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Reconceptualizing Motherhood: Feminist Agency and Maternal Identity in Selected New Woman Fiction by Grant Allen and George Egerton

Semanti Nandi, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Jadavpur University.

Abstract: This paper examines the representation of motherhood in selected New Woman texts of the fin de siècle, focusing on Grant Allen's The Woman Who Did (1895) and George Egerton's "A Cross Line" (1893). New Woman has often been associated with the rejection of conventional domestic roles, particularly marriage and maternity. However, through a close reading of these texts, this paper argues that motherhood occupies a significant and affirmative position within certain strands of New Woman writing. Drawing upon contemporary feminist debates surrounding the "Woman Question", this study explores how Allen and Egerton challenge dominant anti-feminist assumptions about emancipated women's repudiation of maternal bonds. Allen's Herminia Barton and Egerton's unnamed heroine both negotiate unconventional sexual and social relationships while simultaneously embracing motherhood as a source of self- fulfillment and agency. Their experiences demonstrate that maternity need not be rooted in patriarchal obligation or marital conformity. Instead, it can emerge personal volition, emotional commitment and ideological conviction. By foregrounding maternal desire along with female autonomy, these texts offer alternative models of womanhood that reconcile feminist self-determination with maternal identity, thereby expanding the ideological scope of New Woman discourse at the fin de siècle.

Keywords: New Woman fiction, fin de siècle feminism, motherhood, agency.

Introduction

Situated between the Victorian age and the Modernist era, the fin de siècle was an explosive blend of endings, transitions, and beginnings. Besides being marked by rapid changes in the political, social, economic spheres, the fin de siècle was also a time of accelerated changes for women which was brought about by the ceaseless posing of the "Woman Question" since the second half of the nineteenth century. During the 1890s the interest in the "Woman Question"— which dealt with issues of women's position in society, their educational, professional, marital rights – reached its peak; these concerns gained a new focus in the figure of the New Woman.

The New Woman, Feminism, and Maternal Discourse

The New Woman emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century as a type, a symbol, a social force. To her detractors she was a symptom of decadence and decline of social values in the fin de siècle, whereas to her supporters she was the embodiment of emancipated womanhood, liberated from the domestic ideology that governed women's position in the Victorian society. The New Woman was representative figure who typically valued self-fulfillment and independence rather than the stereotypically feminine ideal of self-sacrifice; she was conscious and candid about her sexuality; a believer in legal and sexual equality, she often chose to remain single because of the difficulty of combining such equality with marriage; as a well-educated individual, she was eager to carve a professional identity for herself. In the gendered world of the Victorian era, governed by strict dichotomy— the "angel in the house" and the "fallen woman"— the New Woman was a site of slippage. An active subject with a mind of her own, rather than a passive, self-negating object, the New Woman marked a new departure in the established notions of femininity and soon emerged the icon of the fin de siècle.

The New Woman was a complex historical phenomenon. Drawing upon and bringing to fruition many of the aspirations of their foremothers, this new generation of mostly middle-class emancipated women focused their critical views on sexual double-standards, fought for women's right to systematic higher education, worked to penetrate male middle-class professions and became notorious for their unflinching outspokenness on various sexual questions (Justovà 1). The New Women's struggle, which was the marker of fin de siècle feminism, was not just for political enfranchisement and social equality, but also for cultural expression and a literature for their own (Hunter 35).

Smoking, cycling, defiant, desiring— the figure of the "New Woman", a term coined by Sarah Grand in the North American Review, was splashed across the press and entered the world of fiction with astonishing rapidity. The figure of the New Woman appeared in multifarious guises in fiction and in the periodical press throughout the 1880s and 1890s. The "wild woman", the "glorified spinster", the "advanced woman", the "revolting daughters"— all these discursive constructs variously approximated to the nascent New Woman (Ledger 3). The relationship between the textual configurations of the New Woman and the beliefs and practices espoused by the fin de siècle feminists was, in fact, dialectical in nature (Ledger 4). Sally Ledger opines that the way the writers and readers perceived the New Woman, the way she was constructed as a product of discourse, was as historically significant as she was in reality (3). The textual configurations of the New Woman at the fin de siècle were as significant historically as the actual lived experience of the contemporary feminists. (Ledger 3). Lyn Pykett in fact claims that the written texts were just as much events as were the petitions to Parliament, only that they were "just different sorts of events, discursive events" (qtd. in Ledger 3).

