Conclusion

In accordance with current endeavours to assimilate literary analysis and historical investigation, this thesis examines both historical documents and fictional accounts using them as analytical tools which help in reviewing defined social constructs by re-reading Victorian texts against the received truisms, borrowed from social historians, about Victorian domesticity. Taking a cue from Monica Feinberg Cohen’s challenge to the idea of binaries that have typified the home in Anglo-American culture – leisure/work, private/public, female/male, consumption/production – this thesis argues that women who were (generally) compelled to navigate to the public domain of work, did go beyond the confines of traditional domesticity, leaving the ‘proper’ private sphere of home (with its implied attributes of leisure, unpaid housework, invisible production) behind, but sometimes this crossing of the domestic boundaries can be invested with newer meanings which forge an emergent understanding of domesticity.

Fictional representation substantiates the socio-historical evidence in several ways like the depiction of weary working women – home-sick, friendless, over worked, functioning as the estranged and disconcerting ‘other’ in the household, impoverished, stigmatized, starved and socially degraded. Commonalities exist among the unheeded tales of these working women and what began as an investigation of their labour soon revealed another strand of similarity – almost all working women are marginalized in society. Both subtle and overt processes of hegemony pushed these working women to the periphery, making them victims of social exclusion and discrimination. Most working women in Victorian society were relegated to the background, frowned upon or dismissed as doing something either too
insignificant for notice or too improper to be acknowledged. Their income and occupational status customarily denied them social prestige. Their struggle for emergence and existence in the male dominated public sphere was a matter of survival and was an exigent task. Working class labour, especially female labour, always included an element of exploitation, lesser pay for same work, arbitrary hire-and-fire, no defined rest and leave pattern, and most occupations reiterated the unorganized nature of the employment: much depended on the whims and caprices of the employers, with hardly any rules to safeguard the interest of the workers. When society allowed women to work for pay, it was almost a charitable act, these women workers could barely claim survival rights, and so the question of dignity of labour, pay commensurate with nature of work, reasonable work hours and right to bodily rest were rudely brushed aside or almost never raised. The looks of the woman worker became something which either went against her or attracted uneasy attention or proved to be advantageous in her work. Governesses (arguably also companions) and domestic servants, perhaps as they lived in the household and might attract and tempt the predisposed Victorian male, were better suited to their jobs if they were severe looking, while actresses, professional storytellers, dressmakers, and prostitutes benefited by their charming looks. A young solitary female would understandably attract unprovoked male attention, on account of her loveliness, when she ventured out to work; accordingly, she would neither have to disguise it by disfiguring herself, as Tess did, or bear the consequences of her beauty.

Despite certain similarities there were distinct lines of differences among these working women in general, and their fictional representation in particular. Each fictional representation cannot be upheld as a generalized portrait of all her working sisters nor can the fictional accounts of a working woman’s circumstances, experiences, feelings, and work
hazards be held up as universal truths about her colleagues. However, an examination of the fictional representation, read along with socio-historical documentary evidence, can offer some idea of the lives and experiences of working women. The different work options were not, as pointed out, class exclusive; almost all employments engaged women from different classes but the suppositions about the social background of these working women rely on the assumptions and evidence regarding majority of the members of a particular profession. Every profession had a hierarchy within itself; the power, position and autonomy of highly accomplished governesses, flourishing journalists, renowned writers, successful actresses, eminent painters, established dressmakers, stately housekeepers, thriving dairymaids or cheese makers, and even high profile prostitutes is far removed from the powerlessness, poverty, degradation and dependence of her ordinary, exploited, less successful, or less fortunate co-workers in the respective fields.

In carrying out my research several challenges presented themselves. The quest for primary documentary evidence appeared daunting, conflicting, and incomplete. The major silences on crucial issues (like sexual exploitation of women workers) were at first disappointing, then the rationale behind it had to be accepted with resignation. Key resources like Mrs. Tonna’s *The Wrongs of Women* could not be accessed and it was discouraging but nonetheless the work had to go on with the available resources. The discrepancy in attitudes, reasons, and reception of an employment created such varied responses that it became difficult to reach definitive conclusions. It was tempting to measure all working women with a similar yardstick and assume that all were forced to the drudgery of work and all were exiled from the sunshine of domesticity, or that they were forced to choose between domesticity and career, or that all working women loathed their work and longed for the
leisured comforts of domesticity, yet each assumption was shattered by both factual evidence and fictional representation. Despite these limitations in the approach to the subject, it is perhaps possible to distinguish between the diverse professions and look at the women workers as individuals, as workers, as women negotiating change and participating in history, as women who almost inadvertently became harbingers of a revolution, prompting emancipation, as forerunners of the feminists and careerists who refused to bear discrimination and marginalization silently. In chalking out a new domesticity, in proving that domesticity could, and in fact did, include professionalism, Victorian working women appear as the precursor to Virginia Woolf’s demand of ‘a room of one’s own’.

My account could not be other than selective and the arrangement is not chronological. This study does not make sweeping claims of including every possible earning avenue open to Victorian women, nor does it pretend to be inclusive of every single representation of working women in Victorian fiction. Curiously, most novels of the period mention one or other type of working woman – be it furnishing homes with governesses, and/or servants, or farm labourers who almost form part of the rural settings, or even prostitutes, who are mentioned in passing. This analysis has only concentrated on working women who play a substantial role in the novel, or are of interest from the point of view of particular aspects of their labour and its consequences. The feisty industrial worker or the factory girl is perhaps less prominent as novelists showed partiality towards the more feminine sufferings of the governess, the dressmaker, even the prostitutes, than this product of industrialization. The fragmented concept of home – home as a physical being, home as a psychological construct, home as a refuge, home as an ugly, troubled zone – and the longing for home in the migrant
worker, touch upon the alienation of the exile and further complicate the splintered concept of received domesticity.

This work is an attempt to foreground the individualized Victorian woman worker who borders on the point of oblivion in works of history and criticism, and is almost like an endangered species threatened to be erased from human history. Her walk to work was not a simple matter of economics, nor can it be dismissed as a-flash-in-the-pan phenomenon. This study suggests that the seeds of rebellion for the rights and privileges of the career woman, which revolutionized the concept of domestic ideology, were sown by these early Victorian women workers who traversed the confines of domesticity, stormed the male citadel and opened the doors for their descendents. Future researchers may use this submission to explore the themes of marginality, the processes used to marginalize women workers, and the politics of rendering their work invisible and/or inconsequential.

This study inscribes the personality of the Victorian woman worker as a versatile and commanding manifestation of the intricacies of Victorian communication of class and gender identity. If this work is able to sensitize readers towards the hardships and plight of working women; if the fringe characters in novels can also be read as vital, throbbing, significant beings with their individual needs and desires, and not simply as the author’s instrument; if the feelings, motives, and experiences of the ‘hands’ that toil or the ‘hands’ that serve their ‘superiors’ can be attributed to human beings in no way inferior to us, apart from artificial social constructs and wealth; if such ‘inferiority’ can be read as a result of deprivation; if the hypocrisy in using and abusing prostitutes can be lessened; if women’s work can be appreciated on the merit of their work alone; and if women can be viewed as competent workers, then the purpose of this study has been justified.