

Agency and Subversion in Feminist Resilience within Neo-Victorian Historical Fiction Narratives

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Abstract: This research paper delves into the concepts of agency and subversion within the framework of feminist resilience in Neo-Victorian historical fiction. Taking novels like *Fingersmith*, *Alias Grace*, and *The Passion* as examples, the paper investigates the ways female protagonists cope with the patriarchal system, employing both agency and subversion to gain control over their existence. In doing so, the paper proves that through subversion of gender stereotypes and social norms, the female protagonists achieve resilience. It is important to note that agency is used by the protagonists as an instrument of empowerment, while subversion is employed as an approach to undermine and alter oppressive institutions. Through Neo-Victorian fiction, it becomes possible to analyze historical gender inequality issues and draw parallels with current feminist challenges. Additionally, the paper explores the wider impacts that these fictional representations have in terms of their significance to feminist studies and shows that, even today, the impact of such literature on the conceptions of gender power relations is felt. The paper ends on a note about areas for future research that could be done regarding the intersectionality of feminist resilience in regards to the depiction of subversion in current literature. In this regard, the Neo-Victorian genre proves an important tool in researching gender resilience.

Key Words: feminist resilience, agency, subversion, neo-victorian fiction, gender roles, empowerment, historical fiction

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Introduction

Historical fiction from the Neo-Victorian tradition, which is a recreation of the Victorian period, provides rich possibilities for discussing the theme of feminist resilience (Cox, 2017). Historical fiction frequently addresses the hardships that women face during earlier times, emphasizing the challenges that arise in a patriarchal society (Chemmachery, 2019). Feminist resilience discussed within such literary tradition includes all the strategies women use when facing adversity through resistance within oppressive frameworks, both active and passive (Sturgeon-Dodsworth, 2015). In essence, literature from the Neo-Victorian tradition can be seen as a commentary on the current state of gender affairs (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2012).

Agency is the defining element of feminist resilience, and it relates to the autonomy and self-direction of women that enables them to be independent, take action, and direct their future lives (Predmore, 2020). Neo-Victorian literature is characterized by female characters who exhibit their agency by rebelling against social constructs, questioning established gender roles, and determining their own futures (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2011). Subversion is used to refer to the actions by which such women undermine established systems of power. Through subversive acts, they are able to challenge and reinvent their roles and redefine the nature of being a woman in the process. Agency and subversion are key aspects of feminist resilience since they represent how women have managed to make their voices heard in difficult situations.

The paper will demonstrate that agency and subversion are some of the essential processes through which feminism in the form of Neo-Victorian historical fiction can be explored. Through an analysis of how the female protagonists in the chosen texts employ agency and subversion, the paper will prove that the Neo-Victorian genre allows for the reinterpretation of the role that women played historically, while also revealing the struggles that women face even today. In addition to providing insight into the genre of Neo-Victorian literature, the discussion will help enhance the existing feminist discourse.

The paper is structured in the following way: Section II gives a historical background of the Neo-Victorian genre, the role of women in it, and how the Victorian era is applicable in contemporary feminist discourse. Section III examines the idea of agency in the feminist resilience, and the way in which it is manifested through female characters, defying the norms of society. Section IV explores the theme of subversion, exploring how female characters subvert the gender roles as a means of resistance. Section V provide case studies of feminist resilience in Neo-Victorian fiction and the ways these themes have been treated by different authors. Lastly, a conclusion is given in Section VI, which summarizes the main findings and recommendations concerning future studies.

Historical Context of Neo-Victorian Fiction

The literary sub-genre known as Neo-Victorian fiction has appeared in the last few decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century (Llewellyn & Heilmann, 2013). It refers to fictional literature about the Victorian era that explores the history and culture of the 19th century from a present-day perspective (Robinson, 2011). The main aspects of the Neo-Victorian fiction sub-genre are its use of historical fiction combined with a contemporary approach. Examples of Neo-Victorian fiction novels include *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles and *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood (Kohlke et al., 2022). The authors writing Neo-Victorian fiction take a critical approach towards the Victorian age, criticizing its social norms, morality, politics, and questioning the fate of the women living in this time period (Romero Ruiz, 2019; Davies, 2012).

