**The Concept of New Woman in the selected texts of Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird and Sarah Grand**

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**Introduction:** The sole aim of the present paper is to understand the concept of New Woman in the selected novels by women writers of the West. An attempt is made to understand the nuances of the theory that concern the concept of New Woman. It does so by elucidating the origin and evolution of the concept in the West.

**The Origin and Evolution of the Concept of New Woman in the West:**

The concept of New Woman emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century around 1880. It saw the beginning of a change in social attitudes with regard to gender relations, a questioning of patriarchy, a movement towards female independence and gender equality. A woman aspiring for education and financial independence was the common feature of that fin de siècle the end of a century – specially the nineteenth century. The term New Woman was gradually included in literary studies to describe the growth in the number of independent career-oriented women, who were not only educated but also feminists in their thinking. The introductory part of the research mentions that in literature the term New Woman was used by the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen in his plays *A Doll‟s House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890). Ibsen’s female protagonist Nora of *A Doll‟s House* (1879) is depicted as leaving her husband and children because she wanted to discover herself. The female lead protagonist Nora in *A Doll‟s House* (1879) leaves home at the end of the play slamming the door on her secure future and forays into an insecure, vague and untrodden path in order to search for her role as a human being first and then the other roles that society accords her. The above is illustrated in the lines from the play *A Doll‟s House* (1879),

Nora: That I no longer believe. I think that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are – or, at least, I will try to become one. I know that most people agree with you, Trovald, and that they say so in books. But henceforth I can‟t be satisfied with what most people say, and what is in the books. I must think out for myself and try to get clear about them. Act Three (2016:117)

*Hedda Gabler* (1890) is the story of Hedda Gabler, an intelligent, active, perceptive and, manipulative woman who is married to Jurgen Tesman but in love with Eilert Lovborg. Hedda has just returned from her six months honeymoon and is pregnant. She comes to know through mutual friends that her former lover Eilert Lovborg, who was a drunkard and a failure has now reformed and is a successful writer. Hedda is unable to live happily with her husband and is unable to accept Eilert’s success. Eilert loses the manuscript of his work due to his inebriated state. Hedda has the manuscript but does not disclose it to Eilert. She burns the manuscript and hands the pistol to Eilert telling him to have a beautiful death. After Eilert’s death is reported, Hedda shoots herself after playing the piano for a few minutes. Hedda’s New Woman characteristics can be observed in the following lines from the play *Hedda Gabler* (1890),

Hedda: I am in your power none the less. Subject to your will and your demands. A slave, a slave then! [Rises impetuously] No. I cannot endure the thought of that! Never! (2003:95)

Ibsen’s Nora of A Doll’s House (1879) leaves her husband and children because she wants to discover herself. Hedda Gabler follows her own ideas rather than conform to society and expectations, an unconventional woman in conventional times. Both the plays evoked great controversy due to their unconventional endings. The term was further made popular by British-American writer Henry Arthur Jones in his play *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894), to describe the gradual growth in the number of feminist, educated and independent career-oriented women. The initiation of the evolution of the New Woman can be seen in the women’s writing of the West from the 1800s. Few authors of the said period from the West and their work include Emma Frances Burke’s *A Superfluous Woman* (1894), Sara Jeanette Duncan’s *A Daughter of Today* (1894), Eliza Margaret Jane Humphreys who published *A Husband of No Importance* (1894), using the pen name of Rita. Edith Johnstone’s *A Sunless Heart* (1894), May Crommelin‟s *Dust Before the Wind*, (1894), Annie .E. Holdsworth’s *Joanna Trail*, Spinster (1894), Hunt Caffyn’s *A Yellow Aster*, (1894), Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), Florence Farr’s *The Dancing Faun* (1894), Henrietta Eliza Vaughan Stannard who used the pen name of John Strange Winters *A Blameless Woman* (1894) and Elizabeth Robin’s cruel satire on these pseudonyms female characters, *George Mandeville’s Husband* (1894) to name a few. Their writing largely opened up a gynocentric space for discussion and initiated feminist thought, through depicting issues that troubled women, for the first time without any reservations. The New Woman writers of the West raised pertinent questions regarding contemporary Victorian society, gender discrimination in right to academics, economics, health and the right to vote along with discussing such sensitive topics as sexually transmitted diseases, sexual hypocrisy of men and the sexual ignorance of women of those times.

