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Re-visiting George Egerton: Reclaiming the Subdued Voice of Fin de Siècle New Woman Fiction

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Abstract: Canon formation is often based on dominant ideological considerations. Texts like F.R. Leavis' *The Great Tradition* (1948) and Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) showcase the institutional academic prevalence of such prejudices. One of the authors subjected to such systematic erasure was George Egerton (1859-1945), who wrote her fictional works in the late-nineteenth century focusing on issues like female sexuality, marital rape, alcoholism, non-conformist/deviant motherhood. For her explorations of such issues, she was not only lambasted by the contemporary periodical press but also excluded from the canonical estimates of the subsequent critics. However, since the publication of texts like Elaine Showalter's *a Literature of their Own* (1977) and *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle* (1993), feminist critical tradition has reconfigured the canon by foregrounding the contributions of the fin de siècle women writers like George Egerton, claiming them to be the missing links between the eminent writers of the Victorian novel and the feminist writers of Modernism. My paper intends to focus the contributions of George Egerton, whose feminist aesthetic branded her as a notorious iconoclast of the fin de siècle, in view of the changed sensibility of the twenty-first century academia.

Keywords: gender, sexuality, motherhood, literary canon, feminist revisionism

In tandem with the emergence of the first-wave feminism, the literary works of New Woman writers came to the fore in the early 1890s. Although multitudinous addressing the Woman Question had flooded the periodical press throughout the 1880s and the early 1890s, it was Ouida who extrapolated the phrase "New Woman" from Sarah Grand's essay "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" primarily in order to ridicule the radical aspirations of the late nineteenth century feminists (Ledger 9). The New Woman was simultaneously a historical phenomenon and a discursive construct of the fin de siècle. While the 'real' New Woman included the late Victorian feminists and suffragists, it was the textual representations of the New Woman that became the center of controversy. As the term "New Woman' was essentially used to designate a deviation from the Victorian model of conventional femininity, the fin de siècle's dominant discourse on the New Woman – which was disseminated by the periodical press and anti-feminist treatises – denounced her as a sexual aberration, who was "a threat to the human race, [and] probably an infanticidal mother" (Ledger 10). Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, has argued that the appearance of a dominant discourse automatically invokes the emergence of a "reverse discourse" and "… discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also […] a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (101). According to Sally Ledger, the hostile dominant discourses on the New Woman during the fin de siècle led to the formation of a "reverse discourse" as several feminist

writers came forward to speak on behalf of the New Woman. One of the most eminent authors of New Woman fiction of the fin de siècle was George Egerton.

Mary Chavelita Dunne (1859-1945), predictably writing under the male pseudonym of George Egerton, was a controversial writer of the 1890s, whose experimental approach and provocative themes simultaneously earned her much popularity and notoriety. Although she has been branded by modern critics as one of the most influential writers of the fin de siècle feminist movement and claimed that, "I am embarrassed at the outset by the term 'New Woman'… I have never met one— never written about one. My women are all eternally feminine" (qtd. In March-Russell ix). However, Egerton's exploration of feminine subjectivity and sexual emancipation reverberated with New Woman preoccupations. While her literary oeuvre diversely comprised short-story collections, novels and even incidental contributions to journals, particularly *The Yellow Book*— which induced contemporary critics to associate her with the Decadents— my paper aims to focus primarily on her early short-story collections *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894), which, pre-dating the Oscar Wilde trial in 1895, were written during the heydays of her career. *Keynotes* (1893), Egerton's debut collection which announced her entry into the debate over the New Woman, was an instant success. Within the next six months, it was reprinted twice (O'Toole 2) and lent its name to a series of books published by John Lane which included the writings of various avant-garde authors. In spite of being a best-seller, *Keynotes* (1893) provoked an intense critical backlash from both the contemporary periodical press and anti-feminist commentators. While the *Punch* magazine parodied Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893) in "She-Notes" by Borgia Smudgiton (Fitzsimons 2), *The Athenaeum* complained that the text was notable "chiefly on the account of the hysterical frankness of its amatory abandonment ("The Year in Review" 18). Even W.T Stead, a pioneer of new journalism who did much to publicize what he termed as "The Novel of the Modern Woman", singled out Egerton's *Keynotes* for his vehement disapprobation, arguing that the stories only "present one side, and that too an unpleasant one, of the modern woman' (68). The hostile critical reaction evoked by the *Keynotes* (1893) also went on to 'greet' Egerton's second volume of short-stories, *Discords* which was in 1894. James Ashcroft Noble, writing in the *Contemporary Review* in 1895 cited Egerton's *Keynotes* and *Discords* while commenting that the "fiction of sexual sensualism […] has largely made itself such a nuisance to ordinary decent and wholesome readers" as it distorted reality and presented one with "a series of pictures painted from reflections in convex mirrors" which unnaturally emphasized "the sexual passion" at the heart of all social relations (494). Based on such negative responses from contemporary critics, George Egerton, much like various other iconoclastic New Woman writers of the nineteenth century including Sarah Grand, Olive Shreiner and Mona Caird, was denied a position within the mainstream literary canon by the twentieth century critics like F. R. Leavis and Harold Bloom, who deemed such writers unworthy of entering the high echelons of literature.

