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The New Woman in Twenty-First-Century English Novels: Continuity, Rupture, and Reinvention of a Literary Figure

Banpreet Kour

¹ Associate Professor, Department of English, Government Degree College, Samba, Jammu and Kashmir, India

* Corresponding Author:

Banpreet Kour

banpreet.kour@yahoo.co.in

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ABSTRACT

Born in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the New Woman – the fictional heroine who eschewed marriage as her calling, who asserted her intellectual and economic independence, and who challenged the moral double standard – has remained a fixture in English fiction. This paper will explore how the New Woman is re-imagined in the context of twenty first century novels in English that have been written, in what ways she carries her predecessor's legacy, and in what ways she has been changed, and how much, as a reflection of neoliberal economics, digital mediation and an increasingly intersectional definition of gender. Grounded in an in-depth analysis of a range of contemporary British novels, including Zadie Smith's *NW*, Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy, and Diana Evans's *Ordinary People*, the paper proposes that the New Woman of the present is neither complete nor final, but rather a process of actualization and authentication that is often fraught with anxiety and ambiguity, unfolding in a field of conditions that claim to offer emancipation from the structures of subjectivity, but quietly deplete their material roots. The paper concludes that the continued existence of the New Woman as a critical category proves both the futility of emancipation her own nineteenth century predecessors had envisioned, and the continued value of fiction as a medium through which that futility can be explored.





INTRODUCTION

As Sarah Grand wrote in an essay for the *North American Review* in 1894, "the New Woman" was a concept that had been in works of fiction for several years: a female protagonist who rode a bicycle without a chaperone, read Schopenhauer, talked about marriage in terms of choice rather than fate, and generally resisted the domestic plot that had governed the English novel for a century. By the First World War, "New Woman fiction"—discredited, ridiculed, and disorganized as it was—had ceased to be a recognizable literary movement and merged with modernism, suffrage literature, and more. But the woman who demands economic self-determination, sexual self-determination, a say in her own story is a constant presence in English fiction. She is resurfacing in each succeeding decade, reinvented, and the twenty first century has been an excellent decade for her return.¹

What becomes of the New Woman when she moves from the drawing rooms and bicycle paths of the 1890s, to the shared houses and compromised tenancies and smartphone screens of modern Britain? The question is important for two reasons. First, the New Woman was not a portrait of the woman as she actually was, but a discursive creation, created from fears about marriage, employment and the franchise, and the reading of her subsequent incarnations reveals what fears have survived and what have been superseded. Second, contemporary novelists who are most commonly identified with the single working, sexually autonomous woman (Sally Rooney, Zadie Smith, Bernardine Evaristo, Rachel Cusk, others) are not often read together, because the New Woman is usually defined as a period movement that is limited to the 1880s and 1890s. When these two groups of writings are brought into dialogue, it is possible to provide a more comprehensive history of the changes and the continuities.²

The argument is broken down into three parts. It starts by reconstructing the historical new woman and the theoretical language of postfeminism, intersectionality, precarity, to account for her contemporary descendants. It then methodically explores five fields in which the type has been most clearly reconfigured: economic autonomy, sexuality, motherhood, race and migration, and digital mediation. Finally, it provides extended readings of several novels that illustrate these patterns, and then reflects on the implications of the fact that there are continuities and changes from the Victorian model for the condition of gender and fiction today. The word "New Woman" is deliberately employed as an anachronism throughout: it serves to reveal the "new" Woman of each generation as a self-enclosed historical moment, thus obscuring the lineage of its appearances.

2. Theoretical and Historical Foundations

2.1 *The Fin-de-Siècle New Woman: Origins of a Cultural Figure*

The New Woman of the 1890s was a product of higher education for women since Girton and Newnham were established, clerical and retail jobs for middle-class women, and a print culture that was hungry for sensationalizing the ensuing social controversy. It was given narrative form by novels by Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, George Egerton, and Ella Hepworth Dixon. In *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), Grand combined a traditional marriage narrative with a stark portrait of the contagious venereal disease passed on from husband to wife, and contrasted the disease with a literal representation of the damage wrought by concealing ignorance as a virtue in women. More scandalizing of reviewers, Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893) took a more forthright approach to the subject of female desire and maternal ambivalence. The New Woman was a symptom of the imagination's anxieties over degeneration, imperial decline, and the destabilisation of class boundaries as well as a legitimate literary champion for women's rights, as Sally Ledger has explained (Ledger).³

