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Female Workers in Industrial England: Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* and *The Wrongs of Woman*

Chandrama Basu

Abstract:

Female workers formed a substantial portion of the nineteenth century industrial workforce as more than a million women were employed and exploited in factories by the middle of the century. The industrial novels, intended to form a narrative of social protest against the unprecedented developments generated by the Industrial Revolution, like the abominable working conditions of factories or the exploitation of factory labourers, however, rarely delineate the condition of female factory workers. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, a presently obscure writer, is an exception in this regard as she strived to bridge this critical gulf through her active participation in debates concerning the condition of proletariat women workers. The present study aspires to assess the conventionally marginalised condition of the female industrial workers in Victorian England, with particular emphasis on Tonna's contentions about the working women's rights and plights as articulated in her novels *Helen Fleetwood* and *The Wrongs of Woman*.

Key Words:

Industrial novels, female workers, non-canonical, working-class, women's rights.

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The Victorian society witnessed the ascendency of the Industrial Revolution in the form of unprecedented technological and scientific progress that transformed England from an agricultural country to an industrial one. While on the one hand it boosted the economy of the nation to an exceptional level and played a major role in positioning England as one of Europe's most prosperous countries, on the other hand, however, the rapid industrial development engendered extensive migration from rural to urban centres, led to unorganised urbanisation and relegated a large number of people to anonymous 'hands' who were forced to work as factory labourers under abominable conditions irrespective of their age or sex. The literature of the age complied with this phenomenon, became one of the potent means to evaluate the impact of Industrial Revolution on the British society and led to the emergence of a new fictional genre, known as 'industrial novels'. These fictional narratives represented, analysed and criticized the underlying paradoxes of a seemingly advanced industrialised nation. In *Culture and Society,* Raymond Williams acknowledges industrial novels not only for providing "some of the most vivid descriptions of life in an unsettled industrialised society, but also… certain assumptions within which the direct response [to industrialism] was undertaken" (94).

One of the most significant developments stimulated by the industrialisation of society was the transformation of existing gender hierarchies. While the industrial space has traditionally been considered as men's domain, the increased mechanisation of production had made the industrial system affable for women workers, owing to which more than a million women were employed as factory workers by the middle of the century. The decline of agriculture, a supply of more workers than jobs available and the consequent urban poverty often forced women, hitherto limited to the domestic sphere, to enter the public space and grab any job available at subsidised rates. According to James Richard Simmons Jr., part of the appeal of the sub-genre of the industrial novels rests in the "element of pathos and helplessness that the large numbers of children and women working in the factories provided" (337). The canonical industrial novels by the likes of Charles Dickens,

Benjamin Disraeli, Anthony Trollope and few female novelists like Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot, however, rarely delineate women workers who actually work in the factories. As Patricia Johnson notes, even if industrial novels "focus on women characters, yet none of the women whose lives those novels use as templates for industrial transformation ever works in—or even enters—a factory" (1), consequent to which the experiences of female industrial workers remain largely unrepresented.

Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790-1846) stands out to be an exception in this regard because of her awareness of and active involvement with the industrialisation of society, with particular emphasis on the problems of child and female factory workers. In opposition to the Victorian ideology that proscribed women from expressing their opinion on important matters of the society, Tonna asserts, "we [women] too have our private opinions on such matters [of social and political importance]; and we do not hold ourselves pledged not to advance them, on a fitting occasion" (qtd. in Krueger 130). The range of social evils provoked by the rapid industrialisation of society, like maladministration of the factories, misapplication of the Factory Act (1833) or the New Poor Law (1834) and the resultant exploitation of women (men and children) industrial labourers proved to be an appropriate occasion to necessitate her active arbitration. Consequently, Tonna's non-fictional and fictional works like *The System* (1827), *The Wrongs of Woman* (1840-44), *Helen Fleetwood* (1841) and *The Perils of the Nation* (1843) demonstrate an authentic picture of the atrocious conditions of the factories through intensely researched representation of factual details about working-class women gleaned from Government reports.

