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The Neo-Victorian Maid as the Agent of Social Critique: An Analysis of Jane Harris's *The Observations*

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Abstract

The figure of the maid servant in the 19th-century is under-represented in 19th-century literature. Except for playing minor roles these women have very little space in the pages of 19th century fiction. But Neo-Victorian novels, with their focus on recovering lost and marginal voices of history, often foreground marginal women as protagonists. Of them the figure of the Neo-Victorian maid servant is portrayed in novels as a protagonist that complicates the notion of Victorian domesticity. In the re-workings of the figure of the maid in Neo-Victorian novels, these characters are often depicted as trying to liberate themselves from their position as servants. This is because the role of a servant often subsumed all other aspects of a person's life. Therefore, self-emancipation of the figure of the maid leads to her personal development. This paper analyses Jane Harris's novel *The Observations* (2011) as a Neo-Victorian text that foregrounds the figure of the maidservant. This paper shows how the titular maid Bessy Buckley is able to chart her own freedom from her position as a maid by gaining unsanctioned forms of education and in the process is able to expose patriarchal abuses towards women irrespective of class divisions. In doing so Bessy not only liberates herself but also is able to change the destiny of her mistress, who she discovers is also a victim of patriarchy. By doing so, this novel reclaims the figure of a Victorian maid as one with agency and with control over her own destiny.

Keywords

Neo-Victorian, Victorian, Feminism, History, Maid, Mistress, Novel.

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The institution of keeping servants was one of the cornerstones of Victorian society. The presence of the servant was instrumental in determining the social status of the family. Thus the institution was inherently connected to the self-definition of Victorian domesticity (Lethbridge 6). One of the enduring cultural images of the Victorian Age is that of the households filled with a panoply of servants being facilitators of their master's life. In this role, the role of the Victorian servant is often ubiquitous in Victorian literature. But this ubiquity is not an index of their agency in literary texts as the servant figures were merely used as plot conveniences in the lives of their superiors.

The institution of servant keeping in Victorian England had its own distinctive tendency in the Victorian Age. The particular rules and mechanisms of service in this era had no historical parallel in English history or had any counterpart in any other European countries (Lethbridge 7). The servants were legally under their masters and the masters served as loco parentis to the servants (Lethbridge 103). The servants were considered to be like children and masters were expected to treat the servants like one would treat children. It was generally accepted that servants needed to be ruled with an iron hand by their employers to ensure a smooth running of the household. What was the most significant issue was that the identity of being a servant had an all-pervasive quality, and servantliness precluded all other forms of identity. So once in service, a servant was expected to subsume all his other qualities under the identity based on his employment. The hierarchy between the masters and servants were considered divinely ordained, as some manuals of servants stated (Lethbridge 7).

It is true that this theoretical rigidity of the servant class often varied from actual experiences of the servants. This study is not concerned with the lives of actual Victorian servants but the literary image of the servant in 19th century English fiction. The role of servants in Victorian literature is marginal and predominantly silenced. In fiction, they mainly serve as go-betweens of the main characters and used as plot conveniences (Robbins 6).As a result, the servant figure was a shadowy presence in Victorian literature, mostly

reduced to a human prop. There are very few Victorian domestic novels that feature servants as protagonists and most representations completely efface the humanity of the servant.

Neo-Victorian novels diverge from Victorian fictions in their self-reflexive revisionary intent. These self-reflexive interventions help in making the Victorian Age more democratic and transgressive. One major way to achieve the said intervention is to foreground marginal characters as protagonists in this novel. Thus, Neo-Victorian novels show a marked trend where various characters that are marginal or sidelined in Victorian novels find places of prominence in Neo-Victorian novels (Tomaiuolo 6). Women who are marginal in Victorian society represent a large number of these protagonists. By giving prominence to marginal women, Neo-Victorian novels explore the lives of these women complicated not only by their gender subordination but also their position vis-a-vis the domestic ideology. Christian Gutleben notes this tendency to position outcast figures as protagonists in Neo-Victorian novels as a means of critiquing the social fabric around them (37). This helps us to see the insertion of these characters in a larger context of Victorian society. The figure of the Victorian maid is a figure that is marked by not only gender subordination as well as an element of class sub-ordination and further complicated by the rules of service. The Neo-Victorian figure of the maid becomes an outcast figure capable of interrogating the complex of the above three.