**Feminist and the New Woman:**

Charles Fourier, a French philosopher coined the term Feminism in 1837 in which there was organized movement by women to gain equal opportunities with men in the public sphere. While it had its beginnings in the West with women agitating on political platforms seeking political, economic and social equality with men, the term New Woman was coined by Sarah Grand in 1895 to include women who aspired for independence from the traditional confines of marriage and its concomitant responsibilities. The impact of physical sexual relations with men on the sexual health of the woman, sexual liberation for women, partial religious prescriptions for men in matters of divorce, domestic responsibilities only on women, and suppression of female intellectual power – in short it questioned the need for marriage as an institution were the major questions addressed by the New Women of the West. The primary difference between the two movements‟ lies in the origin, that is, while feminism was a political movement, the New Woman ideas began as a thought against the literal and figurative confined space in matrimony due to motherhood and other domestic responsibilities. It eventually led on to questions raised by women in writing regarding the occupation of the woman’s mind and time for other activities than those related to the domestic sphere. Feminism began during the early twentieth century with Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own”, in 1929, in which she argued for the emancipation of women from the clutches of patriarchal society identifying the basic rights to societal manifestations like education and money. Feminism has been documented into three waves with the first wave being primarily identified in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century with suffragette demands and property rights for women. The second wave of feminism which began in the 1960s has focused mainly on gender discrimination. The third wave of feminism includes women of colour, Asian women, post-structuralist definition of sexuality and gender, ethnically specific concerns, multiculturalism, ecofeminism, questions the involvement of only upper middle White women and intersectional feminism. The New Woman movement and writings by the women of the West, on the other hand is documented till the 1930s (Heilmann: 2004), but research interest has been rekindled in the writings from 1970s till date with the publication of new analysis and perspectives in *Rethinking New Womanhood:* *Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia* (2018). Questioning the colonial nationalist discourse in India as tradition bound and creating a new image as one who was culturally refined and educated, yet also a devoted wife and mother, it seeks to understand the present predicament of the South Asian women as self-constructed rather than imposed by patriarchal powers ( Hussein:2018:1-2).

**Link between Feminism and the New Woman Writings:** In the intervening periods of 1890s and 1920s it has been identified as launching first wave of feminism through its writings mainly seen in the work of writer Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird (Heilmann: 2004:1).Such a movement began to find expression in all aspects of life like literature, painting, music and theatre in the field of arts. There were noticeable changes in political thinking, economic and bureaucratic policies too. Gradually the issue of women demanding education and equal opportunities to work and be financially enabled began to be recognized as the New Woman movement in England. The New Woman movement, which was an amalgamation of women’s new thought and a literary genre had a great impact and in fact gave birth to feminism at the end of the nineteenth century. Therefore the New Woman movement as reflected in novels, books, travelogues and other forms can be considered as harbingers of first wave of feminism. Ann Heilmann, states, Principal spokeswomen in the “New Woman” debates, Grand Schreiner and Caird also gained considerable prominence as first-wave feminists (2004:4). The New Woman at the fin de siècle was a diverse and enterprising personality. The New Woman ventured into a number of different areas previously considered not for women, mainly through empowering themselves with education, either at home or in the formal mode of schooling. So, women forayed into feminist activism, social reform, writing novels, poetry, and drama or entered into politics through suffragette demands in real life. The New Woman writers of the West responded to contemporary new socialism, imperialism, fiction and journalism and were a part of the concatenation of cultural writing which resulted in the 1880s and 1890s. Having established the link between the New Woman writings of the West and feminism, the study now examines the concerns of their writing. The New Woman writers have expressed their concern for employment and education for women, wage earning work and motherhood, sexual morality and freedom – in short they identified the needs of women in family and society, thereby creating a platform for placing their articulations before society through the most popular form – novel writing. The Concept of New Woman in the West began such discursive constructs as “the single woman” – as she chose to not marry, “the odd woman‟ – as she was considered to be odd due to the free expression of her ideas, “the wild woman”– as she did not adhere to conventions, “the modern woman‟ – as she was educated, “the woman who did‟ – as she successfully displayed individuality, “the shrieking sisterhood” – the women suffragists, and so on. The New Woman writing of the West generated controversy by being sensational and dwelling on physical sensation. The writing was seen as transgression for there were no heroes in the first place but only heroines and they were all speaking a different tongue demanding previously unheard of things from society. Ann Heilmann (2004), states, “Although New Woman fiction as a genre experienced various transmutations after the turn of the century and disappeared with the demise of first-wave feminism in the late 1930s, it laid the foundation for the resurgence of popular feminist fiction in the 1960s and 1970s” (2004:2). She then states that even though a direct link cannot be established between, the New Woman writing of the 1890s and the feminist literature – critical theory or narrative – of the twentieth century women’s liberation movement, there are conspicuous affinities in their conceptual frameworks and discursive strategies (2004:2). In order to arrive at the distinctive features of the writings of the women of the West, a brief analysis of three predominant novels is undertaken.