Tonna was not concerned about the "abstract idea of a suffering family" (*Wrongs of Woman* 441) based on absolute imagination but was interested in evoking images that were relatable and relevant for the readers. In *Helen Fleetwood* Tonna informs her readers that the novel should not be misjudged as merely a work of fiction "to conjure up phantoms of a heated imagination…. the work [instead] shall be used to reveal the "hidden atrocities" of the factory system that has turned "every mill into a pandemonium" (51). The novel portrays the deplorable conditions created by the factory system and centralizes around the eponymous heroine, who along with her foster mother, the poor Widow Green and her other grandchildren are forced to relocate to the industrial city of M. where they are employed as factory workers. *The Wrongs of Woman*, on the other hand, is comprised of four sections, namely "Milliners and Dressmakers, "The Forsaken Home," "The Little Pin-headers," and "The Lace runners" and portrays young women who have been employed in various trades and are subjected to physical, psychological or economic oppression in their workplaces.

The life of the titular character of *Helen Fleetwood* along with Mary Green as factory workers begin when Widow Green and her family pursue a fabricated story imparted to them about a life of comfort and health in the prosperous city of M. Widow Green is induced to leave their rented cottage in the agricultural south when she is unable to pay the rent and is persuaded by an agent of Lancashire manufacturer that the industrial city of M. would be the perfect place for them with its "Good lodging, capital clothing, the best to eat… kind neighbours, generous masters, skilful doctors" (Tonna 28), lots of Bible societies and capital schools. The case of Widow Green resonates the unjust administrative system of the Victorian parishes that began developing strategies of cost reduction to accommodate the rising costs of poor relief. The institutions often sought to employ overseers like Mr. Stratton for "averting, impending [or potentially long-term] burdens" (Tonna 20) like old women, widows and/with children from the parish and Widow Green, with her advanced age and a family of five young children proved to be the perfect victim of the system. Nevertheless, despite being apprehensive about living in an industrial city and allowing the children to work in the factories, Widow Green was anticipative about the prospect. This is firstly because she is depicted as a "guileless character… unsuspicious of evil" (Tonna 24) and secondly because she believed in the efficacy of the factory laws enacted by the government for the protection of the

working people's rights. More importantly, it was her indigent financial situation that goaded her into believing the promises made by a colourful pamphlet about the city, despite being warned about its rapacious activities.

Green realises the deception as soon as she reaches the manufacturing town with her grandchildren and the gloomy atmosphere of her daughter, Sally Wright's household provides a microcosmic reflection of the industrial city. The dusky walls of Mrs. Wright's apartment with its sombre discolouration, the cobweb festooned windows "rendered opaque by dirt" (Tonna 49) and the mistress's struggle to maintain a façade of wellbeing, corresponds the bleakness of the manufacturing town with its narrow and filthy allies, that in the garb of offering gratification and contentment, causes anguish and dejection to its inhabitants. To substantiate the unamenable condition of the factory system, Tonna furnishes a picture of the increasingly competitive market of the Victorian age that demanded tireless dedication of the workers and prompted the manufacturers to employ a huge number of workers to toil in inconvenient conditions for prolonged hours to achieve his target of production at the lowest possible expense. That Tonna's novels mark a veritable exposition of the economic exploitation of female industrial labourers by their upper-crust employers become palpable as the eponymous character of *Helen Fleetwood* is unjustly stricken by the factory overlooker "across the arm and shoulder with one of the rods of the machinery" (Tonna 221), when she is unable to resume her work being weighed down from physical weakness and continual derision from her colleagues. The picture becomes more desolate for Widow Green when the locals share dreary details about the manufacturing units of the town. Mrs. Johnson, for instance, relates that the law enforcer "comes once a year [to the factories] and is bound to advertise his coming in the newspapers; so they [the administration of the factories] take care to have all right just then. But if a complaint is made and proved too…. the law made the lowest penalty" (Tonna 88) against the offender. This unjust atmosphere of the factories confounds the old woman as she discovers that the entire industrial system is controlled by a corrupt administration that is guarded against penalization and hence operates with hardly any attrition about exercising illegal and unfair practices.

