New Women's Writing

New Women's Writing:

Contextualising Fiction, Poetry and Philosophy

Edited by

Subashish Bhattacharjee
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CONTENTS

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Samya Achiri's "Who Am I?": Between the Burden of the White House, Clutches of Political Agency and the Eagerness for Privacy in Nadine Gordimer's *Occasion for Loving*, which appeared in the journal *Forum for World Literature Studies* (Vol. 7, No. 4, December, 2015).

Bi-ling Chen's A Grandmother's Seduction: Narrative Slippage and Ethnic Othering in Gish Jen's "Who's Irish?", which appeared in the journal *Journal of Ethnic American Literature* (2012).

Pritika Nehra's Bridging the Binaries of gender Construction in Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fiction, which appeared in the journal *Creative Forum* (Jan-Jun 2015, Special issue on Women's Writing).

Sharon Worley's Atoms, Freud and Gender in Nature: The New Modern Woman Emerges in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which appeared in the journal *The Apollonian* (Vol. 1, Issue 2, December, 2014).

INTRODUCTION

SUBASHISH BHATTACHARJEE
AND GIRINDRA NARAYAN RAY

I

Virginia Blain, Isobel Grundy and Patricia Clements argued that "[most] of our women are not represented in the 'standard' reference books in the field" (Blain et al viii-ix). This statement has been echoed as recently as 2014 when Joanne Harris claimed that "'[w]omen's fiction' is still a sub-category" (quoted in *The Guardian*). It has become progressively more difficult, with contemporary genre-bending, to identify sub-categories that have gradually become defunct within the category of women's writing. The above statement by Joanne Harris, among many others similarly poised, constitutes a part of a generous amount of vitriolic directed towards women's writing. Commentators have been divided on their positions concerning the deletion of the sub-category of 'women's writing'. While critics of the sub-category such as Joanne Harris argue against the obsolete status of the nomenclature, others have argued in favour of such an appellation as necessary to distinguish the broad genre of women's writing from works by their male counterparts.

Dale Spender had stated quite accurately in his 1980 book *Man Made Language*:

> The English language has been literally man made and… it is still primarily under male control…. This monopoly over language is one of the means by which males have ensured their own primacy, and consequently, have ensured the invisibility or 'other' nature of females, and this primacy is perpetuated while women continue to use, unchanged, the language which we have inherited. (12)

The statement may still be said to hold currency when we look at the contemporary scenario despite apparent changes in the social and cultural outlook that have given precedence to women and their personalised mode of writing. The patriarchal bias in writing has been a mainstay not merely in

literary works that are decidedly serious or academic in nature but also equally or perhaps more noticeably, in popular literary modes. Despite the sharp increase in women writers over the past several decades, the literary output by these writers remains outside serious academic consideration, and consideration is given to a select group of writers who are considerably normative in the genres of sections that they represent. The eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries may have been witness to the upsurge of women adopting the pen, but the twentieth century served as the period when women opted for a more personalised, subjective utilisation of the pen, independent of the patriarchal bias and repressive manoeuvres that have haunted the genre of women's writing for a considerable period of time.

Considering the rather belligerent stance towards women's writing for the greater part of the twentieth century, the resistance of women's writing by women has not been equally regressive, as Joanna Russ has commented: "In considering literature written by women during the last few centuries in Europe and the United States, we don't find the absolute prohibition on the writing of women *qua* women that has buried so much of the poetic and rhetorical tradition of black slave America" (6). The sweeping remark has been contested as fallacious, containing no indicator as to the ethnic and racial divisions which aggravate resistance to the writing by women in several cultures. More recent criticism has argued that ethnicity and race are past symptoms, as is class, and the present status of women's writing is hinged on a radicalization of the position that women can attain in a largely patriarchal field of creative writing (Zamora; Milne). Further changes in the social scenario have led to an increasing space for women's writing, giving voice to diverse ethnicities within the gender specificity of women's writing. The shift had initially begun in the genre of 'black women's' writing, and then gradually embraced across other ethnic and racial segments over the period of several decades, extending beyond Joanna Russ's rather recent contention that cis white women's writing has been normative towards the development of women's writing as a category or a genre.

The literary taxonomy of women's writing, or 'feminist literature' as some critics have opted to term the genre, is a development that is independent of the social and political movement which came to prominence largely in the early twentieth century with its particular nomenclature. Women's writing has consistently challenged patriarchal norms by the simple act of creation independent of male intervention, and whether this act is militant or not is relegated to a secondary debate. Simone de Beauvoir specified the role of the writing female *vis-à-vis* the passive woman demanding equality: "Much more interesting are the insurgent females

who have challenged this unjust society; a literature of protest can engender sincere and powerful society" (718). Women's writing may have the underpinnings of active resistance towards a patriarchal mode of writing but they are not specifically reactive. Rather, to borrow from the French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the reaction is gradually displaced by an action that is creative and enterprising. This, elliptically, validates Beauvoir's position despite the apparent contradiction—Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, or the Brontë sisters did not strive towards a militant assertion of identity through their writing, but the assertion was produced tacitly, questioning patriarchal literary hegemony through covert means.

Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's comments expand the ambit of the analysis to which women's writing is subjected to. In the Introduction to the first volume of *Women Writing in India* they wrote that they "believe that a feminist literary history must map the play of forces in the imaginative worlds in which women wrote, and read their literary initiatives not as an endless repetition of present day rebellions or dreams of triumph, but as different attempts to engage with the force and the conflict of the multiple cross-cutting determinations of those worlds" (1991 26). Indeed, women's writing has expanded beyond the rigmarole of conventional and archetypal analyses that relegate an oppositional and rebellious status of the genre. Tharu and Lalita further attacked the canonical representation of women's writing in their Introduction to the second volume of *Women Writing in India*:

> Solitary figures such as Virginia Woolf or Rebecca West apart, the involvement with *women's writing* or the idea of retrieving a lost tradition of women's literature has actually developed only over the last twenty years and *has been largely an American one*. Since this is the work that is also the most easily available and most easily assimilable into existing critical paradigms, it has seemed very attractive to many feminist scholars and to sections of the literary establishment. (1993 16)

The cultural stagnation which pre-Modernist literature had experienced in terms of women's writing, towards the end of the nineteenth century, was more political than one could assuage with the aid of critical devices. For a surprisingly long period of time, English literature of women had to hark back to the legacy of the Brontës, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and going further back, to Austen, Mary Shelley, and even Aphra Behn. During this period of extended absence of women writers, works by male writers, however, continued to thrive, and it was read as a sign of the age that showed a sustained diminution of women's contribution to literature. The period may be said to reflect the

carcinogenic intensity of Luce Irigaray's remark when she states that "[if] our cultures or societies become ossified, age, perish, it is because they are constructed from a fixed, one could say a dead, energy. The forms that structure them persist for a time, indeed proliferate like cancerous cells" (57). The return of women's writing as part of the mainstream as well as in establishing itself firmly within the superscripted tenet of the *avant-garde* took place from the inception of Modernism onwards. This prevented further aggrandisement of a patriarchy-led literary practice while simultaneously situating itself at the juncture of widespread feminist upheavals. The thrust of women's writing has gradually widened hereafter, including genres that were not explored previously, opening the field for the inclusion of writing by women of all cultural backgrounds, and preparing a scaffolding for the projection of women's writing on a par with that of their male counterparts.

Some of the earliest racially reformative writings by women were produced by the women of colour—the African American women who opted for writing as the means to escape their condition as well as to strengthen the position of double bind that they found themselves subjected to:

> In their writing, black women problematize the notion of community. Rather than paying it lip service, they scrutinize the community as it existed in the past in order to question whether or not and in what form it might exist in the future. Contemporary black women writers tend to associate the existence of community with their mothers' generation, while they see themselves struggling and writing against the devastating influence of late capitalist society, particularly as it erodes the cultural identity of black people, replacing cultural production with commodity consumption. (Willis 214)

The contribution of the black women writers to the wider genre of women's writing is immense. The racial and cultural inclusiveness that has been accepted as a common phenomenon in women's writing would not have been a possibility without the intervention of these women writers. The growing acceptance of black women writers allowed for a proliferation of reactive writing which addressed historically embedded as well as immediate issues on an equal footing. The evolution and trajectory of black women's writing, therefore, can be mapped comparatively with the space of postcolonial women's writing. This comparison may have arbitrary conclusions but is essential towards the conceptualisation of the obstacles that both these sections had to encounter and overcome in order to assert themselves as not merely a part of an established genre, or genres, but a genre in itself, replete with its own intricacies.

Women's writing, even when viewed from the reformist position that has given it a distinction amidst writing that is generally differentiated on the basis of other markers and qualifiers, has gradually started to establish itself as a centred projection of certain archetypes. This chiefly includes the notion of white heterosexual women being solely authorised to produce legitimate literature created by women. The notion is further fuelled by the widespread acknowledgment of this writer class in most major literary awards. Therefore, the historical and cultural shift propelled by the women who opted to write is responsible for building structures which resist the interference of other modes. The anti-canon thereby is assimilated into another canon of a particular section of women writing. Nancy Armstrong addresses this re-establishment of canon when she says that "[cultural] authority does not remain 'decentered' for very long, if at all; it invariably forms new centers." And, "[by] capturing such authority specifically on behalf of disenfranchised voices," women's writing "simultaneously seized authority from women's traditional lack of economic and political power and handed over that power to groups who lacked the means to represent themselves" (115).

It is necessary that women's writing be separated from its heterosexual white middle-class woman bias. While the issue of race has been broached in the works of authors who have challenged the racial canon, the issue of sexuality has been largely uncontested in critical debates. However, the steady development of analyses building on the contribution of lesbian writers since the 1970s and the 80s is an indicator of the interrogative position that women writers have taken towards the representations of sexuality in and related to literary works. Susan Gubar's statement at the turn of the millennium expressed the monumental change that lesbian women's writing has undergone over the past four decades:

> In literature and criticism, lesbian writing has undergone a sort of renaissance from the seventies on. Not since the flowering of lesbian letters during the first few decades of the twentieth century has the vitality of lesbian creativity been so evident. Indeed, if by 'lesbian literature and criticism' we mean writing about and by publicly self-proclaimed homosexual women, the contemporary phenomenon remains unprecedented in English and American literary history—a beginning (naissance) rather than a return (renaissance). (45)

The contemporary period is not devoid of its prejudices against the positioning of women writers as prominent within their own genres. The genre of postmodern fiction, for one, is rife with such examples where male authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo or Cormac McCarthy are

readily counted whereas women fictioneers are allotted secondary status. Maroula Joannou assesses this abject lacuna when she writes:

