

Sensation, Genders, and Identity Politics in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*

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Abstract

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), considered one of the best sensational novels in the Victorian age, offers a new space for re-considering identities, genders, and domestic ideals by demonstrating the transgression of the artificial boundaries established by the Victorian propriety. In doing so, the novel, with its questionings of marriage, home, and being woman and man, focuses on the protagonist Lady Audley's nonconforming attempt to go beyond the Victorian domestic norms as she wears some masks to hide what she is. In this context, drawing upon gender studies, this article explores how gendered identities are produced and installed as the effects of discursive practices, and how Braddon breaks down the stability of genders in the novel by acknowledging gender performativity and gender fluidity. This destabilization raises broader questions about the female identity and identity politics of the Victorian age. In searching for some answers to these questions, the article scrutinizes how the novel challenges the trenchant patriarchal assumptions about genders and goes beyond hegemonic patriarchy.

Keywords: Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, sensation novel, identities, genders, performativity

MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON'IN LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET ADLI ROMANINDA SANSASYON, TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYETLER VE KİMLİK POLİTİKASI

Öz

Viktorya döneminin en iyi sansasyon romanlarından biri olarak kabul edilen Mary Elizabeth Braddon'ın *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Viktorya dönemi görgü kuralları tarafından inşa edilen yapay sınırların ihlalini göstererek kimlikleri, cinsiyetleri ve eve ait idealleri yeniden düşünmek için yeni bir alan sunmaktadır. Bunu yaparken, roman, evlilik, ev, kadın ve erkek olmaya dair sorgulamalarıyla, başkahramanı Lady Audley'in ne olduğunu gizlemek için bazı maskeler takarken Viktorya döneminin eve ait normlarının ötesine geçme konusundaki geleneklere uymayan girişimine odaklanır. Bu bağlamda, toplumsal cinsiyet çalışmalarından yola çıkan bu makale, toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı kimliklerin söylemsel pratiklerin etkileri olarak nasıl üretildiğini ve yerleştirildiğini ve Braddon'ın toplumsal cinsiyet edimselliğini ve toplumsal cinsiyet akışkanlığını kabul ederek romandaki toplumsal cinsiyetlerin istikrarını nasıl yıktığını araştırıyor. Bu istikrarsızlaştırma, Viktorya döneminin kadın kimliği ve kimlik politikaları hakkındaki daha geniş soruları gündeme getirmektedir. Makale, bu sorulara bazı cevaplar

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ararken, romanın toplumsal cinsiyetlerle ilgili belirgin ataerkil varsayımlara nasıl meydan okuduğunu ve hegemonik ataerkilliğin ötesine nasıl geçtiğini incelemektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, sansasyon roman, kimlikler, toplumsal cinsiyetler, edimsellik

INTRODUCTION

On 9th May, 1863, an anonymous reviewer remarked in *Literary Times* that “‘sensation’ sermons, ‘sensation’ novels, ‘sensation’ histories, ‘sensation’ magazines, ‘sensation’ pictures, and, in fact, sensational amusements of every kind are the only intellectual food upon the British public now fatten” (p. 102). “Sensationalism” in the 1860s, as this quote indicates, permeated every intellectual debate with the rise of the sensational novel, arguably suggesting that the “sensational” was used as a derogatory term and as an indicator of a new trend in Victorian fiction. The sensational novel in this sense, as Laurie Garrison puts it, is rendered as “a curious phenomenon of the Victorian press” (2011, p. 1). It is from the start of the debate regarding the sensational novel that sensational literature has been such a contentious area that it was relegated to inferior status, that is, to “cheap literature” in that the discussions about sensationalism focused on the physical effects of the sensational novel on readers, especially female ones. In this respect, it is believed that sensational literature inspires bodily pleasures in readers, thereby probably resulting in the “degeneration” of the female readers in the society. However, not only does the sensational novel offer the readers a comfort zone for fantasies and pleasures of bigamy, luxury, crime, and impersonation; it also gives a free space for breaching the boundaries and conventions construed by the Victorian discursive formations. From such sensational literature emerges Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s bestselling novel, *Lady Audley’s Secret*. In what follows, drawing on gender studies, the aim of this article is to delve into the content and context of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, with an attempt to scrutinize how gendered identities are produced and installed as the effects of discursive practices, and how Braddon transgresses the stable boundaries of genders in the novel by acknowledging gender performativity and gender fluidity. Thus, the paper first focuses on the issue of the sensation novel as a genre and Mary Elizabeth Braddon before examining genders and identity politics in the novel.

