

I. Staging Female Resistance in *A Woman of No Importance*

This research analyses Oscar Wilde's play *A Woman of No Importance* from the perspective of feminism. The resistance on the part of the female characters will be examined considering their social position and their subversion of the Victorian institution of marriage. The women are regarded as 'other', insignificant and women of no importance by the Victorian males. But they are ready to do anything to get the woman when their pride is at stake.

The protagonist of the play is Mrs. Arbuthnot who had once been lover of Lord Illingworth. She had been involved in clandestine relation with him before marriage as he had promised her to marry her. He kept on postponing the marriage plan and she was compelled to leave him pregnant with his baby. She suffered a lot and bore the degraded social status of an 'outcast' woman being an unmarried mother. Unmarried mothers were condemned in the Victorian society and were shunned. Bravely facing such odds of her life without support from Lord Illingworth, she reared Gerald Arbuthnot to make him virtuous gentleman. When villain father, Lord Illingworth meets Gerald in Hunstanton Chase, he gets impressed with him and offers the position of his Secretary. He shows the various dreams to Gerald and makes him determined to join him. But when Mrs. Arbuthnot discovers that Lord Illingworth is determined to confiscate her son from her at any cost, she protests him and finally shatters him refusing his selfish proposal to marry him and persuading Gerald to refuse his proposal.

The protagonist is backed by Hester, the Puritan, American guest to resist the Victorian patriarchal codes and the institution of marriage. Time and again, the wit of Lord Illingworth is tested by the wit of Mrs. Allonby who also resists the codes of Victorian marriage going out with the men other than her husband. Thus, the

characters' resistance to the patriarchal codes of the Victorian society has been the focus of the analysis in this research.

Women in the Victorian society want to reclaim equal social status as men but they are compelled to accept 'otherness and objectness' in the society. Their independent success is in contradiction with their femininity. Assimilating these facts, Beauvoir proclaims:

The women of today are not women at all . . . In sexuality and modernity, women as subject can claim autonomy . . . The men of today show certain duplicity of attitude which is painfully lacerating to women; they are still requiring her to remain the inessential . . . With man there is no break between public and private life . . . Whereas women's independence and successes are in contradiction with her femininity, since the truth woman is required to make to make herself object, to be the other. (276)

The difficult and dominated life of Victorian women is always in the state of 'otherness' and they are the inessential objects for males with no importance. The resistance of the female characters to such subordination and the institution of marriage is the major subject of inquiry in this research.

Wilde and His Literary Context

Oscar Wilde, celebrated playwright and literary provocateur, was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford before settling in London. During his days at Dublin and Oxford, he developed a set of attitudes and postures for which he would eventually become famous. Chief among these were his flamboyant style of dress, his contempt for conventional values, and his belief in aestheticism—a movement that embraced

the principle of art for the sake of beauty and beauty alone. After a stunning performance in college, Wilde settled in London in 1878, where he moved in circles that included Lillie Langtry, the novelists Henry James and George Moore, and the young William Butler Yeats.

Literary and artistic acclaim were slow in coming to Wilde. In 1884, when he married Constance Lloyd, Wilde's writing career was still a work in progress. He had gone on a lecture tour of North America and been lampooned in the 1881 Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience* as the self-consciously idiosyncratic philosopher-poet Reginald Bunthorne, but he was celebrated chiefly as a well-known personality and a wit. He may have been the first person ever to become famous for being famous.

During the late 1880s, Wilde wrote reviews, edited a women's magazine, and published a volume of poetry and one of children's stories. In 1891, his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, appeared and was attacked as scandalous and immoral. In that same year, he met Lord Alfred Douglas, who would eventually become his lover, and Wilde finally hit his literary stride. Over the next few years, he wrote four plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is about a wicked man whose face remains young and beautiful while the face of his portrait, hidden in his house, gets older and uglier with each wicked thing he does. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first serialised in a popular magazine. When it was later published as a book, in 1891, Oscar had added some new chapters and a revenge subplot. Though he probably did this simply to extend the book's length to that of a normal novel, some critics believed that these extra chapters had weakened the story. Most readers, however, preferred to argue over the book's morality. Suddenly, many people wanted to believe that Oscar was as wicked as his character. Between 1892 and 1895, Oscar

returned to writing plays. One of these, *Salomé*, from the Old Testament story of St John the Baptist, was written in French and was intended for the famous actress, Sarah Bernhardt. The other four plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are comedies. They are very witty plays, full of short, memorable sentences. All these plays were very successful in London, but in the year that *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first produced, Oscar suddenly fell from public favour.

Lady Windermere's Fan and *A Woman of No Importance* enjoyed successful runs in the West End theater in 1892 and 1893, respectively. *An Ideal Husband* opened in January 1895, but it was *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which opened a month later, that is regarded by many as Oscar Wilde's masterpiece. Its first performance at the St. James's Theater on February 14, 1895 came at the height of Wilde's success as a popular dramatist. Wilde was finally the darling of London society, a position he had striven for years to attain.

In many ways, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is an artistic breakthrough for Wilde, something between self-parody and a deceptively flippant commentary on the dramatic genre in which Wilde had already had so much success. Wilde's genre of choice was the Victorian melodrama, or "sentimental comedy," derived from the French variety of "well-made play" popularized by Scribe and Sardou. In such plays, fallen women and abandoned children of uncertain parentage figure prominently, letters cross and recross the stage, and dark secrets from the past rise to threaten the happiness of seemingly respectable, well-meaning characters. In Wilde's hands, the form of Victorian melodrama became something else entirely. Wilde introduced a new character to the genre, the figure of the "dandy" (a man who pays excessive attention to his appearance). This figure added a moral texture the form had never

before possessed. The character of the dandy was heavily autobiographical and often a stand-in for Wilde himself, a witty, overdressed, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes, ridicules the cant and hypocrisy of society's moral arbiters, and self-deprecatingly presents himself as trivial, shallow, and ineffectual. In fact, the dandy in these plays always proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

The Importance of Being Earnest was an early experiment in Victorian melodrama. Part satire, part comedy of manners, and part intellectual farce, this play seems to have nothing at stake because the world it presents is so blatantly and ostentatiously artificial. Below the surface of the light, brittle comedy, however, is a serious subtext that takes aim at self-righteous moralism and hypocrisy, the very aspects of Victorian society that would, in part, bring about Wilde's downfall.