Similarly, in *The Wrongs of Woman,* the employer Madame A opines that a doctor's name is often taken by a worker as an excuse to dodge her duties at work and she forces Alice to continue her work even in her ailing health. Ann and Frances King employed in dressmaking factories also endure extensive working hours as it was not uncommon among milliners and dressmakers to work for "fifteen sixteen and even seventeen hours a day" (Tonna, "Wrongs of Woman" 499) without sufficient intervals of rest. The condition of the dressmakers and milliners were catastrophic to the extent that "societies like the Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dress-Makers and Milliners" (Kestner 195) were founded for regulating their working conditions and to avoid the increasing rate of mortality among women of this profession. These are some of the instances that Tonna uses to explicate the course of calamitous destiny shared by the Victorian female factory workers and it is indeed due to these factors that the enactment of the Ten Hours Bill became a crying call of the day, which was finally passed in 1847, limiting women and children's working shift to ten hours per day.

Tonna also condemns the claustrophobic and polluted atmosphere of the contemporary factories in which the workers "doubly fevered, doubly debilitated, by excessive toil" worked in spaces "excluded from the free air, and almost from the pure light of day; shut up in an atmosphere polluted by clouds of fetid breath" (Tonna, "Helen Fleetwood" 165). In a similar vein, "The Little Pin-Headers" of *The Wrongs of Woman* depict workers cramped in a dingy room where "the light of day never falls broadly… where fresh air is excluded, where freedom never comes, where cleanliness is unknown" (Tonna 457). A consistently dejected and shabby workspace is also provided in "Milliners and Dress-Makers" where Ann works with thirty other persons in a dusty, badly ventilated, confined chamber that is rendered all the more oppressive and nauseous by the

heat of the blazing gas lights and is advised to spend the extra hours of work past midnight standing, to avoid falling asleep on her very first day at work. By representing the dismal state of the factories and mills in which Tonna's characters are employed, she exposes the relentless disapproval of the labourers' toil, lack of authorial influence on the workings of the factories and the inhuman treatment of the labourers.

According to Tonna, the employer is often well aware that his hands in factory depend upon his mercy "for their daily share of the coarsest food, the scantiest raiment, the most miserable shelter" (*Wrongs of Woman* 476) and hence he could bear to overwork and exploit them. This is especially true for women workers because the employers were squarely aware of the impoverished conditions that obliged them to transgress the limits of the domestic hearth and partake in factory jobs, and the masters frequently misused working-class women's predicament by paying them with only one half of the male wage, for procuring maximum material profit. Besides, while all factory workers were subjected to the exploitative system of the Victorian industries, irrespective of their sex, there is one specific issue that differentiated the working conditions of the two sexes in the Victorian age-- the maintenance or abstinence of their expected gender roles. The Victorian society was accustomed to women's prediscursive roles as subservient wives and dutiful mothers regulating domestic affairs or agricultural services at the most, and correspondingly women who secured works outside their homes and especially in factories and mills were perceived as unfeminine and irresponsible women.

