History of Female Devilry in Literary and Cultural Representations:

The tradition of representing of women as evil or associating women with the Devil dates back to the time of the Book of Genesis. There are many examples of seductive and dangerous women (e.g. Ashtoreth, Cybele, Inanna, Diana, Hathor, Medusa, Ishtar, Asherah, Asherah, Harpies, Furies, Sirens, etc.) in pagan mythologies of ancient religions, but they were not denigrated and demonized in the way transgressive women were represented in biblical and Christian mythologies and in their interpretations in literature and various forms of cultural representations. Ancient cultures often worshipped and celebrated these fatal women as the emblem of fertility, creativity, power, and sexual pleasure as well as of destruction and death. Some of these pagan idols, who were associated with eroticism and carnality, were worshipped and reverenced instead of being despised in the pagan mythology of the pre-Christian period. The common feature that these female goddesses share is that most of them are related to a serpent figure. The association of the Moon goddess with serpent is well-known. In *Women and Evil*, Nel Noddings says, "Both the moon through its cycles and the snakes through its shedding become periodically new and whole" (54). The Serpent is viewed as a symbol of fertility and sexuality in many cultures. In some cultures, it also symbolizes wisdom and knowledge. In *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbolism*, Barbara G. Walker remarks, "…the serpent was one of the oldest symbols of female power. Woman and serpent together were considered holy in preclassic Aegean civilization, since both seemed to embody the power of life" (387). Walker further says, "Of course, in the Bible both Eve and her serpent were much diabolized; but Gnostic sects of the early Christian era retained some of the older ideas about their collaboration concerning the fruit of knowledge. Some sects worshiped the snake as a benevolent Female Spiritual Principle, who taught Adam and Eve what they needed to

know about God's duplicity" (388). With the emergence of Christianity, both woman and serpent were demonized, and sexual pleasure and body began to be abhorred. Women became "the devil's gateway." Nel Noddings in her book *Women and Evil* describes the three facets of this long association of women with evil: firstly, association of women with body and subordination of body and its functions; secondly, circulation of the idea that female mind is more vulnerable to demonic forces, and lastly, the biblical myth of the Great Fall and its interpretation demonize women (36). According to Noddings, the denigration of body and nature, and the favouring of mind and spirit in their place date back to the time of Aristotle. The Judeo-Christian tradition only hardened this belief. For the saints of the church, the body was something like the prison house of the soul. It was often compared to the home of the Devil. They cared more for the souls of the men than for their bodies. Women, on the other hand, were thought to be more materialistic and concerned with corporeal things. Noddings in this context gives the example of Pearl S. Buck's Nobel Prize-winning biography of her parents. Her father, who was a Presbyterian minister, valued soul and spirit more than anything else. Her mother, on the other hand, was preoccupied with the bodies and earthly life of her children. Death of their four children in the foreign land was an unbearable loss for the mother while the father accepted it as "the Lord's will" with calm resignation as he was mainly concerned with the souls of their children. But for the mother, their bodies were as important as their souls. Noddings quotes, "Is the body nothing? I loved my children's bodies. I could never bear to see them laid into earth…They were precious bodies." (41). The female body itself was an object of fear and hate for religious persons. Menstruation, Noddings mentions, was considered an evil thing. Noddings reminds that menstruation was seen with awe and veneration in the primitive tribes too, but they

considered it as a manifestation of a powerful force that has both harmful and benevolent effect upon human life. However, with the advent of Christianity, "the mystery of menstruation became a curse," and the female body became the container of "primordial slime" (Noddings 39). Noddings even wonders that the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre who denied the existence of an *a priori* human nature considered the human body as "one of the strongest sources of nausea" (Noddings 39). Noddings writes, "Sartre expressed exceptional disgust with female anatomy. He wrote on the obscenity of holes" (39). Thus, the disgust with the female body and its evil nature, which began with Christianity, is deep-rooted in western culture. Secondly, the female mind, along with the body, was considered more vulnerable to evil than the male. This resulted in the rise of witch craze that included indiscriminate witch-hunting and witch-prosecution in a period from the late fifteenth to the late eighteenth century. The reason behind this association of the female mind with evil has already been discussed in the first chapter. I will just add one more point here. There was a socio-political reason behind the witch-hunting craze in Europe. Feminists like Mary Daly and Ehrenreich found a medical conspiracy behind it. According to them, witches were actually midwives and folk healers. They posed a serious threat to the male practitioners of medicine at the advent of the Age of Science and Reason. As a result, they were labelled as witches and prosecuted to secure the interest of the male practitioners of medicine.