During 1895, however, a series of catastrophes stemming from Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred or Bosie, also a poet, led to personal humiliation and social, professional, and financial ruin. On February 28, 1895, two weeks after *The Importance of Being Earnest's* opening night, Lord Alfred's belligerent, homophobic father, the Marquess of Queensberry, publicly accused Wilde of "posing as a sodomite." The nobleman meant "sodomite," of course, an insulting and potentially defamatory term for a homosexual. Queensberry had for some time been harassing Wilde with insulting letters, notes, and confrontations and had hoped to disrupt the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a public demonstration, which never took place. Against the advice of his friends, Wilde sued for libel and lost. Wilde probably should have fled the country, as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had made homosexual acts punishable by up to two years' imprisonment. However, Wilde chose to stay and was arrested. Despite information about Wilde's

private life and writings that emerged at the trial, the prosecution initially proved unsuccessful. However, Wilde was tried a second time, convicted, and sentenced to prison for two years.

Prison life in Victorian England was very difficult. The prisoners had to do hard, physical work every day, and Oscar was not used to this. Life became dreadful for him. His two years in prison – mostly in Reading Goal – ruined his health. While he was in prison, Oscar wrote a long letter to Bosie which was full of blame and self-pity. It was published as *De Profundis* (From the Depths). Shortly after he left prison, in 1897, Oscar wrote a long poem about his experiences called *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which described the horror of prison life and its terrible effect on prisoners. Oscar Wilde went to France after he left prison, but he was in very poor health. He used the name Sebastian Melmoth and lived simply because he had very little money left. He met Lord Alfred again, but the two men had a difficult relationship. They were not happy apart, but they were not happy together either. Today, Oscar is best remembered as a social commentator. His novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is still read and admired. Many of his stories and plays are also still greatly enjoyed. But of all his work, it is his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which remains a masterpiece of nineteenth century theatre. Like his earlier plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is full of witty and clever sayings, but everything in the middle class society it describes is mocked. It is wonderfully funny and touchingly close to the real life-story of this brilliant, but tragic, writer.

Wilde could avoid the sentence fleeing to France before the punishment but he might have remained in England for a number of reasons, including self-destructiveness, denial, desperation, and a desire for martyrdom. However, some historians have suggested that Wilde's relentless persecution by the government was a

diversionary tactic. Lord Alfred's older brother was reportedly also having a homosexual affair with Archibald Philip Primrose, Lord Rosebery, the man who would become prime minister. Queensberry was apparently so outraged that he threatened to disclose the relationship, and the government reacted by punishing Wilde and his lover in an effort to diminish the marquess. In any case, Wilde served his full sentence under conditions of utmost hardship and cruelty. Following his release from prison, his health and spirit broken, he sought exile in France, where he lived out the last two years of his life in poverty and obscurity under an assumed name. He died in Paris in 1900.

For sixty or seventy years after Wilde's death, critics and audiences regarded *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a delightful but utterly frivolous and superficial comedy, a view that partly reflects the mindset of a period in which homosexuality remained a guarded topic. The decriminalization of homosexuality in England in 1967 and the emergence in America of an interest in gay culture, and particularly in the covert homosexual literature of the past, has made it possible to view the play in a different light. The play's danger and subversion are easier to see from a twenty-first-century perspective. In the ambiguity over exactly what people refer to when they speak of "wicked" or immoral behavior, we can detect a system of coded references to homosexuality, just as we can infer a more general comment on the hypocrisy of late Victorian society.

The play *A Woman of No Importance* has been first staged in Haymarket Theatre in London, on 19 April, 1893. It instantly drew the attention of the various critics with its break with the traditional theme and critical stand protesting the Victorian condition of the females and doubt over the institution of marriage. Generally, women were viewed as inferior to men, yet Wilde shows compassion for

them in his writing, this can be seen through his kindness to Mrs. Arbuthnot towards the end of the play.

The break with the tradition in the content prompted many of the critics to respond to the play. William Archer hails Wilde as the greatest dramatist full of the artistic competence and uniqueness as he writes:

The one essential fact about Mr. Wilde's dramatic work is that it must be taken on the very highest plane of the modern English drama, and, furthermore, that it stands alone on that plane. In intellectual calibre, artistic competence and in dramatic instinct Mr. Wilde has no rival among his fellow workers for the stage. (12)

Another critic of Wilde, Anne Varty sees the radical ideas brought on the stage by Wilde as equal to the radical continental playwrights like Zola, Ibsen, and Strindberg. She observes that the Continental playwrights such as Zola, Ibsen and Strindberg Praising the contribution of Oscar Wilde and his British counterparts, Anne Varty shows the radical ideas had been staged by them in the stage like their contemporary dramatists Zola, Ibsen and Strindberg. British dramatists were the innovators of the social dramas, for Varty, were:

[...] rebelling against the commercial interests which dominated theatre practice at the time. They rejected the tradition of [...] theatrical entertainment in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In this context Wilde was revolutionary because he delivered plays which were politically engaged, artistically innovative and commercially successful. (1)

Thus, the break with the tradition and bringing the revolutionary ideas into the stage is the prominent feature of the play of Wilde. The apparent political engagement and

artistic innovation is found in his plays that elevates his position among the radical playwrights. Wilde himself was of opinion about his own plays as they were for him, “[. . .] exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy and it has its philosophy. . . that we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things with sincere and studied triviality” (qtd. in Varty XXII).

Thus, being sincere to the concern of Wilde himself, reading triviality of the plays with sincerity and seriousness of his plays to study triviality; this research focuses upon the female resistance in the play. Among the radical intervention to the tradition of social comedy, this research attempts to draw the sincere protest of Victorian women against the patriarchal codes of the time.

The present research work has been divided into three chapters. The first chapter fundamentally deals with introductory outline of the present study. It introduces critical review and the writer and his characters in relation to their position in the contemporary English society and the impacts of such circumstances in the life of the characters of the play. Thus it presents the bird's eye view of the entire research. The second chapter aims at providing the theoretical methodological reading of the text briefly with both the textual and theoretical evidences. It attempts to examine the characters' resistance to the patriarchal codes and their subjection under the discourse of the time. On the basis of the concept of gender, female resistance, and the feminist implications of the characters the play will be analyzed in this chapter. It will further sort out some extracts from the text to prove the hypothesis of the research and in doing so, it uses the ideas of feminist, cultural and historical scholars and theorists. This part serves as the core of the present research. The third chapter concludes the ideas put forward in the earlier chapter, focusing on the outcome of the entire research. The logical conclusions will be summarized as

the proof that the play has forwarded the radical ideas of resistance to the Victorian patriarchal codes by highlighting the conclusions of the whole research.