Even as a discursive phenomenon, the New Woman was a highly controversial figure. Making the New Woman the target of misogynistic ridicule, periodicals like Punch, Cornhill Magazine, lampooned her as a desexualized fellow, dressed in 'manly' attire, obsessing over education. This finds its echo even in Hugh Stutfield's claim that the New Woman was but a "desexualized half man" who was "a victim of the universal passion for learning" (qtd. in Ledger 17). Elsewhere she was posited as an overtly sexual being, morally decadent and sexually licentious, who disregarded the time-hallowed social and gender codes and rejected marriage and motherhood for a life of promiscuity. The repeated assertion that the New Woman rejected motherhood had not merely a social, but a profound political implication at the fin de siècle. At a moment when Britain required her women to urgently raise a strong British race in order to sustain the nation's imperial supremacy, the New Woman's rejection of maternity and her inclination for traditionally male academic pursuits—which, according to the prevalent pseudo-scientific biological discourses, would blight her reproductive capabilities and enfeeble her offspring— construed her as a threat to women's role as the mothers of the British Empire.

Sally Ledger claims that the Foucauldian theorization of "dominant" and "reverse" discourses proves to be quite useful for understanding the way the New Woman phenomenon was mediated textually (3). Michel Foucault in his History of Sexuality has argued that the appearance of a dominant discourse automatically invokes its other, and makes possible an articulation of suppressed voices. The same holds true, argues Ledger, for the dominant discourse on the New Woman during the fin de siècle (10). The widespread attacks on the New Woman – which included claims that she was a sexual aberration, a specimen of depraved femininity whose negation of her biological destiny of motherhood posed a threat to the entire British race— were anti-feminist ploys to undermine and curb the influence of the contemporary feminists. This hostile "dominant" discourse on the New Woman which manifested itself in the periodical press of late nineteenth century Britain, led to the simultaneous emergence of a "reverse" discourse: the New Woman began to speak on her own behalf. This alternative views on the New Woman manifested themselves largely through the fictional works of New Woman writers like Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, George Egerton, Olive Shreiner. Support for the New Woman did not fall neatly into gendered camps, but persisted among free-thinking radicals of both sexes. Just as certain female anti-feminist commentators deplored the figure of the New Woman as a rebellious beast of regression, similarly male authors like George Gissing, Thomas Hardy, and Grant Allen celebrated her as the beacon of progress in their works. Delineating the New Woman with much sympathy in their fiction, these New Woman novelists treated her as a radical figure, who dared to challenge and transgress the boundaries of the patriarchal society, to etch for herself a new self-identity. These writers often employed as their mouthpieces bold, free-thinking women who rebelled against the age-old conventions of the conservative Victorian society for being antithetical to women's emancipation and empowerment; they also tried to posit how the socially-sanctioned institution of marriage discriminated against women and, by default, made them subservient to their husbands. But most significantly these New Woman writers also ventured to deal with the taboo-topic of female sexuality with a new candour and depicted their female protagonists as more vital than the insipid and sexually unaware heroines traditionally favoured by the Victorian readers.

Although the New Woman writers were united in their belief in the autonomy of women and the need for social and political reforms, they were found to harbour divergent opinions on several issues. They are often happened to portray their New Women in remarkably different ways, which were in keeping with the different agendas these writers had in mind for making their works a conduit of social change. A conflictual attitude towards motherhood, a recurrent theme in the diverse body of New Woman fiction of the 1890s, is typically found in a good deal of the works by New Woman writers.

