

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

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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.*

The figure of a seamstress is a vastly discussed and debated topic of concern for Victorian scholars who have dealt with the 'Woman Questions'¹ of the nineteenth century. In Victorian novels, we often encounter intricate descriptions of dress as a symbol of the material culture of the age, and it invariably brings into question the figure of the seamstress as a cog in the ravages of the textile industry in England. The term 'Woman Questions' connoted a complex array of questions, as Nicola Diane

Thompson recounts in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question* (1999), concerning women's proper role and status in society — matters such as marriage and divorce laws, women's property and custody rights, and educational and employment opportunities for women, and the purview of employment was intimately intertwined with the condition of the seamstress in the Victorian society. In a nineteenth-century Victorian society that was increasingly changing due to industrialisation and working-class reforms, the figure of seamstress had become, as Lynn Alexander puts it 'a working-class paradigm: her condition had become a representation of the condition of all workers.'² The over-worked, underpaid, thrashed into basements with poor ventilation and dim lights, figure of a seamstress catered as a representative of the larger working-class population in Victorian England. However, Beth Harris slightly moves away from Alexander's point of view, and adds the class aspect to the question, remarking that 'the seamstress often had middle- or upper-class origins that made her seem more refined, vulnerable, genteel, and therefore more feminine and sympathetic than her working-class counterparts.'³ Harris, furthermore, adds that 'sewing had connotations of delicacy, precision, and grace' and that its resemblance to idealized femininity made the figure of the burdened seamstress troubling for Victorians.⁴ Patricia Zakreski in *Representing Female Artistic Labour* (2006) goes a step further and states that the 'refined' work of sewing adds to a woman's femininity and thus, 'almost everyone was united in pity for these "white slaves of England."⁵ As the condition of working-class needle-women achieved notoriety, many philanthropic associations came forward to ameliorate the working conditions of seamstresses. The Association (or Society) for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners was founded in March 1843, that demanded better working situations for seamstresses. For example, instead of long inhumane work hours, they demanded 12 hours' work shifts at rooms with better light and ventilation, and leave on Sundays for the seamstresses. They suggested monetary aid to be made available for seamstresses in acute need and distress. They also asked for better management of demand and supply chain to alleviate the excessive workload on seamstresses.⁶

In 1847 The Distressed Needlewomen's Society asked for similar demands for seamstresses as well. Various local organisations also cropped up in many cities – such as in Glasgow, Glasgow Milliners and

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Dressmakers' Association was founded in 1861, and in Manchester, Female Provident Association worked for the betterment of the needlewomen.

The condition of Victorian seamstresses in literature and art:

The poor working conditions of the Victorian seamstresses became popularised in art and media, and the poem that inspired innumerable representations of the figure of overworked seamstress and etched it into nineteenth century public memory was Thomas Hood's 'The Song of the Shirt' which was published in 1843 in the Christmas issue of *Punch* magazine. The poem insightfully narrates the harrowing tale of a widow seamstress who due to utmost poverty had traded some of her master's belongings and was charged with larceny. The first stanza of the poem reads:

WITH fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat, in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread—
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the "Song of the Shirt."⁷

This sleep-deprived, worn-out figure of the seamstress with poor working conditions was reflected in many other art works of the day. Richard Redgrave's painting, 'The Sempstress' (1844) signifies one such iconic figure of a distressed seamstress working at an attic. This painting epitomizes the lines from Thomas Hood's popular poem "The Song of the Shirt", with the following lines from the aforementioned poem were inscribed with the painting 'Oh! men with sisters dear/Oh! men with mothers and wives,/ It is not linen you're wearing out,/But human creatures' lives'.⁸



Richard Redgrave's painting, "The Sempstress" (1844)⁹

A careful observation of Redgrave's painting renders the iconography of the Victorian seamstress clear: the seamstress in the painting is sitting at a poorly-lit attic with her needle and rags. She is looking upward with an exhausted disposition, as if seeking relief from this tiring needlework. Chipped utensils visible in her room are suggestive of her poverty and hardships. Interestingly, from her attic window, another dimly-lit attic window is visible in the painting, which creates a meta-picturesque effect and subtly hints at the possibility of another needlewoman working at a neighbouring attic in similar working conditions. Redgrave's painting, thus, depicts at length the depth of the nineteenth-century seamstress's life story. A decade later, Anna Elizabeth Blunden's painting, 'The Seamstress' (1854), another art piece inspired by Thomas Hood's poem 'The Song of the Shirt', elaborates on the theme of the life of the seamstresses in a similar manner.