II. Resistance of Patriarchal Discourses in *A Woman Of No Importance*

This research examines the female resistance in Oscar Wilde's play *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) that depicts the Victorian complacent life-style of English aristocrats. On the contrary to the superficial meaning of the title of the play, the play is the brilliant example of female resistance and the powerful position of the protagonist Mrs. Arbuthnot who elevates herself to the position of woman of most importance from the woman of no importance in the Victorian society the females used to be regarded as the mere playthings of the males; to marry with a man and become a good wife used to be regarded as the duty of a female. Society mediated by the patriarchal ideology regards female as other and it is culturally conditioned. Her identity is gendered one that has been shaped by the patriarchal culture with the continual biases to the females. Clarifying the construction of gender Miriam-Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* states:

Gender has root in culture and culture has root in society. Sex is determined biologically as male and female but gender is psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity. And the word 'woman' is socially constructed. As French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir says, "one is not born rather becomes the woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determine the figure that the human female present in society ; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine." (281)

The otherness of the woman in the Victorian society in the basis of gendered bias of males has been subverted by Mrs. Arbuthnot. She is first regarded as other by Lord Illingworth who had once deserted her refusing to marry her after she was pregnant

with his baby but at the end of the play she refuses to marry him regarding him the man of no importance. The males like Lord Illingworth and Gerald Arbuthnot are subjected to the patriarchal ideology. But Mrs. Arbuthnot disrupts the institution of marriage and the patriarchal discourse of female attachment at once refusing to marry with the father of Gerald Arbuthnot and disrupts the constructed identity of a woman. She crosses the constructed feminine barrier and becomes the agent of her own life.

Mrs. Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth's premarital union gave birth to Gerald Arbuthnot but he became the abandoned child of lord Illingworth as he never married Mrs. Arbuthnot and she alone rears Gerald shaping him in to a good gentle man. But with the act of being an unmarried she becomes the social 'outcast' and loses the connection to the aristocratic English society, still by facing both the emotional and physical ordeals she sacrifices her life to rear her son. Her ordeal during that period is unbearable as the patriarchal society of Victorian England produced unbalanced standards of morality, duty, and gender, usually subjugating women and holding them to strict scrutiny while, at the same time, venerating and favoring men. Wilde interrupted the status quo, then, by featuring women like Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester prominently in his play, allowing them to act in non-traditional ways that were not considered proper or ideal for Victorian women. They stand as the resistant female voices challenging their subjugation under patriarchal codes in the Victorian society. Mrs. Arbuthnot also denounces the institution of the marriage refusing to marry Lord Illingworth because it is the institution necessary only for the males to dominate females wherever necessary. Same Lord Illingworth who leaves pregnant Mrs. Arbuthnot in hardships refusing to marry her in the youth and "regards women simply as a toy" (230) as another character Mr. Kelvil sees gets ready to marry her to gain her worthy son twenty years later. She is regarded as insignificant, "A woman of no

importance” (234) by Illingworth at first, but she degrades him refusing to marry her and proves to be the most important woman. She clearly understands that to be recognized in association with tyrannical man’s appellation is the most deplorable person. In society, according to Beauvoir, “She is sex absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to men, not she with reference to men, not she with reference her” (qtd in Sydie, 138). She realizes her constructed gendered identity and strongly discards it and refuses to be abided by her subordination to the male like Illingworth. She reconstructs her own identity not in reference to males but in reference to herself.

When we examine the play, only her name and her expected presence have been mentioned in the first act. She has been depicted as women who rarely joins the gatherings of aristocratic society; she is a good woman, a good friend of Lady Hunstanton, the owner of Hunstanton chase, and the mother of the sought after gentleman Gerald who has been recently appointed as the personal secretary by Lord Illingworth. Only her letter has been delivered to Lady Hunstanton and when Lord Illingworth eventually sees the letter he remembers a woman with no importance who had been somehow involved with him many years ago. Thus, when the act one ends, we see the outcast life of Mrs. Arbuthnot who is regarded as a woman of no importance by the aristocrat males like Lord Illingworth.

The act I is important to see the traits of the aristocratic characters. The setting is the terrace at Hunstanton chase; a country villa belonged to Lady Hunstanton. Lady Hunstanton is the host of all the other throng of the aristocrats thronged there in Hunstanton chase to spend their time leisurely as the act opens, we see Lady Caroline and the American guest Miss Hester Worsley talking to each other throng of the aristocrats thronged these in Hunstanton chase to spend their time leisurely. As the act

opens, we see Lady Caroline and the American guest Miss Hester Worsley talking to each other about the difference of life-styles of the people living in England and Miss Hester, the beautiful American young lady is spending her time in country house for the first time. She is puritan by heart and resists many of the codes of conduct of the English people.

The English women are full of complacency as they respectfully praise the English gentlemen spending time with them in Hunstanton Chase but with certain distance to them. Unlike them, Hester openly shows her enthusiasm about the young man Gerald Arbuthnot and thus, resistance to the English values starts to be seen with Hester. For Lady Caroline asserts. “[. . .] in my young days, Miss Worsley, one never met anyone in society who worked for their living” but Gerald Arbuthnot is “the young man who has a post in a bank” (222). But in America the people who work for their living “are the people we respect most” (222). And due to the same American value, Miss Hester loves and shows enthusiasm towards Gerald which is not so good thing for the English people. So Lady Caroline tries to teach Hester the English social codes as we see in the following conversation:

Lady Caroline: It is not customary in England, Miss Worsley, for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex. English women conceal their feelings till after they are married. They show them then.

Hester: Do you, in England, allow no friendship to exist between a young man and a young girl? (222)

In this way, the democratic and Puritan values that advocate for the equality between men and women before the eyes of law and god are the weapons for Hester for resistance of the Victorian English values that forbid women to express their emotion

and feelings towards the men. The sense of equality has been the vehicle of Hester to always believe in justice and take the choice of right refusing to be abided by wrong and resist the unequal position of women in the society. Friendship has no hierarchy like other relationships. One is equal to other and it is just and the other relationships outside it are hierarchical, unequal and full of control and domination. Hester, so, expresses her enthusiasm to General going against the Victorian English practices.

To discuss about Victorian women thoroughly, one must realize that there is indeed an historical background to explore. Therefore, for the historical study of the Victorian women this research draws on the texts such as Richard Altick's *Victorian People and Ideas* and Joyce Burnette's "A Brief Introduction to Nineteenth-Century English Farming," each one providing historical insight about Victorian England and the treatment of its female residents. Altick writes a section called "The Weaker Sex," a phrase that refers to a widespread perception that all women are weak by nature. To a certain degree, people in the Victorian Period measured a woman's strength and weakness by looking at the value of her contributions to society (i.e., jobs, political affairs, etc.). Thus, a popular viewpoint was that, because women in lower- or middle-class Victorian England were more active and worked for a living, they were automatically stronger than the upper-class 'lazy' women who did virtually nothing of consequence. As Burnette observes:

[. . .] because the mid-1850s saw a change in the expectations of working-class female farmers, who began to do far less work than ever before, some women in the lower and middle classes came to be seen as idle, much like upper-class women. (18)

The idleness, complacency and passivity of the English aristocrats start to be seen when we examine the characters of Sir John Pontefract, Lady Caroline, and Lady

Hunstanton etc. Lady Caroline is always running after her husband Sir John spoiling him with her excessive care. Sir John is the most passive character of the play who does not develop throughout the play. He is contented with the excessive and always clinging unnecessary care of his wife Lady Caroline. He speaks very little throughout the play and he is only the cause of worry of his wife who never lets him go out of her sight. He is like the thing of Lady Caroline. It is ironical to see that Lady Caroline loves him so excessively, as he is her fourth husband. When she rushes after her husband it is seen that she is not so beautiful as it is seen by Mrs. Allonby as:

Mrs. Allonby: Curious thing, plain women are always jealous of their husband but beautiful women never are!

