

ISSN : 2395-4132

# THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 6.4

**Vol. 12 Issue 1 February 2026**

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)



## **The Improper Feminine in Neo-Victorian Novels: A Critique of Domestic Ideology**

**Kush Sengupta**

**Assistant Professor**

**Department of English, St. Pauls Cathedral Mission College**

**33/1 Raja Rammohan Roy Sarani, Kolkata- 700009**

**Email- [sengupta.kush27@gmail.com](mailto:sengupta.kush27@gmail.com)**

---

### **Abstract**

The genre of Neo-Victorian novels has seen a prolific development in the last few decades establishing it as a separate genre. Despite displaying a wide variety of concerns and strategies, one central purpose of this genre is to revisit the Victorian past in a way that it speaks to contemporary issues. This paper argues that one of the most effective ways Neo-Victorian novels mount this revision of the Victorian past is by foregrounding non-normative women as protagonists in Neo-Victorian Fiction. The Victorian Age had produced a depoliticized and idealized femininity through the Angel in the House figure. But that narrow idea, termed “Proper Feminine” is a narrow idea that valorized only one limited idea of femininity. Neo-Victorian novels show a political scepticism to this limited view of femininity as modern society has embraced various other models of feminine existence. As a result, Victorian fiction often portrayed other kinds of femininity as marginalized characters and in certain cases these characters were completely obliterated from the pages of fiction. In doing so, Neo-Victorian novels represent a wide variety of women in these novels from the spinster, maid, female orphan etc. This paper briefly discusses how the Victorian past becomes an effective vehicle of revisiting the past especially through these figures that Lyn Pykett terms as the “Improper Feminine”. In this paper, I briefly analyse three Victorian novels each featuring a definite kind of Improper Feminine as protagonist and discuss briefly the roles they play in the novel and how they bring new representational politics in Neo-Victorian novels.

### **Keywords**

Neo-Victorian, Victorian, Feminism, History, Literature, Nineteenth-Century, Femininity.

---



## **The Improper Feminine in Neo-Victorian Novels: A Critique of Domestic Ideology**

**Kush Sengupta**

**Assistant Professor**

**Department of English, St. Pauls Cathedral Mission College**

**33/1 Raja Rammohan Roy Sarani, Kolkata- 700009**

**Email- [sengupta.kush27@gmail.com](mailto:sengupta.kush27@gmail.com)**

Neo-Victorian novels have emerged as a distinct genre of its own since its inception in the 1960s. The way this genre relates to the nineteenth century has been a matter of debate among critics. But according to Samantha Carroll, to differentiate Neo-Victorian novels from its predecessor Victorian novels, readers must look for ways that the Neo-Victorian novels must “renovate textual representation” (173). This impulse to achieve what Carroll formulates has led to Neo-Victorian novels exploring the Victorian past in a variety of ways. This paper studies how the Neo-Victorian novels renovate the representation of women observed in Victorian novels. These novels, as this paper argues, also interrogates the notion of Proper Feminine embodied in the figure of the Angel in the House in Victorian novels by populating the Neo-Victorian novels with various categories of non-normative heroines.

The evocation of the Victorian past in Neo-Victorian fiction is an ongoing debate which has not been satisfactorily resolved. But without adopting a definition for the same, it would be impossible to note the disciplinary ambit of the Neo-Victorian genre and study how it can be differentiated from the Victorian afterlife. It is now beyond debate that the afterlife of the Victorian Age continues to be an integral part of contemporary Western popular culture. But since the 1960s, we find a marked change in the attitude towards the Victorian past. It was during this period that the “the libertarian impulses of the 1960s, so invested on the one hand in driving a final stake through the heart of Victorian values, reanimated them on the other through its prurient curiosity about the period” (Kaplan 86). Further with the publication of academic works like *The Other Victorians* (1964) by Stephen Marcus and *The History of Sexuality* (1976) by Michael Foucault, a renewed way of looking at Victorians was inaugurated where “Victorian culture had begun to seem more vivid and interesting, more diverse and less strait-laced than had hitherto been imagined” (Mitchell 45). Further, the intervention of the discourses of feminism, psychoanalysis and postcolonialism, now gaining popularity in Western academia began to influence the afterlife of the Victorian Age.

# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com) ISSN: 2395-4132

The Neo-Victorian novels as a separate genre also makes an appearance during this time, exemplified by the publication of two novels: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). These two novels were literary pioneers and became precedents of novelistic manifestation of this new way of looking at the Victorian Age. Beyond the issues of mere nostalgia that evokes the Victorian Age as a superficial element, these novels used academic interventions particularly that of postmodernism and feminism to turn a critical lens towards the 19th century. The subsequent expansion of this separate genre called Neo-Victorian novels has subsequently emerged as a separate literary genre "as a worthwhile, even necessary process of historical analysis, contributing formatively to an ethically informed subjectivity, mindful of the long-term consequences of socio-political policies, strategic decisions, and ideologies that continue to reverberate in the cultural echo chamber over a hundred years later?" (Kohlke 36).