The most important facet of demonization of women is possibly the myth of the Great Fall and its interpretations by the churchmen and the religious scholars throughout the ages. The biblical myth of the Great Fall is very significant in understanding the changes in the ways transgressive women have been represented in literature. Nel Noddings remarks, "We have at least two good reasons for studying

and analyzing the myth of Eve and the Fall: its continuing effects on present patterns of thought and social structure and its influence on traditional conceptions of evil" (52). The myth of the Great Fall is considered as the beginning of Christian misogyny. It describes the first transgression by woman, but it does not explicitly express any misogynistic ideas about Eve. The cultural receptions and interpretations of the Great Fall myth by various biblical scholars and religious authorities of various ages conduce to the formation of the cultural construct of Eve as the temptress, the ally of Satan and the destroyer of man.

Jean M. Higgins, a scholar of the Bible, remarks that the habit of viewing Eve as a temptress and Satan as her adviser stems from the "imagination, drawn mainly from each commentator's own presuppositions and cultural expectations" (Faxneld 63). Per Faxneld, another scholar of History of Religion, remarks,

> …when looking at the reception history of this passage, as *it pertains to gender relations*, it soon becomes clear that only during the last 150 years or so has it been used to any notable extent for purposes other than legitimating the subjugation of women. Some have alleged that it also functions as a dangerous justification for violence against women, which is in effect in our own time. (61)

Thus, Faxneld in his study of the reception of the Great Fall myth shows how church authorities at different times have used this myth to legitimize the demonization and subjugation of women. The writings of Tertullian, an early Christian author, are often quoted to substantiate it. In his treatise *On the Apparel of Women,* Tertullian described each woman as Eve and considered them as "the devil's gateway." He writes:

> Are you not aware that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives on in our own time; the guilt must then, of necessity, live on also. You are the devil's gateway. You first plucked the forbidden fruit and first deserted the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not brave enough to attack. (Faxneld 67)

Irenaeus, a Greek bishop, considered Eve a treacherous woman and mentioned her role in the fall of the human race. John Chrysostom, who was the Archbishop of Constantinople, once remarked:

> The woman taught once and for all, and upset everything. Therefore he (Paul) says. "Let her not teach." Then does this mean something for the rest of womankind, that Eve suffered this judgment? It certainly does concern other women! For the Female sex is weak and vain, and here this is said of the whole sex. (Faxneld 68)

St. Augustine, a famous Christian theologian and philosopher, pointed out Adam's strength and Eve's weakness in this biblical myth. In Augustine's words, in Eve's mind, there was "a certain love for her own power and a certain proud self-presumption" (Faaxneld 68). He considers this as Eve's weakness that makes her vulnerable to Satan's temptation. Protestant theologians held a lesser misogynistic attitude towards Eve, but they always blamed Eve for weakness that made her an easy target for Satan. Martin Luther, a Protestant theologian, remarked that "if he had tempted Adam first, the victory would have been Adam's, and the man 'would have crushed the serpent with his foot" (Faxneld 69). The followers of Protestantism thought that Eve committed a crime by rejecting the protection and supervision of her

husband Adam. Therefore, according to Luther, women should do penance for the sin committed by Eve by doing domestic work and staying at home.

Though Milton in *Paradise Lost* humanizes Satan and makes a hero out of him, Eve's status does not improve much in his text. Feminist critics often find in Milton's Eve a proto-feminist figure as she often demands equal rights like Adam. Devil begins to tempt her by appearing in her dream. Then he appears in the guise of an angel lamenting that no one eats fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. He asks her tactfully "is knowledge so despised?" and encourages her to eat the fruit: "Taste this, and be henceforth among the gods/ Thyself a goddess, not to Earth confined" (Milton 124). He assures her against her fear of punishment by God: "God …cannot hurt ye, be just/ Not just, not God: not feared then, nor obeyed" (236). He also questions God's intention for declaring such prohibition: "… and wherein lies/ The offense, that man should thus attain to know?/ Or is it envy, and can envy dwell/ In heavenly breasts?" (237). Thus, he gradually instills into her mind a doubt, a question: is such jealous God really good? Then She considers God as "our great forbidder" (239) and Satan as her "Best guide" (239). She follows his advice and eats the forbidden fruit and attains the secret knowledge. At first, she decides not to share this secret with Adam for a reason which encourages the feminist readers to interpret her role as well as Milton's text as feminist. She contemplates if she keeps the new found knowledge to herself, it may "… add what wants/ In female sex, the more to draw his (Adam's) love/ And render me more equal, and perhaps/ A thing not undesirable, sometime/ Superior: for inferior who is free?" (240). Feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* remark, "Milton's Eve falls for exactly the same reason that Satan does: because she wants to be "as Gods" and because, like

