Chapter Two

The Socially Constructed Femininity: The False Sensibility

One of the major themes of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is centered on Radcliffe’s criticism of the unnatural formation of femininity—the false sensibility. Radcliffe indicates that the false sensibility reflects the social deprivation of women’s rights. To Radcliffe, the false sensibility is synonymous with femininity and the foundation of the false sensibility is based on the social inferiority of women. The words of Mary Jacobus echo this viewpoint. She assumes that “the feminine subject is constituted under conditions of learned weakness, inherited debasement, and enforced sexual subordination” (245). The problematic development of women’s characteristics has to be radically questioned because what is natural to women is merely “a reflection of social constraints” (Alexander 2).

The focus of this chapter is Radcliffe’s attack on the false sensibility. In this novel, the false sensibility includes five vices: hypocrisy, excessive passion, submission and women’s excessive dependence on beauty. This chapter is accordingly divided into five sections.

I  Hypocrisy

This section focuses on Radcliffe’s criticism of hypocrisy. She assumes that benevolence cannot do without sympathy and reason. Due to the lack of sympathy and reason, the purposes of doing good are misleading.

Radcliffe initiates her attack on the false sensibility with her description of
hypocrisy. In the first volume of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, she delineates the hypocrisies of the upper class. Since the death of her father, Emily is forced to leave her home, La Vallée. She accompanies her aunt, Madam Cheron to Tholouse. Madam Cheron is a rich widow, who lives in the suburb of Tholouse. She is addicted to luxurious life-style; therefore, she loves to invite many upper class visitors to her mansion. During this period of time, Emily engages in many social activities and meets many visitors in the parties. She witnesses the vanities of the upper class and discovers that their intellectual shallowness is beyond description. Their conversations expose their ignorance, and foolishness is not the worst fault of the upper class. The worst fault of the upper class in Tholouse is their hypocrisy. Emily is indignant at the hypocrisies of the visitors. She thinks that these people are selfish, insensitive and they “can feel for nobody but themselves” (283). In the meantime, she observes that the upper class has no sympathy for the sufferers. Hence, their benevolence “must sometimes derive from the sufferings of others, and partly from a desire to display the appearance of the prosperity, which they know will command submission and attention to themselves” (123). Under such circumstances their attitude to benevolence is misleading, because their motivations are to show their own fortune and superiority.

In this novel, the hypocrisies of the upper class visitors reflect the degenerating of morality. One of the most important characteristics of morality is benevolence. According to the standard of morality, benevolence must be based on pity and reason. Thus, benevolence cannot do without pity and reason. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*,
the vanity of the upper class in Tholouse distorts their purpose of doing good. They think that benevolence is a way to demonstrate their power. Thus, the meaning of benevolence is lost, because it has nothing to do with reason and sympathy. The behaviors of many upper class members are irrational and cruel. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft’s description testifies to an upper-class woman’s cruelties and absurdities:

The lady, who sheds tears for the bird starved in a snare, and execrates the devils in the shape of men, who goad to madness the poor ox, or whip the patient ass, tottering under a burden above its strength, will, nevertheless, keep her coachman and horses whole hours waiting for her, when the sharp frost bites, or the rain beats against the well-closed windows which do not admit a breath of air to tell her how roughly the wind blows without. And she who takes her dogs to bed, and nurses them with a parade of sensibility, when sick, will suffer her babes to grow up crooked in a nursery. (172-73)

By criticizing hypocrisy, Radcliffe uses the episode of Tholouse to satirize ruthless persons and unreasonable persons, because they have no sympathy for the suffering of others. Meanwhile, they become vicious and absurd in order to take more advantages. Their motivations of doing good are impure, because they always want something in return. Thus, benevolence becomes a means of gaining for them.

**II Self-Interest**

Radcliffe continues her attack on the false sensibility by her criticism of self-interest. Radcliffe thinks that self-interest misleads women and turns them to
mean, narrow-minded mother figures. Under the influence of self-interest, women only care for their own interests. In order to achieve their goals, many women reject and oppress their daughters.