Lord Illingworth: Beautiful women never have time. They are so occupied in being jealous of other people's husbands.

Mrs. Allonby: I should have thought Lady Caroline would have grown tired of conjugal anxiety by this time! Sir John is her fourth! (231)

Thus, being plain woman and finding the fourth husband whom she can use as her private thing Lady Caroline shows excessive care to her husband. She shows women can have perfect control over their husbands.

Lady Hunstanton is very sociable person who enjoys mixing up with the friends. She invites the guests to her Hunstanton Chase with her own selection as Lady Caroline praises her. She has "a wonderful power of selection" (222) showing her happiness to get the chance to meet and mix up with the guests she selectively invites. She lives dignified life of the host and is respected by all. She has poor memory and time and again, she forgets what she saw or did. She is also the representative aristocrat and enjoys her complacency. She feels herself very minor

before the witty remarks of Lord Illingworth who is the most reputed and know-all guest for the aristocratic ladies and men.

Lady Stutfield is full of the power of right observation at times and she is inconsistent enough in her position as she keeps on modifying her belief time and again as per the development of the argument. She is the next character besides Hester to observe the fact that the world is made for men and not for women but she doesn't want to be so radical believing upon the complete equality between men and women in society rather she believes upon the slow change automatically changing the position of women. Mrs. Allonby also has the similar view. So, the resistance to male position is thin in them. As we see in the following conversation:

Lady Stutfield: Ah! The world was made for men and not for women.

Mrs. Allonby: Oh, don't say that, Lady Stutfield. We have a much better time than they have there are far more things forbidden to us than are forbidden to them.

Lady Stutfield: Yes; that is quite, quite true. I had not thought of that.

(225)

Thus, aristocratic Victorian females are forbidden in too many social roles in Victorian society but still, instead of rebelling and resisting the inequality the women find it as enjoyable because they have more rest, time for luxury and more freedom than males in society. Thus the passivity, hedonism and complacency have become the part of the life of the upper class Victorian women. Women in Victorian England are always after the bodily enjoyment and material comfort. Mr. Kelvil, the Member of Parliament sees purity in women thus, he favors women taking part in politics but the women are not concerned about their social reality and they enjoy the parties in their aristocratic gatherings rather than joining in political parties. Kelvil believes,

“The growing influence of women is the one reassuring thing in our political life” as “women are always on the side of morality, public and private” (226). But unlike him, Lady Hunstanton believes upon the dark consequence of politics as she says, “Politics are in a sad way everywhere, I am told. They certainly are in England. Dear Mr. Cardew is ruining the country. I wonder Mrs. Cardew allows him” (227). The view of Lady Hunstanton shows that Mrs. Cardew, the female should only be the moral guide to the politicians, males like Mr. Cardew and thus, the active participation of the females in politics was not so desirable for the Victorian women.

Mr. Kelvil is rational man believing upon the justice in society and females should not be regarded just as the toys for the males. Kelvil observes, “I am afraid too, that Lord Illingworth regards woman simply as a toy. Now, I have never regarded woman as a toy. Woman is the intellectual helpmeet of man in public as in private life. Without her we should forget our true ideals” (230). This view of woman in Victorian males is very rational quality as we see when the play advances, Lord Illingworth really regards the women as the toys as he never married single woman he physically involved too and due to his this tendency he is humiliated by Mrs. Arbuthnot as she bore the position of outcast, fallen woman because of him. Thus, Mr. Kelvil is very logical man to judge Lord Illingworth and his code of conduct as such. He sees women as the intellectual counterparts of males who help males to lead them in moral path. Otherwise, it is impossible for the males to follow the true ideals without females.

Mrs. Allonby is very apt her observation of the social injustices and unequal position of males and females but still sees some privilege is there for women that let them to maintain their content. As we see in the following conversation:

Mrs. Allonby: I don't think that we should ever be spoken of as other people's property. All men are married to women's property that is the only true definition of what married women's property really is. But we don't belong to any one.

Lady Stutfield: Oh, I am so very, very glad to hear you say so.

Lady Hunstanton: But do you really think dear Caroline, that legislation would improve matters any way? I am told that, nowadays, all married men live like bachelors and all that bachelors like married men. (226).

Even though males regard the females as their property, Mrs. Allonby sees females don't belong to anyone as males marry with women's property. The resistant voice of female is their but the sense of victory is also there at once. For her, marriage makes females bound in the periphery of the household but still females belong to no one and they are not actually defeated. The bitter truth of freedom of males even after the marriages observed by Lady Hunstanton but they are not to resistant to such freedom of males but expecting the improved legislation to give them the equal rights as the males, though female resistance is there in those Victorian women they are not able to protest against it and demand the social equality for the females y themselves. They are passive lacking in the material activity but their resistances limited only in their gossips and gatherings.

The character of Lord Illingworth is very important as the whole play hinges around him. He is reputed aristocrat and the chief subject matter of talk even in his absence. He has decided to make Gerald Arbuthnot as his personal secretary that comes as the hot news in the party gathered in Hunstanton Chase and it becomes the crucial subject matter for the development of the whole play, the revelation of the real

identity of Mrs. Arbuthnot with her pitiable past and bringing forth the villainy of Lord Illingworth that he can do anything unacceptable to save his face, he is humiliated as the man of no importance from such important man and Mrs. Arbuthnot transcends from the social position of outcast and woman of no importance to the woman of all the values that are rational. Lord Illingworth is very sought after man with very sharp wit that nobody is comparable to him throughout the play. He regards marriage as chain and never marries as he wants to remain in the romance and enjoy as he believes upon the soul always growing young. We see his view of life in the opposition to other views. For him, life is always a comedy but he finally experiences the tragedy of life as he fails to attain Gerald as his son. As we see in the conversation, we see his approach towards the life:

Lord Illingworth: I never intend to grow old. The soul is born old but grows young. That is the comedy of life.

Mrs. Allonby: And the body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy. (233-34)

The view of life is very typical and masculinistic view of the Victorian male as we see with Lord Illingworth's opinion and Mrs. Allonby's supplement and correction of his view is the resistance to the male voice that exerts the sense of control over females. Further Mrs. Allonby's view is pessimistic that the Victorian women enjoy their life only when there is the charm of youth in their body and by the means of their body and by the means of their body they control the world. Illingworth is happy because he is male with reputation and for him the whole life is comic but for female like Allonby life is tragic. The sense of tragedy of life is the resistance to the patriarchal view of life. So, as a typical Victorian woman Mrs. Allonby finds joy of life in luxury, gossips, parties and the aristocratic gatherings. She asserts she adores the London

dinner-parties while Hester dislikes them. She says about the London dinner parties, "I adore them" (232).