While Mona Caird was vehement in her opposition to the binding ties of maternity, Sarah Grand regarded it as central to women's self- identity. Grand's stance was also adopted by George Egerton and Grant Allen. While the former, as my paper will try to evince, considered motherhood a pristine path to women's self-fulfillment, the latter depicts motherhood as a woman's glorious means for ushering social regeneration. Through a close analysis of Egerton's "A Cross Line" (Keynotes, 1893) and Grant Allen's The Woman Who Did (1895), the aim of my paper is to explore how these New Woman writers use their fiction to assert the fact that renunciation of maternal ties is not necessarily a corollary of being a New Woman. In fact their female protagonists seem to harbour profound maternal sentiments – strong enough to possess the power to either make them or break them.

Voluntary Motherhood and Feminist Agency in Allen's The Woman Who Did

The paean of motherhood reverberates through Grant Allen's The Woman Who Did, one of the iconoclastic novels of the 1890s. The novel offers a convenient entry into the sexual politics of fin de siècle England and emerges as a strong polemic against the conservative Victorian society for its hypocritical conventions and patriarchal intuition of marriage.

The narrative revolves around the character of Herminia Barton— a well-educated, intellectually emancipated, economically independent, self-assured woman—who aims to lead her life on her own principles. Bearing a strong opinion against the institution of marriage— which she views as a vile practice that is but "an assertion of man's supremacy over woman" (Allen43),, which enslaves a woman and ignores her individuality— Herminia makes it the sacred mission of her life to strike a blow for feminism by stepping into a 'free union' with her beloved Alan Merrick. Her quest for 'free love'— sexual relations without marriage— is a part of a larger progressive social project aimed at the social and sexual emancipation of women.

Herminia's vehement rejection of the oppressive, patriarchal institution of matrimony seems to establish her as the mouthpiece of the iconoclastic ideals of the author himself. In his radical views Grant Allen was inspired by the ideals espoused by the visionary poet, P.B Shelley, including his insistence on maximizing personal liberty, promotion of 'free love' and protest against the legal regulation of the instinctive human affections. Shelley believed that love "withers under constraint" for its very essence lies in liberty and "the connection of the sexes is so long sacred as it contributes to the comfort of the parties, and is naturally dissolved when its evils are greater than its benefits" (qtd. In Ruddick 185-86).

Herminia, the emancipated woman is also found to profess adherence to Shelley's radicalism; she opines that matrimony is not sacred consummation to be devoutly desired in life, but a tyrannical institution that demotes women into passive sexual objects, left at the mercy of their husbands, their lord and master: "I know on what vile foundations your temple of wedlock is based and built, and what pitiable victims languish and die in its sickening vaults; and I will not consent to enter it" (Allen 48).

Alan tries to dissuade from the act, realizing fully the degree of ignominy and social ostracization it will bring to his beloved; but Herminia's "uncompromising rectitude"(Allen 56) and profound sense of ethical responsibility for her fellow women does not let her flinch from the enormous agenda of social reform she has taken over herself. She is prepared to act as a genuine moral pioneer in living according to her principles in establishing a 'free union' with her chosen mate, Alan, and prove to the world that the fear social stigma will never be able to prevent her from treading the "thorny path"(48) to bring liberation to her 'sisters': If I would, I might go the beaten way you prescribe, and marry him legally. But of my own free will I disdain that degradation… I seek no temporal end. I will not prove false to the future of my kind in order to protect myself from your hateful indignities. (Allen 47-48)

Herminia's rejection of marital ties, however, by no means implies a rejection of the ideal of a monogamous relationship. Far from being a sensual woman with whom the concept of "free love" is usually associated in fiction, Herminia emerges as a saintly, Christ-like figure whose salvation lies in the social and moral emancipation of women; she explains the hallowed aim of her life in a rhetoric of martyrdom: It never occurred to me to think…my life could ever end in anything but martyrdom…For whoever sees the truth, he must be a moral pioneer, and the moral pioneer is always a martyr. People won't allow others to be wiser and better than themselves, unpunished….We have each to choose between acquiescence in the wrong, with a life of ease, and struggle for the right, crowned at last by inevitable failure. To succeed is to fail, and failure is the only success worth aiming at. Every great and good life can but end in a Cavalry. (Allen 44)