In "The Foresaken Home", the povertied circumstances of the family and the husband's inability to find a job in the city compels Alice to join a nail factory as a result of which their children are deprived of maternal care and become living pictures of "hopeless neglect" (Tonna 439). This reversal of expected gender roles positions Alice as the provider of the family and wounds her husband's self-esteem, who, in turn, remains unemployed and is swayed to occupy himself with "the abandoned companion of depraved female associates" (Tonna 438). Alice's engagement as a worker, therefore, functions as a negative catalyst that ultimately leads to the collapse of her family structure and transforms her home into a wretched space of desertion and abandonment. Such cases of women assuming professional roles and in factories or mills were not infrequent in the lives of Victorian working-class and the very notion that women's participation in jobs implied *abandonment* of their husbands and children is a very clear reflection of the Victorian ideology of separate spheres. In the second section of *The Wrongs of Woman* when John is informed that it would be easier for his wife to get employment because "the masters find they work harder and take less" (Tonna 420), he opposes the arrangement and asks the pervasive question that if "wife and girls go out to work; who's to mend and make, to wash and scour, and tidy up the place of evenings?" (Tonna 420), thereby confirming the Victorian ideology that expected women to be ideal mothers and wives-- "the angel in the house" obligated to managing the household.

The female factory workers, therefore, were by no means ideal Victorian women. With rapid industrialisation, swelling urbanisation and decline of agriculture, women were prompted to adopt new roles and acquire "access to remunerative employment" (Young 15). Their engagement as factory workers implies their violation of the very ideals that rendered them their inherent feminine qualities like passivity, daintiness, cleanliness, delicacy among others, thereby relegating them to the position of social outsiders in relation to the opulent class. On her first day to the mill, for example, Mary is mocked and shamed for wearing her milking-dress, because her humble, yet clean clothing appears too fine for factory workers. She has been conditioned with the principle that "Neatness and cleanliness are never out of place… they make the poorest child look respectable" (Tonna, "Helen Fleetwood" 102-103). But as her fellow counterparts indicate, Mary is still unaware that female industrial workers had to renounce hitherto imbued philosophies of life, undergo a process of what Kaplan terms "defeminisation" owing to their assumption of crude ventures,

entrance into the "processes of urbanisation and industrialisation" (Kaplan 54) and consequent renunciation of so-called feminine virtues.

An acute version of dehumanization and defeminisation is delineated in "The Lace-Runners" section of *The Wrongs of Woman* through Mrs. Collins, a ruthless employer of the impressionable heroine Kate. While the latter is portrayed as a sympathetic and merry young woman, her mistress acts as an apt representative of the industrialised society, concerned only with the money-making business. However, as the story progresses, one realizes that it is the mechanized factory system that has reduced Mrs. Collins to an ostensibly obdurate and pitiless person, whose professional duties refrain her from nursing her own child. When Kate pleads with Mrs. Collins to feed her child, she, almost mechanically, explains her inability to feed her son outside the schedule because "then he'd get the habit of wanting suck ever so many times a day,…[forcing her to] leave off my business to take him…. I am training him now to do without so, as to let me mind my work" (Tonna, "Wrongs of Woman" 484). An unlikely picture of motherhood is also presented in *Helen Fleetwood* through the life of Widow Green's daughter Mrs. Sally Wright. From the very outset, Mrs. Wright is revealed to be an inconsiderate wife and impassive mother of factory workers. She appears to be a scornful and temperamental woman who sniggers at Helen's conviction in the Almighty, accuses her of having a share of her brother's orphans' food and keeps persuading Widow Green to employ her under-aged grandchildren at the factories.

But as Mr. South reveals to Widow Green, Mrs. Wright was one of the most respectable women to settle in the town who has eventually been "turned into a stone… towards her own children, by hardening her heart to their sufferings, [so] that she might live on their toil and ruin" (Tonna, "Helen Fleetwood" 94-95). She has one debilitated and handicapped daughter who has lost her arm, caught up in the machinery, her eldest daughter Phoebe turns into prostitution and her son "is a devil incarnate; [who] drunks, swears, and cheats, and seems to hate all things for the sake of hating it" (Tonna 95). While her children's sufferings and comportment emerge from their active engagement in the degenerating atmosphere of the factories, Mrs. Wright's irritable demeanour stems from her agonies as a mother who cannot afford to resist her children to work in factories because their meagre earnings are the source of the family's subsistence. She casts her motherly emotions aside for the sake of the family's sustenance and continues to witness the ruin of her children in vain. Mrs. Wright has never been a factory labourer, yet her miserable attitude is directly associated with the pathetic operations of the factories. Tonna, therefore, underlines the vicious cycle of agony and ordeal precipitated by the factory system that not only affected the labourers but also afflicted their relations who continued to suffer vicariously through their family members.