THE SENSATION NOVEL AND MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON

First of all, it is worth touching upon the genre “sensation novel” and its problematisation as a literary genre in order to pass judgement on Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*. In the context of a view that the Victorian age in the 1860s was in ongoing flux, and everything was reinforced and reconfigured in relation to the societal, scientific, political and literary changes, the literary landscape was thoroughly altered with the rise of “popular” publishing and the widespread of literacy among lower- middle-classes. As Pamela Gilbert remarks, sensation fiction “emerged in Britain as a distinct genre around 1860” (2011, p. 2). But Lyn Pykett argues as follows: “Was the sensation novel actually a distinct genre or subgenre, or was it rather a label applied to a range of novels by certain kinds of reviewer to express and amplify a particular kind of cultural anxiety?”

(2006, p. 50). Broadly speaking, sensation fiction, with its deployment of mystery, crime and the features of domestic realism, appeals to sensations, inducing curiosity, fear, vehemence, and excitement through secrets, murder, bigamy, mysterious characters, blackmail, and sexual desires. As a literary genre the sensation novel also “comprises a range of Victorian novels depicting the disturbance of a contemporary and supposedly normative domestic sphere by individuals whose conduct or presence there is detrimental to its integrity and whose own identity is often ambiguous” (Bennett, 2016, p. 2.399). The genre became notorious and popular in the 1860s when three novels were published: Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859-60), Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) and Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*. These three novels best exemplify the characteristics of the sensation novel in forming this genre. Ostensibly, it is really difficult to define and to categorise the sensation novel.

Moreover, the sensation novel is rendered as one contravening the conventions of the novel and normative traditions. As noted by Pamela Gilbert, the sensation fiction was “distinctively transgressive,” for it was “thought to appeal directly to the ‘nerves,’ eliciting a physical sensation with its surprises, plot twists, and startling revelations” (2011, p. 2). This reflects the fact that as “mass-produced, disposable consumer product” the sensational novel has physical effects on fe/male bodies through visceral stimulations (Gilbert, 2011, p. 2). Bodily sensations, corporeal feelings are part of the structure of this genre. Patrick Brantlinger also argues in his important article “What is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel’” that the sensational fiction “was and is sensational partly because of content: it deals with crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper bourgeois, domestic setting” (1982, p. 1). Conspicuously, the sensation novel’s subjects for Victorian readers are shocking and curious despite the fact that many sensation novels “derived their plot situations from newspapers, especially from the police reports and the reports of the new divorce courts,” borrowing “the techniques, character types, and plot situations of lower-class literary forms such as popular melodrama and penny dreadful” (Pykett, 2006, pp. 87-88). This variety made the sensation novel more and more popular and widespread at that time, for it was affected by stage melodrama, “sensational” journalism, actual bigamy trial and divorce law reform. Therefore, sensation fiction, as Andrew Mangham remarks, “was uniquely modern and of its time. As a product of the age of newspapers and new print technologies, the genre was ideally suited to comment on contemporaneous developments by incorporating them into its novels” (2013, pp. 4-5). The sensation novel in this sense encompasses bigamy, murder, disguise or impersonation, blackmail, fraud, madness, theft, incarceration, and “inheritance” plots. These subjects were too dangerous for an ordered society like the Victorian one. This genre thus was denominated as sensational in that it used to “the full opportunity for suspense and melodrama afforded by serial instalments” and it stimulated “an ‘unhealthy’ interest in the diseases and crimes – such as adultery, abduction, insanity or falsely alleged insanity, arson, bigamy, and the crime passionate – which the newspapers claimed threatened society daily” (Jay, 2008, p. viii). Arguably, at that period, the literary reviewers regarded the sensation novel as the harbinger of sickness, degeneration of the society and literary disease.