Inspite of being ethically opposed to matrimony, Herminia never for once considers rejecting maternity which she sees as the "full realization of woman's faculties, the natural outlet for woman's wealth of emotion" (Allen 138). Thus she bears no objections to bearing children within free union' with her beloved Alan; rather she looks forward to conferring upon them the "unique and glorious birthright of being the only human beings ever born into the world as the deliberate result of a free-union, contracted on philosophical and ethical principles"(75). She will bear them not in a subservient sense of duty towards her spouse, as is done by women bound in ties of matrimony; rather her children will be the embodiment of lofty ethical stance she has voluntarily espoused in her life.

But calamity descends on her life when Alan dies during her confinement in Italy and a pregnant Herminia is left in abject penury as she fails to inherit Alan's property for not being his legal wife. As an unwed mother, stranded in an alien country, bereaved Herminia realizes that she has but one companion to find solace in: Often for hours together she sat in the cathedral, gazing up at a certain mild-featured Madonna enshrined above an altar. The unwedded widow seemed to gain some comfort from the pitying face of the maiden mother. (Allen 133)

The analogy drawn between the ambiguous position of an "unwedded widow" and that of the Virgin Mother, acts as a strong indicator of Herminia's spiritual purity—the she has apparently transgressed the socio-sexual codes of her society, she is nonetheless as purged as Virgin Mary. Although conventional society may brand her as an unchaste woman for her engagement in sexual relations outside wedlock, she has only given in to the pure and natural instincts begotten by her heartfelt love for her partner, Allen. Thus she is far more morally superior to the 'respectable' society whose convention she flouts— society which imposes legal restrictions on the most spontaneous of human instincts, and promotes a husband's tyranny over a wife's body. The association between Mother Mary becomes all the more pertinent as, after giving birth to her baby, she envisions her to be the sacred child "destined to regenerate humanity" (Allen 133) and redeem women from the vile slavery of matrimony and be "the world's savior" (128): the "child to whom she had given the noble birthright of liberty was destined from her cradle to the apostolate of women" (138).

With the aim of raising her child as a "useful citizen" (Allen 159) who will usher in social progress, Herminia devotes herself completely to the task of bringing up her daughter, Dolorosa. Jostling with penury, social condescension, familial ostracization, and trying to be "father and mother in one to it", dedicatedly channelizes her physical and intellectual efforts to the welfare and education of her daughter (128).

But gradually it dawns upon her that the child "who was born to free half the human race from aeons of slavery" (Allen 155), bears traits of moral degeneration. Herminia realizes with a "shrinking regret that Dolores's mind is "incurably and congenitally aristocratic or snobbish" (181). Her mother's elevated morality and radical principles have left little impression on Dolores who is "sunk in the same ineffable slough of moral darkness as the ordinary inhabitants of the morass of London" (182). The very Dolores whom her mother has borne "in sorrow" (134) to be the "apostle of freedom to her sisters in darkness" (182) diminishes herself into 'Dolly'— a mere irrational 'doll' to whom the conventional sanctions and superficial opulence of society is deemed to be of supreme importance. It seems almost credible to Herminia that inspite of being the progeny of such morally emancipated parents, Dolly's ideas are so very stereotypical which seems to develop "from within by a pure effort of atavism" (179-80). Although Herminia fails to fathom the reason behind Dolly's regressive mentality, it seems evident in the narrative that Dolly's moral fibre is textured largely by her paternal inheritance. As the authorial voice claims: Indeed, when we remember how greatly mental and moral faculties differ from brother to brother…can we wonder that they differ much more from father to son , the product of one like factor alone, diluted by the addition of a relatively unknown quality of maternal influence? (180) As a staunch believer in the evolutionary ideas propounded by Herbert Spencer who advocated the inheritance of acquired characteristics of organisms by their progenies (Renwick 117), Allen seems to implicate the moral atavism of Dolly on her paternal inheritance. He indicates that, inspite of being a good man in his own way, Dolly's father has not been worthy of her morally superior mother. Alan Merrick does not represent the "picked souls of humanity" – inspite of some underlying fine qualities of nature, he has acquired "that mean philosophy of the class from which he sprang" (Allen 32). As the indicates, prior to his encounter with Herminia, Alan has been a man of cold calculative disposition, still "looking about him" for a marital alliance of 'convenience' , and most likely visiting prostitutes in the meanwhile. However, the "Midas" (32) touch of Herminia's saintly spirit and sincere love "saves" (32) Alan's soul and raises "his nature for a time to something approaching her own high level" (32); but Alan's true unworthiness is only revealed long after his death in what he has genetically transmitted to her daughter.