Anna Elizabeth Blunden's painting, "The Seamstress" (1854)¹⁰

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In Anna Elizabeth Blunden's painting, 'The Seamstress', the needlewoman is portrayed as sitting at an attic with her needle-set and rags, pensively looking out of her attic window, looking outward in the sky, holding a gesture of prayer to God, as if she is praying to be saved from her terrible working conditions and the ravages of her trade. Another attic and the cloudy London skyline are visible from her window which is suggestive of the industrialised cityscape and its working-class population.

After twenty years of publishing the renowned poem 'The song of the shirt' that turned the harrowing working condition of a seamstress into a popular iconography, *Punch* magazine published a cartoon titled 'The Haunted Lady' or 'The Ghost' in the Looking-Glass' in 1863.



John Tenniel, "The Haunted Lady or 'The Ghost' in the Looking-Glass"(1863)¹¹

The aforementioned cartoon in *Punch* was published as a part of its anti-sweatshop campaign that emphasised the ignoble realities of the sweatshops that thrived at the cost of the poor seamstresses working for them. The cartoon portrays a stylish lady in a Victorian evening ball gown, keenly observing her reflection in a mirror. Her haggard looking dressmaker stands in the corner behind her. Nevertheless, the reflection in the mirror neither shows the beautiful ball gown nor the anticipating dressmaker behind it; instead, it shows a haunting image of a dead body of a seamstress with her mouth open and arms beside her, in a ragged dress, and a shabby background. *Punch* had published this cartoon as a response to the extensively broadcasted death of Mary Anne Walkley, a seamstress who was working at Madame Elise, Regent Street. The news of Mary Anne

Walkley's death raised a storm of inquiry and debate in the public arena regarding the horrible working conditions of the Victorian seamstresses which was alleged to be the cause of her death, as an anonymous account published on 17th June 1863, in *The Times* revealed a letter by 'A Tired Dressmaker' claiming to be Walkley's coworker, and the one discovering her 'dead in bed' due to exhaustion and dismal working hours. In August 1863, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* claimed the unforgettable nature of Mary Anne Walkley's tragic demise: 'The story of Mary Anne Walkley has been too widely told, too closely argued, too thoroughly exhausted, for [the public] ever to forget it, or the lesson it conveys.'¹²

However, instead of the widespread awareness surrounding Walkley's death, it failed to bring forth the much-needed changes in working conditions for her living needlewomen coworkers. Although the Factory Acts of 1847 and 1850 limited excruciating workday hours, they did nothing about improving the working conditions of most seamstresses working in private houses which were not open for general inspection.¹³ An investigation by philanthropist Beatrice Potter Webb in the East End sweat shops was famously recorded in her book *Nineteenth Century* (1888) and later in her autobiography titled, *My Apprenticeship* (1926). After leading an investigation into the East End sweat shops, W. J. Walker and Frances Peak established a shirt-making and tailoring cooperative. Grounded on this knowledge, in 1889 Walker addressed Parliament's Select Committee on the Sweating System. He advised banning home-work and forming unions. In 1890, The Select Committee on the Sweating System also advocated the formation of 'co-operative societies.'¹⁴ However, the minimum wages imperative was not established until 1909 with the Trade Boards Act, so all the popular images of the art and newspapers achieved little in terms of actual change.

On silver jubilee of Walkley's death, *Punch* published a cartoon titled 'The Modern Venus Attired by the Three Dis-Graces' on 16 June 1888.