Radcliffe indicates that self-interest confines the thoughts of women, because under the influence of this weakness women only care for themselves and ruthlessly reject each other. The relationship between mothers and daughters is hostile. In other words, they become enemies. In the meantime, the drive of self-interest turns many women to mean persons and cruel oppressors. These women use immoral ways to sacrifice the happiness of their daughters. They have no maternal love and they are unable to educate their daughters. They are weak and narrow-minded, because they are slaves “in every situation to prejudice” (Wollstonecraft 51).

In this novel, Radcliffe uses a female character to express how self-interest distorts a woman’s nature. This character is Madam Cheron (later Madam Montoni), who is the aunt of Emily. She is the equivalent of an evil stepmother. Through Madam Cheron, Radcliffe indicates that women have been taught that the only purpose of their life is to keep their own advantages. They will use every forceful means to achieve their purpose. Self-interest ultimately devours the conscience of women and turns them into resentful persons.

In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Madam Cheron is the sister of St. Aubert. However, unlike St. Aubert, Madam Cheron is stupid, unreasonable and “totally insensitive and indecorous in speech and behavior” (Stoler 134). Since the death of St. Aubert, Madam Cheron is the only legal guardian of Emily. As the closest blood
relation of Emily, Madam Cheron should love Emily as her late brother loved his own
daughter. However, she resents Emily. She thinks that Emily is only a burden. Hence, she assails her niece with cruel insults. Madam Cheron is very rich; therefore, her great fortune makes her a prey of wicked fortune hunters. She unwisely marries an evil Italian—Montoni. Madam Cheron agrees to everything this man plots. She even helps Montoni to sell Emily to a profitable marriage. The Montonis take Emily to Venice, where they force Emily to marry an Italian aristocrat—Count Morano. In order to acquire high prestige, Madam Cheron uses every possible way to urge Emily to accept the Count’s proposal for marriage. Nevertheless, Emily insists that she will not marry the Count. Hence, Madam Cheron is indignant at the disobedience of her niece. She scorns Emily as a proud girl and attacks the personality of the late St. Aubert:

    Nay, niece, it cannot be denied, that you have pride enough; my poor brother, your father, had his share of pride too; though, let me add, his fortune did not justify it. . . . I do not pretend to understand any thing of these high-flown sentiments, niece; you have all the glory to yourself: I would teach you a little plain sense, and not have you so wise as to despise happiness . . . . I cannot boast of a learned education, niece, such as your father thought proper to give you, and, therefore, do not pretend to understand all these fine speeches about happiness. I must be contended to understand only common sense, and happy would it have been for you and your father, if that had been included in his education. (204-05)
For Madam Cheron, her attitude to Emily is “the blindest modification of perverse self-love” (Wollstonecraft 150), because she only thinks much of her own interests. She is a social climber; therefore, she wants to be the aunt of a Countess eagerly. In order to achieve her ambition, Madam Cheron plans to sacrifice the happiness of Emily. Under such circumstances kinship does not guarantee love. Regardless of Emily’s distress, Madam Cheron continues to oppress Emily. Her hostility to Emily does not cease until she is imprisoned and humiliated by Montoni.

Thus, Radcliffe indicates that a selfish woman is also a ruthless woman. Madam Cheron stands as an example of this viewpoint. Self-interest turns Madam Cheron to “Emily’s most sadistic tormentor” (Castle xviii), because she is obsessed with the drive of desire.

III Excessive Passion

This section concentrates on Radcliffe’s concern with the dangers of excessive passion. She contends that excessive passion turns women to corrupt persons and leads them to destruction. To Radcliffe, passion is not a bad quality, but everything in excess is a vice. The excessive passion will devour our reason and destroy us.