Mrs. Collins, like Sally Wright, reasons her inability to exhibit her motherly emotions to her children by exclaiming: "I could hardly have treated myself to a cry before my own children, for fear they'd think they might work on my feelings, someday, to shorten tasks" (Tonna, "Wrongs of Woman" 485) and curtail the family's income. She considers the display of natural emotions as an extravagant indulgence that might prove to be an obstacle to their source of livelihood. She was once against the custom of employing children and their toil for monetary income and wanted all her children to have a healthy and cheerful childhood. However, with accelerated capitalisation and industrialisation of the society, the working conditions of the factory labourers also became more stringent. She confides in Kate, "When I married, things hadn't come to pass they're at now,… they were getting worse and worse every day; steam-machines being so expensive at first cost, and wanting to be altered or changed so often, made the labour of hands and feet worth a deal more than they are now;…" (Tonna 486). Subsequently, she, like other working mothers of the factories, adopts unnatural means to adapt to the changes. She resorts to the unhealthy practice of drugging her infant child with Godfrey's Cordial and laudanum, used to tranquillize and assuage infants, to continue with her factory work-- an execution that ultimately interferes with her son's natural

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defence against the contagious viral disease of measles leading to his death. Her insistence on continuous labour at the cost of her motherhood and her children's interests becomes understandable from the fact that lace runners did not earn "more than half-a-crown per week" (Tonna 501) and that she is forced to undertake extra work of lacing a veil to pay for her dead child's coffin, the one, whom she could not nurse adequately because she had to work and "earn what should feed and clothe others that had as good a claim" (Tonna 487). She suffers as a mother who is responsible not for one, but all of her children and she is compelled to intoxicate one of them, so that she can provide for all of them, including the one who is presently the primary object of her neglect. The capitalistic system, therefore, plays a dual role for the female industrial workers-- it is both a means to and an end in itself. Mrs. Collins is unable to tend her child because of her obligation to work and earn money for the family, which again becomes an inevitable means without which she would fail to perform the last rites of her child.

Tonna's fictions thus refute the traditional theme of canonical Victorian novels, where courtship and marriage, and the success or lack thereof is the only entity the women participate in or speculate about. She expresses her "solemn protest" against the tide of "love tales" and employs her novels as "useful reference[s] on topics of permanent importance" (qtd. in Kestner 197). Tonna provides an alternate narrative to the traditional Victorian idea of marriage-- even if characters like Mrs. Collins, Mrs. Wright or Alice represent married lives, they are substantially bereft of the 'happy-ending' that marriage usually signifies in typical Victorian narratives. Instead, they underscore how their lives evolve after marriage and the way the Victorian industrial system has afflicted their lives as wives and mothers of an industrial society. In *The Wrongs of Woman,* when the devastated Mrs. Collins exclaims after the death of her child, "I ain't guilty; I ain't the murderer! And them that are shall answer it. They shall answer it…" (Tonna 487), Tonna censures the profit-makers, the escalating consumerism, the expanding gulf between the rich and the poor and the degenerating law and administration of the society that failed to support and defend the rights of the unprivileged section of the Victorian era that by extension often led to the decimation of their families. Tonna's female characters thus demonstrate that the Victorian industrial organisation was not a gendered discourse impacting only the male members of the society but affecting the lives of women, their marriage and motherhood as well.