In historical fiction, and specifically neo-Victorian stories, women are usually represented as fighting against oppressive societal values; at the same time, these women are shown to be strong enough and able to resist or even overcome the restrictions that bind them (Ruiz, 2026; Fresno-Calleja, 2024). For instance, in many works of historical literature, women are represented as embodying traditional feminine values of domesticity, passivity, and subservience to males. Neo-Victorian writers break away from such conventions by developing multifaceted heroines who resist the pressures imposed upon them (Ruiz, 2021; Stetz, 2012). Such female protagonists are described as rebelling against the existing social order and challenging the oppressive traditions in which they find themselves.

The Victorian age plays an important role in modern-day feminism because it was an era that underwent great changes, social, political, and cultural ones, especially with regard to gender relations. The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of movements advocating for the right of women to vote, to have access to education, and generally to enjoy equal rights with men – all of which are still debated today. Neo-Victorian novels explore the historical battles of gender oppression to emphasize their significance for modern day gender relations and inequality. Through the exploration of women as they were represented in Victorian England, Neo-Victorian fiction allows readers to think about how women struggle nowadays against their oppression, lack of freedom, or empowerment.

Agency in Feminist Resilience

Definition of Agency in the Context of Feminist Theory

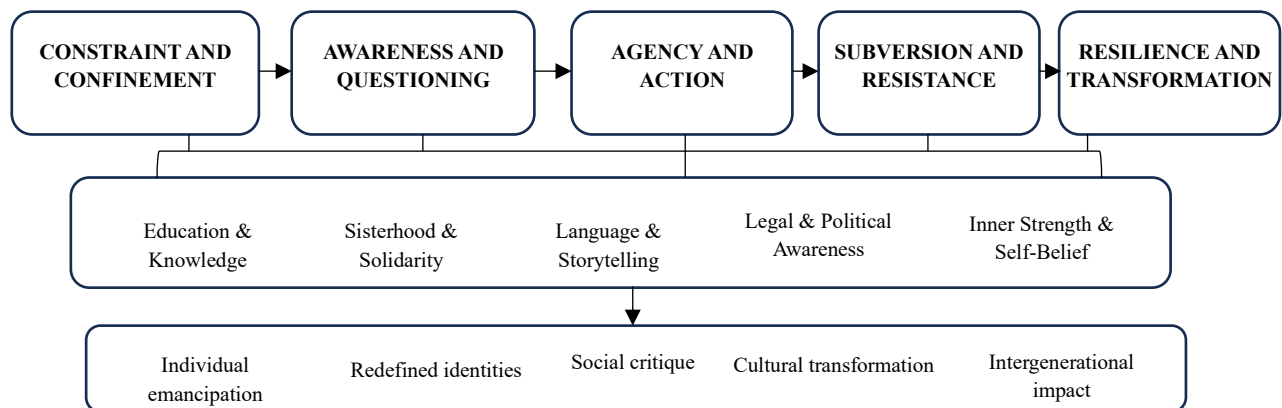


Figure 1: Narrative Structure of Feminist Resilience in Neo-Victorian Texts

Figure 1 depicts the steps taken in achieving feminist resilience in Neo-Victorian Literature. The first step involves constraints and confinement since social conventions constrain the heroine. Subsequently, she moves to the phase of awareness and questioning when she comes to realise her constraints. This is followed by agency and action, during which the heroine makes decisions and acts against her oppressions. Subversion and resistance follow when she opposes the hegemonic system. The final step includes resilience and transformation that depict her personal growth and social change.

Agency, in the context of feminist theory, is described as the ability of individuals, especially women, to operate autonomously, make decisions, and have control over their lives. This term goes against the assumption in conventional thinking that women are powerless in relation to societal standards and conditions. Feminists suggest that agency does not involve only individual independence; it also involves a refusal to accept oppression that undermines the choices of women. Through exercising their agency, women reject patriarchal domination and imagine new possibilities within society. This process involves the use of empowerment to challenge existing standards and recreate one's identity as a woman in society.