> The fact that women writers, with honourable exceptions such as Angela Carter and, … Jeanette Winterson, do not readily come to mind in connection with the innovative postmodern novel, and are not to be found in any significant numbers at the forefront of stylistic experimentation during this period, should not distract from the importance of the attempts of individual women to articulate an alternative to the androcentric discourse in literature. (10)

And the compartmentalisation of women as separate literary producers outside the norm of specific patriarchal literary genres is not limited to postmodern fiction or even to the genre of fiction. A more detailed study would have been able to assess the projection of women poets and playwrights and their systematic rejection from arbitrary canons of literature. This seclusion and rejection is the symptom of a greater malady, one which has persistently survived across centuries and that which has its roots strongly embedded also in the critical disregard that later women writers have often had to struggle with.

Women's writing has the natural precedent of biological distinction from men. This also forms the foundation for the concept of the *écriture feminine*. "An obvious way in which the content of women's writing might be expected to differ from that of men's would be by virtue of the experiences it records. Men's and women's biological experiences are different. Historically the differences have been emphasized and supplemented by marked differences in upbringing, education and pursuits" (Larrissy 102). Furthermore, while the biological differences have been acculturated in the female psyche, they have also been used as paradigms that were deconstructed to create newer and evolving forms of women's writing. While early examples of women's writing sought to portray the nature of relationship thus strained along lines of biology as may be evidenced in a work such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* which attempted to address the issue of reproduction and procreation as an event that could possibly endow women with power, later and more contemporary writers have undertaken the task of challenging the predetermined nature of biological disposition, as can be seen in works such as the novels of Jeanette Winterson.

The critical contentions presented in this book can possibly be induced a philosophical fervour through Toril Moi's summarisation, in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, of the positions endorsed by Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous:

> For Kristeva […] there is a *specific practice of writing* that is itself 'revolutionary', analogous to sexual and political transformation, and that by its very existence testifies to the possibility of transforming the symbolic order of orthodox society from the inside, whereas for Cixous, [woman] is wholly and physically present in her voice—and writing is no more than the extension of this self-identical prolongation of the speech act. The voice in each woman, moreover, is not only her own but springs from the deepest layers of her psyche: her own speech becomes the echo of the primeval *song* she once heard. (11; 112)

The positions which Kristeva and Cixous put forth attempt to break down the parochial conventions and structures that characterise writing. However, while Kristeva and Cixous are celebratory in their estimation of the powers of the women who write and the effect their writing produces, Elaine Showalter is cautiously optimist. Her primary argument is that women's writing has been marginalised and therefore contains the trajectory of this marginalisation and repression. Showalter, in her 1981 essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," had stated:

> The dominant culture need not consider the muted, except to rail against 'the woman's part' in itself. Thus we need more subtle and supple accounts of influence, not just to explain women's writing but also to understand how men's writing has resisted the acknowledgment of female precursors. […] women's fiction can be read as a double-voiced discourse, containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story. (344)

Hélène Cixous further contends that the process of writing is a traversal of sexuality, stating that "[to] admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death—to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of one and the other, not fixed in sequence of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another" ("Medusa" 254/46).

The intervention with which Cixous and Kristeva, as much as Showalter, endow a potential theory of women's writing is further strengthened with input from Deleuze and Guattari who write in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

> [W]riting should produce a becoming-woman as atoms of womanhood capable of crossing and impregnating an entire social field, and of contaminating men, of sweeping them up in that becoming. The rise of women in English novel writing has spared no man: even those who pass for the most virile, the most phallocratic, such as Lawrence and Miller, in their

> turn continually tap into and emit particles that enter the proximity or zone of indiscernibility of women. In writing, they become-women. (276)

Verena Conley, while discussing women's writing in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's statements, makes an observation that interfaces with the contemporary shifts in women's writing, one of becoming-woman even through the process of writing:

> The writer intersects with the philosopher on several points. […] To write oneself (out of painful situations) and to singularize through recourse to aesthetics and ethics, away from grammars of repression, were tantamount to engaging in a poetic revolution that would open the way to—the still modernist notion of—political revolution. Artist, more than theorists of all stripes, were felt to be endowed with 'radar' like antennae, more capable of 'perceiving' virtualities or structures-other. […] Becomings will be initiated primarily by women. Since man is called to the scene of castration more than woman and since he has more to lose than she in the present order of things, it will be easier for women to experiment with changes and, in the process, to bring about changes in men. (22-23; 25-26)

The attribution of this heightened role to literature and writing in the present volume as a zone of contest for female identity is because, to cite Barbara Johnson, "[it] can best be understood as the place where impasses can be kept open for examination, where questions can be guarded and not forced into premature validation of the available paradigms. Literature, that is, is not to be understood as a predetermined set of works but as a mode of cultural work, the work of giving-to-read those impossible contradictions that cannot yet be spoken" (13). The contradiction that women's writing presents have often been spoken (of) and dissected in popular and critical spheres, but much remains to be (done, and to be done with the proper concern about what is to be done) explored despite the steadily increasing number of such works.