him, she is secretly dissatisfied with her place, secretly preoccupied with questions of 'equality'" (196). These traits were represented by Milton as flaws that paved the way for fall. These apparent feminist traits of Eve were actually used by Milton to demonize her. Per Faxneld comments, "His message here is clearly not feminist. Rather, reading the whole epic, or even just all of chapter nine (wherein the fall occurs), makes it clear that he argues that it is an absolute necessity that wives be completely obedient to their husbands, lest their impudent attempts at independence bring about cosmic chaos and doom" (72).

Besides Eve, another female transgressor who belonged to the Judeo-Christian tradition was Lilith. She is often taken as Adam's first wife. A contradiction in the Bible also points to this fact. In Genesis 1:27, it is mentioned: "So God created man in his [own] image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (The King James version of the Holy Bible 1). However, the origin of Lilith as the first wife of Adam resolves this contradiction. *Alphabet of Ben Sira,* an anonymous Hebrew work written in the eighth century, gives a detailed account of the myth of Lilith. In this book, Adam and Eve were described as an unhappy couple. She declined to lie beneath Adam during intercourse and demanded equal status as they were, she claimed, made of the same earth. She left him, and God sent three angels to bring her back, but she refused to come back. *Sefer ha-Zohar* ("The Book of Splendour"), a 13th century Kabbalah text compiled by Spaniard Moses de Leon, describes this story quite differently. According to Janet Howe Gaines, the account of Lilith found in this book actually conforms to Lilith's account gained from the rereading of Genesis 1.27 and its interpretation in the Talmud. A shift of pronoun from singular to plural can be observed in the above line in Genesis 1.27: The pronoun "him" is replaced by "them" at the end. Talmud interprets this differently. At

first, God made an androgynous figure that had two distinct halves. He desired to create two creatures, but at last, he finished his work creating an androgynous figure with two halves. The book *Sefer ha-Zohar* ("The Book of Splendor") gives an account of how these two halves were separated. God split the female part off the main figure by putting Adam in a deep sleep and later presented it to Adam as her new wife when he got up from sleep. Another passage in this book mentions that Lilith deserts Adam when she finds him embracing her rival Eve. Lilith is regarded as the feminist icon by the twentieth-century feminists. However, she is also seen as Adam's first wife and a horrible, seductive female demon in Jewish tradition. In Jewish culture, it is believed that the men and the new-born children, who sleep alone in bed, are prone to the mischief of Lilith. Like Eve, Lilith was never the part of religious teaching in Christianity. She, in turn, was assimilated and adapted in the literature and folklore of various countries. She has been engaging the thoughts and imaginations of the poets, writers, and artists down throughout the ages. Goethe's *Faust* (1808) gives a beautiful description of Lilith. In this play, Faust encounters Lilith at the witches' Sabbath at Brocken Mountain. Faust wants to know about this strange and beautiful woman from Mephistophilis. Mephistophilis then informs him:

> The first wife of Adam
> Watch out and shun her captivating tresses:
> She likes to use her never-equaled hair
> To lure a youth into her luscious lair,
> And he won't lightly leave her lewd caresses. (Goethe 379)

Faust then dances with her and says:

> A pretty dream once came to me;

In which I saw an apple tree;

Two pretty apples gleamed on it,

They lured me, and I climbed a bit. (379)

She replies:

You find the little apples nice

Since first they grew in Paradise.

And I am happy telling you

That they grow in my garden, too. (381)

Their conversation bears erotic connotations. However, Goethe also depicts her as a symbol of fatal temptation that causes one's destruction. In the poem *Adam, Lilith and Eve*, Browning depicts a detailed picture of Lilith. Though his depiction of Lilith seems to represent her in a positive light, the close study of the poem reveals that it actually belongs to the old misogynist tradition that demonized Lilith. Pre-Raphaelite poets and artists also dealt with the myth of Lilith. Two poems (*Eden's Bower* and *Body's* Beauty) written by D. G. Rossetti give a detailed description of Lilith. *Body's Beauty* describes the physical beauties of Lilith, but it also suggests a strong sense of terror and danger associated with her beauty:

Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went

Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent

And round his heart one strangling golden hair. (Rossetti 162)