The amalgamation of different genres one could find some features in this genre, further, is of great importance to the sensation novel. It is the “unique mixture of contemporary domestic realism with elements of the Gothic romance, the Newgate novel of criminal ‘low life,’ and the ‘silver fork’ novel of scandalous and sometimes criminal ‘high life’” (Brantlinger, 1982, p. 1). It can be said that the sensation novel is a hybrid form which combines realism, melodrama, romance and the domestic. Generally, it focuses on ordinary middle-class families and members of the landed gentry in the English countryside and suburbs. That is why the sensation novel has various labels in relation to content and context: “mystery fiction,” “novel with a secret,” “bigamy novels,” “newspaper novels,” “railway novel” and “literature of the Kitchen.” That is, the sensational novel blurs the line between fiction and journalism, as it was usually read in the railway transportation, as it was read in the “Kitchen” by servants like Braddon’s mother’s cook. Obviously, the sensation novel has been a controversial genre, providing a transgressive and free space for female and male novelists to break down the rigid codes and boundaries in the Victorian society. This genre is clearly crucial for Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who develops the conventions of the sensation novel.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915) was born in London, and had “peripatetic childhood with her mother” (Pykett, 2011, p. 124) after her parents’ separation. Brought up and educated by her mother, Braddon was “‘a keen, precocious and eclectic reader’ of Shakespeare, Scott, Byron, Dickens, Eliot, Thackeray and Wilkie Collins” (Showalter, 2012, p. 33). What is significant to note here is that Braddon’s literary taste displays her preoccupation with serious literature. Her literary tastes were “also formed by her mother’s cook, Sarah Hobbes, who introduced her to the popular fiction of the Family Herald and Reynold’s Magazine and condensed editions of novels such as Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii*” (Pykett, 2011, p. 124). It seems that Braddon’s interest in both popular and literary literature comes from her childhood. Particularly, her mother’s cook plays an important role in Braddon’s encounter with popular sensational magazines. She was also “a ‘genuine enthusiast’ of French fiction, especially Balzac, Flaubert and Zola” (Showalter, 2012, p. 33). In a way, Braddon’s fiction encompasses these influences to some extent.

Moreover, in the 1850s Braddon first turned to theatre and acting for a career. She used the name “Mary Seyton” in provincial theaters as an actress (McWilliam, 2011, p. 63). What is more important is that as Rohan McWilliam points out, “the reason why her novels proved so easy to adapt for the stage” was her theatre career (2011, p 63). The theatre had a great impact on her novels in terms of characterization, plot devices, and performativity. Lyn Pykett notes that “Braddon’s theatrical interests and her personal experience of the professional theatre were important in shaping her development as a novelist. Her plots and character types were clearly influenced by the stage repertoire and some of the sensational scenes and dramatic tableaux in her novels, including *Lady Audley’s Secret*, clearly have a theatrical quality” (2012, p. ix). This theatrical dimension is of great importance in understanding role-playing and performative nature of genders and identities in the novel. Then, Braddon turned to writing in “dreadful penny magazines,” and began to earn her living by her pen. She met John Maxwell, an Irish entrepreneur. The affair between them became notorious because Maxwell’s wife was in a lunatic asylum in

Dublin (Edwards, 2008, p. xx). Obviously, Braddon's own private life (bigamous relationship) played an important role in forming her novels' content. She published several stories in Maxwell's magazine. So prolific and versatile was Braddon that she published more than eighty novels, as well as poems, short stories and plays. This shows how Braddon's writing output was so intense and variegated, and how she wrote for lower-class and middle-class people. The two markets at that period include "the lower-class audience for whom she continued to produce anonymously authored thrilling 'penny bloods,' and the wider audience for M. E. Braddon's equally thrilling, but more literary and sophisticated, tales in a different social register" (Pykett, 2011, p. 125). This is an evidence showing us the fact that Braddon was so popular and "bestseller," and she had a number of readers from every walk of class in Britain. It is important to remark that Braddon's career is "in many ways both a model of the career pattern of the successful professional woman writer in the mid- to late nineteenth century and a guide to changing literary tastes and publication practices in the period" (Pykett, 2011, p. 128). It displays the expansion of the literary market for women writers in the 1860s. Braddon was also the editor of a literary magazine, *Belgravia*. She used the magazine as "a platform for defending popular fiction in general and the sensation novel in particular against its critics" (Pykett, 2011, p. 128). It is obvious that she was aware of the literary circle and publishing industry, and was a manipulator of literary taste at that period. It is stated that "[t]he magazine gave Braddon an ongoing forum in which to construct and reinforce her image as a sensationalist, and her own articles were an important part of this strategy" (Palmer, 2011, p. 59). It is by means of this publishing that she had power to "break down the male monopoly of publishing" (Showalter, 1999, p. 154). In doing so, Braddon brings to the spotlight the question of genders, being woman, and identity politics, challenging the Victorian gendered heteronormativity.