II

Argha Banerjee writes on the women poets of the First World War who worked in and narrated the experiences of the British munitions factories. The essay highlights writings by a class of women who have been largely neglected in the study of literature emerging from the World Wars. The poems by these women poets successfully bring forth the sense of social prejudice that often worked against the women working in these factories and also serve to show the social conditions from which the poets

emerged. The essay looks into the works by a number of women poets to present a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon.

Sharon Worley's essay presents Virginia Woolf's depiction of a feminist consciousness in her seminal work, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as derived from and reflecting Sigmund Freud's theory of the subconscious, modern physics and modern art. Woolf relies on all three areas in her analysis of gender role models and nature in the novel, to enlighten the aforementioned modern feminist consciousness of the reader through the literal deconstruction of society and nature in words and images.

G.N. Ray's essay "Otherness as Philosophy" is an exploration of Iris Murdoch's philosophy that animates and gives depth to the question of the relation of ethics and aesthetics. Her importance is that she is one of the English pioneers who challenged the contemporary analytical philosophy with the new awareness of *Otherness* that happened to be the central focus of the later Continental philosophy. *Otherness* as a point of departure in the cognition of the Self also determines the realism of her art, which presumes a deeper relation between ethics and aesthetics.

Camille Alexander's essay bears on Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (2007), Vernella Fuller's *Going Back Home* (2012) and Elizabeth Nunez's *Boundaries* (2011) to show how the children of the post-*Empire Windrush* generation who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s to Caribbean parents in the U.K. struggled with identity formation and often sought to repatriate to the Caribbean to escape the increasing alienation that they were subjected to.

Kristin M. Distel's essay is an analysis of Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" in its depiction of the home as a patriarchal power structure and the way in which domestic patriarchy regulates and limits the female bodily experience. The story, which operates on the premise of misinformation of the death of the protagonist's husband, is an apt instance of the operability of the power structures in the sphere of the household.

Isabel López Cirugeda's essay looks at the spatial appropriation of New York City and Midtown Manhattan in the short stories of Dorothy Parker. The essay ties the various emotions of absent syncretism in Parker's fiction to the geographical space of the city, filtering down to the microcosm of the house, the personal space that is a stage for domestic or subject-specific realisations. The essay shows how Dorothy Parker appropriates the city and the home for the portrayal of the psyche of the characters in her stories.

Irina Armianu's essay is a study of Colette's incomplete autofiction, *Gigi*. Armianu establishes Colette within a larger frame of her contemporary French writers such as Marcel Proust, Jean Cocteau, and André Gide,

and intends to uncover her creative resources and their influences on French literature at the beginning of the twentieth-century Belle Époque.

Arup K. Chatterjee writes on the issue of travelogy in selected works by Doris Lessing and Toni Morrison. The essay undertakes the task of creating a class of criticism that accords similar status to women's travel writing as has been granted to that by men. By drawing on writing itself, and a writing that is inclusive of travelling, Chatterjee creates the space for a study of travelogy in the works by the two novelists. The essay looks at the writing by these women as inclusive of travel on a plane similar to the inclusion of sexual, economic and political relations of signs.

Samya Achiri's paper evaluates Nadine Gordimer's novel, *Occasion for Loving*, to reflect on the impact of the apartheid on the white people of conscience. The minoritisation of these empathisers within a white minority in the country is played as the fulcrum against which their desire to be politically active and more involved is dependent on. Achiri uses a theoretical framework derived from Lacan, Bakhtin and Bhabha to demonstrate that after an arduous psychological journey, the female protagonist of the novel succeeds in constructing an identity of her own.

While the previous essay highlights Angela Carter's continued relevance and importance in the genre of the gothic, Antonia Peroikou looks at the figure of the non-human or the inhuman in her fairy tales. By presenting a reading of bestiality, from the theoretical perspective of animal studies, the essay reinvents some of the more obscure areas of possible intervention in Carter's works.

Cristina Herrera presents a study of award-winning Chicana author Reyna Grande's critically acclaimed novel, *Dancing with Butterflies*. The essay analyses how the act of looking in the mirror and seeing oneself or another holds great significance when discussing the novel, with its multiple passages describing mirrors, and the metaphorical reference to the relationship between a pair of sisters whose lives are connected and shaped through Mexican folkloric dance.

Bi-ling Chen's essay reads the "seductive" characterisation of the grandmother in Gish Jen's "Who's Irish?" The essay deconstructs the character's humour and practical sensibility which leads most readers of the short story to support her views. By creating a strong sense of Chinese identity in the grandmother, Gish Jen prepares the stage for an assimilative experience that the readers are susceptible to in the first-person.

Jane Alberdeston Coralin presents a reading of Pulitzer-winning poet Natasha Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia* where she seeks to return to the work of folding and unfolding to show how the new generation of Black

women's poetry continues its journey away from the dominant culture's construct of Blackness.

Emine Gecgil presents a reading of Lisa Loomer's *The Waiting Room* and its study of sexual fetishism. The essay looks at the ways in which sexual fetishism works towards validating androcentric discourses of sexual practice. The essay serves to highlight the methods that are applied in alternate sexual practices and deviant methodologies in order to appropriate or re-appropriate the female figure and disable her autonomy over her own body.

Siham Arfaoui presents a study of three literary works that question the national and ideological hegemonies of the Middle East. The novels in question are Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*. The novels and collection of poems crisscross at the level of redrawing geopolitical and religio-sectarian conflicts in Iran, Iraq or in between.