However, it is to be noted that the notion of canon is dominated by various hierarchies of class and gender. Those texts which remain in tune with the dominant conventions of the time find themselves easily consecrated as canonical. Feminist critics have played a crucial role in the interrogation of the male-oriented canon and have sought to recreate the canon in a way that challenges patriarchal assumptions about aesthetic values and becomes more hospitable to the aesthetic tradition committed to the foregrounding of women's rights, consciousness and predicament. With the emergence of "Phallocentrism" and "Gynocriticism" during the 1960s, the

existing male-dominated literary oeuvre came under feminist scrutiny and they forwarded the concept of an alternative feminist canon in order to recuperate the voices of several female authors who, in spite of enjoying great popularity during their heydays, have eventually ebbed into obscurity.

Feminist critic Elaine Showalter, who has famously coined the term "Gynocriticism", employed her critically acclaimed work, *A Literature of their Own: British Woman Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977), to retrieve the voices of fin de siècle writers like Sarah Grand and George Egerton and appreciate the feminist aesthetics that characterizers their works. It is from this perspective that my paper aims to reevaluate the position of George Egerton, whose writings not only document the various concerns of late-nineteenth century, but also deals with the "Woman Question" in an innovative and iconoclastic manner.

With the emergence of the first-wave feminism during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, several writers, both male and female, championed the cause of the feminists who rallied in favour of civil rights of women. In this respect, Egerton seemingly occupied a liminal space. Apparently distancing herself from the term "feminist", he argued that her writing was not guided by an urge "to usher in a revolt or preach propaganda, [but] merely to strike a few notes on the phase of the female character I knew to exist…" ("How to Court an Advanced Woman" 194). This is further reverberated in "A Keynote to *Keynotes*" where she states:

> I realized that in literature, everything had been done better by man that woman could hope to emulate. There was one small plot for her to tell: the *terra incognita* of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man like to imagine— in a word to give herself away, as man had given himself in his writings. (58)

However, underneath this ostensibly modest and innocuous statement, Egerton seems to authoritatively claim that "women's writing both corrects men's myth about women and tells hitherto unarticulated stories about "the *terra incognita* of woman" (Fluhr 245) and thus offers an accurate depiction of female subjectivity. Parading against the conventional gender mores of the patriarchal Victorian society, Egerton employe her fiction to examine the various facets of femininity and promulgate her ideas about female emancipation. Her short-story collections, *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894) are no exceptions. Attesting to her attempt of portraying woman "as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine" ("A Keynote to *Keynotes*" 58), Egerton's *Keynotes* offers alternative model of womanhood which is driven by sexuality, agency and desire for self-fulfillment— a far cry from the traditional Victorian notions of femininity which demanded women to be sexually insipid, passive beings, who could be easily assimilated into the mould of a dutiful wife and self-abnegating mother. On the other hand, in *Discords* (1894), Egerton probes into the realities that shaped women's experiences during the nineteenth century and addresses various taboo topics like illegitimacy, infanticide and the predicament of the "fallen" woman. However, in this paper, I would like to focus on Egerton's texts like "Gone Under", "Virgin Soil" and "A Cross Line", featuring respectively in *Discords* and *Keynotes*, in order to explore Egerton's iconoclastic take on contemporary social concerns like prostitution, alcoholism, marital rape, sex education and birth-control. My literary choices also determined by the way these texts diversely undermine the dominant discourses of the time and

reveal perspectives on the nineteenth century British culture that are rarely locatable in canonized works and, in turn, push the readers to reevaluate their perspective of Victorian life and attitudes.