The worst part of the false sensibility is the propagation of excessive passion, because it associates with women’s nature to excess and encourages women to indulge in excessive passion. The words of Rousseau reveal this fact. He expresses this perspective in his book of education, Émile. Rousseau suggests that women “are ape to indulge themselves excessively in what is allowed them. Addicted in everything to extremes, they are even more transported at their diversions
than boys” (333). As a woman writer, Radcliffe disagrees with Rousseau’s idea. She thinks that Rousseau’s view relegates women to “the physical and the erotic sphere” (Conger 101). Radcliffe indicates that it is wrong to encourage women’s indulgence of excessive passion. Once a woman excessively develops her passion, she will be immoral and irrational. Thus, Radcliffe uses a female character—Lady Laurentini to express how excessive passion corrupts a woman and leads her to destruction in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

Laurentini is a beautiful, aristocratic Italian. She is the only child of her parents and the heiress of the castle of Udolpho. Her parents spoil her so much that she turns out to be a capricious and violent person. The death of her parents in the same year leaves young Laurentini completely unguarded. As a pretty and wealthy young girl, Laurentini is very popular among the upper class. Many young noble men admire her. However, she indulges herself to excessive passion and behaves in a more and more degenerating manner. In Venice, Laurentini falls in love with a French noble—the Marquis De Villeroi, the former possessor of Chateau-le-Blanc and the cousin of the Countess De Villefort. The Marquis is a very handsome man and he is also one of the most influential aristocrats in France. Laurentini loves the Marquis very much; therefore, she wants to be his wife. In order to marry the Marquis, she pretends to be very chaste and moderate. Laurentini succeeds in getting the commitment of the Marquis. She gladly accepts the Marquis’s proposal of marriage and expects to live happily with him. However, the happiness between Laurentini and the Marquis only lasts for a short period of time. A day before her
wedding, Laurentini returns to the castle of Udolpho, where she has sex with another lover. The Marquis follows her and discovers her sexual looseness. The infamous conduct of Laurentini irritates the Marquis and causes his denial of their engagement. Though Laurentini deceives the Marquis, she still loves him very much. She afterwards becomes his mistress. Having passed a few weeks with the Marquis in the castle of Udolpho, Laurentini is abandoned. The Marquis thinks that Laurentini is unfit to be his wife; therefore, he wants to return to France and decides to marry a virtuous middle-class woman. Nevertheless, the Marquis does not tell Laurentini his decision. He promises that he will return to Italy and marry Laurentini.

Day after day, Laurentini waits for the news of the Marquis, but she hears nothing from him. She is desperate for his departure from Udolpho. At last, a report reaches her that the Marquis has married in France. Laurentini is heartbroken. After suffering from all the extremes of love, jealousy and hatred, she decides to revenge herself on her lover. Thus, she goes to France secretly.

In France, Laurentini finds the residence of the Marquis. She plans to murder the Marquis and his wife, but she still gives up this horrible plan. Finally, she comes to the Marquis and determines to kill herself in front of him. However, she fails. Laurentini loves the Marquis so much that she faints. Meanwhile, the Marquis still cannot resist the beauty and the sensibility of Laurentini. He thus resumes their love affair. Unfortunately, this relationship brings no satisfaction to Laurentini. She is no longer contented with being the mistress of the Marquis. Laurentini discovers that the Marquis suspects his wife’s unfaithfulness. Thus, she uses this opportunity
to incite the Marquis to murder his wife. The consequence is miserable; the Marquis poisons his wife, but he immediately realizes that his wife is innocent. Hence, the Marquis is tormented with the death of his wife. He ascribes the crime to Laurentini, confines her to a remote convent, the monastery of St. Clair and forces her to be a nun. Due to the torture of grief and guilt, Laurentini is driven to madness. Her true identity as the mistress of the castle of Udolfo remains unknown. Since the death of the Marchioness, Laurentini and the Marquis never meet. The Marquis leaves France forever, spends the rest of his life with repentance and dies on the battlefield.