To highlight the contentious nature of the figure, even among those who may today be considered as sympathizers. Some of the New Woman novelists envisioned a reform, not an end, of marriage; others envisioned a eugenicist ideology that found an uneasy home in the present, a world of celibacy as the only legitimate stance for an educated woman; and others, in a eugenicist discourse that is uncomfortably contemporary, envisioned the New Woman as a guardian of racial fitness rather than a defender of individual liberty. Ann Ardis has demonstrated that New Woman fiction was a formal experiment as well as a thematically provocative work, that it drew on the realism of the realist tradition, the romance of romanticism, and the polemical essay of the later Victorian polemical tradition, and that

these features challenged the generic conventions of the Victorian novel (Ardis). Formal restlessness is one of the most evident continuities with the contemporary novels which are discussed later in this paper and which also frequently find themselves at odds with inherited novelistic form when trying to depict female autonomy.

2.2 From Suffrage to Second Wave: The New Woman's Twentieth-Century Afterlives

The New Woman did not survive the Edwardian period as a labelled genre, but her concerns were absorbed into the modernist project. Virginia Woolf's insistence, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), that a woman needs money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction, translates the New Woman's demand for economic independence into a claim about authorship itself. Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and *Orlando* likewise carry forward the New Woman's interest in consciousness and interiority as sites where social convention could be tested, even as Woolf distanced herself from what she regarded as the New Woman novel's more openly didactic tendencies.⁴

The middle decades of the twentieth century produced their own versions of the independent heroine Muriel Spark's *Jean Brodie*, Doris Lessing's *Anna Wulf* in *The Golden Notebook* (1962) figures who inherited the New Woman's scrutiny of marriage and vocation but did so under the pressures of postwar domestic ideology and, in Lessing's case, an explicit engagement with organized feminist and left politics. By the time second-wave feminism reshaped both fiction and criticism in the 1970s, the New Woman as a period category had become primarily an object of literary-historical recovery rather than a living tradition, a shift consolidated by Elaine Showalter's influential account of a female literary tradition in the English novel (Showalter).

2.3 Feminist Theory in the Twenty-First Century: Postfeminism, Intersectionality, Neoliberal Feminism

Reading the contemporary New Woman requires a different theoretical toolkit than the one used to read her Victorian ancestor, because the social conditions she navigates are different. Three concepts are especially useful here. The first is postfeminism, understood not as a claim that feminism has succeeded and is therefore no longer needed, but, following Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, as a cultural sensibility in which feminist gains are simultaneously acknowledged and undermined — a woman is assumed to be free to choose, but her choices are relentlessly evaluated against norms of self-discipline, appearance, and sexual availability that feminism was supposed to have dismantled (McRobbie; Gill). The second is intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw's term for the way race, class, and gender combine to produce experiences of subordination that cannot be understood by simply adding up separate axes of oppression (Crenshaw). The New Woman of the 1890s was almost without exception white and middle-class; her twenty-first-century descendants, in the hands of writers like Evaristo and Evans, cannot be adequately read without attention to race and migration.⁵

The third concept is precarity, a term drawn from labour sociology to describe employment and housing conditions characterized by short-term contracts, unstable income, and the erosion of the postwar welfare settlement. Precarity matters to this study because the economic independence that defined the Victorian New Woman the ability to earn a wage, however modest, and thereby escape dependence on a husband or father no longer straightforwardly guarantees security. The heroines of Rooney and Cusk are economically active, often university-educated, and yet chronically underhoused, underpaid, or dependent on freelance and short-term work. Independence, in other words, has been achieved and simultaneously drained of the stability it once promised.⁶

3. Literature Review

Existing scholarship on the New Woman has concentrated heavily on the fin-de-siècle period itself. Richardson and Willis's edited collection *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact* remains a standard reference for the historical figure, while Rita Felski's *The Gender of Modernity* situates the New Woman within a broader account of women's ambivalent relationship to modernity as both a promise of liberation and a new set of constraints. Criticism of contemporary British fiction, meanwhile, has tended to discuss questions of gender and autonomy without explicitly invoking the New Woman tradition. Studies of Rooney's fiction, for instance, generally place her within debates about millennial



precarity, autofiction, or the post-2008 Irish novel, rather than within a genealogy stretching back to Grand and Egerton. Scholarship on Evaristo and Smith is more often organized around Black British writing and multicultural London than around gender as an organizing category in its own right.