GENDERED IDENTITIES AND *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*

The problem of gendered identity is carefully and elaborately plotted in *Lady Audley's Secret*, and the analysis above indicates how Braddon and her life calls attention to the problematics of gendered identity politics. In this regard, *Lady Audley Secret* provides a perfect example for gender and class fluidity with regard to social, cultural, economic, and technological mobility and developments. First, *Lady Audley's Secret* began to be serialised as "a thriller for the penny magazines" (Showalter, 2012, p. 33). Later, it was published as a three-volume novel in 1862 and had gone through eight editions by December (Pykett, 2012, pp. viii-viv). Like *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon's fiction explores subjects as such

mid - nineteenth - century attitudes to women – as writers, readers, and subjects of fiction; gender and sexual relations ... ; the legal discourses on marriage and divorce and changing attitudes to marriage and the family; the power and constraints of the domestic ideology; class identities and class relations at a time of political reform and accelerated social mobility; nineteenth - century medico - legal discourses on insanity and its moral management (especially in relation to women); the literary representation of the body and the bodily effects of reading ... ; the politics of affect ... ; the mechanics, aesthetics, and meanings of melodrama; and the fluidity of identity. (Pykett, 2011, p. 132)

What is deduced from this quote is that her fiction's scope is so variegated and challenging in terms of identity, the body, class, sexuality, gender relations, family, and marriage that these traits make Braddon not just popular and artistic but nonconforming and taboo breaking. As Showalter concedes, "[n]one of Braddon's novels so captured readers as *Lady Audley's Secret*, which defeats other contenders not only because it's shocking but also because it's stylish, accomplished and original" (2012, p. 33). Considered as "the doyenne (or demon) of the sensation novel and a catalyst for debates about sensation fiction" (Pykett, 2011, p. 123), Braddon tells a scandalous story rife with false identities, bigamy, blackmail, arson, madness, murder, desertion, and detection in *Lady Audley's Secret*. In the novel, there are two interconnected narratives: The Lady Audley story and Robert Audley Story. There is the rise and fall of the transgressive female protagonist, Helen Maldon, who is first left behind by her husband, George Talboys, searching for his fortune in the Australian goldfields. Helen deserts her baby son and her father, and then, becomes a governess by changing her name to Lucy Graham. After in Mr. Dawson's house she meets the elderly Sir Michael Audley, the Baronet, she commits bigamy and becomes the mistress of the Audley Court. Lucy Audley tries to hide her past throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Robert Audley, the nephew of Sir Michael Audley, is an unemployed barrister. He comes across his friend from Eton College, George Talboys, who returns from Australia with a fortune. Then, George mysteriously disappears at the Audley Court. As an "amateur detective," Robert tries to unravel the mysterious past of Lucy Audley and George Talboys. This short synopsis does not at all explain the plot's twists and Lady Audley's complex identities. Therefore, it is necessary to explicate the positions and roles of the main characters in the novel.

Lady Audley's Secret is posited as "a site in which the contradictions, anxieties, and opposing ideologies of Victorian culture converge and are put into play, and as a medium which registered and negotiated (or failed to negotiate) a wide range of profound cultural anxieties about gender stereotypes, sexuality, class, the family, and marriage" (Pykett, 1992, pp. 50-51). What is at stake in the novel is the contentious issues such as woman, genders, patriarchy, domination, oppression, identity, voice, subjectivity, embodiment, performativity, and heteronormativity. The Victorian gender roles and stereotypes were exploited as a means for the oppression and suppression of both women and men in the society, as the Victorian normative patriarchy consolidated the stereotypical roles through law, science, medicine, print culture, religion, and other socio-cultural discursive practices. Heteropatriarchal hegemony used male power relations so as to regulate and configure the socially sanctioned roles for women and men. It can be said that gender roles are discursively constructed, and the trenchant stereotypes are as follows: Femininity encapsulates the "Angel in the House," domestic wife, mother, fallen woman, whereas masculinity includes gentleman, white, heterosexual men of middle and upper classes. These became common labels for the Victorian ideal of middle-class women and men. For instance, John Ruskin's impactful lecture "Of Queens' Gardens" in 1865 was so significant to construe gendered identities: "She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side" (2002, p. 78). Although Ruskin challenges some assumptions of male superiority