This Neo-Victorian way of using the Victorian past can only be considered as a reiteration of the special relationship of the Victorians with the contemporary time appearing as "benign grandparents" (Hadley 1). Hadley further calls this relation as being "in and out of history" entailing the fact that they "occupy an instrumental role in the history of modernity and, particularly within Britain, are central to a narrative of national development" but they also appear removed "from their specific historical context" (Hadley 8). This relationship between the Victorians and our contemporary times therefore allows us to use the Victorian past to interrogate cultural issues that are relevant to the current age. According to Schnitker and Gruss, it helps us to locate a historical origin point of our contemporary issues (5).

Therefore, it is possible to locate our contemporary concerns in the Neo-Victorian evocations of the 19th century. But such a process then requires a conscious process of embedding revisionary impulses within the narrative. Therefore, Neo-Victorian novels when seen from this light must acknowledge the supremacy of self-reflexivity involved in the process of its composition. Thus, when Heilmann and Llewellyn provide their influential definition of the Neo-Victorian, they argue that Neo-Victorian, "texts... must in some respect be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (40).

This self-conscious recovery of history as agent of revision in fiction then accompanies a realignment in the relationship between history and fiction. According to Kate Mitchell, once history is viewed not simply as an objective truth but just as a version of events rooted in conscious choice of material, "[h]istory is no longer a stable entity, the assurance of an extra-textual reality or context against which literature can be understood. Nor is it a stable context against which historical fiction can be judged as true or false" (Mitchell 24). Fiction therefore then is not subordinate to history but forms a complementary aspect to history in recovering lost voices. In such cases, fiction, especially Neo-Victorian fiction is used:

"...as a cultural memory, to be re-membered, and imaginatively re-created, not revised or understood. These novels remember the period not only in the usual sense, of recollecting it, but also in the sense that they re-embodiment, that is, re-member, or reconstruct it... the dis(re)membered pieces of the past are reconstituted in and by the text, and also in the reader's imagination" (Mitchell 7).

Kate Mitchell calls this process of the novels being turned into what she terms as "Memory Texts" which "are more concerned with the ways in which fiction can lay claim to the past, provisionally and partially, rather than the ways that it cannot" (Mitchell 3). This process helps to reposition lost or marginal voices of history into the cultural memory of the age, and in a sense enrich the popular cultural memory of the age. According to Mitchell this

process helps to transmit memory through the community by actively shaping it (Mitchell 31). This process of image formation naturally focuses on the transgressive or deviant forms marginalized and silenced from official histories. As Silvio Tomaiulo writes that “Neo-Victorianism seeks to explore thematic areas and concerns that—although already treated by many nineteenth-century artists—could not have been entirely addressed for reasons related to moral decorum or opportunity...” (6). Thus, Neo-Victorian novels are often preoccupied by recovering lost or deviant voices that have been marginalized or silenced in official histories.

One of the most predominant aspects of the 19th century that has been rendered deviant or silent is the issue of female sexuality. But Neo-Victorian novels often foreground issues of women’s sexuality in novels. The precedent for such interventions can be seen in French Lieutenants Woman and Wide Sargasso Sea. Christian Gutleben also notes that same feature in Neo-Victorian novels where he calls the phenomenon: “[t]he foregrounding of Victorian outcasts” (Gutleben 34). The function of these characters according to Gutleben is that these figures are used to critique the social structures around them. This phenomenon is so widespread in Neo-Victorian fiction that it cannot be dismissed as mere nostalgia. Instead, these figures represent the contemporary intervention in Neo-Victorian novels through which contemporary authors insert their own concerns in these revisionary critiques of the Victorian past. As a result, these novels become what Kym Brindle calls “Critfiction: as a hybrid between “theory and fictional narrative” (10). Especially, the issues of gender in the 19th century became the fertile ground of revisionism. Jeanette King notes the ubiquity of historical fiction that goes back to the 19th century to explore issues of gender and sexuality (1). The depiction of the issues of gender, according to King, has a strong revisionary intent as they accord “women back their place in history, not just as victims but as agents” (2).