In this context, this study looks at the figure of the Neo-Victorian maid in the novel *Observations* (2011) by Jane Harris. This study argues that by positioning the figure of the maid as the protagonist, this Neo-Victorian novel achieves two functions. First, it expands the panorama of Victorian cultural memory by giving visibility to the stories of marginal women. Secondly, Neo-Victorian maids as protagonists help interrogate the domestic ideology that renders their status as sub-ordinate and reveals the ideological and disciplinary regimen of the same.

Esther Saxey notes that one of the chief features of the figure of the Neo-Victorian maid is to break free of the domestic ideology that subordinates them. She calls this the "Liberation Plot". Saxey also notes that the Liberation plot is mostly used in Neo-Victorian novels where social liberation of the maid entails a sexual liberation (Saxey 58). What I argue in this paper is that the Liberation Plot can be also reconceptualized to consider issues beyond sexual liberation. The liberation plot used in the novel under discussion entails the Neo-Victorian maid assuming unsanctioned forms of education as a means to secure her liberation. The issue of the education of the servant is a contentious issue that has roots in the Victorian era itself. It was the employers' prerogative to impart useful education to the servant but so as to only make the servants more efficient for household work. This education naturally did not have any aspect of possibilities of social mobility for the servants and ensured that they remained tied to the role of servant (Fernandez 1).

In this novel, acquisition of unsanctioned forms of education leads to the liberation of the Neo-Victorian maid. This paper will analyse how the figure of the Neo-Victorian maid acquires this form of education that leads to her eventual liberation. This paper also shows how the process of acquiring this education not only leads her to liberation but also results in her personal growth and fostering a sense of autonomy. Therefore, this novel charts the liberation of the figure of the maid from her role as a servant and most importantly it leads to a process of mental decolonization that helps her to throw down the yoke of her existence as maid. It is by acquiring this education and pushing for her liberation that the figure of the Neo-Victorian maid is able to critique the domestic ideology that results in her subordination as a maid.

Another issue that this paper discusses is the dynamic of the mistress-maid relationship in context of the liberation plot of the maid figure. In this respect, the fate of the figure of the maid is also inherently tied with the fate of the mistress of the family. Elizabeth Langland in her book *Nobody's Angels* notes how the category of the Angel in the House or the idea of Proper Feminine is not only a gendered identity but as well as a class identity. The mistress of the family was often likened to a commander of the army under whose able rule the servants were able to function in a smooth and orderly manner. Therefore, effective management of the servants was seen as a prerequisite for an orderly home and it also bolstered the role of the mistress of the house(18). Therefore, by arguing that the figure of Neo-Victorian maid breaches her subordination within the family also entails a critique of the power of the Angel in House. This is why the evolving relationship between the mistress and the maid also becomes an object of study of this novel. In this paper I would show how the liberation of the maid does not only mark a personal achievement for the figure of the maid but also accompanies a liberation of the mistress from being the Angel in the House. This is how Neo-Victorian novels are able to invert the Victorian power paradigm between the mistress and the idea of traditional domesticity. An analysis of this dynamic would also help find a roadmap for cross class feminine solidarity which resonates with the modern idea of class.

The novel *Observations* by Jane Harris charts the journey of Bessy Buckley, who narrates her own past life as a maid when she was fifteen years old. According to Brindle:

> The Observations adheres to what some argue is the fundamental revisioning of the neo-Victorian project – to give a voice to those marginalised or silent in history. Rescued by neo-Victorianists from silence, the nineteenth-century classed 'other' now speaks in contemporary fiction along with pathologized 'others.' (Brindle 31)

The narrator Bessy narrates the story in her own voice signalling autonomy that she has reached by the end of the novel. Looking back at her own past life involves a kind of textualizing her developing consciousness from a girl of fifteen who had her head "full of sugar" (Harris 3). to the mature narrator who now takes charge of her own life in her own terms. Bessy begins her narrative with a customary warning that this narrative is meant only for the perusal of a select view. Kym Brindle says that "in presupposing a reader or addressee for the diary, the boundaries between diary and letter form become imprecise and conventional concepts of diary privacy are exploded" (Brindle 6).

The apparent secrecy is due to the fact that her narrative besides being her own story is the story of the implosion of the Reed family, her employer. The role of the deferent servant that she assumes here is primarily a narrative strategy she assumes here to underplay her role in the implosion of the family. Thus, we see from the very outset, Bessy adopts an assumed tone of servant-like deference which she uses to couch her own radical potential.