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“The Modern Venus Attired by the Three Dis-Graces” (Punch, 1888)¹⁵

Similar to the ‘The Haunted Lady or ‘The Ghost’ in the Looking-Glass’ (1863) cartoon, this aforementioned skit showcases a fashionable lady in front of a mirror. But, the 25years gap in terms of fashion is visible in the attire she is wearing. Instead of the Victorian iconic ball gown, this lady in question is wearing a fitted suit dress, with a narrow skirt and a fitted bodice, along with a tailored jacket. She portrays the new woman fashion of the 1880s. Her posture, however, resembles the stance of the famous Venus de Milo. She is looking over her shoulder in a proud nonchalant glance, while the mirror is hazily reflecting her silhouette of her upper body and head. Three sickly, haggard looking seamstresses are surrounding the ‘Modern Venus’ in their sincere act of stitching, and measuring and mending. On the right corner of the floor lay an iron and a tablet with inscriptions that read ‘Tailor Made Patterns’. Here, in this cartoon, the inscription on the tablet, and the attitude of the central figure, and the title, depicts a threefold purpose to unveil the yet unchanged poor condition of the Victorian seamstresses. First of all, the inscription ‘Tailor Made Pattern’ marks the point in sartorial history that required a more fitted ‘tailor made’ suit for its new woman clients who needed such altered dressing as their societal stereotypical roles gradually changed as they began riding bicycles and horses more often. Owing to this the role of the seamstresses also gradually began to change as more and more male tailoring techniques were adopted by female needlewomen to attain to their clientele. Secondly, calling the seamstresses as ‘the Dis-Graces’ also

underlined the risk factors ingrained in the trades of the needlewomen. Over-worked, underpaid needlewomen of the Victorian period were highly vulnerable to the societal burden of seduction, prostitution, and crime. Their existence as respectable crafts women often dwindled in the face of poverty and exploitation, in a society that ostracized women in the name of their sexual behaviour. Finally, the stance of the 'Modern Venus' is reflective of the materialistic culture that thrived upon the oppressed figure of the seamstresses. The nonchalant glance of the central figure portrays the nonchalance of the aristocratic society that just like the 'Modern Venus' figure is looking away from the harrowing condition of the seamstresses working under its nose. The central figure's looking away from the seamstresses, in a way projects how in actuality, a narcissistic society looked away from its underbelly and their troubles, keeping the condition of the needlewomen troublesome for decades before creating a safe working space for them.

At this juncture, it is important to note that, it is during this period that Margaret Oliphant was writing her unconventional tale of a new woman seamstress, in *Kirsteen: The Story of a Scotch Family Seventy Years Ago* (1890)¹⁶ where the eponymous heroine differs from the iconographic image of a Victorian seamstress mentioned till now, as Kirsteen hails from a landed gentry family, and leaps from a seamstress to a successful dressmaker and dress shop owner without going through the typical ravages of the trade. Many critics have argued that Oliphant's portrayal of Kirsteen is to some extent unmindful of the painful history of a Victorian seamstress. However, before branding Oliphant's portrayal of Kirsteen as problematic, it is notable that Oliphant was well aware of the terrible condition of the working-class needlewomen, and taking a cue from her personal struggles as a commercial writer, she wrote in 'The Condition of Women', in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (Feb. 1858):

There are consequently crowds of half-starved needlewomen, thousands of poor governesses, and a great many more feminine writers of novels than are supposed to be good for the health of the public; and so the tale is full. A woman who cannot be a governess or a novel-writer must fall back on that poor little needle, the primitive and original handicraft of femininity. If she cannot do that, or even, doing it, if stifled among a crowd of others like herself, who have no other gift, she must starve by inches, and die over the shirt she makes. We are all perfectly acquainted with this picture.¹⁷

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Here, when Oliphant states ‘We are all perfectly acquainted with this picture’ she refers to the iconography of the Victorian seamstress presented in ‘The Song of The Shirt’ and the paintings inspired by it. However, Oliphant’s creation of the character of Kirsteen is unique from the very onset of the novel. Oliphant creates a courageous, self-reliant, intelligent new version of a Victorian woman, who is an insightful needlewoman in her trade, ultimately creates a name for herself. Initially in her family life we find her in an oppressed condition, but her resolution of character often shines through her actions and aspirations.