Dolly seems to "hark back of internal congruity to the lower vulgar lane of her remoter ancestry" (180) because of her inheritance of the traits her that father acquired by virtue of his class position. Though Dolly seems to inherit a degree of Herminia's sense of self- respect, the intensity of Herminia's moral fabric has been largely "diluted" (180) in her by the genetic influence of her father.

Although Herminia laments her failure to failure to produce a moral pioneer of a child and blames the atavistic tendencies on blind chance, narrative voice asserts that, "it adds…to the tragedy of Herminia Barton's life that the man for whom she risked and lost everything was never quite worthy of her: and that Herminia to the end never once suspected it (30).

Herminia's disappointment with the child "whose success in the deeper things of life was to atone for her own failure" robs her life of all hopes and puts the "final thorn in her crown of martyrdom" (Allen 182). But her maternal sentiments are dealt the heaviest blow when her "free- born" (209) daughter, on learning about the circumstances of her birth, derisively refutes Herminia's principles and blatantly blames her mother for begetting her under the "curse" (209) of illegitimacy. She disavows her mother and intends to gain social recognition as the adopted daughter of the snobbishly aristocratic Dr. Merrick, her paternal grandfather. Realizing that she is becoming an obstacle to the happiness of her daughter, for whom the ideas of British "respectability" (Allen 180) were immensely important and who can never marry into the rich 'respectable' English society till her ignominious mother is alive, Herminia decides to sacrifice her life for her Dolores.

Till the very end of her life Herminia sticks to her principles, and lays down to her final repose "like some saint of the middle ages" (Allen 223), renouncing her life for the sake of her beloved daughter. Though from the very inception of her moral crusade for social regeneration Herminia prepared herself to be martyred by the hostile society, she never for once had the inkling that the road to martyrdom would include the collapse of her cherished bonds with her daughter. The fact that her very presence is loathed by her dear Dolores, shatters her completely and in immense love for her child she decides to lay down her life for her daughter's sake. Thus Allen's New Woman Herminia seems to emerge as an epitome of the spirit of emancipated womanhood blended seamlessly with profound maternal sentiments.

Sexual Subjectivity and Maternal Selfhood in Egerton's "A Cross line"

A similar eulogy of motherhood echoes through the works of the New Woman writer, George Egerton, the nom de plume of Mary Chavelita Dunne. A prolific writer of short stories, Egerton's clear commitment to adding women's voices to literature and articulating their desires established her as one of the most important literary figures associated with New Woman feminism. . Through her fictions, Egerton challenges the male ¬-constructed edifice of "womanhood", and thereby tries to posit what Sally Ledger calls "a woman's-eye-view of womanhood" (qtd. in Liggins 73). Egerton herself claimed: I realized that in literature, everything had been better done by man than woman could have hoped to emulate. There was only one small plot to tell: the terra incognita of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her— in a word, to give herself away, as man had given himself away in his writing. (qtd. in Liggins 73)