Eden's Bower delineates a more detailed picture of Lilith with an emphasis upon the demonic aspect of her character and appearance. Here, Lilith is presented as a female demon who carries out revenge upon Adam by taking the help of Satan who appears

in the form of a serpent: “It was Lilith the wife of Adam/ (Sing Eden Bower!)/ Not a drop of her blood was human” (43). Now Lilith addresses the serpent of the garden as her lover and asks his help: “Help, sweet Snake, sweet lover of Lilith!/ … Help me once for this one endeavour,/ And then my love shall be thine forever!” (44). She beseeches him to give his shape to her so that she may take revenge upon Adam. Rossetti also created a piece of painting titled *Lady Llilith* (1868) on Lilith. He focused more on the ineffable beauty of Lilith than on the fatal aspects of her nature in it. Another pre-Raphaelite artist John Collier portrayed Lilith in his painting *Lilith* (1887) as a nude partially covered by a coiling serpent that hides her private parts. Collier portrayed her as a gorgeous blonde against the backdrop of a dark and deep forest, but the dark forest, the serpent coiling Lilith and the strange and mysterious expression in her face are suggestive of the danger and terror associated with her beauty. Kenyan Cox, an American painter, depicted Lilith in his painting *Lilith* (1892) as a hideous and dangerous female demon. The painting is parted into two panels. The top panel bears semblance to Collier’s painting to some extent. It depicts Lilith as a nude entwined by a snake that appears to kiss her. The bottom panel presents the temptation scene where Adam and Eve fall prey to the temptation by Lilith who appears in the shape of a human-serpent creature. Its lower part looks like a serpent, and the upper part resembles a human. Hugo van der Goes, an artist of the late fifteenth century, portrayed Lilith in his painting *Fall and Redemption of Man* in the same way with a woman’s face and a serpentine body. Here, she is presented as standing under the Tree of Knowledge and tempting Adam and Eve to eat its fruit. Michelangelo also portrayed Eve as a human-serpent figure, which coils the Tree of Knowledge and allures Adam and Eve, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Thus,

Serpent was often viewed as Lilith's friend and even identified with her in the art and literature of the post-Christian period.

Thus, the image of the serpent-woman or the fatal and demonic woman, who is at once beautiful, seductive and dangerous, and her collusion with Satan turned into the object of misogynist fantasy in English literature of different ages. From the Old English to the present era, English literature is fraught with images of women who transgress the accepted feminine roles. They are demonic and evil either in appearance or in nature or both. The earliest example of the demonic woman in English literature is Beowulf's mother in Old English epic poem *Beowulf*. Anglo Saxon life was dominated by the values of heroism and valour. The literature of this period glorifies men who took part in battles and showed bravery. Women in the society were supposed to do less important and less glorious work like pleasing and entertaining the war heroes, mourning for any kind of loss, etc. In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar's wife Wealhtheow does the work of serving alcoholic drink to the war heroes. In "Wulf and Edwacer" and "The Wife's Lament", women are found to lament for their present state of existence. Very few women who transgress their boundaries and enter the sphere of men are ignored or demonized in the literature of this period. Modthryth and Judith in *Beowulf* are known to do some heroic exploits, but the anonymous poet of *Beowulf* does not spare much space for them. Another character known as Grendel's mother, who shows real valour in her fight with Beowulf, was demonized in the poem. Yet, only 293 lines were used in a poem of 3183 lines to describe her activities. She fights with Beowulf to avenge the death of her son. After a horrible fight in which she causes serious injury to the hero, she is killed by the hero with a magic sword. Though Grendel has been described as cannibal and bloodthirsty in the poem, no such blame against her is found in the

poem. She just follows the path of heroism and warlike men. She wants to take revenge for the inhuman killing of her son. She has been described as a monster in the poem, but the same would have been called legitimate if it was done by a male war hero. Thus, monstrosity of Grendel's mother is not innate but socially and culturally constructed for her transgression of the accepted gender role. Lady Bertilak in Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Wife* appears to be a powerful dominant woman. She might be called the earliest example of the prototype *femme fatale* in English literature (The concept of *femme fatale* became prominent in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century and the term was not coined until twentieth century[1]). She is at once beautiful and dangerous. At the outset of the poem, she does not appear to be the submissive and angelic woman of Medieval romance, who needs the protection of man. She is bold in expressing her sexual desire to Sir Gawain and exploits her beauty adeptly to dominate him. Her sexual advances to Gawain is transgressive not only because she violates the vows of marriage but because she transgresses the accepted feminine codes of modesty and delicacy. However, this powerful lady becomes a humble wife when it is revealed that she was manipulated by her husband to tempt Gawain. Though she is finally revealed to be powerless woman controlled by her husband, her acting in the role of a powerful seductress subverts the cultural binary between the chaste and seductress showing both are the two sides of the same coin. The Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is one of the important examples of transgressive women in Middle English literature. She is a powerful and dominating character. Medieval society hardly approved the second marriage of a widow, but she had five husbands whom she married, she candidly confesses, for the upliftment of her income and social status. Though she does not look demonic in her appearance, Chaucer describes her as a sexually assertive woman