When Bessy's narrative begins, we see her undertaking a journey to Edinburgh to secure the job of a maid in an aristocratic establishment. Her wish to secure a job at an aristocratic house is not to live a life of service but as a means of social mobility, she plans to marry a rich man and move up in life. Bessy dreams to replicate the fate of Samuel Richardson's character *Pamela,* who presents the model for ultimate ascent of a maid servant to respectability. Moreover, it has to be also taken into account that Pamela had secured her exalted position by resisting sexual temptations. But Bessy, being a Neo-Victorian heroine does not have the sexual naivete of Pamela. Bessy has an extremely sordid and abusive past. Born to a prostitute Bessy had never known her father. She had witnessed her mother having sex with her clients from a very young age, which makes her extremely worldly-wise in the

matters of heterosexual sex. Further, her mother continually sees her as a burden and thus she grows up knowing no maternal comfort. Bessy gets temporary respite from her sordid situation as an elderly Jewish man, Mr Levy takes her inn as a companion. Mr. Levy does not sexually exploit Bessy and instead keeps her in material luxury. Moreover, Mr. Levy teaches Bessy to read. The formative experiences of her life make Bessy into a character who is a mix of naivete and pragmatism. Further, her time with Mr. Levy makes her assume that the role of a servant does not involve hard labour and instead entails a life of easy affluence. The death of Mr. Levy puts an end to her comfortable existence and not desiring to go back to her mother, she takes on the road to Edinburgh to secure her future.

Midway to her way to Edinburgh, she gets hired as a maid by the enigmatic Arabella Reid to be a maidservant in her home at Castle Haivers. Bessy pretends to be a maid as Arabella interviews her but the reason Arabella really hires Bessy is that she discovers that Arabella knows how to read (Harris 13). Arabella asks Bessy a series of minute questions about her life and hands her a notebook to write down her thoughts every night. Bessy's first day at Castle Haivers establishes a pattern that gradually becomes a routine. Arabella proceeds to take her accurate measurements of her physique and then asks her to do a series of strange baffling tasks like standing up at Arabella's command (Harris 29). Bessy also realizes that Arabella watches Bessy very closely not to make sure the household is run efficiently but if Bessy had been following her commands exactly.

Bessy first finds her mistress's commands strange but then as she gets habituated to their life at Haivers Castle. But Bessy has also resolved to not give in completely into the role of a servant. To preserve her sense of autonomy, she starts to fabricate her journal entries, making them appear less sophisticated than her actual thoughts and observations. In her journal, she pretends to be an unsophisticated and servile servant while at the same time observing Arabella from close quarters. Before long, Bessy develops a kind of emotional dependence on Arabella as they were the only residents of the Haivers castle. The long hours spent in close proximity make Bessy feel closer to Arabella. One day as Bessy is emboldened to ask Arabella about her past, Bessy finds out that Arabella had been a victim of her own family. She had grown up motherless and unloved by her father, and now is trapped in a cordial marriage with her husband, who is mostly away on visits to bolster his political career. Bessy at this revelation feels closer to Arabella as she relates to her condition despite their class barrier (Harris 60-61). We get evidence of this emotional intimacy when Bessy stops referring to her mistress as Ma'am and begins to address her by her name. Bessy imagines their shared existence to be some kind of female utopia, with no masculine intrusion.

But her sense of the feminine idyll was soon shattered when Arabella's husband came back from his travels. James treats Arabella like one would expect a maid, bombarding her with a series of questions about her background. The arrival of James also hampers their daily routine together, especially when Arabella would read her journal. Bessy feels a sting of jealousy at the disruption of their daily ritual and feels the sense of utopia dissolving in front of her.

One evening as she was left alone in the house as the Reeds had gone out Bessy wanders around the house and discovers Arabella's journal entitled the Observations (Harris 90). She feels a pang of guilt going through her mistress's journal. Reading her journal, Bessy discovers that Arabella had been observing Bessy as a part of the treatise trying to understand the character of servant girls through studying their physiognomy and how it relates to their character. The aspect of the characters of the female servants that Arabella was most

interested in was obedience. Bessy goes through several case studies of former maids and how Arabella had tried to study them to find the ways to instil obedience in them. She was particularly attracted to Arabella's observations on Nora, who represented the best possible kind of servant. Bessy feels a pang of jealousy at the depth of attachment Arabella had for Nora and at Arabella's grief at Nora's sudden disappearance. When she reaches the latest portions of the journal where Arabella's observations had been recorded about Bessy, she is shocked to discover that under her name at the beginning of the section was written "The Most Particular case of a Low Prostitute" (Harris 107). Bessy finds out that not only was Arabella treating her as an experiment but she knew all about her past, after finding out by enquiring from the family of Mr. Levy. Bessy felt her ego being bruised, and she also feels humiliated and completely vulnerable. Instead of the beautiful relationship of equality and mutual confidence, Arabella had only been acting around Bessy to push her studies of the servants even further. Bessy, by concealing the details of her life, imagined that she had the psychological one upmanship over Arabella, the discovery of the journal made Bessy lose her sense of victory and superiority over Arabella. Gone was the feeling of attraction that she felt for Arabella, in its place she was gripped by a desire to take revenge. This also activates the liberation plot of the servant.