Through the tragedy of Laurentini, Radcliffe indicates that excessive passion is a destructive power. In this novel, Laurentini commits murder because the unrestrained passion devours her judgment. Using Laurentini as an example, Radcliffe shows that “these flights of feelings only increase evil” (Wollstonecraft 129). Due to the indulgence of passion, Laurentini becomes a slave of emotion and desire. Her severe charge of passion stands as an example of the hazard of unrestrained feelings:

Sister! beware of the first indulgence of the passions; beware of the first! Their course, if not checked then, is rapid—their force is [uncontrollable]—they lead us we know not whither—they lead us perhaps to the commission of crimes, for which whole years of prayer and penitence cannot atone!—Such may be the force of even a single passion, that it overcomes every other, and sears up every other approach to the heart. Possessing us like a fiend, it leads us on to the acts of a fiend, making us
insensible to pity and to conscience. And, when its purpose is accomplished, like a fiend, it leaves us to the torture of those feelings, which its power had suspended—not annihilated,—to the tortures of compassion, remorse, and conscience. . . . Remember, sister, that the passions are the seeds of vices as well as of virtues, from which either may spring, accordingly as they are nurtured. Unhappy they who have never been taught the art to govern them! (646-47)

Though Lady Laurenitini is only a fictional character, Radcliffe uses this character to oppose the propagation of excessive passion in fiction. According to Todd’s *Sensibility*, since the mid-eighteenth century, fictional heroines’ surrender to unrestrained passion is considered to be “fascinating and noble” (137). Wollstonecraft also indicates this problem in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She says that novels tend to “make women creatures of sensation” (61). As a famous writer of popular fiction, Radcliffe intends to use her character to point out that passion is a “wayward power” (Todd 138). She thinks that it is essential to teach women how to govern their own passion. If women never learned to control the unrestrained passion, they would be “easily corrupted and turn into infidelity” (Grimshaw 16). Under such circumstances women are very miserable because they are the “mixture of madness and folly” (Wollstonecraft 61). Thus, Radcliffe believes that women have to reject the snare of excessive passion, because this dangerous quality will ruin their life.

VI Submission
Submission is another fault of the false sensibility. However, in Radcliffe’s time, men regard this weakness as a female virtue. Radcliffe thinks that submission is not a female virtue, because it causes the miseries of women. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, Montoni’s words stand as an example of this idea. He says that “obedience” (270) is the indispensible virtue for women.¹ In this novel, Montoni’s definition of obedience means the following things: first, women’s subjection to men; second, women’s unconditional sacrifice to the family. Through Montoni, Radcliffe reveals that the life of women is under the unjust demand of men. No matter men are wrong or right, women must fulfill the requirements of men. A paragraph in Rousseau’s Émile also reflects the social mistreatment of women:

Every daughter ought to be of the same religion as her mother, and every wife to be of the same religion as her husband: for, though such religion should be false, that docility which induces the mother and daughter to submit to the order of nature, takes away, in the sight of God, the criminality of their error. As they are not in a capacity to judge for themselves, they ought to abide by the decision of their fathers and husbands as confidently as by that of the church. (340)

As an intellectual woman, Radcliffe opposes the social deprivation of women. She thinks that it is unfair to require women “to be obedient, dutiful, modest and chaste, accustomed to pleasing men and submitting to their will” (Grimshaw 16). Thus, she uses one female character to criticize the submission of women. This

¹ In this novel, Montoni is the villain and the oppressor.
character is the Marchioness De Villeroi, who is the beloved sister of St. Aubert. She is beautiful and good-natured, but self-denying and subservient. Her submission brings her no happiness but wretchedness.