This paper's contribution is therefore less to introduce new primary material than to argue for a reading practice: treating the New Woman as a recurring structural position within English fiction – a heroine defined by her refusal of an inherited script and by the narrative strain that refusal produces rather than as a period-bound label. This approach follows the spirit, if not the specific claims, of critics such as Ardis and Ledger, who insisted that the New Woman be read as a discursive figure assembled differently in different contexts rather than a stable social type.

4. Methodology

The analysis that follows combines close reading with a comparative, thematic organization. Primary texts were selected on two grounds: their prominence within contemporary discussions of gender and the novel, and their capacity, taken together, to represent a range of class, racial, and generational positions among their protagonists. Novels published in Britain and Ireland between 2003 and 2019 were prioritized so as to capture the period in which the concerns outlined above – post-2008 economic precarity, the mainstreaming of intersectional feminist vocabulary, and the saturation of everyday life by digital communication – had become fully visible in fiction. The paper does not attempt an exhaustive survey; it instead reads a small number of texts in depth, on the assumption that the New Woman is best traced through the specific narrative and formal choices individual novels make rather than through plot summary alone.

5. The New Woman Reimagined: Thematic Analysis

5.1 Economic Independence and the Precarity of Choice

The Victorian New Woman's demand for paid work was, in large part, a demand to be spared the choice between marriage and destitution. Her twenty-first-century counterpart usually already has paid work, often a university degree, and frequently a professional or semi-professional occupation – journalism, academia, retail management, care work – and yet financial security remains elusive. Frances, the narrator of Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*, supplements an unpaid arts internship with occasional freelance writing and a small allowance from her father, whose drinking makes even that support unreliable; her poverty is not the poverty of the workhouse but the poverty of overdraft fees and unheated flats, no less structuring for being less visible. Rooney's prose repeatedly tracks Frances totting up small sums, an accounting habit that recalls the housekeeping calculations of nineteenth-century domestic fiction while relocating them to a context in which budgeting has become a near-constant cognitive labour rather than an occasional task.⁷

Cusk's *Outline* trilogy pushes this theme further by making economic precarity a condition of the narrator's very authority to speak. Faye, the novelist-narrator of *Outline*, *Transit*, and *Kudos*, has left a marriage and lost much of the financial security it provided; her occupation as a teacher of creative writing courses places her in a position of temporary, contract-based employment, and much of the trilogy's action consists of her listening to the more confidently narrated lives of people she meets, as though her own economic and narrative uncertainty leaves her unable to claim the same authority over her own story. Where the Victorian New Woman's paid employment was typically presented as a hard-won achievement, worth narrating as such, Cusk's Faye treats her own work almost as an aside, a fact of life rather than a triumph, which is itself a mark of how thoroughly female employment has been normalized even as its rewards have become less certain.⁸

5.2 Sexuality, the Body, and the Politics of Desire

Frankness about female desire was one of the most scandalous features of 1890s New Woman fiction, and it remains a defining feature of the type today, though the terms of the frankness have shifted considerably. Where Egerton's stories treated desire as something to be confessed, often with an undertone of shame or danger, contemporary novels more often treat desire as a subject for negotiation, catalogued with a kind of clinical precision. Rooney's fiction is the clearest example: both



Conversations with Friends and Normal People narrate sex in unadorned, almost procedural sentences, stripped of euphemism and also, notably, of the moralizing framework whether of condemnation or of triumphant liberation that earlier fiction tended to supply. Critics have sometimes read this flatness as a limitation of Rooney's style; it can equally be read as a formal choice consistent with a postfeminist sensibility in which sexual freedom is assumed rather than fought for, even as the emotional costs of that freedom, particularly within an affair such as Frances's relationship with a married actor, remain acute.⁹

Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, formally more radical than Rooney's realism, represents desire and its violation through a fractured, pre-grammatical syntax that enacts the difficulty of narrating a female body under duress rather than simply describing that difficulty from a stable narrative distance. The novel's unnamed protagonist experiences sexual initiation, abuse, and eventually self-destructive promiscuity in a style that refuses the reader easy interpretive purchase, a strategy that recalls the formal experimentation Ardis identified in the earliest New Woman fiction, where breaking with realist convention was itself a way of registering that women's experience exceeded the forms available to narrate it.¹⁰