From seamstress to dressmaker:

Although written in 1890, the novel is set in 1810s and 1820s, in the Scottish landed gentry of Drumcarro, in the wilds of Argyllshire. The head of the family is Mr. Douglas, who prefers to be called Drumcarro, by the name of his estate, which in extension talks length about his character as he acts a staunch patriarch with little concern for her four daughters – Anne, Mary, Kirsteen, and Jeanie; and wife Mrs Douglas, where as he treated his seven sons very differently. From the very beginning of the novel we gain a vibrant picture of a high-spirited eponymous heroine who according to the Maid *de facto* of the house, Margaret possesses a very strong personality with a rare balance of sensibility – ‘who could hold head against her, or whom she could not crush at a blow’¹⁸—who is swift to enter a room with a thud yet considerate enough to not make the hasty noise to disturb the comfort of her ailing mother. The physical appearance of Kirsteen is also noteworthy which makes her stand out in a crowd:

She was a girl of nearly twenty, a daughter of the hills, strongly built, not slim but trim, with red hair and brown eyes and a wonderful complexion, the pure whiteness like milk which so often goes with those ruddy locks, and the colour of health and fine air on her cheeks...quite out of accordance with the canons of the day. She was slightly freckled.¹⁹

It is evident from the aforementioned account by Oliphant that Kirsteen was unconventional in her looks and disposition, and later on we will learn how her ‘vigorous and full curl’²⁰ of red hair would act as a symbol to engrave emotions and to go against the grain. She acted as a crafty needlewoman in the house and carefully stitched dresses and hems, and possessed a unique sense of dressing. Her bodily appearance also underlines her confident posture and pragmatic dressing sense, and her petit arms predisposed to her being a skillful needlewoman:

She was,[...] strongly built; and in the dress of the time, a very short bodice and a very straight and scanty skirt, her proportions were scarcely elegant, but her waist was round if not very small, and her arms, in their short sleeves, shapely and well formed, and whiter than might have been expected from their constant exposure to air and sun, for Kirsteen only put on her gloves on serious occasions. The air of health and brightness and vigour about her altogether, made her appearance like that of a burst of sunshine into this very shady place.²¹

It goes without saying that her vigour and bright personality will help her becoming a dexterous dressmaker in her later years. Her “burst of sunshine” will help to bring about a community of seamstresses, a profession lingering in the shades, into a successful trade in Miss Jean’s dress shop.

The Douglas family took great pride in their lineage even when their financial conditions declined; Mr. Douglas made no conventional efforts to marry his daughters off in wealthy families like traditional landowners would do to make wealthy alliances. To him, his daughters are burdens and only useful for homely duties and sewing things in the house. According to him:

They were unlucky accidents, tares among the wheat, handmaids who might be useful about the house, but who had no future, no capabilities of advancing the family, creatures altogether of no account... Mr. Douglas felt that every farthing spent upon the useless female portion of his household was so much taken from the boys, and the consequence was that the girls grew up without even the meager education then considered necessary for women, and shut out by poverty, by pride, by the impossibility of making the appearance required to do credit to the family, even from the homely gaieties of the country-side.²²

The sons of the Drumcarro house were sent off to various peninsulas to act as officers in the British trading agencies, whereas the daughters had little to nothing planned for them. But the eldest daughter was a bit rebellious, and took matters into her own hands and married a doctor, for which she was ostracized by her family. Kirsteen, a different kind of rebel, however, took a dissimilar route and defied her family in a different way. She was an ambitious person and protested against the stereotypical gender roles ascribed to females. While her brother Robbie was going off to India for service, and she was hinged into petty household works, she stated, ‘I

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cannot settle to work... I'm not just a machine for darning stockings. I wish I was Robbie going out into the world.'²³

In the novel, the much undermined act of feminine sewing becomes a means of resistance as Kirsteen takes on needlework to express herself. She used sewing to proclaim her affection and commitment discreetly for Roland Drummond who was leaving the country to go to India for service with her brother Robbie. Kirsteen very sincerely sew a thread of her red lock into a handkerchief inscribing the initials of 'R.D' and presented it to Roland as a memento of a secret engagement of sorts, epitomising their unwritten yet binding love for each other. Kirsteen's act of sewing a piece of her hair into a piece of clothing suggests a great deal about the conviction of her emotions and her resolution of desire.