This reclamation of women as agents of history creates the space in Neo-Victorian novels where various kinds of deviant femininity are afforded narrative foregrounding. That is why neo-Victorian novels are littered with heroines who do not conform to the narrow Victorian ideal of femininity. This narrow Victorian ideal, often referred to the “Angel in the House” figure, was an ideological creation of the 19th-century. This ideal of femininity was created to sanctify the role of the domestic ideology with the image of the idealized woman at its heart. The English Census of 1871 defined the idea of a “complete” family on the following terms- It said that “The natural family is founded by marriage and consists, in its complete state, of husband, wife and children” (Thiel 8). During the 19th-century we have the idea of the modern nuclear family solidifying. The idea of a family as an economic unit lost ground due to the Industrial Revolution and establishment of large-scale industries. As a result, the idea of the home gained a sacral status removed from the chaos and mechanization of the outside world.

This led to the development of the idea of the separation of spheres for men and women and for the middle class, the idea of home developed into an exclusive domain for women (Nelson 6). This shift in the nature of the family also resulted in a change of the locus of virtue in the body politic. The rise of the newly developed middle class changed the codes of dominant morality and resulted in the “redefinition and relocation of the idea of virtue. Till the advent of the 19th century, the aristocratic class in Britain was the fountainhead of morality. But with the rise of the middle class, instead of being articulated upon inherited class position in the form of noblesse oblige, virtue was increasingly articulated upon gender in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As the liberal discourse of rights and contracts began to dominate representations of social, economic, and

political relations, virtue was depoliticized, moralized, and associated with the domestic sphere”.

The women now were increasingly identified with the home and the domestic sphere. This resulted in the glorification of the woman as the figure of a mythic wife-mother. The idealized image of the Victorian woman also came to include that idea that maternal love was the highest instinct in a woman and that “that women were not self-interested and aggressive like men, but self-sacrificing and tender” (Poovey7). Women were also expected to be passionless and exercise their influence in being the gentle moralizing force confined to the home. Lyn Pykett calls this ideological creation of femininity as the “Proper Feminine” (Pykett 16). She further says that “[t]he proper feminine is a system of difference which marks off woman as essentially different from man, and whose meaning depends on a series of excluded terms” (Pykett 16). The representations of heroines in Victorian literature further solidified the image of the woman as unselfish, passionless and “Proper” in the cultural memory of the Victorians. According to Francoise Basch:

...the hegemony of this domestic and family ideal, this amenable and disciplined vision of human relations, has one chief victim, the heroine. Most females in English fiction of the first part of the Victorian era are caricatured or idealized figures; at any rate they are simplified, and seem to conform to a few stereotypes inspired by a tyrannical and narrow ideal of the woman in the home (Basch, xii).

One of the most potent ways that Neo-Victorian novels alter the cultural memory of Victorian femininity is by displacing the “Proper” heroines of the Victorian novels with women characters who do not conform to the narrow ideal. Pykett defines such women as “Improper Feminine”. The characters that can be called the Improper Feminine include:

a whore; a subversive threat to the family; threateningly sexual; pervaded by feeling; knowing; self-assertive; desiring and actively pleasure seeking; pursuing self-fulfilment and self-identity; independent; enslaver; and victimiser or predator (Pykett 16).

In other words, this category includes a variety of non-normative behaviour. In Neo-Victorian novels we often see such unconventional portraits of Improper Feminine. These portrayals often go beyond the triptych of Victorian femininity embodied by the Angel in the House, the Spinster and The Fallen Woman (Basch xix). The types of Improper Women as protagonists in Victorian fiction are many. The notable types include the 1. The New Woman/ Spinster 2. The Maid Servant 3. The Female Orphan. These are only a few representative examples. With each type of Improper Feminine, Neo-Victorian novels are afforded a unique view of marginal lives of women and now these women relate to the traditional domestic ideology. Each type is afforded its own unique set of challenges and documenting their lives gives us a variety of the ideological regimens of the hegemonic discourse of domestic ideology. In the following section of the paper, I would refer briefly to each abovementioned type of Improper Feminine in reference to the novels that feature them as heroines.

**The Spinster/ New Woman**- The novel *Gillespie and I* (2011) by Jane Harris depicts the story of a young Harriet Baxter, a spinster and New Woman and her fateful encounter with the Scottish artist Ned Gillespie. The story is narrated by an older Harriet in the year 1933 describing the events of 1888. Harriet presents herself as a spinster of independent means who visits Glasgow at the time of the International Exhibition. There she strikes a friendship with an artist named Ned Gillespie by patronizing the work of this fledgling artist. Harriet ‘s appreciation for Ned soon leads her to be an adopted member of Ned’s family of

# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com) ISSN: 2395-4132

his wife, mother and two daughters. Unbeknownst to Harriet, her association with the Gillespie's soon become a matter of discomfort for the contemporary society who fail to understand Harriet's motives. Harriet is soon implicated in the disappearance and eventual death of Ned's daughter Rose which leads to a very public scandal and humiliation for Harriet. This novel deals with the disjuncture between the inner world of the spinster Harriet and the public reception of her behaviour and how a single woman is automatically stigmatized in the eyes of the society.