Egerton's "Gone Under" deals with the figure of Edith Grey, whom the female protagonist comes across during her journey on a steamer from New York to England. During a storm at sea, she responds to Edith's cry for help and, while nursing her through the night, grows interested in her new acquaintance, who drinks continually and confines herself to her room. As the protagonist develops a degree of tenderness Edith, the agony-ridden soul reveals her predicament. With circumstances conspiring against her, Edith, an orphan, was seduced at sixteen by her lover, whom she considered her husband and lived accordingly. Her wealthy lover, however, did not share her delight at her consequent pregnancy and rather made arrangements to wriggle herself out of situation. He duped the naïve girl into visiting an establishment called Madame Rachelle's where he conspired with the mercenary midwife to do away with the baby. Although certified as stillborn, Edith was certain that her new-born was murdered. Edith's plight sheds light on an issue which emerged as a pressing concern in Victorian England— infanticide. According to A. Cossins, "Infanticide was an offence that constituted the dark pool of criminality, since it amounted to the most common crime committed by women during the nineteenth century", with most infanticide being committed by unwed mothers soon after birth and by midwives who readily masked live births as stillbirths since they knew the ways to produce "a quiet 'un" (7). The loss of her baby shatters Edith emotionally and she resorts to alcohol to blotch out those tormenting memories: "…[B]ut it haunted. I could feel it [the baby] at night groping about for me, and the chill of its little hands clung to me, and I used to drink to get warm again and forget it" (*Discords* 100). On top of that, when her lover abandons her for Europe, Edith is propelled into a life of debauchery, guilt and shame. Although the protagonist sympathizes with the bereaved mother and claims that "a woman who mothers a bastard, and endeavours bravely to rear it decently, is more to be commended than the society wife who contrives to shirk her motherhood", she fails to ameliorate her situation (*Discords* 101). Judged harshly for her debauchery by her lover, who is himself responsible for her decline, it is hinted that Edith is finally abandoned to a life of prostitution. The female protagonist thus realizes, as she moves across Leichester Square which is the "rendezvous of leering, silk-hatted satyrs and flaunting nymphs of the pavement", that sometimes in this "city of smug outer propriety" the foot-walks are "crowded with the 'fallen leaves' of fairest and frailest womanhood, like wild rose leaves blown by a wanton wind into a stay" (*Discords* 109-110). This attests to the limited options that were offered by the ostensibly puritanical Victorian society to 'fallen' women like Edith to sustain themselves. While the 'fallen' woman is forced to a life of degradation, as the text critically points out, the man's existence continues unencumbered. However, Egerton makes the tragic figure of Edith Grey challenge the conventional Madonna/harlot binary— she emerges as a liminal figure of the 'grey' zone in whose character a subaltern sexuality finds harmonious coexistence with a strong maternal instinct. While the nineteenth century medical theorist Wiliam Acton, in keeping with the dominant moral attitudes of the time, maintained that "all illicit intercourse is prostitution, and that this word is justly applicable as those of 'fornication' and 'whoredom' to the females who, whether for hire or not, voluntarily surrenders her virtue" (qtd. In Logan 9), Egerton's text pushes the readers to probe into the circumstances that conspire to expose women like Edith to a life of depravity and degradation.

While Egerton's "Gone Under" sheds light on the harrowing experiences of an unwed mother, "Virgin Soil" bears testimony to the sordid aspects of conventional marriage and compulsory motherhood. The tale deals with the character of Flo who, at the tender age of who seventeen, is married off to a middle-aged but crucially wealthy man, as her mother considers it the best way to secure her future. Like a traditional Victorian mother, her parting advice to her daughter is that she must obey her husband in all things and that "marriage is a serious thing, a sacred thing" (*Discords* 148). However, apart from emphasizing the apparently sacrosanct nature of marital bond, the mother feels too hesitant to discuss the sexual aspect of marriage and lets her leave with her husband without any knowledge of sexuality. Five years later, when Flo returns to her mother, "the hollow-eyed, sullen woman is so unlike the fresh girl who left her five years ago" that the mother can barely recognize her (*Discords* 151). The narrative reveals that Flo, whose countenance betrays a "cynical disillusion", has left her husband and has come home to remonstrate with her mother, before heading towards a new life of her own (*Discords* 150). She informs her mother that Philip, her philandering husband, "has gone to Paris with a girl from Alhambra" and that his excursions with other women have seemed to her as "lovely oasis in the desert of matrimony" as she loathes her sexually demanding husband and this has made her conjugal life seem like "a nightmare" or "one long crucifixion, one long submittal to the desires of a man I bound myself to in ignorance of what it meant" (*Discords* 159). She chastises her mother for keeping sexually ignorant and sending her to "fight the biggest battle of a woman's life, one in which she ought to know every turn of the game with a white gauze of maiden purity as shield" (*Discords* 157). Subverting the ideology of marital bliss upheld by well-noted nineteenth century texts like Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854), a paean to marital bliss, Egerton's New Woman protagonist Flo reveals the harsh physical reality of conventional marriages:

> Marriage becomes for many a legal prostitution, a nightly degradation, a hateful yoke under which they age, mere bearers of children conceived in a sense of duty, not love. They bear them, birth them, nurse them, and bear again without choice in the matter, growing old, unlovely, with all the joy of living swallowed in a senseless burden of reckless maternity… . (*Discords* 155)

This not only sheds light on the shocking experience of marital rape that often tainted the lives of married women, but also highlights the way conventional marriages alienated women from their reproductive faculty that is coerced into replicating the will of the husband. However, Flo, like a typical Egerton-ian heroine, acknowledges that "I have my rights too, and my duty to myself" (Discords 159) and have seemingly resorted to the use of illegal abortifacients as a means of retaining agency over her reproductive faculty. This hinted when, as a response to her mother that the presence of a child would have alleviated her marital discontentment, Flo's outright negation of the proposition is accompanied by "a peculiar expression of satisfaction over something […] as a man has when he dwells on the successful accomplishment of some secret purpose" (*Discords* 160). Abortion, despite being illegal in England since 1803, was the chief form of birth-control that was employed secretly and widely by women of all classes, and abortifacients ranged from herbs, salts to castor oil, turpentine and, by the 1890s, lead pills (Bland 190). According to Lucy Bland, "all such potions were unreliable and many were poisonous, frequently resulting in ill-health, even death" (190). In Egerton's text, the extensive emphasis on Flo's physical deterioration post-marriage— with

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her skin being "sallow with the sallowness of a fair-skin in ill-health"— seems to covertly indicate the way prolonged use of abortifacients have taken a toll on the health of the sexually abused young wife (*Discords* 150). Furthermore, the text evinces the way patriarchal intervention can lead to the disintegration of mother-daughter bonds— Flo, instead of condemning her sexually demanding husband for her ruin, lays blame squarely on her mother for ideologically moulding her in a way that renders her vulnerable to such patriarchal oppression. Through this, Egerton seems to etch a new code of maternal responsibility— whereby a mother must not act as an unwitting agent of the heteropatriarchal order, but rather support her daughter to find herself a suitable partner who, as Flo claims "would satisfy me, body and soul […] of whom I would think with gladness as the father of a little child to come" (*Discords* 158). Egerton's text also validates the fact that maternity and female fulfillment cannot be always considered synonymous – motherhood can only be a fulfilling experience when it is espoused voluntarily by a woman with a partner of her choice.

While "Virgin Soil" illustrates the negative ramifications of compulsory motherhood, Egerton's "A Cross Line" advocates the idea of a sexualized motherhood. As per the dominant sexual ideology of the times were not supposed to experience any sexual passion. According to William Acton, the British medical practitioner whose perceptions on female sexuality held sway till the 1890s, women are primarily guided by the "[l]ove of home, children and domestic duties" and generally "a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him, and, but for the sake of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attention" (101-102). But in "A Cross Line", Egerton's heroine, appropriately referred to as Gypsy, seems to contradict such patriarchal parochialism. Manifesting all the characteristics typically associated with the New Woman, like smoking, drinking whiskey and moving around unchaperoned, the young wife in Egerton's text is depicted as a free soul who despises "life with its tame duties and virtuous monotony" and fantasizes escape (*Keynotes* 27). On one of such occasions, the married heroine adulterously fancies herself as a gauze-clad, bejeweled Salome-like figure dancing erotically before a congregation of admiring male audience:

> She bounds forward and dances, bends her lissome waist and curves her slender arms, and gives to the soul of each man what it craves, be it good or evil […] she can see herself with parted lips and panting, rounded breasts, and a dancing devil in each glowing eye. (*Keynotes* 27-28)