She carried her work to the window and sat down there with the white handkerchiefs in her hand.

"And what colour will you mark them in, Kirsteen? You have neither cotton nor silk to do it."

Kirsteen raised her head and pulled out a long thread of her red hair. "I am going to do it in this colour," she said with a slight blush and smile. It was not an unusual little piece of sentiment in those days, and the mother accepted it calmly.²⁴

As mentioned in the above paragraph from the novel, in Victorian England, exchange of lock of hair within a locket or souvenir was in vogue and reflected a sense of sexual desire and intimacy within the bounds of societal propriety. So, in that sense, Kirsteen acting upon her desire and taking the initiative to convey her love to Roland, although quite courageous, fell into the purview of the social sexual codes for respectable women. Kirsteen shows great courage when she decides to flee Scotland to escape from an arranged marriage with Glendochart, a lord and cousin of Miss Eelen, a landowning mistress of Scotland.

[Glendochart] a man between fifty and sixty, with a fresh colour, and gentle, friendly air, much better dressed and set up than Drumcarro, but yet with something of the look of a man more accustomed to the hill-side and the moor than to the world.²⁵

When Drumcarro arranged Kirsteen's marriage with Glendochart to salvage his family's financial conditions, Kirsteen fled to London embarking upon an unknown journey of self-discovery to establish herself as a dressmaker. Here, Kirsteen's decision to undertake dressmaking to

establish herself to flee the claws of his oppressive father works as a sartorial resistance to patriarchy. Interestingly, she sought the help of Margaret's sister, Miss Jean, who had a dress shop in Mayfair, London to help her learn her trade. Here, it is noteworthy that, Oliphant draws on female camaraderie to further Kirsteen's cause rather than introducing a male figure to help the damsel in distress. However, Miss Jean was apprehensive at first about Kirsteen as women from landed gentry or aristocracy hardly ever chose the profession of a seamstress, or needlewoman, a trade overshadowed by clandestine affairs and prostitution. Kirsteen was a fine craftswoman and very soon learned the trade and became a leading figure in Miss Jean's dress shop. Her genius was palpable in the following passage:

It may not be thought a very high quality in a heroine, but Kirsteen soon developed a true genius for her craft...She was not, perhaps, very intellectual, but she was independent and original, little trained in other people's ideas and full of fancies of her own, which, to my thinking, is the most delightful of characteristics... Kirsteen tried her active young powers upon everything, being impatient of sameness and monotony, and bent upon securing a difference, an individual touch in every different variety of costume.²⁶

The narrator credits that even if Kirsteen was not ahead of her time or more enlightened than the rest of the world, she had a certain unique quality about her, that made her stand out in the crowd. She was an artist who applied her talent in each and every possible way in fashioning her dresses. Kirsteen made 'invention of pretty confections and modifications of the fashions with much of the genuine enjoyment which attends an artist in all crafts.'²⁷ However, what swiftly turned Kirsteen into a trade's woman than a seamstress in the new dress shop had to do with her temperament and her background as a noble woman. Kirsteen's pride and noble background bode well for her business, and soon wealthy aristocratic clients started to come to her dress shop. Miss Jean upon recognizing her protégé's potential in the dress trade acknowledges 'Miss Kirsteen is just the prop of this house Not a thing can be done without her advice.'²⁸ Kirsteen's sidea to reject the 'commoners' in her dress shop, represents her fractured ideologies regarding the *nouveaux riches*. When Miss Jean enquires why Kirsteen wants to begin 'insulting all the poor bodies that are not good enough to please ye,'²⁹ (215) Kirsteen swiftly explains her definition of poverty:

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‘Not the poor bodies,’ said Kirsteen, ‘but the folk with money and nothing else, that come in as if they were doing us a favour...I would like to learn them a lesson: that though we’re mantua-makers, it’s not for the likes of them.’³⁰