5.3 Motherhood, Domesticity, and the Refusal of the Maternal Script

Motherhood was a comparatively minor concern in 1890s New Woman fiction, which tended to focus on the unmarried heroine poised before the marriage plot rather than on women already inside domestic life; where maternity does appear, as in Grand's fiction, it is often used to dramatize inherited disease or degeneration rather than examined as an experience in its own right. Contemporary fiction has been considerably more willing to treat motherhood directly, and often ambivalently, as a further site on which the New Woman's autonomy is tested.¹¹

Diana Evans's *Ordinary People* follows two Black British couples in South London as their relationships buckle under the accumulated weight of childcare, work, and unspoken resentment; Melissa, one of the novel's central women, experiences motherhood as a kind of erasure of the self she had cultivated before children, a loss the novel treats with considerable sympathy rather than as evidence of maternal failure. Cusk's earlier work, particularly the memoir *A Life's Work* and its fictional afterlife in the *Outline* trilogy, is even more explicit in refusing the assumption that maternal feeling is uncomplicated or automatically fulfilling. Ali Smith's seasonal quartet, beginning with *Autumn*, takes a different approach, largely bypassing biological motherhood in favour of intergenerational friendship between women, as though suggesting that female continuity across generations need not run through maternity at all. Taken together, these novels suggest that the contemporary New Woman's central act of refusal is directed less at marriage as such, which no longer functions as a near-universal social requirement, than at the assumption that motherhood, once entered into, should absorb a woman's entire identity.¹²

5.4 Race, Migration, and Intersectional Womanhood

Perhaps the most significant departure from the Victorian model is the extent to which contemporary fiction insists on reading female autonomy through race, migration, and class rather than treating gender as a self-sufficient category. Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, which shared the 2019 Booker Prize, follows twelve interconnected characters, most of them Black British women, across a century of English social history, and its formal structure free-verse-like prose without full stops at the end of sentences, moving fluidly between interior monologue and social observation — enacts a refusal of any single, tidy account of what Black British womanhood consists of. Amma, a lesbian theatre director whose career spans from underfunded fringe productions to a National Theatre premiere, embodies a version of the New Woman's demand for vocational recognition, but Evaristo is careful to show how that recognition arrives late, and only partially, because of the racism and homophobia Amma has navigated across four decades.¹³

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* offers an earlier and in some ways more constrained version of the same concerns, following Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman brought to London for an arranged marriage, as she moves from near-total domestic confinement toward a modest independence achieved through

piecework sewing and, eventually, an affair that functions less as romantic fulfilment than as an assertion of choice. Nazneen's trajectory is considerably more circumscribed than that of Evaristo's or Rooney's protagonists, a difference the novel insists is a function of immigration status, language barriers, and community surveillance rather than of any lesser desire for autonomy on Nazneen's part. Reading Ali alongside Evaristo makes clear that the New Woman cannot function as a single figure in contemporary fiction; she is refracted differently depending on the intersecting structures racial, religious, economic, legal through which a given protagonist must act.¹⁴

5.5 Technology, Surveillance, and the Digitally Mediated Self

A final and distinctly contemporary dimension of the New Woman is her relationship to digital communication, which has no real precedent in the 1890s beyond the letter and the newspaper. Zadie Smith's NW, discussed at greater length below, uses fragmented typography, including text-message-like exchanges and abrupt shifts in font and layout, to register how digital communication has altered the texture of intimacy and self-presentation among its Kilburn characters. Rooney's novels, though more conventionally typeset, are saturated with email and instant messaging, media through which her characters perform versions of themselves that are more articulate, and sometimes more cutting, than they manage to be in person; Frances's emails to Bobbi and to Nick function as a kind of alternative narration running alongside the novel's primary one.¹⁵

Naomi Alderman's speculative novel *The Power* approaches the same territory from a different generic angle, imagining a world in which women develop the ability to generate electric shocks, a power that spreads through networked communication and social media as much as through the biological change itself; the novel is less interested in individual female autonomy than in the systemic consequences of a wholesale reversal of gendered power, but its premise depends on the same contemporary awareness, visible in Smith and Rooney, that female selfhood is now inescapably mediated by networked technology. Where the Victorian New Woman had to contend with public opinion transmitted through newspapers and gossip, her contemporary counterpart contends with a form of exposure that is faster, more granular, and harder to escape.¹⁶