Arunima Ray's essay examines the need for looking into the specificities of the problems faced by the gendered subaltern and examines the various relations of power that affect their lives at micro-levels and looks for the possible discourses of resistance that might emerge from these texts. Mahasweta Devi's 'Bayen' and 'Draupadi' represent the subaltern space of India. While 'Bayen' is the story of a so-called untouchable community, 'Draupadi' represents a tribal community. Both the stories represent a woman protagonist fighting alone against larger and powerful forces.

La Tanya L. Rogers's essay reads the Black Surrogate character of Hester in Pulitzer-winner Suzan-Lori Parks's play *in the Blood* (1999), which offers a scathing social commentary on identity, womanhood, and motherhood by revisiting Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). In Parks's play, Hester, or LaNegrita (the Black) is a homeless mother of five children who makes her home under a bridge and inscribes the letter "A" in the dirt repeatedly. Parks' African American Hester encounters a series of characters, male and female, who offer her advice on abstinence while taking advantage of her sexually.

Pritika Nehra writes on the novels of Ursula K. Le Guin, whose works, while not presenting answers or alternatives to gender constructions, pose those gender questions which are otherwise never raised. She breaks binaries of ethnicity and gender in, as the essay argues, terms of content and performance in a holistic perspective.

Inbar Kaminsky presents a study of transmedial evolution of Myla Goldberg's novel *Bee Season* to its screenplay by Naomi Foner Gyllenhaal and subsequent film adaptation by the directors Scott McGehee and David

Siegel. The alterations in the narrative by a woman and of a girl as it passes through the stages of adaptation are significant in the cueing transition of gender representations across multiple modes of media.

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WOMEN'S POETRY, FIRST WORLD WAR, AND WORKING-CLASS EXPERIENCE IN BRITISH MUNITION FACTORIES

ARGHA BANERJEE

> Munitions jobs for women were created by the male state and male industrial employers, because of the (male) war, and were permitted by the powerful, dominant male trade unions. Thus women workers' status and experience as workers was overlaid with their status as women in a patriarchal society. (Woollacott 89)

Emily Kinnaird's popular refrain: "Every girl in the fighting line/ Is willing to do or die," (Kinnaird 162) sung by women cordite workers during their night shift at H.M. Factory Gretna, Scotland, symbolises the resilient spirit and deep involvement of British working women in manufacturing shells during the years of the First World War. Poetry, adaptations of popular tunes, jingles and lyrics were an integral part of women's war labour in most of these shell factories. Focusing primarily on some of the factory and service newspapers, this essay tries to reconstruct the cultural impact of women's work experience as evinced through evidence in verse written and published by working women. This large body of publications[1] well documents women's work experience in the shell factories, often in considerably great detail. Most of these poetic testimonies articulate working class women's feelings and mood of the hour, besides documenting the general extent and nature of their work experience during the years of the First World War. In her analysis of "Working-Class Women's Factory Newspapers," Claire Culleton refers to these papers as 'political manifestos', as she argues most of them carry veiled voices of deep resentment and protest against victimisation of women workers through 'unfair labour policies' and other various forms of exploitation at the workplace:

> […] in their articulation of women's wartime experience, the writers characteristically censure factories for unfair labour policies; they criticise the long hours and point to dangerous working conditions, hazardous materials, lacklustre facilities, and insensitive or cruel superintendents; they poke

> fun at the national rationing system to reveal its inadequacies; they wax eloquent on what seemed to some the dissolving class structure in Britain; they mourn the loss of co-workers and loved ones and condemn gender discrimination. It is this sense then that I argue that women's factory and service newspapers were political manifestos. (Culleton 122)

At the outset, it is important to note that patriotism was not always the motivating force for most women munitions workers who queued up for shell work. Pecuniary concerns drove most of them from various parts of the country to enlist; especially as munitions wages were relatively higher as compared with other prevalent forms of labour. While for some women it was a starting point of their professional careers most others required the money to sustain their families in the absence of male earning members. The separation allowances for the male breadwinners were not received by all, and even those who received them often found it inadequate to maintain their families. Unlike a profession like nursing, which stayed in tune with the conventional gender stereotype, women's involvement in shell making contributed a great deal to the cultural anxiety of the period. Hall Caine's contemporary reflection on women's involvement in the Woolwich arsenal work amply testifies to the initial cultural anxiety: "there is at first something so incongruous in the spectacle of women operating masses of powerful machinery… that for a moment, as you stand at the entrance, the sight is scarcely believable" (Caine 20). Caine's initial astonishment is echoed by Mary Collins in "Women at Munitions Making," where she questions the compatibility of the task of shell making with the inherent conventional feminine nature:

> Their hands should minister unto the flame of life,
> Their fingers guide
> The rosy teat, swelling with milk,
> To the eager mouth of the suckling babe
> Or smooth with tenderness,
> Softly and soothingly
> The heated brow of the ailing child...
> But now,
> Their hands, their fingers,
> Are coarsened in munitions factories...
> 'Kill, Kill'. (Collins 32)