The tendency to define women and prove himself as far more superior to women is seen with Lord Illingworth. He regards himself love the success and since they love the success they love him. As we see in the following conversation:

Lord Illingworth: Don't you know that I always succeed in whatever I try?

Mrs. Allonby: I am sorry to hear it. We women adore failures. They lean on us.

Lord Illingworth: You worship successes. You cling to them.

Mrs. Allonby: We are the laurels to hide their baldness. (233)

We see the only person who poses real resistance to the wit of Lord Illingworth is Mrs. Allonby who is not only witty views of Lord Illingworth but she also poses resistance to the inherent tendency of Lord Illingworth to define and dictate the females. It is in such witty conversations Mrs. Allonby provokes Lord Illingworth to kiss the puritan girl Hester through which Lord Illingworth falls into the pit of disgrace and humiliation before Gerald. Mrs. Allonby's wit has such a power. She is clever enough to disrupt the discourse of males that females love the success with the cool counter that females love and adore failure. Thus, this counter argument has the strong sense of resistance and the power to confiscate the territory males' stand hurting the inner ego of males.

The subversive tendency in female characters to the patriarchal discourses is examined under the feminist analysis of the texts. Feminism refers to the female struggle for power, equality, and meaning, as well as any instance in the texts where that power, equality, or meaning is challenged or where women are relegated to the

periphery. Female inequality has existed for thousands of years, if not since the very beginning of man/woman; even Aristotle said that “the male is by nature more capable of leadership than the female, unless he is constituted in some way contrary to nature, and the elder and perfect [is by nature more capable of leadership] than the younger and imperfect” (Miller 243). Ideas like the one Aristotle articulated would thrive throughout history—particularly in Victorian times, when the notion that the female was the ‘weaker sex’ became central to a patriarchal, male-dominated society that, furthermore, regarded morality as supreme. Mrs. Allonby refuses to be abided by the strict codes of the Victorian society that she should remain under the control of her husband. She openly goes out so often with Lord Illingworth. She openly challenges him with her witty remarks and leads him to the disgrace challenging him to kiss Hester. The attitude of Lord Illingworth is similar to Aristotle as he wins the women to gain power and social popularity and thus, he is the leader willfully using them for his dominance in the society. He says:

No man has any real success in this world unless he has got women to back him, and women rule society. If you have not got women on your side you are quite over. You might just as well be a barrister, or a stockbroker, or a journalist at once. (254)

Thus, using women as the means of getting advantage is obvious. So, he plays with women and never marries them and remains constantly popular among them. He terms women as “fascinatingly willful sex” (254) as Aristotle sees them as younger and imperfect sex, the inferior, other, and the weaker sex. Contending such position of women, Virginia Woolf protests:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercised for their faculties and a field for their

efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation precisely a man would suffer; and it is narrow minded in their more privileged fellow-creature to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags it is though less to condemn and laugh at them (75-76)

Lord Illingworth is the representation of the patriarchal, male ideology of the Victorian society who doesn't think that the women are similar to men in their feelings. For him, going to Church is not modern and being dandy who dominates the aristocratic gatherings is the most capable man. While talking to Gerald he makes the witty conversation about his philosophy of life he encourages him to be a dandy. The superficial life is what people want to value and respect and the superficial dandy is the key to the success if one wants to convert oneself to the successful man, for Illingworth. Thus, he is corrupting the mind of Gerald. He says, "A man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world. The future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule" (253). Inherent longing to rule the society, rule the females riding on the hope of success and ambition of Gerald is tactfully manipulated by Lord Illingworth which indirectly suggests that he wants to dominate the values of gentleman Mrs. Arbuthnot endows to Gerald with cultured upbringing. Thus, he is dangerous man who thinks he can gain control over all the things but he meets strong resistance from Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot that his philosophy is doomed to failure.

His longing to rule all the women of the society comes from his understanding of the society that women are the key to success as women rule the society. Even though, he knows well about the powerful role of women in society, he anyhow

manages to make them follow him so that he can gain success all over. Thus, he tries to generate the similar view in Gerald about the women to gain all the success. He says to Gerald, "No man has any real success in this world unless he has got women to back him and women rule society. If you have not got women on your side you are quite over"(254). Thus, to rule the world we need to be backed by the ruler and the ruler of the world is woman; that's why he handles the power given to him by the support of women to attain the success. He is doomed to failure as he does not get any support from Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot and so, he is unable to take Gerald into confidence, make his son and make his personal secretary. Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot show strong resistance to his male ideology and misuse of the power he gains from women themselves and thus, he fails in his move to gain yet another success. As Foucault asserts the subversive characteristic of discourse in the following way:

We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (100-101)

The discourse of Lord Illingworth is not only providing him the power to dominate females rather it is vehemently resisted and its fragility, vulnerability starts to be exposed. He meets resistance from Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot and that proves his own saying true that, "The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future"(256). Mrs. Arbuthnot is his past in her life. Their love of youth left her pregnant and Lord Illingworth didn't keep his promise to marry her, thus, she left him to raise Gerald alone. Lord Illingworth never

remembered about the past, the sin he had committed and always headed ahead looking for the future. Thus, he is sinner and he let his sin to be the burden over the head of Mrs. Arbuthnot who bore both the physical and emotional loss to raise Gerald into the good gentleman. She bore the pain and endured the sufferings of being an outcast woman carrying her past. She, thus, is the saint as her past never left her as she had Gerald always with her to remind her. She grows strong overcoming all the weaknesses to disrupt his discourse of domination. Lois Tyson defines discourse in his book *Critical Theory Today* as such:

A discourse is a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience. For example, you may be familiar with the discourse of modern science, [. . .] liberal humanism, [. . .] white supremacy, [. . .] ecological awareness, the discourse of Christian fundamentalism, and the life. [. . .] Although the word discourse has roughly the same meaning as the word ideology [. . .] the word discourse draws attention to the role of language as the vehicle of ideology. (281)

The patriarchal ideology and the discourse to impose hegemony to the female is the site of resistance on the part of the characters like Mrs. Arbuthnot, Hester and Mrs. Allonby. Hester challenges the English aristocratic discourse when she says, “The English aristocracy supply us with our curiosities, Lady Caroline. They are sent over to us every summer, regularly, in the steamers, and propose to us the day after they land. As for ruins, we are trying to build up something that will last longer than brick or stone”(241). She thus has the subversive tendency and the sense of resistance to the

English aristocratic discourse. She charges English aristocratic discourses for the ruin of American values.