to some extent, he contributes to the discursive construction of gendered identities. In short, for the Victorian ideal, women were considered as impeccable, beautiful, devoted, chaste, pure and selfless, while men regarded as patient, prudent, merciful, forbearing, hardworking, tender and respectable. In the Victorian era, women were also categorised as Eve and Mary. "The two most powerful images of woman that emerge from the Bible, or at least from the interpretation of it that has dominated Western thought for two thousand years," as King underlines it, "underpinned the division of Victorian womanhood into the polarised extremes of 'madonnas' and 'magdalenes'" (2005, p. 10). This binary opposition can restrain female roles to inferior in contrast to men's dominant powerful roles. It is important to highlight the fact that transformations in living conditions developed in connection with prescribed gender roles, which began to seem "natural" and "innate" because they supported the logic of industrial capitalism and bourgeois family life. Victorians tended to think about identity in terms of oppositions: male/female, rich/poor, black/white, homosexual/heterosexual. In the novel, these identities are problematised and transgressed through mobility and new apparatuses. The Victorian gender stereotypes began to change with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (Divorce Act), which "allowed abandoned or mistreated middle-class women to sue their philandering husbands for divorce," Married Women's Property Act, which gave "married women legal control over their own fortunes" and Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, which enabled women to "control their own bodies" (Allen, 2011, p. 404); that is to say, women started to become more powerful within the society with these amendments. These laws secured women's positions, and made them stronger within the social and economic status. In the novel, one can observe the reversal of roles, and transgression of genders and class-based boundaries with regard to performative role-playing, particularly in the case of Lady Audley. Of utmost importance in understanding the role of Lady Audley is to look at her fluid identities and the performativity of genders. The identity politics in the novel is so complicated that the text tries to solve the subversion through the restoration of "so-called" happy marriage of Robert and Clara.

Judith Butler's argumentation of "gender performativity" might be best to begin the discussion so as to illustrate how the gendered identities of Lady Audley and Robert Audley are reconfigured through daily discursive and visceral performances in the text. Repudiating the idea that there is a prediscursive essence for gender and sex in *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler characterizes identity as construed by performativity, rather than as a biological essence. In the context of gender performativity, the focal point for Butler is the way in which gender and sex are constructed and naturalized in terms of hegemonic heteropatriarchal structures, practices, and norms that regulate and control female subjectivities in the society. What Butler argues is that gender and identity are fabricated through the repetitive discursive practices that are socio-cultural, medical, political, religious, and technological. As she puts it, "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (1999, p. 179). In relation to institutional discursive

formations, gender is an effect of repetitive stylized acts, performances, and imitations that are performative, which she terms “gender performativity.” Gendered identities thus are constituted through this performativity.

Crucial to Butler’s conceptualization of gender performativity is her deconstruction of the boundary between sex and gender to show the patriarchal productions of gender and sexuality. Gender and sex in Butler’s contention are discursive and sociocultural constructions. Gender, as she argues, must “designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (1999, p.11). She suggests that sex is not at all an expression of biology or nature. Rather, sex is discursively constructed as much as gender. Butler points to the way in which gender and sex are naturalized by hegemonic structures and practices, stating that “[i]f the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (1999, pp. 10-11). The focal point for Butler is that both gender and sex are discursive inscriptions produced by heteronormativity. “Not only does she point out the radical consequences of cutting gender free from sex, the signifier from the body being signified,” as Sarah Gamble argues, “she also begins to interrogate the very means by which the concept of ‘sex’ itself is produced” (2002, p. 40). In this regard, gendered or sexed identities are merely constructed as “gendered” or “sexed” by historical, social, and cultural discourses.

Within this context, it might be argued that Lady Audley’s gendered identity is constructed through the role-playing of “Angel in the House,” imitations of being a virtuous wife. In the narrative, Lady Audley is described as follows: “The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley’s fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all contributed to preserve to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness” (Braddon, 2012, pp. 58-59). Here Lady Audley embodies the very Victorian notion of Angel in the House by being impeccable, beautiful and innocent. The make-up and dress shape her role assigned to her by the society. As Butler points out, such “acts, gestures and enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (1999, p. 173). Lady Audley’s repetitive performances continue to become “natural” or “innate” in character. In a different way, her gendered body is only constructed as “gendered” through the stylized repetition of acts which are regulated by the Victorian historical, social, and cultural discourses. The effects of these regulatory norms attach new meanings to gender. Luciana Parisi explains the function of performativity by stating that “[p]erformativity therefore defines the production of discourses as they occur through a certain kind of repetition, which installs (sets into practice) the effects of certain ontologies. Performativity shows the conditions under which certain biological differences become norms of sex in certain historical periods” (2009, p. 77). The iterative performances of Lady Audley consolidate the Victorian female role. The regulatory norm of being domestic angel is used and exploited by Lady Audley in order to hide her “true” identity. What is significant for Butler is that “the action of

gender requires a performance that is *repeated*" (1999, p. 178). In a way, Lady Audley's gendered identity becomes performative through her repetitive acts of being a submissive wife of the middle-class ideal and her performances. Consequently, the gendered body is constituted through this performativity.