Kirsteen’s excellence as a genius dressmaker and an expert leader is reflected in her ability to sustain the community of seamstresses together and motivate them to work in high spirits in her dress-shop. In Victorian England the conventional imagery of the seamstresses was ridden with promiscuity and perils of prostitution, but Oliphant portrays the seamstresses in *Kirsteen* in a different light. Walking away from similar tales of seamstress by renowned Victorian novelists like Gaskell in *Ruth* (1853) and *Mary Barton* (1848), Oliphant draws an idealized and precisely de-sexualized existence of the Victorian seamstress. Some critics have found these traits in *Kirsteen* problematic. Oliphant’s dress shop led by women, availed by women and sustained by women represents an idealised feminine utopia. The narrator calls it ‘the little community.’³¹ A distinguished picture of the community life is reflected through this passage:

I tell this chiefly as an illustration of the manner in which Miss Brown and Kirsteen managed their affairs. But as a matter of fact Miss Jean often read aloud when there was no such urgent call for it. She read the newspapers to the girls when there were any news of interest.³²

Although, Miss Jean’s dress shop had no inspectors to regulate its labouring hours, the narrator justifies this situation by explaining the further cosy comfort provided by its administering women.

There were no inspectors to look after the work-rooms of the dressmakers in these days, but perhaps also, at least with mistresses like Miss Jean, there was little need for them. If the young women in the work-room had sometimes to work for a part of the night it was only what at that time everybody was supposed to do in their own affairs or in their masters’, when business was very urgent, or throng as was said in Scotland. The head of the house sat up too, there were little indulgences accorded, and when the vigil was not too much prolonged, there was a certain excitement about it which was not unpleasing to the work-women in the monotony of their calling.³³

However, there is dichotomy in the narrator’s representation of Miss Jean’s dress shop. Although, Kirsteen describes the outside street of the shop to be ‘tedious, insignificant, unlovely’ with ‘foggy smoky air’ and the

sense of the house to be 'petty dingy and small,'³⁴ the inside of the shop reflects miraculously a quiet and peaceful ambience with well-ventilated long rooms with 'many windows,'³⁵ But it is more likely that due to window-taxes prevalent in the 1810s, there could not be so many windows present at a shop like Miss Jeans's. If we take note of Henry Mayhew's³⁶ account of the dress shops of the nineteenth-century, it will be clear that he had classified the dress shops into four major categories. First, the court dress shop that catered to the tastes of rich and noble/aristocrats and the nobility: here 'a first-hand dressmaker' would go to the personal residence of the lady to take her measurements. And then administer the cutting and sewing of the dress by other minion seamstresses. The second category is similar in operations only that it would cater to the middle-class population. And here, the second-rate houses would vendor out their petty works to individual freelancers. The third and the fourth category sewing houses catered to the lower middle-classes and made everything on their premises. Miss Jean's dress shop in *Kirsteen* combines these all four categories and thus creates the confusion. By the end of the novel it is mentioned as a 'Court house dress shop', yet it had little clientele of rich ladies before Kirsteen joining it, and it made all of its cutting and sewing on the premises.³⁷ Another dichotomy remains, as the novel ends on the note that, Kirsteen remains unmarried after learning the news of Roland's death in India, and returns to Edinburgh, Scotland to buy out her father's lost estate and establish herself as the successful socialite in Edinburgh. By the end of the novel she is regarded as the 'best dressed woman in Edinburgh' and the 'friend of the poor and struggling everywhere'³⁸ and the narrator bluntly remarks that "most people had entirely forgotten that in past times, not to disgrace her family, her name appeared on a neat plate in conjunction with the name of 'Miss Jean Brown, Court Dressmaker and Mantua-Maker, as MISS KIRSTEEN.'³⁹ This last omission from public memory undercuts the struggle of Kirsteen into becoming the successful socialite she is today. Her struggle as a seamstress and eventually a courthouse dressmaker should not be a thing to be obliterated but to be celebrated as a success story of sartorial resistance of a Victorian resilient woman who went against the conventions of the society and made her own career in dress industry.