Hester's resistance to the English aristocratic discourse is clearly seen as she justifies her stance as the opposition to the English consumerist values that love only the physical aspects of the things. She further says:

You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season. With all your pomp and wealth and art you don't know how to live - you don't even know that. (241)

Hester is, thus, critical of the discourse of English aristocratic lifestyle. So, she ironizes their situation in which the rich English people are living their life. The wealth has made them blind and they live even without knowing how to live. They have become myopic. So they have failed to appreciate the self-sacrifice. The failure to see the self-sacrifice becomes clear later when Lord Illingworth doesn't value the self-sacrifice of Mrs. Arbuthnot but wants to use her son Gerald for his personal benefit without being sympathetic to the plights Mrs. Arbuthnot bears alone for twenty years. The English peoples just focus upon the material, physical pleasure without thinking of everlasting spiritual solution to the problems. Hester further charges the English people:

You love the beauty that you can see and touch and handle, the beauty that you can destroy, and do destroy, but of the unseen beauty of life, of the unseen beauty of a higher life, you know nothing. You have lost

life's secret. Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish. It has blinded its eyes, and stopped its ears. . . It is all wrong, all wrong. (241)

Hester sees shallowness in the English values. They handle beauty just for the material benefits and pleasure and destroy it. They do not know anything about the higher, spiritual beauty and sticking only to the sensual pleasure, they have become selfish and shallow. Their senses are blinded with their attachment to the material pleasures and they fail to see the emotion and feelings of the people. They just toy with the feelings of the people and ruin their beauty. Hester resists the shallow English values and the patriarchal discourse that the females are mere the things to provide pleasure to males. She is not dictated by such discourse of male superiority. She unmasks the selfish motives of Lord Illingworth humiliating him when he attempts to kiss her. This event creates enmity between Gerald and Lord Illingworth. Her resistance to the kiss which is regarded as a simple activity by English males can be seen in the conversation after the unseen kiss:

Hester: (Outside) Let me go! Let me go!

Enter Hester in terror, and rushes over to Gerald and flings herself in his arms.

Hester: Oh! save me - save me from him!

Gerald: From whom?

Hester: He has insulted me! Horribly insulted me! Save me!

Gerald: Who? Who has dared - ?

(Lord Illingworth enters at back of stage. Hester breaks from Gerald's arms and points to him.) (264)

This kiss is very important as it reveals the villainy of Lord Illingworth that has compelled Mrs. Arbuthnot to bear the sufferings for twenty years. Later, out of the greed to gain Gerald, Lord Illingworth defends his action of kissing Hester before Mrs. Arbuthnot; she strongly resists his mindless action that could ruin a life of a woman like her. The conversation highlights her resistance to his action:

Lord Illingworth (*Sitting down*): Last night was excessively unfortunate. That silly Puritan girl making a scene merely because I wanted to kiss her. What harm is there in a kiss?

Mrs. Arbuthnot (*Turning round*): A kiss may ruin a human life, George Harford. I know that. I know that too well. (274)

Thus, the incident of resistance to the kiss is the resistance to the whole domain of ideology in which the English aristocratic men are living their life. Mrs. Arbuthnot is very strong to point the danger in each of the shallow, mindless activities of the Englishmen.

The sin of the physical union had been committed by both, Mrs. Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth but the punishment has been endured only by her and during twenty years of painful endurance she raised herself in the position of the saint and her sainthood is reflected in the gentlemanly values adopted by Gerald who has grown able to make his impact upon the Victorian society. When she sees her son is ready to work for the same sinner father Lord Illingworth who neglected them for so long and forced them be condemned them as outcasts she strongly comes to resist any possible interference from Lord Illingworth in her family. She doesn't let her son work with him at any cost. It is very hard for her to convince her son who is already full of the ambitions and nurturing his dream, to excel his life with Lord Illingworth: she can't share him the tragedy she bore for so long due to her fear of moral indignation before

her son. She tells him the tragic story of pain of a woman who was ruined by Lord Illingworth, still. Gerald is not convinced and he transferred the blame to the woman who was involved with Lord Illingworth questioning the morality of that anonymous tragic woman. Thus, Mrs. Arbuthnot couldn't tell him that it was the story of her and she herself was the woman who faced such a tragedy.

At the end of act III, Lord Illingworth attempts to kiss Hester in the garden and she rushes to Gerald and Mrs. Arbuthnot for help to save her from such humiliation. Gerald comes to be very angry with Lord Illingworth and filled with indignation that he wants to kill him. His view of women and love for her mother and Hester are reflected as he says, "Lord Illingworth, you have insulted the purest thing on God's earth, a thing as pure as my own mother. As there is a God in heaven, I will kill you! (264)". The faith upon the God and his mother and Hester prove that he can take any step for sake of them. Mrs. Arbuthnot tries to save Lord Illingworth but Gerald wants to chase him and attack him. Then, to control the possible violent situation she is compelled to disclose that Lord Illingworth was Gerald's own father. Then, she sinks to the ground in shame and Lord Illingworth is shocked from such revelation. The strong resistance of Hester against any wrongdoings of Lord Illingworth is very helpful to bring the moral humiliation of the Lord Illingworth. Before the resistance materialize, to understand what does it mean to be a woman is underscored by Third world feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty. The value of understanding of being a woman is very important to resist the social violence and injustice imposed upon a woman in the society. Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes in the introduction of her book *Feminism without Borders* as:

It would require a clear understanding that being a woman has political consequences in the world we live in; that there can be unjust and

unfair effects on women depending on our economic and social marginality and/ or privilege. It would require recognizing that sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism underlie and fuel social and political institutions of rule and thus often lead to hatred of women and (supposedly justified) violence against women. (3)

The attempt of Illingworth to kiss Hester and leaving Mrs. Arbuthnot helpless refusing to marry her after the physical intercourse making her pregnant are the examples of social violence. They are rooted in the patriarchal discourse of male superiority. The domination based on such discourse is resisted both by Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot as they are well aware about their being of woman.

Thus, for female resistance, Mrs. Arbuthnot, Hester and Mrs. Allonby all are important characters. Even after such shocking revelation Gerald tries to find a solution and wants his mother to marry Lord Illingworth and the cynical Illingworth who never favored marriage also becomes immediately ready for the marriage for he desperately longs her son. But he is shattered and further humiliated by Mrs. Arbuthnot. She is too strong for him to gain again and he is defeated. Hester strongly backs Mrs. Arbuthnot and threatens Gerald to break her relation to him if he does not stand on the mother's side firmly. In alternative to the Illingworth's job as personal secretary, she shares her property to Mrs. Arbuthnot and Gerald trivializing his need in their life. Lord Illingworth sees Mrs. Arbuthnot as very hard to penetrate and force her with the scheme he has. It is due to such strong defiance he is taken back. He anyhow wants to convince Mrs. Arbuthnot but still he fails. The conversation between Illingworth and Mrs. Arbuthnot is suggestive of inability of him to convince her:

Lord Illingworth: You have grown hard, Rachel.