In her Keynotes (1893), Egerton uses the genre of the short story with its scope for psychological realism, to deal with the taboo topic of female sexuality and articulate the complex nature of female consciousness. Her sparsely-plotted short stories proceed by suggestion, implication and omission, as she tries to plumb the depths of female psyche and illuminate their protean and spontaneous interiority. An excellent example of this can be found in "A Cross Line" (Keynotes), which comprises five distinct psychological moments based on the changing currents of the restless desires of its central character – an unnamed woman. Egerton seems to deliberately dispense her female protagonist of a name to denote her as a psychological type, playing her role in a universalized timeless drama. Egerton's heroine appears to embody the characteristics typically associated with a New Woman— she smokes cigarettes, indulges in the conventionally masculine pursuit of fishing, partakes in uninhibited conversation with men, and is conscious and candid about her sexuality. She is posited as a complex character whose desires cannot be contained within the restrictive ideologies governing conventional Victorian middle-class femininity. In the story, Egerton ventures to unravel the hidden folds of her character through the modernist devices of internal monologues, and reverie. The story opens in an outdoor setting, with the woman sitting "in the midst of a wilderness of trees" – an apparent trope for aligning the woman's inherent nature with the irrepressible forces of nature (Egerton 10). It is amidst this natural setting of the open countryside that the heroine has a chance encounter with the fishing-stranger, who soon becomes her extra-marital lover.

Initially the reason behind the woman's decision to engage in the relationship, inspite of having an affectionate and dutiful husband, remains quite elusive. But as the narrative progresses, it is revealed that she is unable to the Victorian ideal of femininity, which positioned the surrendering of agency and becoming subsumed under the identities of wife and mother as the highest goal of woman's life. But Egerton's protagonist is faced with an acute awareness of her desires for self-determination and sexual assertion. She is not the typical docile Victorian wife who submits herself as a passive receptacle of her husband's sexual advances, but prefers to take the initiative in the sexual foreplay with her husband herself. Her dialogue with her husband is punctuated with her caresses, and she fondly his ear and chin—quite a "fast" behavior for a Victorian lady (Egerton 13).She desires to embrace the "eternal wilderness" which is an integral part of female psyche: "the untamable quality that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture, the keynote of woman's witchcraft and woman's strength" (30).

But the heroine realizes that conventional Victorian marriage ties women to a character that is tame and dulled. The domestic routine and daily drudgery of conjugal life seems to suffocate her and she longs to drift away from "the daily need of dinner-getting and the recurring Monday with its washing, life with its tame duties and virtuous monotony" (Egerton 27). She hates to be bogged down in the predictable, monotonous chores of domesticity which society relegates to her as a woman, and her restless desire to escape from her preordained gender role is evinced in her candid remark ,"I wish I were a man!...I'd go on a jolly old spree!"(23).Thus it emerges that, it is the taming of the pre-wilderness that is immanent in women, into the sphere of domesticity, its repression underneath the relationships, laws and moral codes of matrimony that obstructs women's real pleasure and begets fantasies of adventure, freedom and sexual abandon.

As this "untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks" (Egerton 30) in women is an 'excess' that patriarchal Victorian society cannot fully contain, in her fantasy Egerton's heroine crosses the boundaries of time and place and chooses an Oriental setting to channelize her erotic impulses. She fancies herself in Arabia riding a swift steed and becoming the cynosure of the "flashing eyes set in dark faces" that "surround her" (27).

Lost in delirious joy of the adventure, she is thrilled by the swing of her steed's rushing stride, "and her thoughts shape themselves into a wild song,- a song to her steed of flowing mane and satin skin, an uncouth rhythmical jingle with a feverish beat; a song to spirit that dwells in her" (27).This brief vision is soon yields to a highly erotic one— she fantasizes herself dancing on the "stage of an ancient theatre out in the open air" (27) before a congregation of desirous men where she as a performer enjoys the complete power to act upon the feelings of the male audience, shower her with applause. She assumes power and asserts her sexuality through her erotically-charged female body: "She bounds forward and dances, bends her lissome waist, and curves her slender arms, and gives the soul of each man what he craves for, be it good or evil" (27). The fluid rhythm of her erotic dance is in coherence with the nature of female pleasure which lies in dynamicity, in the "thirst for excitement, for change … and motion" (29).