The "heroine's adulterous sexuality", as Sally Ledger opines, "is eventually sublimated, in the story, into a passionate maternal devotion, a narrative manoeuvre, recurrent in Egerton's fiction, which has often irritated twentieth-century feminist critics" (100). However, it seems that there is room for scrutinizing the apparently conservative ending of this tale. This is primarily because the question of the paternity of Gypsie's forthcoming child remains unresolved— it may either belong to her husband or to the fishing stranger with whom she has seemingly forged an extramarital relationship. But in either way, the unborn child becomes emblematic of her eroticized self and agency, since in the narrative Gypsy is depicted to play an active role ion the sexual foreplay even with her husband as she "shuts his eyes with kisses, and bites his chin and shakes it like a terrier in her strong little teeth" (*Keynotes* 25). This seems to be the reason as to why the revelation about her forthcoming motherhood fills the heroine with a pervasive sense of emotional fulfillment and she begins to

perceive herself almost "as a precious thing" (*Keynotes* 44). Also, by not directly divulging the paternity of the unborn child, Egerton's narrative seems to take a dig at the conventional patriarchal social order by relegating paternal identity secondary to that of the mother. Elated at her pregnancy, Gypsy calls off her relationship with the fishing stranger and shares the news of her forthcoming child with her maid, Lizzie, who, as it is revealed, has had an illegitimate offspring of her own. Transcending their class differences, they bond over their shared feelings of maternity as Lizzie reveals to her mistress the tiny belongings of her baby and "the two women pour over them as a gem collector over a rare stone" (*Keynotes* 43). Challenging the Victorian idea of motherhood premised on the notions of sexual passivity, self-surrender and duty, Egerton's "A Cross Line" offers an alternative model of sexualized maternity that is guided by volition and the ethics of self-fulfillment.

Both *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894) are predominated by feminine presence while men are mentioned only cursorily. Egerton's narratives thus emerge as an alternative realm for the articulation of feminine desires and disappointments, aspirations and anxieties, which traditional male-oriented society would have discounted as both insignificant and indecent. The world represented by Victorian mainstream literature had obscured and occluded various aspects of contemporary reality, especially those pertaining to the experiences of women. The significance of Egerton lies in the fact that her fiction introduces to the readers that marginalized or erased female experience through the platform of literature. Egerton's bold explication of issues like female sexuality, marital rape and enforced maternity has been crucial in shaping the thematic concerns of her New Woman contemporaries. Writers like Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, Ella Hepworth Dixon and Victoria Cross seemingly took cues from Egerton's nuanced depiction of women's inner lives and struggles as they expanded on her ideas, albeit in diverse ways, to etch a new code of female autonomy beyond the dictates of patriarchy. Plunging into the mental recesses of her female protagonists, Egerton comes up with an impressionistic narrative that offers critical insights into the psychological workings of women at crucial junctures of life. Thus, Sally Ledger rightly notes that, "Egerton's short stories have characteristics which we now would associate with a modernist literary aesthetic: they are compressed, elliptical, impressionistic rather than explanatory, and focus on the inner consciousness of their female subjects" (187). Moreover, Egerton's exploration of issues like female agency, sexuality and the experience of motherhood seems to anticipate the subjects of twentieth century writers like Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich. Texts like *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) by Woolf, owing to their explication of the psychological realities of women's lives, seem to echo Egerton's emphasis on the workings of the inner recesses of the female psyche and the complexities of their lived experiences. Adrinne Rich, writing much later in the twentieth century, seems to echo Egerton's critique of traditional gender roles and socially constructed idea of motherhood — her eminent text *Of Woman Born* (1976) explores the way institutionalized motherhood becomes a potential tool for the subjugation of women within a patriarchal social structure. Thus, an examination of Egerton's works helps to locate the roots of a rich feminist tradition. Furthermore, besides authentically depicting contemporary social problems and, in the process, alerting the readers to the necessity and possibility of positive social changes, Egerton's works evince the way literature became for the late-nineteenth century New Woman writers an instrument to impel social reform. Although their overtly subversive content debarred Egerton's texts from entering the hallowed precincts of mainstream canonical literature and they

languished in relative obscurity till feminist intervention during the second half of the twentieth century incorporated Egerton within the feminist literary canon, Egerton's greatest contribution lies in the fact that her texts not only act as significant cultural artefacts of late Victorian times but also addresses issues like marital rape, birth-control and the importance of sex education, which transcend their topicality and continue to be potential subjects of debate well into the twenty-first century. Herein lies the lasting impact of George Egerton.

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