In this novel, the Marchioness De Villeroi dies very young. She is a virtuous and amiable woman. She falls in love with a young, courteous and spirited gentleman. Her father commands her to marry the Marquis De Villeroi, for his money. Hence, she submissively marries a man she does not love. Since she marries the Marquis, she is very unhappy, because she still loves the gentleman. She often cries in her chamber. Though the Marchioness always conceals her tears, her husband still discovers her secret. The life of the Marchioness is miserable because her husband is indignant that she has a lover before marriage. No matter what she does to please her husband, her efforts are in vain, because her sweet and obedient manners only make the Marquis more and more angry. The Marchioness thinks that someday the Marquis will make peace with her; therefore, she endures the torments without complaint. Unfortunately, the Marquis is a mean, narrow-minded man. He always suspects that the Marchioness is unfaithful. He expresses his resentment to her and treats her cruelly. In order to prevent the Marchioness from meeting her lover, the Marquis forbids the Marchioness to see any visitors. The life of the Marchioness becomes very isolated, and she has only one servant (Dorothée) to accompany her. To the Marchioness, Chateau-le-Blanc is like a living hell. She does not expect the Marquis to love her, because her only hope is to live alone peacefully. However, she fails.
The circumstances of the Marchioness are getting more and more dangerous. Laurentini is her rival. In order to make herself the wife of the Marquis, Laurentini adduces some seeming proofs of the Marchioness’s infidelity. The Marquis believes Laurentini and he thinks that his wife disgraces him. Jealousy and hatred devour the reason of the Marquis. He agrees with Laurentini in murdering the Marchioness. They decide to poison the Marchioness because this way will cause her gradual, painful death. The Marchioness thus becomes “a victim to the jealousy and subtlety of Laurentini and to the guilty weakness of her husband” (658). One night the Marchioness is very ill. She calls Dorotheé to her bedside and says that she wants to see the Marquis because she has something to tell him. The Marchioness thinks that she is going to die; therefore, she has to prove her innocence. Finally, the Marquis talks to the Marchioness and discovers that she has never been unfaithful. The innocence of the Marchioness arouses his sense of guilt. The Marquis immediately calls the doctor. However, the Marchioness is tortured by excruciating pain, and she dies before the doctor comes. Soon after the death of the Marchioness, “a frightful blackness spread all over her face” (528). The doctor is so shocked, and he thinks that the Marchioness is poisoned. In the meantime the Marquis realizes that it is very difficult to conceal his crime. He thus bribes the doctor and forbids him to talk about this matter. The news of the Marchioness’s unusual death reaches her family, but they have no evidence to charge the Marquis. Hence, the Marchioness is victimized and the real cause of her death remains hidden.

By describing the tragedy of the Marchioness, Radcliffe shows that submission is
not a female virtue because it induces the tyranny and the vice of men. She thinks that submission makes women incompetent and passive. Thus, women are unable to stop the wickedness of men. The Marchioness stands as an example of this viewpoint. She is very gentle and amiable, but she is too submissive. She blindly obeys the viciousness of her husband; therefore, abuse, murder and death are doomed to fall on her. Radcliffe concludes that the root of the Marchioness’s plight is submission. In order to acquire happiness, women have to reject submission.

V Women’s Excessive Dependence on Beauty

In the eighteenth century, the primary duty of women was to be beautiful. According to Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, women were taught to develop their physical beauty from their childhood. Many women spent much time and energy in making themselves attractive and agreeable. Wollstonecraft wrote, “Should they [women] be beautiful everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives” (19). Why did women care for beauty so much? The reason was very simple. At that time, the majority of women were uneducated; therefore, they were inferior to men in many fields. Most of the women had no advantages at all because the whole social system privileged men. However, a beautiful woman always had more advantages than others. Whether she was rich or poor, she would easily marry a wealthy, powerful man. She would obtain the protection of man through marriage. In other words, women had to depend on beauty because beauty was their power. However, this assumption was under attack.
Radcliffe uses one character to oppose the notion of women’s dependence on beauty in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. This character is the Countess De Villefort, who is beautiful and graceful but contemptible. Through this character, Radcliffe illustrates that it is a mistake to consider beauty the only power of women, because this idea distorts the characteristics of women. Radcliffe does not despise beautiful women, and she thinks that beauty is a very valuable quality. Nevertheless, she believes that those who only think much of beauty are very despicable. She thinks that a woman has nothing but beauty is shallow, self-centered and narrow-minded.