The text, *The Story of an African Farm* (1998) by Olive Schreiner, is an example of the of New Woman writings presenting the European scenario as well as a depiction of the life of the colonized, Africans in the Karoo. It has six distinct perspectives of the New Woman writings namely, it portrays in the character of Lyndall a freethinking woman who lives her life according to the principles drawn up by her and does not regret it. Through the character Lyndall the opposition to male domination and the feature of domesticity for females is expressed. Personal freedom and sexual liberation of women is expressed through Lyndall. Secondly, it is a tract depicting loss of faith in God and considers the repercussions of agnosticism. Thirdly, it is an examination of gender role reversal, female sexuality and female intellectual power. Fourthly, it presents the developments in the field of science, and the questioning of religion as a consequence– from religion to science, from blind belief to hard facts of science. Fifthly, the novel delineates the emergence of the New man in the male characters of Waldo and Gregory Rose – one of the consequences of the New woman movement. Sixthly it is a text voicing the core issues of New Woman; right to education, to employment and to choose a partner in marriage thereby giving voice to the marginalized, thus letting the „subaltern‟ speak. We observe the free thinking streak in the character in the quest for education by women represented by the lead protagonist, Lyndall. The sacrifice of material things for the pursuit of education at a time when women did not consider education as important at all proves the above. The nature of questions that arose not only presents the double standards regarding sexual liaisons but also the emphatic voice of the woman equipped with education and rational thought. She seeks to know the reason for perpetuating the notion that, (...) God sends the little babies “of all the dastardly revolting lies men tell to suit themselves,…Men do not say God sends the books, or the newspaper”(1998:82). Lyndall quests for education and achieves her goal by working hard for it. She goes away from the farm as a child and returns an educated woman with definite ideas of her own. She opines that the patriarchal system “is shortsighted in its view on independence for women” (1998:74). We find the independent streak of the New Woman writings in the fact that Schreiner questions the need for marriage when it curbs independence and individual will of the other partner. Marriage is eschewed for the expression of the self as a hindrance, as a step which thwarts individuality even if there is choice in selecting a partner through the protagonist Lyndall. The questioning of the nature of the legal relationship as suppressing and thwarting individuality is new and the portrayal of Lyndall refusing to marry the man who fathered her child is the expression of denying support of the social systems in a bid to express individuality as well as refuse domesticity. It is also a realization of the power of the woman in facing the repercussions from society. This thought seeks to establish the power of a woman in her independent labour for it gives the strength to bear the social and inner challenges. We see the emergence of the idea that women are also capable of thinking and intellectual activity when she questions, “(…) has God created women only for pursuing womanly activities and not for intellectual endeavours?” (1998:67). We find the feature of the New Woman writings of the West eschewing the social institution of marriage, “to put my neck beneath any man’s foot; and I do not so greatly admire the crying of babies” (1998:70) in the novel. Lyndall makes it clear that it is patriarchy that makes it appear a woman’s oppression to be God given whereas in reality, “We fit our sphere as a Chinese woman’s foot fits her shoe, exactly, as though God had made both – and yet he knows nothing of either” (1998: 75). So we find in the New Woman writings of the West express rational thought in the aspects of society which endeavour to keep the social status of a woman as a dependent. These ideas are not just right to education, choice in partner for marriage but also the sexual aspects of the relations between a man and a woman. The novel depicts the new feature of patriarchy or the New Man in the role reversal of a character who respects the educated woman and abandons conformation to rigid gender roles when he disguises as a female nurse in order to cater to the physical and health needs of a woman. It is in this act of disguise that Schreiner has portrayed the nurturing, caring and affectionate aspect of the men, of which they are capable.