Analysis of How Female Characters Exhibit Agency in Challenging Societal Norms

Women who appear in Neo-Victorian historical novels are commonly placed in restrictive social positions in that they have to get married, give birth to children, or stay at home. Nonetheless, some of them take advantage of their freedom and assert their independence through a refusal to comply with societal expectations, thereby finding their own ways to live life. Thus, for instance, the female character Grace Marks portrayed in the work of Margaret Atwood named *Alias Grace* manipulates the power structures existing in her time by making use of her silence and actions to achieve her own aims. Some women choose another way to prove their agency through working, rejecting traditional relations, or moving away from the expected behavior in their families. Such a form of expressing ones will can either consist in an active manifestation in the form of resistance or rebellion, or be a passive approach to define oneself.

Examination of the Impact of Agency on Their Resilience in the Face of Adversity

The ability to act independently (agency) also plays an essential role in the resilience of females depicted in Neo-Victorian fiction, as it gives them the ability to cope with difficulties and change the course of events. Instead of merely opposing the oppression that they experience, women who have agency have

control over their futures, regardless of the social or personal hardships that they might encounter. Through agency, the characters are able to overcome and survive despite the social rejection, traumas, and challenges that they are encountering. For example, in the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* written by John Fowles, the character of Sarah Woodruff leaves the place where she is oppressed and makes a decision to create a better future for herself through agency. Although Sarah experiences a significant amount of rejection from the Victorian society, she is able to break free from the chains of society through her ability to make decisions for herself.

Subversion in Feminist Resilience

Definition of Subversion as a Tool for Resistance

In feminist theory, subversion is used to refer to the process whereby an individual undermines or upends existing systems, norms, and oppressive regimes. It is one of the tools that people can use to oppose an unjust system. While rebellion can be overt, subversion is covert, implying that it may involve actions like questioning the prevailing societal norms and behaviors, challenging established gender roles, or simply acting against the grain. Feminist resilience involves a process by which women resist patriarchy using subversive methods. Through subversion, women can overthrow the oppressive structures that govern them. By doing so, they can take control of their lives and ensure that they have opportunities that would otherwise not exist.

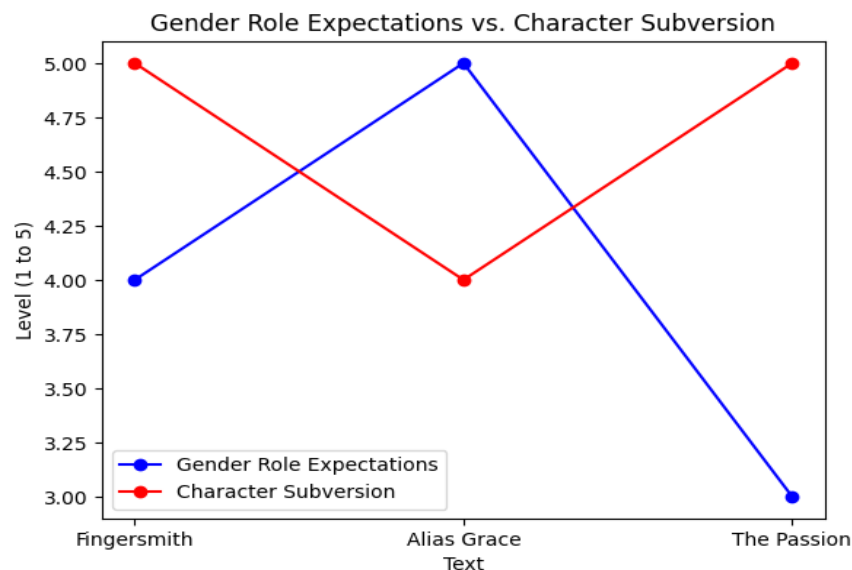


Figure 2: Gender Role Expectations vs. Character Subversion

Figure 2 depicts the degrees of adherence to conventional gender roles and the subversive acts performed by the characters in the chosen Neo-Victorian texts. The graph captures the defiance by female characters against the social standards and expectations of the time and the correlation between their constraints and the manner in which they defy the established conventions. There is a correlation between agency and subversion, whereby high levels of subversion are correlated with a higher level of resistance to gender role conformity.

