Introduction

The advent of Industrialization in nineteenth century England ushered in tremendous changes. This period witnessed a tussle between two worlds. One was a world that was bound to tradition and convention, and the other that was progressive, involving change and strife. Unable to keep pace with this change, man turned to the intensification of personal relationships, and an exaggeration of domestic virtues. The Evangelical Movement, which began around the eighteenth century, transformed the whole character of the English society, laying particular emphasis not on the church, but the Home and the Family. The middle class envisioned a demarcation between proper spheres of male and female – the public workplace for men, and the private home for women. And this arrangement, served as a paradigm for families. The Victorian vision of a family was that of a self-contained unit, a haven in a chaotic and violent world, that counter-balanced the intensely mechanized world beyond the home. “It was not only a refuge, but an altar, that instilled Christian virtues of loyalty, honesty, co-operation, mutual affection and a will to sacrifice the self” (Beales 344). It was these virtues that acted as safeguards against social disintegration, in the face of rapid change.

Social reformers like Ruskin, Carlyle, and Callager promoted the family as a reforming institution that moulded characters for both worlds. Family was the medium through, which individuals entered society. Family came to occupy an important place in the Victorian society as a formative agency. Lessons imparted by a parent to a child, became the focus of domestic guides and conduct literature that flourished in the Victorian society. Family now meant a place where social, moral and emotional selves were created. This echoes the famous dictum “the child is father of the man”
(Wordsworth 7) and stands as an example of the seriousness, with which parents regard childhood, in influencing adult life. Family created the pathway to enter society and now became a “place of Peace” (Ruskin 72). Hidden features of Victorian family patterns became a subject of considerable literature for the Victorians. It was probably due to this fear that novel reading was prohibited in some quarters. What was the reason, behind the novel becoming such a dominant literary form, in the Victorian period? Who were the readers, and what motivated them to read novels? Where did they obtain these novels? These questions are all inter-related. Among the middle classes, patterns of employment, separation of home and working environment – assumption that male head of a household should be able to provide for female members of his family, contributed to the establishment of demarcated leisure time and space for both men and women. “A novel is a splendid thing after a day’s hard work, a sharp practical tussle with the real world” (30) remarks a character of Elizabeth Mary Braddon’s A Doctor’s Wife (1864). Kate Flint in her study “The Victorian Novel and its Readers” observes that “Reading novels was a way of winding down; a mental space from the complicated business of running a home...” (20). Reading was a common social family activity, within the middle class home. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, novel reading became itself identified with “those attitudes we now term Victorian, primarily to do with sexual repression, stultifying middle-class family life and cramped vistas for women’s lives”(Deirdre 1). The Victorian novel was predominantly a novel of domestic manners.

The Victorian novel has been subjected to intense scrutiny and it seems presumptuous to try and study it further. However, there is enough scope to uncover facts, which will add to the oeuvre of this period. In her book A Literature of their Own: From Bronte to Lessing (1977), Showalter states that “The Literature provided a women’s view of life, women’s experience in other words a new element” (3). In the field of fiction,
female novelists gained popularity because they wrote from intensely personal experiences, and treated emotions within a domestic context. This concern with the family as a theme was directly linked to the woman writer's need to establish her identity in a male dominated field. Through this theme, the woman novelist was trying to find her own position in society, both as a woman as well as a writer. On one hand tradition made her cling to Victorian convention, but on the other hand, there was this clamouring need to identify oneself as an individual in a patriarchal society. The woman writer uses the family as a vehicle to navigate through these vital issues. A study of the family in Victorian fiction, and its role in the society, will be beneficial to study the status of women in the Victorian period.

Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte belonged to this period, which laid a great emphasis on the network of relationships and issues that made up family life. Their interest in the family lay particularly in the Victorian idealization of the family, its emerging concerns with Victorian fiction and in the bitter experiences of their personal lives. Early deaths, a note of genteel poverty, a life of humdrum ordinariness and a life of immense loneliness played an important role in forming the basis of their novels. Intense family bonding was an intrinsic feature of this extremely close-knit family of writers. This bond was repeatedly threatened by a series of deaths that struck the Bronte family. Absence of maternal love made them insecure, and a fractured family set-up with distressing orphans, is a regular phenomenon in all the novels written by the three Bronte sisters. The aspects of life depicted in their novels are vivid pictures of a life of their imagination, replete with what they missed out in real life. They filled the uneventful account of their history with the more exciting pages of their fiction. Family as a theme thus occupies a vital place in Bronte fiction. The three were sisters but quite unlike as
women or as writers. When we read from *Jane Eyre*, the Gondal Poems, *Wuthering Heights* and the *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, we cruise through different worlds.

The variety of criticism to which the Bronte’s have been subjected to, mirrors every critical fad or school. There is such a vast quantity of critical commentary that a detailed survey of it would not be possible. The Bronte’s have been targets of various schools of criticism. I propose to briefly scan Bronte criticism through the years. Early critics looked at their novels as messages given out for the benefit of the readers. Criticism was then based on style, theme, character and other related aspects. An early critic remarks in the “Westminster Review” that *Jane Eyre* was “decidedly the best novel of the season” (Lewes 581). *Wuthering Heights* comments the same critic in “The Leader”, “is notable for its mastery in the treatment of its subject” (Lewes 53). Another early critic called *Agnes Grey* “the most perfect narrative in English prose” (Moore 28).

Charlotte Bronte enjoyed remarkable success during her lifetime, but after her death, her sister Emily gradually eclipsed her reputation, so that by 1907, there was a critical consensus on the comparatively minor significance of Charlotte’s novels, measured against the greatness of *Wuthering Heights*. David Cecil in his influential re-evaluation *Early Victorian Novelists* (1934) remarks that Charlotte Bronte:

is our first subjective novelist, the ancestor of Proust and James Joyce ... and like theirs her range is limited to those aspects of experience which stimulates ... the private consciousness ... The world she creates is the world of her inner life. (91)

*Wuthering Heights*, reflects David Cecil, has not been appreciated as it deserved, but Emily Bronte:
is an unequal genius, revealing flashes of extraordinary imagination, remote from the central interests of human life, often clumsy and exaggerated, incapable of expressing her inspiration in a coherent form. (117)

Fannie E. Ratchford's *The Bronte Web of Childhood* (1941) is a seminal study of the Bronte children's creative fantasies including Emily and Anne's world of Gondal. In 1968 Wendy Craik published *The Bronte Novels*, which analyses each novel in close detail eschewing biographical information.

Bronte biography attracts a wide variety of odd theories and mild speculations, about the personal life of the Bronte family. Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857), the first full-length biography, emphasized the family's eccentricities, and blamed Charlotte Bronte's family upbringing for the tone and content of her writings. Margaret Lane's *The Bronte Story: A Reconsideration of Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1953) corrects Mrs. Gaskell and provides an excellent introduction to the Bronte's. Good judgment is evinced everywhere in the writing. Phyllis Bentley in his *The Brontes and Their World* (1966) gives informative pictures of Yorkshire. It will be difficult to find a more informative and attractive shorter introduction than this book. In her three books on the Bronte's, *Anne Bronte* (1959), *Charlotte Bronte* (1967) and *Emily Bronte* (1971), Winifred Gerin has done more research than any other writer. These biographies are valuable as there is an admixture of tradition and conjectural interpretation. The writer misses nothing, and gives thought to many possibilities. In *The Brontes* (1975) by Brian Wilks, the family is seen with remarkable clarity. The author substantiates his views with pictures that speak volumes about the times in which the Brontes lived. Juliet Barker's biography *The Brontes* (1994) not only deals with personal history, but also tries to open gaps that may reveal hidden aspects of their fiction.
Such is the variety and proliferation of critical works, that a simple discussion would be confusing. F.B. Pinion’s *A Bronte Companion, Literary Assessment, Background and Reference* (1975) relates the stories of the inner world with the real world outside, and analyses the novels from the biographical point of view. The Bronte’s have been targets of various schools of criticism. Terry Eagleton’s *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontes* (1975) adopts an explicitly Marxist viewpoint, which takes into account social issues involved, recognizing that they were indeed difficult to separate. His analysis of the relevance of biographical and social background of the Bronte’s is far more subtle and complex, than simple matching of fiction to fact - "That the Bronte sisters were compelled in real life to negotiate the rift between ‘imagination’ and ‘society’ seemed crucial for an understanding of their fiction" (12). Tom Winnifrith’s *The Brontes and their Background: Romance and Reality* (1973) is the best full-length study of the writers in their historical context. The books by Eagleton and Winnifrith, refer to many useful works of a more formally histographical nature.