Mona Caird was born in Scotland and was a bold and visionary woman writer. Her essays reflect the different aspects of a woman’s social financial and medical conditions and discuss ways of improving them. Caird’s article titled, “Marriage” in the Westminster Review in August 1888, disseminated marriage as a vexatious failure and legalized injustice in England’s social system. It generated such a furore and an open public debate that twenty seven thousand letters were written to the newspaper Daily Telegraph which posed an open question to the public, “Is Marriage a Failure?” The letters consisted of personal experiences, anecdotes, humorous accounts and piquant experiences, establishing the fact that the common man was dissatisfied with the existing system of marriage. Caird’s body of work initiated public debate on previously not discussed topics like undesired marital sex, birth control, undesired pregnancy, single motherhood, wages for house work and the right to adultery in an unsuccessful marriage.

The novel *The Wing of Azrael* (2012) by Mona Caird, explores the consequences of lack of participation of women in education through its lead female protagonist Viola Sedley. One of the consequences is lack of avenues except marriage. Marriage is portrayed as a goal and young girls are prepared for marriage. The novel models the character of young Viola Sedley on issues like women’s autonomy, the pressure to marry, the struggle to maintain independence within marriage and women’s responsibility towards themselves as well as their family and social milieu. It presents the social reality in the fact that girls who are not interested in marriage are considered “(...) She is a cumberer of the ground, a devourer of others' substance, a failure, a wheel that won't turn; she is in the way; it were better she had never been born” (2012: 64).We find the timid steps taken towards expression of individuality when the protagonist seeks to engage in work as an option to lead her life independent of male support, “I could sweep away withered leaves, or hoe out weeds; I could dust or cook, or wash, or – or do anything that requires only health and strength. I might even be like Miss Bowles and teach” (…) (2012: 66). Post marriage, it presents the percept that in marriage sexual relations between the husband and the wife is marital rape as it gives the man the legal power. The other option of not marrying and attempting to lead an independent life is not encouraged and thereby individuality is thwarted. The idea – sexual relations in marriage turn into marital rape due to the legal power vested with the man as he is the familial, social and legal head is expressed in the novel.

Sarah Grand an Irish born women’s rights activist utilized experiences of her marriage to illustrate the pit falls for other young women. Her fiction revolves around marriage and the reasons for its failure as an institution at the fin-de-siècle. *The Heavenly Twins* (1894) is an illustration of mismatched marriages in contrast to a married relationship based on independent decision of the spouses. She highlights the social, financial and familial conflicts that play a major role in married life. The novel *The Heavenly Twins* (2002) adds three distinctive points to the theory of New Woman writings emerging from the West. One, the double standards of patriarchy which overlooks male promiscuity and punishes females for the same, secondly, discussion of issues considered taboo like sexually transmitted diseases in the institution of marriage and its impact on the health partners. Thirdly, it questions traditional definitions of womanhood and motherhood. The discussion is in the fortunes of three women protagonists‟ namely Evadne Frayling, Edith Beale and Angelica Hamilton-Wells. They emerge as New Women as they refute the existing systems of social conventions in marriage, refuse to consummate the marriage due to the health hazard involved in cohabiting with her husband who had a sexually promiscuous past. In seeking a “Christ-like man” (2002: 89) and not make a compromise emerges a New Woman. The issue of suffering with social identity of one gender and actually feel the thoughts of the opposite gender in the inner sphere is explored in the same novel.

**CONCLUSION:**

The New Woman establishes the idea of gender as a social construct. The concerns of the women writers is with the interiority and the external sphere of women with emphasis on the sexual rights of women in marriage and the notion of gender as a social construct. The New Woman writings open up a gynocentric space, placing it under public eye for close scrutiny and hence launching a discussion and debate. Patriarchy in all its forms is under close scrutiny for the first time, not only in scholarly debates but also in real life. This, therefore shows the success of literature in its goal of reaching the common man to inform, to persuade or to entertain. These writings further generate public debate and action.

The past few decades have seen a spurt of scholarly interest in the literature of the fin de siècle and the New Woman writing.