Collins's anxiety is further echoed in a poem contributed by Marguerite E. M Steen to the May 1917 issue of *The Bombshell* magazine, the official organ of the NPF or the National Projectile Factory at Templeboro. The lyric entitled "'In the Midst of Life': On a visit to NPF" focuses on the intrinsic incompatibility of shell labour with female nature, as the poet

wonders: "The ladies with their fair hands,/ Their light hands, their dear hands,/ the ladies with their small hands are now creating death!" (Steen 10) While the poem goes on to portray the nerve wrecking labour of women in the munitions factory, it also deplores the fact that their entire effort is directed towards death and destruction. The lyric asserts that such perseverance is irreconcilable with inherent female principles of love, life, and creation. In her discussion of women's shell labour, Newman argues that "no poem points out the irony that the munitions that killed workers on the Home Front were intended to kill Germans on the battlefield" (Newman 95). Steen's lyric does underline the fact that shell labour is not only inimical to female nature but is also synonymous with the notion of death, be it anywhere on earth: "The dark wings, the long wings,/ The sweeping of the sure wings, the mighty wings of death!" (*The Bombshell* Vol. 1 No. 3 1917, 10) Ironically, Steen deliberately evokes maternal imagery in her short lyric, asserting that women's 'laboured breath' (*The Bombshell* Vol. 1 No. 1 1917, 10) and pain has been channelled and redirected to celebrate the cause of death instead of creation, largely on the instigation of the patriarchal state. Such lyrical evidence further underlines the strands of ambivalence deeply rooted in women's work experience during the years of the war.

Beyond the intrinsic nature of the work, one of the most interesting features of women's shell labour was the diverse conglomeration of class and ethnicity in the formation of the labour force. Largely inspired by the relatively higher wages, women labourers working in shell factories came from miscellaneous backgrounds. As Woollacott points out, "The women who made up this cohort were a mixture of ages, classes, sexualities, races, ethnicities, and regional and national origins and represented enormously varied standards of living, cultures, and political views" (Woollacott 37). Poetry also re-echoes this diverse involvement of women from various quarters of the British society, as this worker at the National Projectile Factory reflects: "In a factory I am working amid thousands of other girls,/ Projectiles roll around my feet; o'er head machinery whirls,/ There are tall girls and small girls, and girls with a pedigree,/ There are fat girls and lean girls, as any you may see,/ There are nice girls and nasty girls, and girls of high degrees,/ In fact there is every kind of girl in this large factory,/ With old girls and young girls who labour side by side" (*The Bombshell* Vol. 2 No. 9 1918, 50).

By 1915, the state propaganda was targeted more towards recruitment from the middle-upper class British women into munitions work, as it was unanimously believed that such recruits would be relatively easier to dismiss from labour in case of changing circumstances of the war. It was also

widely assumed that women from the working class in all probability were more likely to unite and resist sacking. The mixture of class at the workplace no doubt fostered a feeling of sisterhood among labourers from diverse backgrounds. However, social friction too was an inevitable feature of such a conglomeration, as Woollacott argues:

> Not all the dynamics operating among women munitions workers were amiable. One widespread dynamic was the tension, even hostility, generated when middle- and upper -class women, doing "their bit for the war effort," mixed with working class women. When women of different classes rubbed shoulders in the dense, noisy, and often grimy atmosphere of munitions factories, they cooperated as necessary to facilitate the work, but antagonism thrived. (Woollacott 40)

Such antagonism is also echoed in verse, as working class women ventilated their occasional laxity in work: "But list, a spy is on the track, She thinks to catch us on the hop;/ I'd like to break her belly back,/ Or hit her whack, right on the top/ Of her not very shapely head/ The blighter, how I wish her dead" (*Munitions* N.p.).

Irrespective of class friction, breaking into a new territory of work front was not an easy form of transition for most women. The shell labour was tough, monotonous, repetitive and exacting. To keep alive the spirit against heavy odds, especially to cheer themselves during the long tedium of night shifts, women munitions workers sang songs of the wartime popular culture. In addition, like the suffrage movement, they often adapted well-known tunes to suit and serve the purposes of the new lyrics they had composed to them. These lyrical adaptations served a variety of purposes for the labourers. Besides boosting solidarity it also aided in distinguishing workers in various sheds and shifts. They often fostered a new sense of identity to working women, infusing "a vivid awareness of the nature of munitions work and of the war at the front, as well as a desire to valorise their own role in it" (Woollacott 192). "The Girls with Yellow Hands," a song from an explosives factory at Faversham in Kent testifies to the indefatigable mood of the hour:

> The boys are smiling though they rush against a barb'ed trench;
> The girls are smiling though destruction hovers o'er their bench;
> And when the soldiers sweep along through lines of shattered strands,
> Who helped them all to do their job? The girls with yellow hands. (Woollacott 193)

Some women workers were well aware of the short tenure of their wartime assignment, for them motivation for temporary employment came largely

from conventional patriotism: "The day will come when the war is won,/ And work is finished for rifle and gun/ You will be proud of the work you've done, / In making shells" (Ibbotson 46).

For most women, working in the munitions factory was a perilous task, fraught with various forms of dangers. Besides being obvious targets of German Goths and Giant Bomber air assaults, the job in itself was potentially hazardous. While flaunting their new lifestyle, working class women workers also voiced their concerns of sudden death which they feared would descend abruptly from nowhere: "We're all here today, mate,/ Tomorrow—perhaps dead,/ If Fate tumbles on us/ And blows up our shed" (Bedford 6). Factory papers, however, lauded the composure of most women workers in seeing through periods of raid alarm. As this declaration in *Bombshell* testifies: "the workers here are to be congratulated on their behaviour and self-control during the recent Air Raid warnings. Few can avoid experiencing some vague, uncanny feeling—partly excitement, partly anxiety—when a warning is given and the lights are dimmed or extinguished so that the suppression of anything in the nature of alarm is all the more praiseworthy" (*The Bombshell* Vol. 9 No. 1 1917, 15).