Mrs. Arbuthnot: I was too weak once. It is well for me that I have changed.

Lord Illingworth: I was very young at the time. We men know life too early.

Mrs. Arbuthnot: And we women know life too late. That is the difference between men and women. (276)

In this conversation, any selfish excuses of Lord Illingworth have been refuted. Mrs. Arbuthnot's growth from very weak condition to the strong one has been presented. The wit of Lord Illingworth has no use now as Mrs. Arbuthnot is grown too strong to make it dull. Still, he wants his son even after he knows they need no economic support from his side, but Mrs. Arbuthnot shatters his longing. When he sees he can do nothing, he mocks Mrs. Arbuthnot as his prettiest plaything of his youth and charges her only of being his mistress. She out of bitter hatred and rage hits him with his glove she snatched from him. Defeated Illingworth can't bear such humiliation and walks out of the room. Hester praises her of being of all woman she had ever known and Gerald asks about her visitor whom she replies as "a man of no importance" (278). Thus, the female resistance has disrupted the moral position of Lord Illingworth and the rebellion of females against established patriarchal codes of Victorian society has been presented. The defeat of the male ideology that females should be treated as inferior has been highlighted in the play. The close examination of the power relationship inside the text shows us that the play is the counter-discourse of the patriarchal domination of the female. As Dorothy Smith suggests the examination of the literary text with the observation of power relation vested in the texts to see the discourse of femininity as she writes:

To explore femininity as discourse means a shift away from viewing it as a normative order, reproduced through socialization, to which women are somehow subordinated. Rather femininity is addressed as a complex of actual relations vested in texts. (63)

The patriarchal domination, thus, is kept in the discourse analysis by the post-structuralist feminist thinkers. The play decenters the patriarchal ideology and resists the patriarchal discourse of the time and so, it is the counter discourse to criticize the social inequality and female subordination in the Victorian English society.

Praising the contribution of Oscar Wilde and his British counterparts, Anne Varty shows the radical ideas had been staged by them in the stage like their contemporary dramatists Zola, Ibsen and Strindberg. British dramatists were the innovators of the social dramas, for Varty, were:

[...] rebelling against the commercial interests which dominated theatre practice at the time. They rejected the tradition of [...] theatrical entertainment in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In this context Wilde was revolutionary because he delivered plays which were politically engaged, artistically innovative and commercially successful. (I)

While we examine the ideas brought forth by Wilde in his play *A Woman of No Importance* we see various radical ideas come on the stage. The institution of marriage in Victorian society is critically presented and the resistance of patriarchal, phallogocentric discourses represented by witty Lord Illingworth has been presented. The character and villainy of Lord Illingworth full of wit and he can stoop any low to gain advantage of the situation. He uses wit cynically to gain advantage times and again. Writing about the character of Lord Illingworth writes:

Lord Illingworth in *A Women of No Importance* is conspicuous for his cynical wit until the last act when his villainy is exposed and he attempts to marry the protagonist. He becomes an object of contempt and there is nothing left but to announce his own redundancy: "There is not much then for me to do here, Rachel?" (277) (XVI)

Thus, the cynical redundancy of Lord Illingworth and the Victorian males has been exposed with the radically rebellious female characters like Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester Worsley as they represent the emotional and religious extremes in female and Lord Illingworth is the cynical extreme of males. Female extremes bring forth the strong refusal of the male extreme and bring it to the downfall with its exposure. Thus, female resistance is the highlight of the play. In Lord Illingworth's women should submit themselves to the feet of a male and they are expected to accept themselves as 'Other' as Simone de Beauvoir asserts:

In men's eyes and for the legion of women who see through men's eyes it is not enough to have a woman's body nor to assume the female function as mistress or mother in order to be a true "woman". In sexuality and maternity woman as subject can claim autonomy; but to be a "true woman" she must accept herself as the Other. (1000)

Without regarding the woman as Other, the males of the society never accept woman as a "true woman" as Beauvoir asserts. The patriarchal values of the society have blinded the men so much that they do not regard females important. They do not see distinction between the mother and other women at all. This, position of female in the English society has aptly been realized by Mrs. Arbuthnot when she does not see the position of her son in the strong support of her mother's stance. She says to Gerald:

Men don't understand what mothers are. I am no different from other women except in the wrong done me and the wrong I did, and my very heavy punishments and great disgrace. And yet, to bear you I had to look on death. To nurture you I had to wrestle with it. Death fought with me for you. All women have to fight with death to keep their children. Death, being childless, wants our children from us. Gerald, when you were naked I clothed you, when you were hungry I gave you food. Night and day all that long winter I tended you. (271)

Thus, the men forget the emotional attachment to the mother and reduce the contribution of the mothers to rear them only to the state of physical labor. Such unfair patriarchal attitude is strongly resisted by Mrs. Arbuthnot. Thus, her resistance is the resistance to the othering discourses that are prevalent in the societies.

In the play *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde presents the negative side of Victorian marriage. He also presents woman to be indecisive in nature and expresses typical Victorian views towards 'outcast' women. An example of this is the refined, upper class Lady Caroline's sarcastic comment to Lady Hunstanton about Mrs. Allonby's questionable activities with men other than her husband "Is that the only thing, Jane, Mrs. Allonby allows to run away with her?(229)" There is a strong hint placed around the words 'run away'. Wilde uses Lady Caroline's out-spoken nature as a medium to mock and convey harsh Victorian morals and standards expected of woman in Victorian society. He clearly shows how social/moral outcasts are scorned by Lady Caroline, a member of English aristocracy who will castrate any questionable woman in fear of being associated with them.

Mrs. Allonby, seen this light of breaching the hard codes and conduct of Victorian society, seems the strong resistance to Victorian institution of marriage and

the logical refusal of the only men getting the freedom after the marriage. She hates to be “other people’s property” and asserts that women “don’t belong to anyone” (236). Her refusal and indifference to her husband is reflected when she says about him, “He talks the whole time. But he has no conversation. What he talks I don’t know” (237). This clearly suggests the lack of communication between husband and wife in Victorian marriages. There lies the tragedy of the Victorian marriage. Thus, in the play, Oscar Wilde hints in several places through the negative attitude of the characters his feelings about the role of marriage in English upper class. In marriage, female needs to accept the servitude of her husband and as a wife only business is to please her husband, to be confined in a narrow boundary of the four walls without hurting the male ego or patriarchal codes. It is the form of patriarchal oppression. The females are not allowed to enter into the important spheres of the society which is very suggestive of the political and civil oppression which is observed by Mary Wollstonecraft as:

The mighty business of female life is to please, and restrained from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression, sentiments became events, the reflection deepens what it should, and would have effaced, if the understanding had been allowed to take a wider range. (398)

So, Wilde has employed the characters who are critical of the institution of marriage. The first opinion we get of Wilde’s view on marriage is when Miss Hester Worsley and Lady Caroline are having a conversation where Lady Caroline explains to Miss Worsley that the English tradition does not allow unmarried young women should “conceal their feelings till after they are married” (222). This suggests that Wilde is mocking the English upper class because even having a friendly comment of the

opposite sex is thought of as immoral whereas, the opposite have every right to speak the way they feel about women married or unmarried. Oscar Wilde's view also comes across to us as readers when Lord Illingworth says a woman that is been married for too long is perceived as a public building or an, this suggests that Oscar Wilde believes that a woman should not be kept a prisoner in her marriage. He overtly puts his motive in his characters making them strong enough to refuse the prison of marriage.