in the general prologue. She declares that she is an authority on the knowledge about love and marriage as she has married five times. She also uses the Bible and scriptures to justify her voracious sexual appetite and five marriages. She argues, “God bad us for to wexe and multiplye” (141; line 28). So one should not hesitate to indulge in sex and produce children. She further argues that though the religious men appreciate virginity, one should marry to produce such virgins. She describes how she used her beauty to control the four of her five husbands. She says that she does not want to be controlled by men. Instead, men should obey her. She argues,

> In wyfhode I wol use myn instrument
> As frely as my maker hath it sent.
> If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!
> Myn housbond shal it have bothe eve and morwe,
> Whan that him list com forth and paye his dette.
> An housbonde I wol have, I nil nat lette,
> Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
> And have his tribulacioun with-al
> Upon his flessh, whyl that I am his wyf.
> I have the power duringe al my lyf
> Upon his propre body, and noght he.
> Right thus the apostel tolde it unto me (144; line 149-160)

What she demands is the supreme sovereignty over husband: “Upon his flessh, whyl that I am his wyf./ I have the power duringe al my lyf/ Upon his propre body, and noght he.” Her story too bears the same message for the readers. The Knight in her story finds the answer to the question: What thing do worldly women love most? The answer was: “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee/ As wel over hir housbond as

hir love,/ And for to been in maistrie hym above" (159; line 1038-1040). Thus, Wife of Bath remains a powerful female character who speaks of female empowerment and sexual freedom. After the Wife of Bath, the character of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is remarkable as an example of an evil transgressive woman. Her vaulting ambition for power shrouds all the other aspects of her character. She is ready to shrug off the feminine aspects of her character to empower herself. She beseeches the assistance of the evil forces for this:

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
> And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
> Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.
> Stop up the access and passage to remorse, (1.5. 38-42)

To kill her femininity completely, she asks the spirits to "(c)ome to my woman's breasts,/ And take my milk for gall" (1.5. 45-46). She goads her hesitant husband Macbeth who is not ready to murder the king. She decides to "pour my spirits in thine ear,/ And chastise with the valour of my tongue/ All that impedes thee from the golden round' (1.5. 24–26). When Macbeth still procrastinates, she uses "valour of my tongue," describing to what she can go to fulfill her ambition. She is ready to sacrifice her motherly nature if it comes as a barrier before her ambition as she says:

> I have given suck, and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,

> And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
>
> Have done to this. (1.7.54–59)

Though the sexuality of Lady Macbeth is not described explicitly, it is hinted at several times during their conversation. Critics often hold the opinion that she appeals to the manliness of Macbeth to provoke him as she says: "When you durst do it, then you were a man;/ And to be more than what you were, you would/ Be so much more the man" (1.7. 49-51). Theatrical representations dating from the late nineteenth century have presented the relation between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as sexually charged and Lady Macbeth as a bold flaunter of her sexual charms. But at the end of the play, she collapses and loses all her strength. In the Sleep-Walking scene, she appears as a guilt-ridden helpless woman. Sandra Gilbert in her article "'Unsex Me Here': Lady Macbeth's 'Hell Broth'" has shown that Lady Macbeth's murderous ambition goes to the extent of madness and even monstrosity, thereby subverting the conventional gender role, but at the end play she is restored to her accepted gender role as a helpless and weak woman.[2] Yet, her boldness and strength in some parts of the play place her in a distinct position in the tradition of fatal demonic women in literature. This archetype of the fatal demonic women finds fullest expression in the literature of the Romantic period. Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony* opines "During the first stage of Romanticism, up till about the middle of the nineteenth century, we meet several fatal women in literature, but there is no established type of Fatal Women in the way there is an established type of Byronic Hero" (191). However, later, Praz contradicts himself by trying to find a "starting point" (192) of the literature dealing with femme fatales. His study aims to figure out a homogeneous pattern in the representation of *femme fatales* in Romantic literature. According to him, the focus of the people gradually shifted from the "Fatal Man" in the first half of

the eighteenth century to the "Fatal Woman" in the second half of the century due to a "chronic ailment." Praz comments that "The male, who at first tends towards sadism, inclines, at the end of the century, towards masochism." Praz ignores the subversive potential of the femme fatale archetype and considers it as a reflection of male fantasy. Adriana Craciun remarks, "Praz's highly influential account of the *femme fatale* relies on an androcentric psychological explanation" (16). She further explains,