**The Maid-** The novel *Observations* by Jane Harris follows Bessy Buckley, a survivor of an abusive childhood who achieves personal autonomy in the process of being a maid to the Reed household. While fleeing a life of deprivation under her prostitute mother, Bessy is employed by Arabella Reed, the highly eccentric mistress of Haivers Castle. Arabella leads a highly lonely and isolated life in her secluded house and a husband always travelling for work. To fill her time and to establish her own name in the society, Arabella is engaged in composing a treatise that seeks to crack the formula of teaching a maid servant to be completely obedient. Bessy is simply the latest maid to her list of maids, particularly Nora, who Arabella had grown especially close to. The novel depicts how the figure of the maid, commonly marginalized in Victorian novels, comes off on her own in this Neo-Victorian novel. Bessy also grows close to Arabella in the novel, but when she finds that Arabella is using her as an experiment, she plans her revenge. Her revenge hinges around her act of literary artifice, she fabricates her journal entries to make it appear to Arabella that Nora's ghost had come back to seek revenge. This act pushes Arabella towards madness as her guilt in failure to protect Nora from being assaulted by a local clergyman comes to surface as Bessy's prank. Bessy's emancipation from the role of maid becomes complete when she takes a job at the asylum where Arabella had to be admitted. Though she works as a maid there, she writes her own narrative describing the events of her life. Thus the figure of the maid in this novel is shown to achieve liberation by gaining unsanctioned forms of knowledge.

**The Female Orphan - *Crimson Petal and White* (2002)** by Michael Faber follows the life of Sugar, a young woman who is a prostitute by profession but in her heart wishes to be a subversive feminist author. Though not technically an orphan, Sugar effectively leads the life of an orphan as it is her mother who inducts her to prostitution. This Neo-Victorian novel does not treat Sugar as an object of pity that an orphan normally is portrayed to be, instead she is shown as a survivor who flourishes in her solitude and lack of family. It is only when she forgoes her independence by being a mistress of William Rackham, a rich businessman that Sugar starts to lose her talent and streak of independence. Faber here inverts the predicament of the orphans showing that families can often be a pernicious influence on people's lives as much as orphanhood can be. The fact that despite having a mother, William's daughter Sophie grows up like an orphan as her mother Agnes is struggling with her own demons. Sugar regains a purpose in life when she joins William's household as a governess to Sophie to be close to William but instead discovers that Sophie needs caring even when she has both the parents alive. In Sophie, Sugar finds a kindred spirit, and Sophie represents the possibilities that she had been denied. The novel concludes with Sugar running away with Sophie, the two orphans symbolically leaving behind their families to restart life on their own terms.

These three portraits of the Improper Feminine give us a dynamic picture of the Victorian Age as conceived in Neo-Victorian fiction. Together they expand the cultural memory of the Victorian Age for contemporary times. Moreover, the varied and transgressive

heroines of these novels explore various ways that femininity can be reimagined and repurposed to make the representations of Victorian femininity more suitable for a modern audience.

## Works Cited

- Basch, Françoise. *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel*. 1974.
- Boehm-Schnitker, Nadine, and Susanne Gruss. *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*. Routledge, 2014.
- Brindle, K. *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Diaries and Letters*. Springer, 2014.
- Carroll, Samantha J. "Putting the 'Neo' Back into Neo-Victorian: The Neo-Victorian Novel as Postmodern Revisionist Fiction." *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2010, pp. 172–205.
- Faber, Michel. *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vintage, 1990.
- Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Random House, 2004.
- Gutleben, Christian. *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*. Rodopi, 2001.
- Hadley, Louisa. *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230317499>.
- Harris, Jane. *Gillespie and I*. Faber and Faber, 2011.
- . *The Observations*. Faber and Faber, 2006.
- Heilmann, Ann, and Mark Llewellyn. "Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009." *ORCA Online Research @Cardiff*, Cardiff University, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230281691>.
- Kaplan, Cora. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh University Press, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748611478.001.0001>.
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise. "Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter." *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1–18.
- Marcus, Steven. *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*. Basic Books, 1966.
- Mitchell, Kate. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230283121>.
- Poovey, Mary. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Pykett, Lyn. *The "Improper" Feminine*. Routledge, 2003, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203359204>.
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. W.W. Norton, 1970.
- Thiel, Elizabeth. *The Fantasy of Family: Nineteenth-Century Children's Literature and the Myth of the Domestic Ideal*. Routledge, 2008.
- Tomaiuolo, Saverio. *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96950-3>.