It is from the 1970s onwards that research interest has been rekindled in the writing of New Woman writers and in a sense rediscovered with the following work being analyzing the rejection of the “womanly woman” notion by the New Woman writers Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand and George Egerton in the socio-historical context of the late nineteenth century (Bjorhovde :1987), primary sources like the New Woman writer Sarah Grand’s correspondence, cartoons and periodical literature of the day, are examined to consider, how it relates to women’s history and feminist theories of narrative and desire and comes to the conclusion that antagonisms of conventional critics to New Woman fiction is denigrate and middle brow (Mangum : 1998). A survey of satires and caricatures taken from British and American periodicals of the 1880s and 1890s is explored for the ways in which humour reflected and shaped reader’s perceptions of women’s changing roles at the fin de siècle (Marks :1990). The parallels between the ends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their representations in art, literature and film, from the Western point of view are explored when emancipated woman were considered a threat to society’s social unit of family and its stability (Showalter: 1991).The New Woman writing from the canonical map of literary history as they were considered threat to Art is explicated by quotes from reviewers and critics of the time and proves how the New Woman writers were marginalized despite their popular and commercial success (Pykett :1992). Pykett emphasizes the fact, that New Women writers and their contribution to the literature of the nineteenth century were ignored or minimized. Questions concerning ideas of aesthetics and literary value as defined in the context of late Victorian culture, where the author refigures the prominence of the feminist political agenda and the cultural construction of the New Woman (Kranidis :1995). The lived experience of the New Woman is compared to the fictional representations (Ledger: 1997). The key aspects of debates in the last two decades regarding the nineteenth century and the volatile events of the 1890s in South Africa, which resulted in the war between the British Empire and the Boer Republics in 1899, through a detailed analysis of the fiction and non-fictional writing of the pioneering New Woman writer Olive Schreiner ( Burdett:2001). The New Woman writings through eugenics in the work of Shaw, Wells, Herbert Spencer, Marie Stopes and Virginia Woolf as strong supporters of the eugenic debate in the arguments in the writing of Sarah Grand, Mona Caird and George Egerton(Richardson : 2003).

The New Woman writers, Grand, Schreiner and Caird are from the perspective of femininities, allegories and mythologies. The Press as supporting women’s agency and critically analyzing newspapers/journals edited, authored by women like Women’s Penny Paper, Woman’s Herald, Woman’s Signal and Shafts – A Paper For Women, for their impact, influence and role at the find de siècle. We see the New Woman writings of the West resurface with Naomi Wolf (1991) who explores the Western women’s status after the benefits of feminism in the early 1970s, wherein women had overturned ancient and revered beliefs about their social role, got legal and reproductive rights, increased their access to higher education, and had entered trades and the professions. The women undertook drastic steps like, crash diets to lose weight, surgeries to reduce or increase the size of their body parts, or became anorexic and bulimic in order to satisfy the patriarchal expectation of physical beauty. The preoccupation with physical appearance, bodies, faces, hair, clothes made such an impact that it lead to feelings of guilt, shame, denial when there was a slight change in physical body parameters (1991:10).

So, the contemporary New Woman of the West questions the patriarchal expectation of physical beauty around her and decides to take action to suit and please herself and not the current man, boyfriend or husband in a relationship with her. Wolf (2002) records the impact on the Western women’s thinking post second wave feminism and how young women fail to distinguish

The role of pornography in creating their idea of how to be, look, and

move in sex from their own innate sense of sexual identity (2002: 5).

So the concerns of the New Woman in 1991 and 2002 show a dangerous focus on physical looks at the cost of health and sexual identity. There is a movement in the mass media regarding colour and African American models. Previously African women with their dark skin were marginalized in the field of modelling and fashion, but in the nineties, African features and dark skin are quite common. One can discern the changing concerns of the contemporary New Woman of the West. It has undergone a sea change from the concerns of the New Woman of the late nineteenth century. In fact, Wolf (2002) argues that it has gone on to create a male beauty myth, driven by consumerism and marketing strategies of manufacturing companies. There are anxious men worried about their midsections, which were previously considered comfortable, happy and prosperous.

As can be seen from the above elucidated origin and evolution of the New Woman of the West we find that, the major concern is marriage its concomitant problems of the personal, social, familial, physical, psychological, and sexual relations and their dimensions.

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