A large number of women munitions workers who handled explosives while filling shells with lethal substances such as TNT (trinitrotoluene) and lethal gases or chemicals had to be extra cautious largely due to the hazardous nature of the job (Woollacott 35). During the years of the war "an unknowable number of women workers died in industry accidents, hundreds of other women workers died from toxic jaundice or TNT poisoning," while "others suffered from black powder poisoning, or were poisoned by cordite ingestion, one of the most dangerous explosives handled by women, or died from protracted exposure to acid fumes, varnish, asbestos, gas and emery dust" (Culleton 75). In accordance with one study carried out at the Woolwich Arsenal, "37 percent of women shell fillers suffered from abdominal pain, nausea and constipation, 25 percent had skin problems, 36 percent suffered from depression and irritability". The same study reports that in the period of the war "349 cases of TNT poisoning were reported with 109 deaths" (DeGroot 134).

Words to certain factory songs often referred "specifically to working with TNT and its emblematic yellowing, presumably to arrogate whatever glamour was possible to a discoloration that must have been a social embarrassment as well as an indication of poisoning" (Woollacott 193). A song from the south of Scotland exemplifies how the workers strived hard to keep their wits intact while indulging in such dangerous labour in a cordite factory: "Give honour to the Gretna girls,…/ And when they are in the factory/ Midst the cordite and the smell,/ We'll give three cheers for

the Gretna girls/ And the others can come as well' (Woollacott 193). Fear also prevailed over the chance of possible explosion at the workplace. Parodies reflecting on the women cordite workers' relative affluent lifestyle also articulated such apprehensions: "Worthwhile, for tomorrow/ If I'm blown to the sky,/ I'll have repaid mi wages/ In death—and pass by" (Bedford 6). Other working class contributions like "Through the Window" or "Ten Little Dornock Girls" also narrate apprehensions and dangers of working with 'N/G' (nitro-glycerine) and acid fumes: "Seven little Dornock girls did some N/G mix;/ One was overcome with fumes, And then there were six. […]/ Three little Dornock girls went to work quite new;/ The Acid fumes did smother one,/ And then there were two" (Culleton 130).

Beyond the perilous nature of shell labour, women's involvement in factory work also facilitated the proliferation of a unique work culture in most factories. Workers of a particular shift often organised concerts for their own entertainment or for injured soldiers in retreat. Besides this, they also participated in sports competitions (like football/hockey) or even in the more conventional hair length or hat-making contests. Workshops at Woolwich arsenal had their own songs to foster a sense of identity among the workers and further correlate them with the Tommy's labour at the Front. This lyric published in *Woolwich Pioneer* (16 February 1917) relates the tireless efforts of women workers toiling in their night shift:

1 Way down in Shell Shop Two
You'll never find us blue
We're working night and day
To keep the Huns away.

2 All we can think of tonight
Are the shells all turning bright
Hammers ringing, girls all singing
And the shop seems bright.

3 To our worthy foreman here
Give three good hearty cheers
Our wounded heroes too
We're mighty proud of you.

4 And the boys who're still out there
Good luck be always their share
And bring them all back
Everyman Jack
To their dear old folks at home. (Thom 154)

Several poems by working-class women specifically addressed the extreme stress associated with the tedious night time labour. As "The Night Shift" testifies, women not only sang to relieve themselves from the monotony of wearisome labour, but indirectly, also complained of the undue exploitation and extreme stress associated with the task: "Sing a song of six inch shells/ Whizzing round and round,/ Four and twenty maidens/ Asleep upon the ground./ When the shop's inspected/ These maidens do not shirk,/ Isn't it's dreadful thing/ To give them so much work?" (*Shell Chippings* 10) In spite of the work-related stress and exploitation, evidence in verse also provides a unique testimony of the rigorous competition between labourers working in various shifts of a factory. This published extract from "That Other Shift—O, I'm so Happy: 'By "B" Shift'" carried by the *Cardonald News* narrates how female workers in a particular shift often raced against time to beat the production record of another shift and create a new record of shell production in the factory:

> The stampers gazed with eager eyes upon the weigher staid.
> Oh, beat that other shift, they cried, who have a record made.
> We don't care what becomes of us if we can just surpass
> The 1506—a total grand!—the other shift did pass.
> The time is four, the work is hit, the sweat is running fast.
> 1303 the total now. ye gods! can they be passed?...
>
> The time is rushing quickly on towards the final hour,
> But beat that other shift we will, and quite above them tower....
>
> 1510! The record broke! And happy we are all
> To know how well we answered our charge hand's stirring call. (*Cardonald News* 3)

Beyond the competitive spirit, some women workers were related to their shell labour as compensatory for the loss of male members of the family. This is clearly evinced in a short lyric like "The Shell Works of Life", where the female worker engenders her war labour while simultaneously honing her technical skills: "When you make a shell it resembles a man/ They're both of them built on a similar plan,/ We'll say you are born, that is where you began/ A ROUGH FORGING/ Some shells and men stray in the *turning* of Fate, And some don't get *centered* and never go *straight*" (*The Bombshell* Vol. 9 No. 1 1917, 12). Continuing to explore the worker's relation with a shell, on analogous lines of a relationship between a man and a woman, this working-class evidence in verse touches on various aspects of shell labour: forging, boring, blending, screwing and polishing down to the final inspection of the finished product by the superintendent.