> …the femme fatale was an ideologically charged figure that both male and female writers invested with a range of contemporary political, sexual, and poetic significations. She cannot be limited to a fantasy of male masochism, as she is in Praz (and in most accounts which rely on him), nor merely to a nostalgic throwback of the aristocratic "empire of women," which on one level she certainly embodied. (16)

Actually, the concept of *femme fatales* or the evil women produced in Romantic literature is a much more complex concept and can hardly be explained or interpreted with a single exhaustive theory. Geraldine, a serpent-woman in Coleridge's poem *Christabel*, enters the castle of Sir Leoline in the guise of a helpless royal lady to entice, sexually abuse and destroy his innocent and humble daughter Christabel. She mesmerizes Christabel by casting a spelling upon her so that she might not be able to disclose the real nature of Geraldine to anyone, but Barcy receives a premonition in his dream where a bright and green snake strangles a young bird named Christabel. Thus, the poem portrays innocence in the grip of evil. The picture also reminds one of the Great Fall myth where Eve was tempted and beguiled by Satan who appeared in the guise of a serpent. The poem also bears an implied moral message that women are vulnerable to evil and can harm themselves and others around them if they are not surveiled, protected, and guarded properly. It also stereotypically represents women

either as angels or demons. When the angel exits from its protected and safe place and violates the norms defined by patriarchy, she can become a demon or prey to the demon. Another *femme fatale* in Keats' poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is also the product of Romantic misogynist fantasy that vacillates between beauty and terror, fear and fascination. The poem gives a detailed description of the bodily beauty of the lady, but it mystifies her by keeping her identity and origin unknown to the readers. This beautiful and mysterious lady makes love to the Knight and leaves him pale in the cold hillside. The knight sees a horrific dream in which pale warriors and kings warn him against the beautiful but dangerous lady. The poem perpetuates the myth of woman as the temptress and the destroyer of men. Lamia is another serpent-woman in Keats' poem *Lamia.* Lamia is a woman who is trapped in the body of a serpent. She sees Lycius and falls in love with him. Hermes helps her to take the shape of a beautiful woman. They fall in love with each other and spend a happy and peaceful time, but it does not last long as Lycius decides to marry her and announce it publicly in the marriage ceremony. Apollonius, a philosopher, who is invited to the ceremony, recognizes Lamia's real nature and discloses it in public. Lamia then disappears, leaving Lycius alone. He dies of a broken heart. The poem portrays Lamia quite differently from the other Romantic poems that reflect misogynist fantasy in representing women. The poem is often taken as a symbolic representation of philosophy and imagination. Lamia and Apollonius symbolize imagination and philosophy, respectively. Lamia is also considered as a creative force because she sheds off her old skin to be reborn as an attractive woman. In the poem, Keats hardly demonizes Lamia. He also does not make her a subversive figure. Instead, Keats humanizes her to elevate her status from a serpent to an affectionate lady who only

seeks true love. However, like a serpent, Lamia also symbolizes deception and elusiveness. She is presented as deceptive and elusive like imagination.

There were some female poets and novelists as well as some male novelists in late the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. *Femme fatales* in their writings can hardly be interpreted as a mere projection of male fantasy. *Femme fatales* in the writings of some female writers like Anne Bannerman, Letitia Landon, and Charlotte Dacre, according to Adriana Craciun, offered "a perspective that cannot be classified satisfactorily as either inherently subversive or normalizing" (19). Craciun further says that these writers' "explorations of natural and unnatural embodiment ranged beyond the (sexualized) criteria that modern critics typically consider when they examine women's writings on the body." Anne Bannerman (1765-1829) chose writing as a means to earn livelihood because of the poor financial condition of her family. Her poems are characterized by ambiguity and obscurity. That is why she did not become popular and had to live in poverty all through her life. So, later she left writing to become a governess. Anne Bannerman's poems "The Dark Ladie," "The Prophetess of the Oracle of Seäm," and "The Mermaid" represent destructive *femme fatales* who stand in stark contrast to the homely virtuous women of Romantic imagination. Bannerman's veiled *femme fatales* resist the romantic craving for the ideal and absolute truth, for the absolute and ideal feminine. Instead, the identities of *femme fatales* are never exposed as the narrative always draws attention to itself in a way that the exposition is always deferred. However, this narrative never goes to mystify them. "Bannerman's female prophetesses and veiled supernatural figures like "The Dark Ladie" are, in the words of Adriana Craciun, "ruthlessly demystified, not through the explained supernatural preferred by Radcliffe, to narrative clarity, what is in fact an excessive and opulent mysticism that draws attention to itself as such"