Bessy's heart may be filled with the desire to take revenge on Arabella but for the readers, she comes across as a pitiable figure as well. A sad and tragic image of Arabella emerges from these readings to the readers, and we get a sense of a woman trapped in an emotional vacuum. She does not have the usual pastimes of a lady of her stature. The image that we got of Arabella before now takes more concrete shapes from her own observations, which unwittingly also reveals her personality to the reader. Therefore, this journal also becomes the central purpose of her life, noting down the observations and getting empirical data for her treatise on servants. Moreover, trapped in a marriage with a husband who is a miser and treats her like a ward, Arabella tries to discover the magic formula for the perfect servant as it was "socially, culturally and psychologically crucial for the maintenance of an employer's class identity" (Fernandez 3). Her insistence on measuring the worth of a servant through obedience seems to be an attempt to feel superior and in control. Only a hired servant would give her the opportunity. By not getting wholesome and lasting emotional support in her life, she tries to look into the human minds for a quest to find the same. For her, Bessy was just another experimental study in the series of many such domestic servants that she studied. Bessy posed a challenge for Arabella, for Bessy was "a coarse girl, with no domestic experience and very little common sense" (Harris 109). She admits taking in Bessy to see if she could "domesticate" her within three months.

We see that both Arabella and Bessy have been trying to replicate their past associations with each other. Both the earlier set of relationships have been unconventional, the closer scrutiny of the society would not have sustained it untainted. Arabella had been trying to create a copy of Nora, her beloved servant in Bessy with whom she had no physical resemblance. Bessy on the other hand had been hoping that Arabella would eventually start treating her like a companion, in the same pattern as the old Mr. Levy. For Bessy, she wants to make her employment as a maid help her move up in the world. She does not fully understand what being a servant means and thinks that the errands that Arabella makes her run is to win her favour. Arabella on the other hand believes that she can train Bessy into the ideal servant, the murkier her past, the more Arabella can claim credit for her improvement and rehabilitation. This sets up these women on a collision course.

Consequently, she comes up with an idea to take her revenge on Arabella, a "childish prank". She now begins to use her journal as a weapon against Arabella. Thus, we see how Bessy uses her "pernicious literacy", "by the use and abuse of reading and writing" (Fernandez 4). She starts staging her prank where she creates sounds and staging events of which no logical reasoning could be found. She uses her knowledge of Nora to give the impression to Arabella that it was perhaps Nora's spirit that has come back to the house. Arabella, unaware that Bessy had read through Observations, begins to assume that these events point towards the fact that Nora has perhaps returned after her death. Bessy plans out her antics with a masterful effect, and using actual pranks and psychological manipulations, she is able to affect Arabella's mind to an extent that she starts believing that it was indeed Nora who has returned. Bessy therefore is able to make Arabella think even more convincingly that the ghost perhaps is that of Nora. Arabella, who does not know that Bessy knows about Nora, starts to get increasingly agitated and upset at these strange occurrences. She begins to lose her sleep and become increasingly disoriented. The only other resident of the house Arabella's husband laughs at Arabella for believing in ghosts and with a characteristic patriarchal mindset blames it on the weak minds of women. For him, his public duties assume more importance than paying attention to what he thinks are the imagined fancies of his wife. Bessy uses this opportunity that she has created to come closer to Arabella and be her only corroborator and confidant.

Bessy now uses her journal to her own end, her entries of this time noting down the strange events that she has fabricated herself with a mixture of fear and wonder. The journal which Arabella had given her to understand her inner workings, now becomes the representation of a public persona that Bessy creates, of a deferential and loyal servant to Arabella, while inside executing her goal of seeking a revenge on Arabella. This reversal becomes the centre stage of her turning of the tables against her mistress, her way of seeking revenge. If Arabella during this time was reading Bessy's journal, the ideas of the ghostly presence of Nora would be reinforced in her mind. The final piece de resistance of Bessy's prank was the moment when she takes Arabella up in the attic during daytime to search the premises carefully. Bessy had written on the dirt on the window pane "Help Me My Lady" (Harris 212). She had used the salutation "my lady" because it was how Nora had addressed Arabella. This was the final straw for Arabella which broke the camel's back. The strain becomes too much for her to bear and she faints.