Lady Audley's gender performativity in this sense displays the malleability of female identity in the novel. Tara Macdonald, for instance, points out in "Sensation Fiction, Gender and Identity" that "[e]mbodiment of a false identity can reveal possibilities of empowerment for female characters. However, sensation fiction also shows how false female identities are often the result of a desperate need for concealment, a need that lays bare women's precarious social position" (2013, p. 128). The mobility of identity makes Lady Audley powerful, but patriarchal hegemony suppresses her again at the dénouement of the novel. The performative nature of Lady Audley's gendered identity shows us the fabrication of the self as a commodity. That is, Lady Audley "performs" or "parades" womanliness in such an authentic way that she becomes a commodified Lady, a fetishised image in the text: "He could no more resist the tender fascination of those soft and melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls; the low music of that gentle voice; the perfect harmony which pervaded every charm, and made all doubly charming in this woman" (Braddon, 2012, p. 9). Lady Audley as a luxurious object becomes a performer through her acts in the novel. This displays surface appearance of gender identities in the novel. "Womanliness," as John Rivi re puts forward, "could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (2005, p. 147). Through donning some masks, Lady Audley transgresses the patriarchal norms. Lady Audley's description is explained:

Her fragile figure, which she loved to dress in heavy velvets and stiff rustling silks, till she looked like a child tricked out for a masquerade, was as girlish as if she had but just left nursery. All her amusements were childish. She hated reading, or study of any kind, and loved society; rather than be alone she would admit Phoebe Marks her confidence, and loll on one of the sofas in her luxurious dressing-room, discussing a new costume for some coming dinner party, or sit chattering to the girl, with her jewel box beside her, upon the satin cushions, and Sir Michael's presents spread out in her lap, while she counted and admired her treasures. (Braddon, 2012, p. 59)

This passage presents how Lucy Audley not only fabricates her identity in relation to artificial commodities around her, but also wears the mask of innocence during her daily performances at the Audley Court. Given that gender is "always already lived, gestural, corporeal, culturally mediated and historically constituted" (Chanter, 2006, p. 3), Lucy Graham performs her gendered role according to the culturally-sanctioned discourses and dons variegated gendered masks so as to veil her fabricated self which is of no origin. As noted by Emily Alan, sensation fiction is "full of women who somehow refuse the angelic role: powerful women who take charge and sometimes multiple husbands; manly or androgynous women; sexually beguiling women; and ambitious and ruthless women who will stop at nothing to get what they want" (2011, p. 404). These women in this regard exemplify how gendered identity is malleable through iterative performances,

imitations, and role-playing of mother, governess, virgin, and wife. Commenting on these variables, Elizabeth Tilley contends,

Lady Audley's competing roles – angel, demon, Gothic villain, rational woman, Gothic victim – demand the creation of separate identities, and this remarkable profusion of “selves” all seems designed by Braddon to point up the possibility of multiple fictions lying in wait beneath the “true” realistic fiction of an outraged family and the steps it takes to rid itself of a socially undesirable member. (2012, p. 484)

What is so important is that Helen Maldon fabricates and performs her various selves in order to survive in the world dominated by men. This shows “her elastic ability to define and re-define herself” (Nemesvari, 2000, p. 517). In this respect, her gendered identity becomes Helen Talboys, becomes Lucy Graham, and then becomes Lady Audley. At the end, Lady Audley gains a new identity, Madame Taylor. As Judith Butler remarks, “[t]he view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (1999, p. xv). Lady Audley's identity process in this sense can illustrate the performative stages of Helen's becoming-womanliness.