(163). The poem "The Dark Ladie" recounts the story of the revenge of a mysterious and dangerous woman the "Dark Ladie" who punishes the crusaders for their attempt to abduct her from her Holy Land. Coleridge wrote a poem with a similar name "Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie" which was published in the Edinburgh magazine. Bannerman's poem was published one month later in the same magazine where she referred to Coleridge's poem in the footnote pointing the readers' attention to it. Bannerman's version of the 'Dark Ladie' is completely different from that of Coleridge. While Coleridge's poem gives a misogynistic representation of the seductive 'Dark Ladie', Bannerman's poem represents 'Dark Ladie' in a way that resists romantic idealization of the *femme fatale*. The narrator in Coleridge's poem describes the 'Dark Ladie' as an object of male fantasy to entice both the listeners and the readers, but in Bannerman's poem different narrators reiterate the story of the 'Dark Ladie' as they are cursed to do so. They repeat their stories neither to excite the fantasy about the 'Dark Ladie' nor to evoke sympathy of the other listeners and the readers for the cursed knights who are destroyed after they finish their stories. This is a part of the narrative structure. Unlike the traditional femme *fatale,* Bannerman's "Dark Ladie" is veiled, and it is impossible to unveil her. In the impossibility of reaching her or knowing her, Bannerman subverts the romantic craving for the ideal feminine. Bannerman gives a beautiful description of her terrifying appearance:

> A Ladie, clad in ghastly white,
> And veiled to the feet:
>
> She spoke not when she enter'd there;
> She spoke not when the feast was done;
> And every knight, in chill amaze,
> Survey'd her one by one:

For thro' the foldings of her veil,
Her long black veil that swept the ground,
A light was seen to dart from eyes
That mortal never own'd. (140-141)

An important aspect of her veil is that she can see the knights through it. The knights who can only apprehend her fiery eyes through her veil are reduced to mesmerized immobile objects:

But, from the Ladie in the veil,
Their eyes they could not long withdraw,
And when they tried to speak, that glare
still kept them mute with awe! (141)

Thus, the veil, on the one hand, restricts the masculine gaze by not allowing them to see more than what she wants them to see about her. On the other hand, it helps the lady to return her gaze making the knights silent and still objects. Thus, the veil serves the multiple purposes only to empower the "Dark Ladie." Bannerman's another ballad "The Prophetess of the Oracle of Seam" (1802) has a similar thematic structure like "The Dark Ladie" poem. The poem is about a mythical isle of Seam guarded by oracle in the English Channel. The Prophetess of the Oracle of Seam protects the sanctity of this secret holy place by destroying the ships that pass by it. The identity and activity of the priestess protecting the oracle are carefully hidden by the poet. The readers can never know the whole truth about it. The truth about the oracle and the prophetess is narrated repeatedly by different victim male characters who die before they finish their story. The poem begins with Father Paul recounting the story of the

oracle and the prophetess, which he heard from the story told by the only survivor of a shipwreck.

> “He told the tale of Se¨am’s isle,
> He told the terrors of its caves,
> That none had passed them with life
> When that sleep was on the waves! (190)

But he cannot finish his story:

> “But when he came to tell, at last,
> What fearful sacrifice had bled,
> His agony began anew,
> And he could not raise his head!
>
> “And he never spoke again at all,
> For he died that night in sore dismay:
> So sore, that all were tranc’d for hours
> That saw his agony! (192)

The poem thus consists of a series of repetitions of the same stories told by the survivors. Those who listen to the story become cursed. Thus, Father Paul creates another cursed figure in the new priest who listens to his story: “It awed the priest of Einsidlin, / And he could not speak at all!” (200). Thus, like the “The Dark Ladie”, this poem also defers the truth about the ideal feminine. Obscurity and self-referential quality of Bannerman’s poem thus resist the male fantasy about the absolute and ideal feminine presence. Adriana Craciun in this respect remarks, “Bannerman offers us a (proto)feminist critique of a Western metaphysics of presence, specifically