The Countess De Villefort appears in the third volume of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. She is a young stepmother of the Count De Villefort’s children. In the upper-class circle, her beauty is unrivalled. However, the Countess is “in violation of every precept of proper female domestic behavior” (Whiting 493). She indulges herself in sentimental novel and luxurious life-style. In addition, she is also indifferent to her role as a stepmother of the Count’s daughter—Blanche. She persuades the Count to send Blanche to the convent, because she has no “sufficient ability, or inclination to superintend the education of her daughter-in-law” (466). Though the Countess dislikes Blanche, she still admits that Blanche is superior to her in beauty. She uses every means to urge the Count to prolong the period of Blanche’s seclusion. The Countess is afraid that Blanche will drive her from the throne of beauty. Once Blanche emerges from the convent, she will be the focus of the public. Nevertheless, the Count decides to cease the seclusion of Blanche. The Count manages to leave Paris and take his family to Languedoc, because he inherits
Chateau-le-Blanc from his late cousin, the Marquis De Villeroi. When the Countess realizes that there is no way to change the decision of her husband, she gives herself “some consolation to consider, that, though the Lady Blanche would emerge from her convent, the shades of the country would, for some time, veil her beauty from the public eye” (466).

Through the Countess, Radcliffe argues that beauty is not the source of women’s power, because it is very unreliable. In this novel, the Countess mistakenly believes that her power is her beauty. Though she is the most beautiful woman in her circle, she is still discontented. Blanche is only seventeen, and she is more beautiful than the Countess. The Countess is insecure about her power, because Blanche is a great threat to her status in the De Villefort’s family and the upper-class circle in Paris. Thus, the Countess uses every way to reject Blanche.

Using the Countess as an example, Radcliffe shows that women cannot rely on beauty. Once a woman takes beauty as her only power, she will become a jealous and mean person. Radcliffe implies that many beautiful women regard themselves as the center of their circle and this thought makes them reject other beautiful women. The Countess stands as an example of this viewpoint. In order to keep her advantageous position, the Countess is hostile to Blanche. Radcliffe uses the Countess to expose the problem of women’s jealousy. She thinks that the nature of women is “swallowed up by the factitious character which self vanity of beauty had produced” (Wollstonecraft 173). Radcliffe thinks that it is very miserable to confine women’s power to beauty. Under the influence of the excessive dependence on
beauty, the life of women is empty, because they have no friends but rivals.

By criticizing the false sensibility, Radcliffe implies that women are under the deprivation of the false sensibility. She not only attacks its faults (hypocrisy, self-interest, excessive passion, submission and women’s excessive dependence on beauty) but also indicates that men use the false sensibility to enslave women. In order to keep their advantageous position, men make women appear to be irrational and weak persons. Under such circumstances “the nature of woman and her development is then derived from what is useful to man” (Gaten 12). Men subject women to their authority and their prejudice. Under the influence of the false teachings of men, women regard themselves as inferior beings. As the subordinate of men, women have always been taught that the primary duty of their life is to please men. The only way for women to obtain the favor of men is to pursue the false sensibility. Nevertheless, this thought leads women to degeneration and wretchedness. According to the false sensibility, the definition of ideal femininity is inconsistent. Women have to play contradictory roles—the modest, chaste wife and the coquettish, unfaithful mistress. The images of women illustrate the “familiar opposition between women as angels and women as whores, between women as the embodiment of moral value and women as the source of moral disorder” (Jones 57). No matter how women strive to keep their behavior properly, men still regard their nature as cunning and unstable. As Wollstonecraft says, “Men are not aware of the misery they cause, and the vicious weakness they cherish, by only inciting women to render themselves pleasing” (142). Thus, women are the victims of the interests of
men. Radcliffe concludes that the only way to reverse the fate of women is to change their thought.