By 1977 the tide of critical opinion was beginning to turn. Series of new critical and formalist analysis gradually replaced previous criticism, and a new kind of exploration evolved. In the last twenty years new critical theories altered the way in which we read literary texts. The most influential factor in the re-estimation of Bronte’s work is the emergence of feminist literary theory. There has been a natural interest in the Bronte sisters among women – “the unusual phenomenon of a sorority of three talented writers (with a talented brother who failed to achieve anything) inevitably draws the interest of female readers and critics.” (Holderness 85). It is a notable feature that most of the Bronte biographers have been women, and there have been admirable attempts to address the problems of female authorship.
The real groundwork for later feminist studies of the Bronte sisters, is found in Inga-Stina Eubank’s *The Proper Sphere: The Bronte sisters as Early Victorian Female Novelists* (1966). This book contains a descriptive analysis of each of the novels and discusses the Bronte’s relationship with early nineteenth century women writers. Jenni Calder’s *Women and Marriage in the Victorian Fiction* (1976), and Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their own: From Bronte to Lessing*, (1977) establishes a more accurate and systematic literary history for woman writers. It is as if these feminist critics are establishing their own great tradition. Showalter’s reading of Bronte fiction presents a powerful challenge to the view that *Jane Eyre* is merely “escape reading for girls” (Spacks 228). All this changes with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Mad Women in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth — Century Literary Imagination* (1979), which is mainly concerned with the position of the women writers, as they relate inevitably to the male mainstream. They point out that “the woman writer suffers an even more primary anxiety of authorship — a radical fear that she cannot create nor fight a male precursor on his terms and win” (47-48). It is perhaps this anxiety that made the Bronte sisters adopt pseudonyms, when they published their first novels. Margaret Homans in her book *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in 19th century Women's Writing* (1986), offers a series of feminist readings based on psycholinguistic myth of language, that she derives from Jacques Lacan and Nancy Chodorow. She argues that “within a predominantly masculine culture, the woman writer can hardly avoid simply ‘Bearing the Word’ for patriarchy” (165). A number of feminist critics laid focus on the narrative technique. Naomi Jacobs in her essay “Gender and the Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights*” gives a legal-social dimension to the question of narrative frame, suggesting like Homans, that the process of exposing the real constraints of women’s lives represents at least a partial loosening of those constraints. Jacobs proceeds to
document the prevalence of nineteenth century wife-abuse and the reluctance of reviewers to accept its existence—"a context which reveals the Bronte sisters as writing what was regarded as un-writable in contemporary terms"(173). In another essay "Gender and Genre in Wuthering Heights", Lyn Pykett analyses the connections between gender, class culture, literature, society and politics and portrays "the family as a site of primitive passions, violence, struggle and control" (97). Stevie Davis in her two books on Emily Bronte argues that Emily was a "free woman" (15). Like Juliet Mitchell, Davis sees Wuthering Heights preoccupied with childhood and the family. Helene Moglen's critical biography Charlotte Bronte: The Self-Conceived (1976) argues that Charlotte Bronte transcends the limitations of the merely personal in her fiction, dramatizing the conflict of "larger social and psychological forces and offers visionary insight into psycho-sexual relationships"(145). In Monsters of Affection: Dickens, Eliot and Bronte on Fatherhood (1982), Diana F. Sadoff argues that Charlotte Bronte desires to question dominant ideologies of masculine and feminine, but fears the consequences. She seeks to redefine terms of mastery to invent male and female, always finding subversion too risky for completion. In her influential essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" published in 1985, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses the figure of Bertha Rochester, to argue that the construction of feminist individualism in an age of imperialism entails the exclusion of the native female.