Exploration of How Female Characters Subvert Traditional Gender Roles

In the genre of Neo-Victorian historical fiction, subversive acts are committed by female characters that violate traditional gender roles. As mentioned above, those gender roles were based on the ideas of

femininity established during the Victorian era and which implied such qualities of women as passivity, domesticity, and compliance to masculine control. Nevertheless, female characters in many Neo-Victorian works rebel against those conventions, taking up unconventional identities or activities that question and oppose gender roles and roles in society. For example, some characters portrayed in Neo-Victorian historical novels, such as Sarah Water's *Fingersmith*, commit subversive acts in defiance of what they consider to be the oppressive social order. They refuse to take on traditional gender roles and act as dutiful wives or obedient mothers. In doing so, they violate traditional gender roles and thereby commit an act of subversion. Subversive women might also reconsider what constitutes being feminine, thus introducing an alternative understanding of femininity into a Neo-Victorian text.

Discussion of the Consequences of Subversion in the Context of Feminist Resilience

Neo-Victorian subversion is never cost-free. Women characters that rebel against the traditional gender roles set by society will definitely face some form of resistance, whether it takes a social, physical, or emotional toll on them. On the other hand, the very act of going against the grain of the norm is one thing that makes up part of their feminist resilience. In defying the system, the women characters do more than simply fight back against their oppressors; they also exercise their rights to free will, freedom of expression, and independence. The repercussions of rebelling may come at a great price, but through these experiences, these women gain new forms of strength and empowerment. One woman who rebels against the predestined future set for her by the rest of the community and pursues her goals will face alienation from others, but she also gains the courage to fight for herself.

Table 1: Subversive Actions and Their Consequences in Neo-Victorian Texts

Text	Subversive Action	Outcome/Consequences
<i>Fingersmith</i> (Dove, 2019)	Sue Trinder deceives and manipulates	Gains self-empowerment, but faces social isolation
<i>Alias Grace</i> (Ober Mannon, 2014)	Grace Marks manipulates historical narratives	Regains control of her story, faces legal consequences
<i>The Passion</i> (Aróstegui, 2000)	Villanelle defies societal gender roles	Experiences alienation but achieves personal empowerment

Table 1 illustrates various acts of subversion that have been committed by the main characters in certain Neo-Victorian novels, together with the repercussions that they incurred as a result. Through the identification of the connection between the protagonists' acts of defiance against prevailing norms and their repercussions, it becomes possible to demonstrate how their acts of subversion have helped in strengthening themselves as individuals.

Case Studies of Feminist Resilience in Neo-Victorian Fiction

Analysis of Specific Literary Examples that Showcase Agency and Subversion

The neo-Victorian genre contains multiple examples where the agency and subversion of female characters have been used as a means of defiance. For instance, in the story *Fingersmith* by Sarah Waters, the heroine Sue Trinder seems like another victim at first, but later in the plot, her character becomes quite active, defying the stereotypes imposed on her by the society around. The defiance of Sue includes the use of various tricks in the process of manipulation and crossing the line between social classes, making her both stronger personally and subversive. This type of agency can be called rather covert and is expressed through a series of subversive steps made by the character. Moreover, there is another example in which the main female character also acts in a subversive way, trying to fight patriarchy. In the novel *Alias Grace*

by Margaret Atwood, Grace Marks, who can be viewed as just another passive female victim, also resists society by using psychological manipulation techniques. It becomes clear that agency can be expressed in various ways, which are both overt and covert and are important in fighting patriarchy.