The rejection of marriage by Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester's firm support to her stance is the resistance of the patriarchal model of marriage that serves males to maintain control over the female. The legal position of women was crucially affected in the society due to marriage as Vivien Jones puts, ". . . a married woman had no separate legal identity, her existence was figuratively 'covered', subsumed into her husband" (92). They become the agent of their own life and reconstruct their history and fate by themselves refusing the servitude under their husbands in the name of marriage.

Thus, as a radical playwright, Oscar Wilde is quite critical as to the role of marriage in the upper class. This can be seen when Lady Caroline suggests bachelors should be "married off in a week (235)" if they are not married by the time they are expected to be. This suggests that Oscar Wilde believes the upper class treats marriage as a punishment for men or women that have not gotten married by the time they should be so, their punishment is they do not get a say in who they are married to. Oscar Wilde also criticizes the upper class about the role of women in marriage. Mrs. Allonby openly says women are nothing without men the upper class women depend on the men in the family so to them the male is the person they look up to throughout their marriage "I think it is every woman's duty never to leave them alone

for a single moment” (235), however, working class women do not have time to depend on their husbands’ activities. So with the resistance to the marriage the characters of Wilde refuse the lifelong servitude to males of the society. Ahmad, commenting upon the Salman Rushdie’s Novel *Fury* states; “[. . .] women are not, in any fundamental sense, mere victims of history; much more centrally, women have survived against very heavy odds and have produced history” (151). By the same line of thought, we can view the character of Mrs. Arbuthnot not only as the victim of history but as the woman who has “survived against very heavy odds and [. . .] produced history” (151) of her own. She had born the twenty years of condemn and inferior position of an ‘outcast’ woman and reared her son Gerald bearing all the ordeals and survived in the odds of life. So, she has grown stronger and has produced her own history. She is the prominent voice to resist the patriarchal domination in the Victorian society.

The patriarchal discourse of Victorian aristocratic society has been put under question by the playwright. The female characters challenging the patriarchal discourses are strong in wit. They outwit the male characters throughout the play with their witty conversations. Handling the wit strategically, the characters like Lord Illingworth maintain their intellectual reputation in the society but with the apt use of wit the female characters challenge the dominant position of the males like him in the play. The female characters are aware of their social position but only a few of them resist the patriarchal dominance and hegemony.

The gendered bias of the males is the major reason for the hegemony and alienation born by Mrs. Arbuthnot. The elitist, patriarchal construction of gender has appropriated her voice and silence is maintained. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asserts, “. . . the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the

contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (32). It is due to the understanding of her subalternity and the identity in the abyss of shadow and silence; she resists constructed, ideological and gendered subjectivity and creates her own history.

III. Female Resistance as the Core of the Play

Examined with the analysis of the social position of women in Victorian society crushed under the patriarchal hegemony and the resistance by the protagonist Mrs. Arbuthnot and some other female characters in Oscar Wilde's play *A Woman of No Importance*, this research draws the conclusion that the play successfully stages the female resistance. Mrs. Arbuthnot, the protagonist, is the victim of patriarchal, gendered discourses of Lord Illingworth and the Victorian English society. She has been betrayed by her young lover George Harford, who leaves her in pregnant condition after physical union. He does not keep his promise to marry her. Mrs. Arbuthnot bears the shame and the position of social 'outcast' giving birth to her son Gerald as an unmarried mother. She suffers for twenty years and raises her son as a virtuous gentleman. During the period of twenty years, her lover, the cause of her suffering, George Harford transforms into reputed, witty aristocrat Lord Illingworth. He is carefree, and he does not lament upon his past deeds rather he regards women as playthings. He loves to spend the life as an unmarried man, using women only for his popularity. In his youth, he uses Mrs. Arbuthnot for sexual pleasure and leaves her pregnant and helpless. When he sees his son Gerald, he becomes impressed and wants to make him his secretary. He is strongly resisted by Mrs. Arbuthnot. His discourse ultimately dooms to failure as he becomes ready to marry her to gain his son. Mrs. Arbuthnot strongly refuses his proposal.

American Puritan guest Hester also backs Mrs. Arbuthnot's strong stance. She is the person who brings the shame upon Lord Illingworth as she reacts strongly when he attempts to kiss her. This incident develops enmity between Gerald and Lord Illingworth. The sexist hegemony of Victorian males has been subverted by these two females. Mrs. Allonby is another character with the strong sense of resistance to the

dominating social discourses. She shows dissatisfaction over the Victorian institution of marriage and openly goes out with other men. She rejects the Victorian patriarchal discourse that the women are the properties of males. She is witty and her wit challenges the wit of Lord Illingworth. Thus, the female characters of Wilde are radical and they subvert the patriarchal discourses and strict Victorian code of morality.

For the analysis of the female resistance, the insights of classical feminist insights of Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, the cultural and poststructural insights like Foucaultian discourse and the recent feminist ideas of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Cakravorty Spivak have been the major strands of theoretical framework in this research. Mrs. Arbuthnot and the other female characters of the play are treated as other by the patriarchal discourses and this othering is aptly supported with Beauvoir's observation of the condition of the females of the society that they need to accept themselves as 'other' so as to be identified as women. The females are sure to be muted and outcast like Mrs. Arbuthnot if they go against the patriarchal discourses prevalent in the Victorian English society. Women are aware about their inferior position in the society but they are unable to go against the prejudiced patriarchal discourses which have become the mediating force behind the social discourses. Few characters like Mrs. Arbuthnot, Hester Worseley and Mrs. Allonby go against the patriarchal codes of the society as they understand their anonymity and lack of identity in the society. They are 'deeply in shadow' as Spivak asserts and attempt to overthrow the shadow of patriarchal discourses so as to assert their distinct identity in the society. Even though other female characters see their limitations in the society, they do not dare to go against the patriarchal codes. The strong female resistance is visible with the protagonist Mrs.

Arbuthnot who grows to the woman of all importance from the patriarchal limitation and the position woman of no importance with the resistance of the patriarchal discourse of Lord Illingworth.

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