Conclusion:

Although Oliphant's *Kirsteen* defies the historical struggles of a Victorian seamstress in its portrayal of the eponymous heroine's reversal from a

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hapless seamstress to a new woman dressmaker, it is important to note that Oliphant in her misplaced and often mixed representation of a dress shop in nineteenth-century England, actually successfully created a feminine utopia that is led by women, patronized by women and sustained by women. In her portrayal of a Victorian seamstress away from the ravages and the claws of sexual promiscuity, she cleverly gestures to the possibility of a business industry that is just and breaks the ceiling of gender stereotyping in dress culture; her representation rather adds dressmaking as an act of sartorial resistance to patriarchy. Although, *Kirsteen*, hailing from her aristocratic landed-gentry origin does not portray the struggles of the hapless seamstress struggling to carve a niche in industrialised London, but nevertheless, her existence as successful trades woman by the end of the novel posits a possibility of a female business icon in Victorian England. However, her flawed representation is still powerful to bring forth a female protagonist taking risks and venturing into the larger world of the trade to discover her future. It sheds a light into the alternate possibility of a Victorian heroine who went against the conventions and succeeded as a seamstress. Furthermore, it highlights a path-breaking narrative of a categorically single damsel (who remains unmarried, and becomes a spinster by choice) without any possible knight in shining armour to lend her a hand to ameliorate her hardships; rather she is surrounded and helped by fellow female characters who aid her success. Thus, Oliphant's *Kirsteen* stands apart as a nineteenth-century novel in its representation of female empowerment, and gestures toward a New Woman fiction, adding to the genre of women's writing in Victorian studies.

Endnotes :

- ¹ Nicola Diane Thompson, 'Responding to the woman questions: rereading noncanonical Victorian women novelists', *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.3.
- ² Lynn M. Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), p.57.
- ³ Beth Harris, *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), p.5.
- ⁴ Harris, *Famine and Fashion*, p.6.
- ⁵ Patricia Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848–1890: Refining*

Work for the Middle-Class Woman (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), p.26.

- ⁶ Christina Walkley, 'Charity and the Victorian Needlewoman', *Costume* 14:1(1980): 136-143, URL:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/cos.1980.14.1.136>. Accessed: 02.07.2016.
- ⁷ Thomas Hood, 'The Song of the Shirt', *The Victorian Web*. URL: <https://victorianweb.org/authors/hood/shirt.html>. Accessed:10.01.2020.
- ⁸ Hood, 'The Song of the Shirt', *The Victorian Web*. Accessed:10.01.2020.
- ⁹ Richard Redgrave, *The Sempstress*. (London, Tate Britain,1844).
- ¹⁰ Anna Elizabeth Blunden, *The Seamstress* (Indiana-Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1854).
- ¹¹ John Tenniel, '*The Haunted Lady, Or The Ghost In the Looking-Glass*'. Getty Images, 1863.
- ¹² Tom Hood Jr. "'Living—and Dying by the Needle.' *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* Aug. 1863", *Clothing, Society and Culture in Nineteenth-Century England*, vol.2, eds. Clare Rose and Vivienne Richmond (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), pp.31-38.
- ¹³ Christina Walkley, *The Ghost in the Looking Glass: The Victorian Seamstress* (London: Peter Owen, 1981), p.73.
- ¹⁴ Walkley, *The Ghost in the Looking Glass*, p.106.
- ¹⁵ The Modern Venus Attired by the Three Dis-graces', *Punch* (16 June 1888).
- ¹⁶ Margaret Oliphant, *Kirsteen: The Story of a Scotch Family Seventy Years Ago* (1890 ;Repr. London: Everyman, 1984).
- ¹⁷ Margaret Oliphant, 'The Condition of Women,' *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Hamilton 209–30(1858): 212.
- ¹⁸ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.7.
- ¹⁹ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, pp.7-8.
- ²⁰ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.8.
- ²¹ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.8.
- ²² Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.38.
- ²³ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.28.
- ²⁴ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.9.
- ²⁵ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.68.
- ²⁶ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.167.
- ²⁷ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.168.
- ²⁸ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.213.
- ²⁹ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.215.
- ³⁰ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.216.

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- ³¹ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.224.
- ³² Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.224.
- ³³ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.222.
- ³⁴ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.161.
- ³⁵ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.160.
- ³⁶ Thompson, E. P. and Eileen Yeo eds. *The Unknown Mayhew: Selections from the Morning Chronicle 1849–1850* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), pp.430-32.
- ³⁷ Walkley, *The Ghost in the Looking Glass*, p.14.
- ³⁸ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.339.
- ³⁹ Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, p.339.