Further, one of the primary means through which the Victorian society characterized factory women, owing to their active engagement in public spaces was that "her morals were very bad…. Her degradation was traced directly or indirectly, to her employment outside the home" (Neff 53). Phoebe Wright is an apposite representation of this idea, as Widow Green alludes her debauchery, spiteful attitude towards the family and her descent to prostitution to the abominable and indecent working conditions of the factory system that has "imbibed the peculiar wickedness that now pervaded her character, also fed the evil, guarded it and armed it with power to wound whatever excited its enmity" (Tonna, "Helen Fleetwood" 165). William Acton, a British medical practitioner, best known for compiling extensively researched reports on Victorian prostitution follows Tonna's line of argument and accounts for factory women's plunge into prostitution by explaining, "the lowness of the wages paid to workwomen in various trades is a fruitful source of prostitution; unable to obtain by their labour the means of procuring the bare necessities of life, they gain by surrendering their bodies to evil uses, food to sustain and clothes to cover them" (225).

This classification of factory women as ignoble courtesans is generally applied to all women factory workers like Phoebe and Ann who are driven to prostitution by their dire financial constraints and also to young women like Helen, Alice or Ann who either die or continue to toil under desolate conditions with their moral character untainted. Tonna challenges this stereotypical ideation about factory women by portraying the eponymous character of *Helen Fleetwood* as a sacred, virtuous and persisting factory worker who is morally strong enough to resist the path of profligacy and

continue to grind with determination and endurance, Alice as suffering, helpless, yet an immaculate woman who endures her domestic tribulations caused due to her engagement as a factory worker with determination and courage and Ann as a considerate and vigilant girl who cautions her sister in vain about the enticing yet detrimental dimensions of achieving a comfortable life with lesser effort and more income through questionable and amoral means. The objective is not to eulogise the sacrifice of these women and establish their suffering as an accepted standard of women's virtuosity to be followed by others but to exhibit the social victimization of the working-class women and use their moral character or the lack thereof as an instrument to vindicate their case to the concurrent society that enshrined moral uprightness, especially among women. She exposes the unjust administration of the factories that fail to pay the workers just enough to sustain a straightforward life and derides the corrupt moral foundation of the society that worsen their situation by taking advantage of their financial constraints.Tonna, therefore, was acutely aware of the social and personal implications of women factory workers and strived to reform their conditions by insisting on their right to renounce jobs that they are not comfortable or inclined to undertake. She stresses on the significance of women's "firmness of purpose", "promptitude of action" and practice of "female influence" ("Perils of the Nation" 345). She advocates "female patronage and control… where almost every lady in the land has power to interfere, at least negatively by withdrawing her custom, and stating the reason of her so doing, where the offence is so committed" (Tonna 359). But Tonna was aware that the working-class section of Victorian England, irrespective of their sex, was not allowed to cast their vote or participate in political matters at the beginning of the century. Following this, she attempted to present the dire circumstances of the working-class women to the affluent members of the Victorian women community in the form of fiction, because they usually "had little access to or interest in the 'male' discourses of parliamentary speech and report" (Kaplan 52). By educating the opulent women of the indigent condition of their working-class sisters, she endeavoured to develop an amenable female-female relationship irrespective of their class identifications, which in turn could be employed as a shield to resist the exploitation of factory women in the name of social progress. Tonna hoped that the upper-class women, once conversant about the circumstances of the factory women, would plead their case with the male members of their families so that they could use their political influence to improve the condition of female factory labourers. In *Helen Fleetwood* Widow Green voices the imminence to practice women's influence and if necessary to start the process right from their home (as women were not yet sanctioned to participate in the political and social decisions of the country), and "use their influence over their own husbands, fathers, brothers, and friends, to make it a point with the candidate they vote for, that he should support our cause in the Parliament" (Tonna 342).