6. Case Studies

6.1 Zadie Smith's NW: Urban Fragmentation and Female Subjectivity

NW has four main characters who have all come up through the same North-West London housing estate; the two core characters, Leah and Natalie (also known as Keisha), take the bulk of the novel's investigation of the New Woman tradition. Natalie's journey from council estate schoolgirl to barrister is presented in an almost formally numbered series of short sections, a stylistic choice which acknowledges the discipline and self-fashioning that the ascent has demanded – and makes visible the extent to which this has occurred.¹⁷ But Smith is careful to point out the price of that construction: Natalie's marriage is performed, not felt, and her eventual secret involvement in the online-arranged, spur-of-the-moment sexual encounters are an effort to find something inside her that has been pushed aside by her over-managed public persona.¹⁸

Whereas Natalie strives to ascend in the world, Leah resists it, staying in the neighbourhood where they grew up, working for a charity, and lying to her husband about taking contraception because she does not want the children that he thinks she is trying for. Leah's rejection is less vocal than Natalie's desire to be a New Woman gesture, quietly speaking and challenging the presumptions of her husband and her community, an insistence on taking control over her own reproductive life. Smith's comparison of the two women does not validate either one particular way of success as more true to the concept of female freedom; female autonomy in this novel, so sensitive to class and place, cannot be limited to one model.¹⁹

6.2 Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*: Polyphonic Black British Womanhood

While NW functions through an inner fragmentation within a single narrative frame, in GWG, the fragmentation is multiplied in a dozen protagonists, each of whom is individually and persistently narrated, with their lives intersecting at various points. This is an argument in itself: no one woman, no

one generation can represent the entire Black British womanhood. The novel handles the transition of many of Amma's struggles as successes with gentle irony, as is the case with her university-aged daughter Yazz, who moves with ease through the lexicon of identity politics but seems to have a less hard-fought sense of what she wants for herself.²⁰

Some critics have interpreted Evaristo's ending with an old white woman, Penelope, who realizes that she has an unknown black lineage, as a gesture of reconciliation to the wider English identity, while others have read it as a culmination of the novel's central thesis that none of these categories - womanhood, blackness, Englishness - is static or monocausal. But in that context, Evaristo's novel takes the New Woman tradition of revealing the "artificiality of social categories" to a new level; it extends the critique to race and nationality as well as gender.²¹

6.3 Sally Rooney's *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends*: Millennial Intimacy

The two novels are often mentioned in the same breath, which is no surprise, because both protagonists of the two books, Frances in *Conversations with Friends*, Marianne in *Normal People*, are young, bright, poor, and have partners who are more socially secure and/or better off economically, and their relationships with them are where issues of power, consent, and self-worth are negotiated. The intellectual drive of the New Woman is adopted in particular by Marianne; she is consistently singled out as the brightest person in any room she moves into, and her achievement of a degree at Trinity College Dublin is a simple repurposing of the New Woman's need for education. What Rooney contributes is a long-term fascination with the way Marianne's intelligence is not in opposition to, but in harmony with, her capacity for controlling and sometimes abusive relationships; she refuses to suggest that these two views are incompatible.²²

In both novels, the only social barrier preventing a degree of independence for the protagonist is none at all; Nazneen is limited by law, immigration status, and even the general eye of the community, whereas Frances and Marianne are not so limited. Instead, they struggle with internal and relational patterns of self-denial, class anxiety, in Connell's case, not Marianne's; and a widespread sense of not knowing how to desire things publicly. This shift is, itself, an important indicator of the evolution of the New Woman figure; whereas earlier women's protagonists struggled against external structures like coverture, the exclusion from higher education, and the marriage bar in employment, Rooney's protagonists struggle against internalized structures, whose origins are more difficult to trace and therefore more difficult to resolve.²³