A lot of emphasis has been given to the two elder sisters, and Anne Bronte the youngest sibling, has been over-shadowed by her more powerful sisters. But recent studies like Elizabeth Langland's Anne Bronte: The Other One (1989) reiterates Anne's position as a novelist. Langland remarks, that Anne's novels herald the arrival of a new heroine to fiction. Arnold Craig Bell in his book Novels of Anne Bronte (1992) points out, that Anne is not a mere shadow of her sisters, but great, with a niche of her own. Susan
Meyer's essay "Words on Vulgar sheets: Writing and Social Resistance in Anne Bronte's *Agnes Grey*", reads the novel as a vehement protest against the silencing and devaluing of both women and the working class. Family relationships are analyzed in Tess O’Toole's essay "Siblings and Suitors in the Narrative Architecture of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*", drawing attention to the asymmetry of Helen Huntingdon’s relationship, with her first and second husband, which brings to light the prominence Anne Bronte gives to family relationships. This diversity of readings indicates the richness of Bronte's text and lively state of Bronte criticism.

Contemporary criticism has aroused interest in the Bronte novels as they reveal forbidden desires, which is generally considered the more plausible key to the novels. It is this desire that finally allows *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* to end with satisfactory marriages. Nancy Armstrong remarks that it is because the Brontes have encouraged readers to seek the meaning of fiction, in a recognizably modern form of consciousness, that their novels play an important part in English literature. The value of regarding the family as a system evolved a new kind of theory the Family - Systems theory. This theory is particularly applicable to the Bronte sisters, who were inevitably reacting to their sibling Branwell Bronte, an alcoholic and drug addict. Jerome Bump in his study "Family Systems Theory, Addiction and the Novels of the Brontes" remarks that the immense need to temper their love for him (Branwell) with detachment, led to a new representation of the family in their fiction. A book of literary criticism has finally been devoted to using family dynamics, in the services of literary criticism. Jerome Bump places the novels of the Bronte sisters in the context of this family system theory. The family as a theme thus occupies a vital place in the novels of the Bronte sisters.

This thesis is an endeavour to project the role of the family in the novels of the Bronte sisters. A biographical approach has been used to analyze the social situation of
the Bronte's time, to discover how the Bronte's own lives, have been instrumental in shaping their vision of the family. From a broad survey of the Victorian family, in Chapter - I, the study narrows down to the Bronte family in Chapter - II and tries to analyze the forces that shaped the imagination of these three writer sisters. The next three chapters study the theme of the family and its role in the novels of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte. Their interest in the family lay partly in the Victorian ideology of the family, its emerging concerns with Victorian fiction, and the bitter experiences of their personal life. These three chapters critically examine the novels and represent these tensions - class, gender, work and finally a women-writer writing about the image of woman. The limitations and development of a woman against the background of family are also discussed. These limitations are looked at from the point of view of class conflict, husband / wife relationship, employer / employee relationship and parent / child relationship. The patriarchal nature of the family and subordination of women are discussed, taking into account the varied images of women portrayed. The thesis attempts to analyze the role of the family in society and the status of women in the family. Chapter VI is an analysis of three contemporary women writers- Charlotte Mary Younge, Dinah Mulock Craik and Elizabeth Gaskell. All three share the same kind of family-life with the Brontes and are concerned with the same issues regarding family in society and status of women in the family. In the concluding chapter, the findings of all the chapters are put together to show the overall vision of the family in the Bronte sisters.

The human psyche, the environment, social and personal facts, seems to be the controlling medium of understanding and appreciating a major theme in Victorian fiction. A full-length study is needed to find out reasons why the focus of these writers was the family? Was it due to personal, social or literary reasons? What are the issues brought out through the use of the family? Probing these aspects will lead to the re-structuring of
experience, in the novels of the Brontes. Very few critics have looked at three of them together, as members of the same family. My study will, I hope provide fresh insights, into the period, especially in terms of its social conditions and the status of the family in particular.
Works Cited


