicitly reject the construction of women as saving angels or divine helpmates by proudly pronouncing that they are ‘no angels’. All these heroines display questionable morality with latent rebellion against their condition. These writers emerge as public voices – as feminist voices condemning the plight of women, this aimless existence, and their economic and moral dependency. Dinah Mulock Craik emphasized that woman could and should be able to support oneself. Self sufficient from the age of nineteen, Craik rejected the world of rigid systems enforced by patriarchal society. The world of her novels is non patriarchal. In 1846 Charlotte confessed to Margaret Wooler:

> I speculate much on the existence of ... woman now-a-days and I have already got to the point of considering that there is no more respectable character on this earth than an un married woman who makes her own way through life quietly pers [e] veringly without the support of husband or brother (C.Bronte, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* 215).

The thrust of feminist concerns of these writers was to allow woman the means to achieve an independency, which is implicit in their novels. For them independence did
not simply mean freedom from economic dependency on a man. More important it, signified an emotional and psychological sense of being whole, of possessing one’s self without contingency upon others for confirmation of self-worth. Education was a means by which a female could gain intellectual and emotional freedom. According to Anne Bronte female education should not be limited to the domestic sphere if female morality is to be protected. Charlotte considered education “a priceless advantage – a step towards independency” (C. Bronte The Life Charlotte Bronte 218). She laments over girls like Shirley Keeldar and Rosalie Murray who are reared only to make mercenary marriages. A girl is never a self for herself; she always and only exists for others.

In life and literature the women writers defied familial and socially imposed limitations on female self-development. In 1849 Charlotte wrote that she wished for every woman in England a hope and motive not limited to the domestic sphere and not centered on a husband and family. Jane Eyre rejects prejudicial assumptions that woman should be content in the sphere to which society has relegated them, arguing that it is narrow-minded to say that woman ought to confine themselves to making puddings, knitting stockings, embroidering bags or playing on the piano. In Shirley, Rose illustrates the refutation on conventional boundaries, when she answers her mother’s charge that she engage in domestic pursuits “I will do that and then I will do more” (Sh 453). Rose here proposes self-hood that exists in, but extends beyond the family. It is through this rejection of boundaries that these writers articulate desires beyond orthodox understanding of female nature revealing what Nancy Armstrong has called “new territories” (Armstrong 370). But an important point to note is that, although these writers promote female autonomy through their fiction, they do not degrade or attack domestic duties and endowment or deny the possibility of self-realization and self-fulfilment within the family. In their novels the longing for independency of self does not prelude the
longing for relationship. The quest for their heroines is to acquire self-possession and self-knowledge within relationships and all the novels conclude with relationships that accommodate and respect the self.

The formative environment of all these writers points to the complexity of the family as an agent in the construction of the family identity. The family functions as a site, not only where the individual is formed, valued and promoted, but also where individual will is curbed, and made to conform and self-restraint inculcated. For all these writers, home fostered their value of self-improvement and self-sufficiency, but it was also a place where the self had to be denied to win the approbation of the father, and where sisters had to put brothers before themselves. The voices of these writers behind a mask become public voices questioning and criticizing their society’s established ideas of morality and femininity. Their fiction values the individual – in a relationship with others both in the context of the family and the larger context of society.

Several of these considerations within the context of the family in the Victorian milieu, seem to suggest a clearly symbiotic relationship. It is of significance that while the family and the familial concerns act upon the woman subject in formative ways, the individual woman is more often than not visible in her attempt to subvert the system for her own inner needs and self-realization. Thus, if within the paradigm of the family the male is permitted transgression, the woman subject and more specifically here the woman writer emerges as a willing subversive. The readings offered in this study of Victorian family, allow for an inherently dichotomous situation where women attempting to break out of the mould are often later compelled to withdraw into the ‘safe haven’ of the family, thus returning as educated if somewhat complexed individuals within that society. Further it perhaps suggests and establishes a vital link in the transit from a stereotypical Victorian
ethos of the codified and domesticated woman, to the liberated 'new woman' of the next century.
Works Cited


