

## Dress, Seamstress and Sartorial Resistance in Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen*

### Abstract

In many late nineteenth-century novels, which are predominantly women centric, the figure of a Victorian Seamstress is a frequently venturing character. Victorian critics who deal with the 'Woman Question' invariably mention the figure of the seamstress as a site of resistance, barely hanging by a thread of 'respectability', while laden with the ravages of the sewing trade — over-worked, under-paid, thrashed into basements with poor ventilation and dim lights, the figure of a seamstress often dwindles with the possibility of falling into prostitution. However, there are a few Victorian novels that represent the conventional seamstress in an unconventional light, breaking away from the stereotypical representation of seamstresses. One such remarkable seamstress is Margaret Oliphant's eponymous heroine in *Kirsteen: The Story of a Scotch Family Seventy Years Ago* (1890). Beginning with a detailed overview of the Victorian seamstresses and their conditions, this paper follows the life story of Kirsteen, and discusses how the female protagonist transgresses the boundaries of Victorian stereotypes, flees the claws of an oppressive patriarch father and reinvents herself as a New Woman Seamstress, a dressmaker in her own right by using sewing as an act of resistance. Examining gender roles, social hierarchies, materialism, and dress culture this paper sheds new light on how Oliphant envisions a feminine utopia, a female 'little community' among the seamstresses in *Kirsteen*, and thus adds to the genre of women's writing in Victorian studies.

**Keywords:** *Nineteenth-century, Seamstress, Needlework, Woman Empowerment, New Woman, Sartorial resistance.*