Table 2: Comparison of Authorial Approaches to Agency and Subversion

Author	Text	Narrative Style	Agency Representation	Subversion Approach
Margaret Atwood (Ober Mannon, 2014)	Alias Grace	Psychological realism, historical fiction	Psychological manipulation, redefining one's narrative	Manipulation of power dynamics, questioning historical truth
Sarah Waters (Dove, 2019)	Fingersmith	Gothic, Victorian realism	Deception, breaking social expectations	Subversive sexuality, breaking societal constraints
Jeanette Winterson (Aróstegui, 2000)	The Passion	Magical realism, historical fiction	Defying time and space, pursuing self-determination	Subverting traditional gender roles, transcending physical boundaries

Table 2 provides a comparison of the various approaches used by three Neo-Victorian writers (Margaret Atwood, Sarah Waters, and Jeanette Winterson) on the issues of agency and subversion. The table takes note of the narrative form and the kind of agency involved, as well as the particular subversive acts employed. This gives an indication of the approach employed by the authors in showing feminist defiance.

Comparison of How Different Authors Address These Themes in Their Narratives

The portrayal of agency and subversion by various writers is unique, but all of them add to the larger conversation surrounding feminist resilience. The protagonist Grace in Atwood's *Alias Grace* highlights psychological aspects such as manipulation, memory, and power within the context of patriarchy. It is the skill of reimagining the story that becomes the focal point of feminist resilience in the book. Conversely, the story of betrayal and deceit in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* becomes an important means of empowerment for Sue Trinder in the novel. Her defiance of social norms becomes another aspect of her feminist resilience within the Victorian era. However, Winterson's *The Passion* is an example of historical fiction and magical realism that portrays the subversion of the traditional gender roles from a completely different perspective. Female characters in Winterson's novel not only manage to subvert gender roles; they also manage to transcend both space and time, thus providing an alternate form of resilience through the prism of magic realism. While all three novels feature strong female characters and depict instances of oppression faced by females, each of these writers employs a different writing style.

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of These Portrayals in Promoting Feminist Resilience

The effectiveness of neo-Victorian representation of women's feminist resilience can be seen through the character development of the women protagonists. In *Fingersmith*, Sue Trinder's subversive tendencies and her manipulation of events in order to change her own reality give her the freedom to rewrite her life in the way she sees fit. This kind of subversion proves the fact that feminist resilience does not have to include rebellion. Instead, it can involve empowering oneself with the necessary skills to control one's life path. In the case of *Alias Grace*, Grace Marks' manipulation of those around her as well as of the powers that try to suppress her individuality is a testament to her resilience. Her psychological manipulations

demonstrate the inner strength of a woman who is fighting for her rights. On the other hand, Winterson's *The Passion* can be considered more symbolic when it comes to the concept of feminist resilience because the author describes the fantastical transformation of her heroine.

This representation is indeed successful in fostering feminist resilience as it showcases the range of options available when it comes to women asserting their agency and challenging oppressive structures. Through manipulation, treachery, and transcendence, it can be seen that feminist resilience is not a single path. Moreover, the use of a range of narrative approaches from historical realism to magical realism serves as proof that there are many ways of depicting feminist resilience. By showcasing the many sides of women fighting against oppression, neo-Victorian fiction emerges as a vital genre in reinventing feminist resilience.

Conclusion

This research paper analyzes the concept of agency and subversion in relation to neo-Victorian historical fiction literature and how they contribute to building resilience in women. It is argued that in the selected books, the women characters demonstrate agency by defying social norms, whereas subversion allows them to escape from gender stereotypes. Some examples of the selected books include *Fingersmith*, *Alias Grace*, and *The Passion*. In these selected books, women are portrayed as resilient and capable of defying social norms that exist in patriarchal societies. The concept of agency and subversion is essential for feminist resilience because it helps characters fight oppression and reclaim power by transforming themselves. Agency gives women autonomy to resist oppression by making choices, whereas subversion provides tools to deconstruct patriarchal structures, thereby giving characters the freedom to escape oppression. Neo-Victorian texts are a good example of literature where themes of agency and subversion are prominent; they give insights into the history of gender oppression and also provide lessons for the future. For instance, an interesting field of study would involve intersectionality in feminist resilience. A comparative analysis between Neo-Victorian novels and other types of historical novels is likely to provide interesting insights, considering the fact that such an investigation will shed light on how literature from different eras portrays the intersections between gender, race, class, and sexual identities within the context of feminist resistance.

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