Work in the shell factory often implied adherence to a strict code of discipline and a deep internalisation of stringent factory rules and regulations for women labourers. Accordingly, women munitions workers created various lyrical codes in order to boost their work culture. The lyrical adaptation in "The Munitions Alphabet" underlines the pressing need to adhere to the exacting discipline and conduct of factory labour: "A's the Arrival at seven on the tick/ B is the Bustle top get to work quick,/ C is the Chatter that goes on at lunch/ D stands for Dot, who is one of the bunch/ E might be Envie, or Edith you see/ F is the Fun and Frolic at ten" (*Shell Chippings* 4). The factory workshop which introduced and familiarised women labourers with technical skills also created its own version of the alphabets: "A is the Army of fair Munitioneers/ B is the Belting, from which we all keep clear./ C stands for Calipers or Chuck if you will/ D is the Drilling machine, also the Drill/ E is the Engine that turns on the lathe/ F is the Foreman so steady and grave" (*Shell Chippings* 4).

While these lyrical codes were created to boost and inculcate a stern sense of discipline, poetic exercises also document deep resentment against the stifling nature of factory imposed rules and regulations on working class women. One such amusing lyric published in *Munitions: Being Some Verses and Sketches from a War Worker's Factory* testifies how one 'Miss E Gower' compensates for the over-discipline in factory premises during her leisure: "Here's a lightning sketch of Miss E Gower,/ Engaged in smoking her ''tenth in an hour,''—/ ''Smoking's forbidden on duty'', they say,/ So she smokes all her leisure time away" (*Munitions* N.p.). Other lyrics also testify to the pervasive fear that plagued most women munitions labourers at work: "We'd love a smoke, but dare not do it,/ For if found out we'd surely rue it;/ We sit and sigh and pine for heat,/ Or something really good to drink,/ For on night shifts we cannot eat,/And sometimes hardly time to think" (*Munitions* N.p.). In such tight exacting circumstances, women shell workers eagerly looked forward to their customary short breaks from work: "'Cease Work' the buzzing noise is stopped,/ machines are now at rest,/ the girls go rushing down to lunch,/ Which they enjoy with zest. /Making the most of one short hour,/ Then back to do their best" (*Shell Chippings* 7).

Employing women automatically implied that they would be docile at the workplace and would incur fewer expenses for the state. However, in actual circumstances, it was witnessed that the "owners frequently shared with the male unionists a patriarchal resistance to the presence of women" (Woollacott 94). Such a resistance on certain occasions also took the ugly form of 'male sabotage' against their female colleagues. As Culleton points out: "many women make reference to stolen tools, and point the

finger at scornful male co-workers who sabotaged their work by nailing shut the women's workstations, for example, pouring oil over tools, or refusing to answer questions about the job" (Culleton 112). A parodic adaptation of Kipling's "If" reveals the quiet hostility women workers encountered at their workplace from their male colleagues: "If you can bear to have your tools all taken/ Each day, and never stop to curse the thief/ If when your tubs want emptying, you're forsaken/ By men, who prefer a plate of beef" (Culleton 112). Among other forms of discrimination, working class women also complain of their petitions being dismissed by male authorities without commensurate scrutiny: "The Super received it […]/ He merely perused it/ Then quietly abused it./ And- pushed it through the window" (Culleton 129).

This male resistance was further complicated for most employers as they had to provide additional amenities for women labourers in the factory. These included separate toilet provisions and amenities like washing, changing, canteen and first aid, all of which were sanctioned by the Ministry of the Munitions. Once these provisions were provided, the male labourers too benefited a lot from them. Women workers who were employed in providing these facilities in the factory also engaged in hard labour. "A Song of Templeboro" appreciates such labour in different quarters of the factory: "It's sung by a maid demure and staid of the staff of the Works Canteen O!/ It's a song of plates and pies and pork—as when they work there's no time for talk—they know there are women behind the gun—who are helping fathers and brothers and sons" (*The Bombshell* May 1917, Vol. 2 No. 2, 10). *The* canteen, as various poetic evidence affirms, was a veritable spot for relaxation and social exchange to which most munitions workers looked forward to during the exacting labour. Several poems, including parodies, came to written on several of these facilities provided by the factory, most of which boosted the relative congeniality and hospitality of the workplace for women workers. In fact, as *The Ministry of Munitions Journal* (December 1916-November 1917) informs, the welfare facilities provided in the shell factories were lauded by Madame Hamon who headed the contingent of French Women Munitions makers' visit to England during the war (*The Ministry of Munitions Journal* 52).

An interesting feature of women's shell labour was the issue of their factory earnings and the deep curiosity it generated in contemporary British society. Poetry testifies to the social lacunae generated due to the extensive involvement of working class women in shell making. For the middle and upper classes, the mass scale access of so many working class women labourers into munitions factories implied that household aid was excruciatingly difficult to come by during the years of the war. Grumbling