In addition, Helen Maldon transgresses against the class code only through the fabrication of new names, new identities. Nevertheless, this fluidity of genders and class is direct challenge and threat to the very system of order of the English house. As Christopher Pittard remarks, the sensation novel “marked the shift of crime narratives from the public space of the streets and slums to the private realm of the family home, and accordingly the danger of the genre was characterized as a type of invasion, the threat of a working-class literature of crime usurping the settings of the middle-class romance and bringing a contagious criminality with it” (2010, p. 107). It is understood that the domestic sphere was invaded by “so-called” female murderer descending from the lower strata of class. In this sense, Lucy Audley is regarded as the embodiment of villain and rational woman; that is to say, she is a “no woman” according to the discursive norms of the Victorian age in that she is an active agent who decides her fate through false journal obituary, attempted murder of George Talboys, and setting fire to the Inn Castle. Lady Audley's doings were too dangerous for an ideal Victorian society and sensational for readers at that period. By destroying the sanctity of the Audley Court, which stands for the past, nation, and tradition, Lucy Graham shows us the disruption of phallogocentric order within the society. Pointing to the displeasures of the Victorian women, Elaine Showalter argues, the “sensationalists made crime and violence domestic, modern, and suburban; but their secrets were not simply solutions to mysteries and crimes; they were the secrets of women's dislike of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers” (1999, p. 158). Obviously, the fact that Helen Talboys leaves behind her son and husband shows us that economic insecurity makes women to decide against their own destiny. As the narrator states in the novel, “how complete an actress my lady had been made by the awful necessity of her life” (Braddon, 2012, p. 323). However, Helen Talboys commits bigamy, and thereby this paradoxical and complex situation makes the plot more complicated. The notions of marriage, family, genders, and motherhood are problematised through the artificial constructions of these roles. It is throughout the novel that the imitation of male power becomes Lady Audley's

own power to alter the ongoing process of her destiny. For Helen Maldon, performative identities are a matter of cultural survival as Judith Butler would claim.

What the novel also underlines is that Lady Audley's gendered identity is both active and mobile, whereas other characters such as Alicia Audley, Clara Talboys, and Phoebe Marks have stable roles regarding the Victorian gender stereotypes. They stand for penetrated passive women in the society. However, Lucy Audley has a doubling in the novel although her servant Phoebe blackmails her. Lucy says that

"you are like me, and your features are very nice; it is only colour that you want. My hair is pale yellow shot with gold, and yours is drab; my eyebrows and eyelashes are dark brown, and yours are almost – I scarcely like to say it, but they're almost white, my dear Phoebe; your complexion is sallow, and mine is pink and rosy. Why, with a bottle of hair dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you'd be as good-looking as I any day, Phoebe." (Braddon, 2012, p. 64)

Lady Audley illustrates how one can change her physical appearance through the make-up and dress, but Phoebe as a doubling does not at all impersonate Lady Audley, for she is relegated to the socially sanctioned roles by the powerful presence of Luke Marks. At the beginning of the novel, Phoebe and Luke penetrate into Lady Audley's secret boudoir which also stands for the womb/tomb imagery as Robert Audley and George Talboys do. The room resembles "vagina dentata." In so doing, they unseal the symbol of the past. It seems that for them, the destruction of the past is a kind of renewal; in other words, this provides a new life for Luke at Inn. Nonetheless, at the end of the novel, Lady Audley as a penetrator sets fire to the Inn Castle in order to preserve her past. The symbol of phallus indicating Luke and Robert is symbolically destroyed in this way. But the fire, for Lady Audley, is again a resurrection. This shows us the pattern of the life-death struggle throughout the text.

As for gendered identities for men in the novel, the focal point is on both Robert Audley and George Talboys; however, George exists in the double triangle: Sir Michael-Lady Audley-George / Robert-George-Clara. Notably, as Ross Forman puts it, bigamy is "essentially a triangle of two men and one woman, a geometry that immediately casts shadows on heterosexual couplings, resulting in a productive tension between characters" (2011, p. 418). The issues of boundary, identity and fluidity across relationships in the text are challenged through the double triangle. Robert Audley is introduced like that:

Robert Audley was supposed to be a barrister. [...] He was a handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing fellow, of about seven-and-twenty; the only son of a younger brother of Sir Michael Audley. [...] ... he had exhausted himself with the the exertion of smoking his German pipe, and reading French novels ... [...] Robert Audley was a good fellow; a generous-hearted fellow; rather a curious fellow too, with a fund of sly wit and quiet humour, under his listless, dawdling, indifferent, irresolute manner. (Braddon, 2012, pp. 36-37)