Romanticism, and its often violent exclusion of women" (175). "Bannerman's poetry", Craciun concludes, "thus challenges the Romantic ideology of imagination and the increasingly naturalized definitions of "woman" at the turn of the nineteenth century" (194). Letitia Landon is often regarded as "female Byron" for the rebellious and demonic nature of her heroines. Her poems are also crowded with *femme fatales* like the Enchantress, the Mermaid, and the Prophetess who challenge the romantic idealism about women prevalent in the writings of male Romantic predecessors. The most important aspect of her poetry is her preoccupation with body and materialism. She celebrates the body despite her painful awareness of its mortality. Her heroines are too aware of the transience of their mortal existences. Yet, they are ready to embrace all the pains and despair instead of resorting to any abstract Romantic ideology affirming any transcendent truth. The Prophetess in her poem "The Prophetess" laments her solitary state of existence and her estrangement from society: "I am alone – unblessing, and unblest!" (345). She reflects upon the hopeless state of her existence:

> I see the distant vision I invoke.
> These glorious walls have bow'd to Time's dark yoke.
> I see a plain of desert sand extend,
> Scatter'd with ruins where the wild flowers bend,
> …
> Life has one vast stern likeness in its gloom,
> We toil with hopes that must themselves consume –
> The wide world round us is one mighty tomb. (345)

Landon demystifies her heroines and places them in a material context. Her heroines attain Promethean status. In her heroines, Landon creates counterparts of Byronic

heroes. In “The Enchantress,” she creates in Medora, the Satanic enchantress, a parallel to Byron’s Manfred. She not only allows her heroine to excel Byron’s hero but also respond to Byron’s marginalizing of the woman figure Astarte in *Manfred* by empowering Medora. Medora narrates how she has achieved immortality by studying as a Magus. She ascends to heaven by exploiting her lover an immortal spirit and drank the potion of immortality:

> I said to him, “Give me an immortality which must be thine.” Worlds rolling on worlds lay beneath our feet when we stood beside the waters of life. A joyful pride swelled in my heart. I, the last and weakest of my race, had won that prize which its heroes and its sages had found too mighty for their grasp. (174)

But unlike Romantic poets, Landon does not idealize this immortality. Instead, her heroine is painfully aware of its bleak future:

> I was immortal; and what was this immortality? A dark and measureless future. Alas, we had mistaken life for felicity! What was my knowledge? it only served to show its own vanity; what was my power, when its exercise only served to work out the decrees of an inexorable necessity?... I had lost of humanity but its illusions, and they alone are what render it supportable. (174)

Thus, Landon subverts Romantic ideals through her heroines who are powerful and wise and devoid of Romantic idealism. Craciun comments, “Her unexamined numerous fatal women (often supernatural figures such as mermaids, phantoms, and enchantresses) offer an excellent opportunity to investigate how her critique of Romantic idealism, intimately involved with the poetics and politics of the body, is gendered” (18). Charlotte Dacre’s fiction and poetry are populated with the *femme*

fatales who are at once beautiful, seductive and dangerous. Besides this, through them, Dacre often implicitly celebrates instincts, passions, body, and sexuality. Appollonia in *The Passions* and Victoria in *Zofloya,* who driven by their dark passions, destroy themselves as well as the others around them, but their destruction should not be taken as punishment or manifestation of natural justice as both the virtuous and vicious are destroyed. However, the author seems to take pleasure in depicting stories of the transgression of social mores. Even in the writings of some male Gothic novelists like M. G. Lewis and William Beckford, some fatal women figures (Matilda in *The Monk*, Carathis in *Vathek)* have feminist potentials. Matilda in M. G. Lewis' *The Monk*, a famous *femme fatale* of Romantic literature, was regarded by Mario Praz as the starting point for the *femme fatale* tradition in the Romantic era. Matilda is a female demon who tempts the church Father Ambrosio to lead him to his destruction. Feminist critics consider The *Monk* as a misogynist text for its pornographic description of some women characters and their destruction at the end of the novel. However, the women deemed as virtuous according to norms and standards of patriarchal society as well as those who do not conform to them are destroyed at the end. Carathis in William Beckford's *Vathek* is another *femme fatale* who leads his son King Caliph Vathek in the path of sin. She is not a supernatural demon like Matilda, but she practises black magic and possesses superhuman power. She is also damned into the eternal fire of remorse as a punishment for her deeds. Both novels were written by male writers and easily tempt one to interpret them as an outcome of misogynist male fantasy, but a close and careful study may reject this theory as well as the moral pretension of these novels. Beside this, these fatal women characters have been depicted as active and sexually assertive individuals who have been given agency to act independently and control and dominate other male

characters. Lastly, the fact that these evil women characters as well as the innocent and humble women are destroyed at end of the novels rejects the possibility that these novels uphold and reinforce any stable system of patriarchal values.