In this clearly non-English, non- Victorian realm of her fantasy, she is not locked into playing certain preordained roles and free choice to be "good or evil"(27); with this imaginary flight from the domestic space of Victorian femininity, she experiences true passion and a sense of liberation which her mundane life lacks. The masquerade of docility, timidity, subservience, which the conventional society encourages her to engage in order to keep up with the Victorian social standards of 'womanhood' is at odds with her inherent nature; but, atleast in her fantasy she can have access her female psyche with its love for passion, freedom and sexual liberation, which the patriarchal society denies her in real life.

Thus it seems that it is not the need of affection from her husband, but a dearth of the means of self-expression and liberty, which make her feel stifled within the ties of conjugality. It is this need for sexual liberation that makes her drift into a 'free union' with the fishing-stranger— an amorous bond of reciprocity where she can be an equal to her partner can freely articulate her desires, sexual or otherwise. The fishing-stranger seems to share with the woman a greater degree of compatibility than her dull, undemonstrative husband. Unlike her farmer-husband who mainly engages in in physical activities, and can at best think of fishing baits in his most contemplative state, the fishing-stranger seems to enjoy an better faculty of imagination; much like the heroine herself, he is engages in creating vivid mental pictures as he describes the bohemian life he intends to offer her. Although there are subtle hints that their relationship is not a purely Platonic one, the narrative does away with any explicit reference to their sexual encounters, perhaps to emphasize the fact that is the woman's intellectual needs than her sexual urges that drive her into an extra-marital liaison with the fishing-stranger.

However, she eventually gets disenchanted with him. Although he manages to "probe a little nearer into the real me" of the protagonist who is "written in black" (Egerton 32) to most of her contemporaries, he fails to locate the precise reason of her restlessness and disappointment in life.

It is not merely from "monotonous country life, with no excitement, no change" (34) that her "free gypsy nature" (34) yearns to escape from, but from the restrictive ideals of femininity that Victorian culture imposes upon women and the limited roles it offers to them in life. Thus to him the true essence of the woman's desire remain elusive .Ultimately she remains to him a "strange woman" (36) as the"…denseness of man, his chivalrous, conservative devotion to the female idea he has created blinds him" to the "problems of her complex nature" (29) and she realizes that "woman must beware of speaking the truth to a man; he loves her the less for it" (37). She fails to find a true bond of empathy even in a 'free union' as she feels her lover to be not quite attuned to her female sensibility and sexuality. Her frustrations are finally resolved by the promise of maternity. The "awesome" (Egerton 41) feeling of life stirring within her fills her with a renewed sense of happiness and self-love as she carries herself around "careful of herself as a precious thing" (44). Though the paternity of her forthcoming child remains unresolved in the narrative, the very fact that the woman breaks the good news not to her husband, but first to her maid who has had an illegitimate child, strongly indicates that the protagonist herself has borne the child out of her liaison with the fishing-stranger. However, in circumventing the issue of the unborn child's paternity, Egerton seems to venture to restore the idea of maternal identity, which patriarchal society relegates as a subordinate complement to paternity, to its supreme position. Forthcoming motherhood seems to bring out a new aspect of her psyche— replete with tenderness and amicability –"she laughs such a soft, cooing little laugh, like the chirring of a ring-dove, and nods shyly to the tall maid's questioning look" (Egerton 43).If autonomous sexuality is an integral part of female psyche, her maternal desires are no less vital to her feminine subjectivity.

In the comfort of her coming maternity, she enjoys a sense of newfound fulfillment. She voluntarily dissolves her 'free union' with the fishing-stranger as it holds little meaning in her life now. Approaching motherhood also helps her to appreciate the tragedy of the death of her unwed maid, Lizzie's baby; cutting across class differences the two women spontaneously formant a new bond based on shared maternal feelings; the maid reveals to her mistress the carefully preserved lock of her dead baby's hair along its other belongs and the "two women pore over them as a gem collector over a rare stone" (43).