Tonna, thus, proposes adopting means of indirect social influence as a substitute to engaging directly in public activities and influences women to act within the very limits imposed on them without attempting to expand their horizons- an assertion that ostensibly problematizes her role as an arbitrator of female factory workers' causes. Tonna has also harboured the opinion that "there are certain duties so manifestly appertaining to the wife and mother, that wholly to neglect them would be doing violence not only to the best but to the strongest impulses of her nature" (*Wrongs of Woman* 418). Further, the ambiguous gender space of the factories where young men, women and children worked together disregarding the Victorian principle of separate spheres was a deleterious source of corruption that has not only led to the transformation of women into men and men into devils (Tonna 502) but has also morphed "the female character into something so depraved that their language and conduct are described as being far worse than the men's" (Tonna, "The Perils of the Nation" 56). This perception is enacted in *The Wrongs of Woman* through John Smith, who resolves to prohibit the women of his family to work in factories because of their "lack of a very obvious needful separation" (Tonna 421) of working space for the two sexes. This communicates the idea that Tonna conformed to the concept that women are ideally suitable for the home space and that

the suffering of the women labourers emerged from the elemental fact that they were obligated to abandon their domestic hearth and work in the male-dominated industrial space.

Although Tonna's perception might appear parochial and restrictive when considered in light of the aforementioned disputes, I argue that an intensive analysis of Tonna's ideas strive to substantiate Diana Thompson's observation that traditional tendency of classifying Victorian women's novels "as either radical or conservative" are often misleading (4). The cultural conditioning of the first half of the nineteenth century recognized women as domestic beings, who were unaccustomed and disinclined to the notion of engaging in dubious public affairs and Tonna appositely defends such women's right of not working unwillingly beyond the periphery of their private abode and underlines their right to improved working conditions that include maintenance of separate spheres for men and women workers. The eponymous heroine of *Helen Fleetwood* for instance, "would indeed have preferred any species of drudgery among the rural scenes" (Tonna 102) than face the evils of working in a mill and projects a Christ-like endurance in the face of adversity on her first day at work and Mary would have gladly "spared the trial [of working in a factory] that now drew near" (Tonna 102). This suggests their utter reluctance at working outside the limits of their home and in a task that often risked tainting their morality and femininity-- issues which when examined under contemporary feminist lens might strike one as ludicrous, but emerges as an imperative contention when weighed in light of Victorian conviction because as Tonna manifests through her novels, the challenge for working-class women is more intricate.

Due to their subordinate position in society and consequent lack of (sophisticated) education, prospects of women factory workers were far more limited than middle-class women. The latter was willing to attempt professional jobs to exhibit their competency against the general perception that deemed women to be the weaker sex and were faced with accusations of appropriating men's jobs and neglecting their natural roles as mothers and wives, and this became a raging issue for Victorian women emancipators to struggle against. But the female labourers' decision to work in factories was driven not by their sense of seeking liberation and empowerment but by their impoverished circumstances. They were compelled to undertake menial jobs often without much deliberation on a proper remunerative structure, evident in Mrs.Collins's assertion, "Poor people like us… can't afford to be idle: young and old we must work for the bit we eat; and though the work is over hard, and the morsel too little, we can't help ourselves" (Tonna, "Wrongs of Woman" 482). Besides, the very fact that working-class women were earning members of their families did not necessarily uplift their status either within their families or in society. Although women were the providers of their families, it was the male family members who owned legal rights to and continued to control the women's earnings. Wanda F. Neff notes such an occasion in *Helen Fleetwood* when Tom South's daughter is anxious to work overtime, "because all of her regular wages went to her father and she had only the overtime pay for herself" (Tonna 51). A similar case is also evident in "The Foresaken Home", where the unemployed John Smith, although unconvinced about his wife's work in the factory, squanders away her earnings on his drunkenness and promiscuity.