He seems indifferent and lazy, which is not all congruent with the Victorian gender role. He may represent effeminate masculinity at the beginning. Yet, it is through his investigation of attempted murder of George Talboys that he gains heteropatriarchal maturity; however, his love object is

transferred to George's sister, Clara. The narrator, for instance, puts a lot of emphasis upon the resemblance between Clara and George in the novel. In a way, Robert tries "to construct a version of the male self that could command moral and cultural respect, sometimes in the face of the most appalling conditions" (Glover and Kaplan, 2009, p. 108). In order to succeed in regulating the new order, he must marry Clara although Robert and Clara live with George at the end of the novel. What comes to surface is that the male bonding is of great importance in understanding the homosocial relationship between Robert and George. As this homosocial bonding might create Robert's desire for George, symbolically, Robert mourns after George's disappearance in the text: "I had a friend . . . whom I loved very dearly, and since I have lost him I fear that my feelings toward other people are strangely embittered" (Braddon, 2012, p. 153). It is explicit that Robert craves for George: "Who would have thought that I could have grown so fond of the fellow . . . or feel so lonely without him? . . . I would freely give up all . . . if . . . George Talboys could stand by my side" (p. 171). It is important to explicate this situation, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of triangulation. In short, two of the people rival each other for the third in the three-person relationship like Robert, George, and Clara. As Sedgwick contends, "the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved . . . the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (1985, p. 21). In this respect, rivalry creates passion between two rivals. In the novel, the love object is Clara. Therefore, homoeroticism between Robert and George increases as a result of this rivalry although Clara has no meaning for both of them. For instance, the emphasis on the resemblance of Clara to George is of great relevance here: "He saw that she was very handsome. She had brown eyes, like George's. . . . 'If poor George were sitting opposite to me, or — or even George's sister — she's very like him — existence might be a little more endurable'" (Braddon, 2012, p. 219). Nevertheless, Sedgwick states that "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining patriarchal power" (1985, p. 25). This is directly related to the restoration of the phallogocentric order supported by patriarchal hegemony. In this process, woman, that is, Clara, becomes a representative of phallus for Robert. In "Women on the Market," Luce Irigaray also underlines it: "[W]hy are men not objects of exchange among women? It is because women's bodies — through their use, consumption, and circulation — provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown 'infrastructure' of the elaboration of that social life and culture" (2004, p. 799). Clara becomes a commodity exchanged between Robert and George as a result. Robert and George perform their gendered identities according to the Victorian ideals for men even though they desire for each other. Commenting on such gender performativity, Claire Colebrook indicates that "the self is nothing more than a series of actions — a performance" (2004, p. 211). In this sense, through both female and male characters Braddon provides a critical insight into the construction of gendered subjectivities. In doing so, Braddon sets out to deconstruct the familiar representations of gendered identities by narrating different alternatives in the novel.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have drawn attention to the significance of genders and gendered identities in relation to the discursive construction of heteronormativity. Obviously, genders and sex are deemed as discursive fabrications shaped by hetero-patriarchal structures, practices, and norms. In particular, Butler attaches more importance to the discursive structure of genders through her concept “gender performativity,” considering gender as a sociocultural construct. The reason for this is that woman has been historically and socially relegated to an inferior status and has been explicitly linked with the feminine regarded as lacking, mindless, passive, and inert. In her groundbreaking book, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler propounds a radical consideration of sex/gender binary opposition which constructs, regulates and controls female subjectivities in the society. What Butler argues is that genders and sexes are constituted and naturalized by the iterative discursive norms. In so doing, she points out that genders become performative through the stylized repetition of acts and performances.

In this context, it is observed in *Lady Audley's Secret* that complex interactions of power, gender, and subjectivity are themselves agents in the installation of gendered identities. More often than not, gendered identities are formed through the effects of Victorian discourses in the novel; moreover, social performances, cultural codes, and discursive practices affect the ways in which gender is constituted. With foci on topics such as gender, sexuality, patriarchy, roles, objectification, sexualization, and commodification of the female body, Braddon destabilizes and overcomes the male authored definitions of femininity by creating Lady Audley's fluid identities.

Inviting to re-consider why genders are discursively made in the way they are, Braddon dexterously problematizes the constructedness of gendered identities via *Lady Audley*. In so doing, she illustrates how the sensation novel not only provides a transgressive and scandalous space for female and male novelists, but also gives a platform for discussing, subverting, and disrupting the Victorian ideals with regard to gender, class, family, and genre. Arguing that literary characters might transgress the boundaries of gendered identities with their new fabricated selves, Braddon offers a new gender critique for the performative constitution of genders in the novel. She suggests that the identity politics within the text paves the way for interrogating the reality and artificiality of the gendered identities. In this sense, Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* is an original, provoking, and shocking work of literature inducing visceral sensations.

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