In this moment of compassionate empathy with her maid Lizzie, the woman an unique pleasure that none of her heterosexual relationships has hitherto given to her, "and the mistress, who is a wife, puts her arms around the tall maid, who has never had more than a moral claim to the name, and kisses her vin her quick way" (Egerton 43).

Although the heroine is now seen reveling in the joys of her forthcoming motherhood, initially in the narrative, she seems to evince an apparent lack of maternal feelings which is signaled by her disgust at the appearance of the newly hatched ducklings— in sharp contrast to her husband's tender delight in them. Now that she exults in her maternity, it may, be atleast partly, due to the fact that she has borne the child not out of her passive sense of duty in a socially- imposed role ,but out of volition within a freely chosen amorous union. Thus her unborn child becomes emblematic of the agency and sexual assertion she has enjoyed within the extra-marital 'free union'. Moreover it is within her own body that her repressed desires for sexual liberation finds expression— through the new life fledgling within her. This perhaps adds a new meaning to her maternity and makes it synonymous with feelings of self-realization and solace in her life.

It is important to note that although apparently Egerton's sensuous heroine is starkly different from Grant Allen's almost saintly New Woman, Herminia Barton, both the women share an underlying correspondence. Both of them beget children out of wedlock, which would be deemed illegitimate by traditional social standards. However, I would like to argue that their motherhood seems to establish a new notion of legitimacy – one which harps upon the indispensability of free will and the importance of spontaneous expression of instinctive emotions. While Herminia's child embodies her principles of 'free love' and her voluntary mission of social regeneration, the child borne by Egerton's heroine becomes a symbol of her spontaneous response to her natural urges. Their maternity is not governed by the stereotypical feminine ideas of passivity and self-renunciation, but is marked by those of volition and self-.

Conclusion

The representation of motherhood in New Woman fiction has frequently been overshadowed by critical assumptions that fin de siècle feminist writers regarded maternity as incompatible with female emancipation. A close reading of Grant Allen's The Woman Who Did and George Egerton's "A Cross Line" reveals a far more nuanced engagement with maternal identity. While both texts challenge the patriarchal structures of Victorian marriage and affirm women's right to sexual autonomy and self-determination, neither presents motherhood as an obstacle to female fulfillment. Instead, maternity emerges as a meaningful and transformative experience that can coexist with women's aspirations for freedom, individuality, and self-expression. The maternal experiences of Herminia Barton and Egerton's unnamed heroine are significant precisely because they are grounded in personal choice rather than social obligation. Their motherhood is neither the passive acceptance of a culturally prescribed role nor thee inevitable consequence of patriarchal domesticity. Rather, it is a consciously embraced aspect of female subjectivity. In both narratives, maternity becomes intertwined with women's agency, emotional fulfillment, and capacity for self-realization. The children they bear symbolize not merely biological reproduction but also the expression of their desires, ideals, and aspirations. At the same time, the texts offer distinct visions of maternal experience. Allen presents motherhood as an ethical and social mission, investing Herminia's maternal identity with aspirations for social regeneration and feminist progress. Egerton, in contrast, depicts motherhood as an intensely personal and psychological experience that provides emotional fulfillment and reconciles the heroine's conflicting desires for freedom, passion, and belonging. Despite these differences, both writers reject the Victorian tendency to define women exclusively through either domestic motherhood or feminist rebellion. Instead, they imagine a model of womanhood capable of accommodating both maternal desire and individual autonomy.

These representations ultimately challenge the dominant anti-feminist discourse of the 1890s, which portrayed the New Woman as a threat to motherhood and the family. By foregrounding voluntary motherhood as a site of empowerment rather than subordination, Allen and Egerton redefine maternity in ways that expand the ideological possibilities of New Womanhood. Their works demonstrate that feminist selfhood and maternal identity need not exist in opposition; rather, they can function as complementary dimensions of women's lived experience. The study therefore contributes to a more nuanced understanding of fin de siècle feminism by highlighting how New Woman fiction reimagines motherhood not as a constraint upon female freedom, but as one of its potential expressions.

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