Moreover, while Tonna has been criticised for supporting the idea of separate spheres and her celebration of motherhood and retention of feminine virtues, she denotes the differential role of society in rearing a boy and a girl, an argument that was to become pivotal in twentieth century women's liberation movement through Simon de Beauvoir's ground-breaking evaluation of women's position in society. While Beauvoir claims that it is due to the contradictory methods of the civilization in treating the two sexes, that while successfully creating a man, manages to produce only an intermediate gender between man and eunuch called woman, Tonna notes in *The Wrongs of Woman* a century before the publication of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), "the difference observable in the mode of rearing boys and girls, from the cradle, operates to the increased feebleness and dependency of the latter as compared to the former…" (398). Tonna exclaims,

> …we shall see the little girl's unshorn locks twisted up in papers, and her slight person adorned with some superfluous article of dress as an attempt at decoration, while her brother's cropped head, and freedom from all but indispensable clothing, leave him far more exposed to the bracing, hardening effect of the elements…. [While] she must, with bent joints, and in a constrained position, ply the knitting or the sewing needle…. (398).

She emphasizes on the rudimentary anomaly that allocates higher status to men, creates "the weaker vessel" called woman, relegates them to an inferior position, and in doing so, anticipates Beauvoir's epochal declaration "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman" (273). Tonna's emphasis on the role of society in the conditioning of men and women in the Victorian period provides the basic premise of her argument according to which it is *wrong* and unjust to employ and exploit women in factory occupations when they have been systematically excluded from the opportunity to build the "nerve required to battle against the many ills that flesh is heir to" (Tonna 398). The society has predominantly reared women with delicacy and restraint, but with the advent of industrialisation and its associated episodes, a section of the same society has contrived to employ women (often substituting male workers) for jobs that they are untrained and inexperienced to undertake and Tonna voices her opposition to this manipulative arrangement. She is against the sudden inflated demand for women workers in factories at meagre wages and under inhuman conditions because it does not entail either the progressiveness of the society or enfranchisement of women, but exposes the underlying hypocrisy of her age-- if the society is inimical to the idea of providing women with equal opportunities like their male counterparts, it should also not compel women to abandon their roles they have perpetually been prepared to assume (to be wives and mothers), and participate in tasks (factory posts), for which they have not been allowed to earn the required qualification.

Following this, I maintain that the straightforward attribution of Tonna as a traditionalist thinker is categorically simplistic. Tonna's works function as a unique space of contact between what Elaine Showalter calls the feminine (1840-1880) and the feminist (1840-1920) phase of women's literary history, where the former depicts an early phase of imitation and internalization of the prevailing social norms and the latter represents "a phase of protest against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy" (Showalter 13). Her emphasis on motherhood and traditional feminine virtues in the first half of the nineteenth century, coupled with working-class women's right to refuse compulsive employment and under exploitative conditions, represent a transitional link between the prevailing and the emerging ideological concerns regarding the position and function of women in society. The mainstream debate challenging women's constrained role in society did not commence full-fledgedly before the second half of the nineteenth century and were largely restricted to the educated middle class, as the concerns for the proletariat were starkly different and yet to gain the political and social thrust that governed the post-1850s England. It is in such a context, Tonna uses her works to foreground and criticise the coeval position of Victorian female industrial workers in society, and represent "strong protests of their decade at conditions that the next period would strive to improve" (Kestner 66).

Tonna's novels *Helen Fleetwood* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, portray such a section of the society, namely the female factory labourers, whose agony as waged factory workers themselves, who are triggered to action by and directly suffer the material hardships of life brought about by the industrialization of society and not just as passive female relations of active male industrial labourers, goes almost unmentioned in canonical industrial novels. Therefore, by elucidating the rights and plights of the female factory labourers of the contemporary age, Tonna's works offer a unique space of contact between contentions relating to women's position and function in society (that later came to be termed collectively as "Woman Question"), and the condition of Victorian industries-- an exceptional task unattempted by any canonical writers either in the genre of industrial novels or in the woman question novels of the Victorian age. More importantly, through her

emphasis on the conventionally marginalized proletariat women's working conditions, she accentuates the underlying nuances and multifariousness of issues concerning women's empowerment and the importance of exploring different versions of experiences, irrespective of their social positions, in order to achieve the common ideals of female emancipation.

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BIO-NOTE

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