Initially Bessy had composed a letter confessing her actions and resigning from the job. But now Bessy decides to stick around and help Arabella get better. This comes shortly after Arabella wakes up and tells Bessy about Nora. They are thus drawn together in a closer bond by this admission. Bessy thinks that her own criminal nature caused by her upbringing and background has brought about this turn of health for Arabella. The chance to cure Arabella becomes a way for her to redeem herself and turn over a new leaf. She had been resisting being an obedient servant but now realizes that it is the exact role that is demanded of her at this point. But in her new role as the obedient servant, she is only loyal to Arabella. Elizabeth Steere notes that female friendships must require a difference for it to be a success (Steere, 147). In other words, one woman must take an active protective role while another must assume a more passive role in a friendship for it to be a functional one. In this novel, it is Bessy who emerges as the active participant in this unconventional mistress-maid pairing. Instead of being the mistress Arabella increasingly appears as a victim of her circumstances and quite unable to bear the pressure of the role. Bessy feels contrite at her actions, and takes

over the role of nurturing Arabella, she also ceases to commit the pranks that she had been up to and Arabella gets better.

It starts to become clear that Arabella's agitation at Nora's death is no simple affair. In her initial delirium after fainting for the first time, Arabella had rued not to be able to protect Nora. The feeling of guilt and hurt refused to subside in Arabella, when Bessy has to take Arabella on a visit to the town, Arabella decides to visit Nora's grave. The depth of her emotions and anguish is surprising for Bessy because it seems excessive for a servant. The official reason for Nora's death had been mysterious and vague. Nora was hit by a train as she went too close to the rail tracks but the details had been hazy and unsure. Bessy had exorcised the ghost of Nora for revenge but she seems to have unlocked something deeper in Arabella.

Nora had been the ideal obedient servant of Arabella, somebody who had impressed Arabella with her purity. The very same purity had appeared contemptible and sanctimonious to Bessy. Nora had been assaulted by Reverend Pollock, the sanctimonious evangelical and left her pregnant. Nora appealed to her mistress for help, but Arabella had been unable to be by Nora's side in her moment of crisis. Arabella had wanted James to adopt the child and bring it up with Nora in the house. Arabella therefore wanted to create a non-traditional family setup with two mothers. This, like her attempts to write the book *Observations*, ran counter to the interest of her husband. James had opposed the idea, thinking of the unacceptability of the situation and the whiff of scandal that it carried. He had decided to terminate Nora from the job to avoid any association with her. The event, in James's words, "broke both their hearts" (Harris 492). Arabella was made to realize the circumscribed nature of her actual power, when it came to helping Nora in her own terms, she turned out to be woefully inadequate. Her powers, being circumscribed by the patriarchal society not only constricted her own abilities but also contributed to Nora's ruin, she was forced to kill herself by throwing herself on the train tracks. This shows that despite hoping to form an alternate family with a maid, Arabella had been unable to protect Nora. She had tried to assume the role of the dominant female but had failed.

Arabella's breakdown culminates in her very public attack of Reverend Pollock with a spade. The scene presents the ironic crescendo of the novel, where we find that Arabella attacks Reverend Pollock during the ceremony of installation of the fountain by James for the villagers. The incident takes place in the public eye, and seeks to undo everything James had worked hard for. Arabella is incarcerated in an asylum for her madness. Arabella had tried to limit her mourning to the sphere of proper feminine, tormented by her guilt, being a helpless bystander. But ultimately, she is driven mad by the code of the proper feminine and her outburst can be called as the outpouring of her improper feminine-by challenging openly the abuser of Nora and physically attacking him. Even though it results in her eventual incarceration, I would argue that she is able to gain some outlet from her oppression by unleashing the improper sides to her femininity.

In order to be close to her mistress Bessy manages to get a job in the asylum. She chooses the work of being a servant deliberately this time. But now she seems to be happy with her position. This is because she is no longer a mere servant but now, she becomes a kind of author and an editor for Arabella's work. She sends Arabella's copy of the *Observations* to various publishers hoping to get it published while at the same time writing her narrative about Arabella's life. Instead of using the role of the maid to improve her fortune, she settles into the role of the maid while improving herself.

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