6.4 Rachel Cusk's *Outline Trilogy*: *The Woman Who Refuses to Narrate Herself*

Cusk's trilogy takes the New Woman's traditional demand for narrative self-authorship and inverts it. Faye, the trilogy's narrator, discloses almost nothing about her own inner life directly; instead, across three novels, she records at length the monologues of people she encounters fellow writers, students, a Polish builder, an ex-husband's family and the reader is left to infer Faye's own situation and feelings from the pattern of what she chooses to record and what she omits. This is a formally audacious response to a problem the New Woman tradition has always faced: how to represent a woman's interiority without simply reproducing, in a new key, the confessional mode that risks reducing her to her feelings and relationships.²⁴

Cusk's method has drawn criticism from readers who find Faye frustratingly opaque, but the opacity is the point. By the trilogy's end, Faye has remarried, apparently without much narrated enthusiasm, and the reader is left uncertain whether this represents a genuine choice or a kind of narrative exhaustion, an inability to keep resisting the marriage plot indefinitely. Read as a New Woman text, the trilogy suggests that the demand for self-authorship, taken to its logical extreme, produces not liberation but a kind of narrative withholding, as though the only way to avoid being written by others is to stop writing oneself into legible form at all.²⁵

7. Comparative Analysis: Continuities and Departures from the Victorian New Woman

Several continuities link the Victorian New Woman to her twenty-first-century descendants. Both figures are defined against a prior generation's assumptions about marriage as destiny; both are



associated with formal experimentation, as though the available novelistic conventions were themselves part of what needed to be resisted; and both attract a critical reception that alternates between celebrating their honesty and complaining of their coldness or self-absorption, a pattern visible in reviews of Grand and Egerton in the 1890s and in reviews of Rooney and Cusk more than a century later.²⁶

The departures, however, are substantial. The Victorian New Woman's central battles — access to higher education, entry into the professions, control over property within marriage, the vote — have been formally won, at least in Britain, which shifts the contemporary New Woman's struggle from securing rights to negotiating what those rights are actually worth under conditions of economic precarity and persistent, if less codified, gender inequality. Where the earlier figure was overwhelmingly white and middle-class by default, contemporary fiction, led by writers such as Evaristo, Evans, and Ali, insists that gender cannot be examined apart from race, migration status, and class, a shift that owes more to the political and intellectual work of intersectional feminism than to anything internal to the novel form itself. And where the Victorian New Woman's visibility was managed through newspapers, letters, and face-to-face gossip, her contemporary counterpart exists within a digital environment that intensifies both self-exposure and self-surveillance, a condition with no real nineteenth-century analogue.²⁷

The most obvious change is, of course, emotional and not structural. In the 1890s, New Woman fiction, in all its formal adventurousness, generally carried a rhetorical demeanor, a sense of high expectations for the women, of the legitimacy of their claims, and of the justness of their grievances. Modern fiction, on the other hand, is far less certain: it will often refuse to assert that its central characters' decisions are clearly progressive. In almost every legal and economic sense Rooney's characters are freer than Grand's and they are, rarely, allowed by their writers to feel simply free: the apprehension which dictates their inner lives indicates that formal equality has not solved, and may have exacerbated, the question which the New Woman was always asking: what does it mean for a woman to live a life she has truly chosen?

8. CONCLUSION

In twenty-first century English fiction, The New Woman does not appear as a period costume for nostalgic purposes but as a structural position that novelists of each generation retake and rework within their own historical context. The changes since the 1890s are significant: Legal and educational obstacles have been dismantled, feminist theory has been significantly race and class conscious, and digital communication has altered the conditions by which women's lives are subjected to public judgment. What has not changed, at least as reflected in the novels studied here, is the fundamental dilemma created for the New Woman: the difference between formal independence and real security, between the right to choose and the material realities and psychologies in which women may make a choice. The persistence indicates for future scholarship two things. First, that such literary criticism ought to identify the New Woman as a tradition more than it represents a phenomenon limited to the fin de siècle, as the literary critic is then able to see how the tradition has been passed on, how it has been revised and changed as it enters new contexts and readers. Secondly, that such criticism ought not to ignore the connections between Grand and Cusk, between Egerton and McBride, between the 1890s marriage plot and the 2010s precarity plot, all of which a strictly period-bound approach obscures. Secondly, just because the ambivalence that is so frequently found in modern novels and other texts about women's autonomy is not necessarily an authorial pessimism is a finding in itself; a finding that the novel, more than any other literary form, is ideally suited to registering.



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