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The fall of the angel, the rise of the monster: A feminist reading of Roald Dahl's short story "Lamb to the Slaughter"

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Abstract

The paper attempts to re-read Roald Dahl's "Lamb to the Slaughter" from a feminist perspective. Patriarchal society tries to impose a binary of "angel in the house" and "monster woman". In this paper, the binary of "angel woman" and "monster woman" is challenged and debunked. The research methodology includes close reading of the text.

Keywords: Patriarchy, feminist, docile, angel, vengeful

Introduction

"In duty bound, a life hemmed in, / whichever way the spirit turns to look ; / No chance of breaking out , except by sin ; / Not even room to shirk ---
Simply to live, and work."
"In Duty Bound"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

The above - quoted stanza lays bare quite a few poignant realities of woman's life in a patriarchal set-up. She is compelled to do what the society has arbitrarily stipulated to be her bounden duty. Whatever the patriarchal strategy may be --- persuasion or pressure – It confines a woman to a Sisyphean drudge. She is expected and designed to play "Angel In the House".

A revisionary rereading of woman's saga should serve us as an eye-opener, highlighting the grim fact, that a woman can hardly ever break open the glass coffin of patriarchy "except by sin".

It is in the light of the galling strands of experience encountered by a woman in a structure where she is treated as "no-man", "other", that I am going to attempt a feminist critique of a highly intriguing literary figure , Mary Maloney in Roald Dahl's story " Lamb to the Slaughter" .

At the outset of the story, we find Mrs. Maloney as an epitome of the eternal feminine virtues of modesty, civility, compliancy and politeness. Devotedly engaged in the art of service and domesticity, she seems to embody a typical, socialized housewife whose sole pleasure is to please the Man. In fact, in the early phase of this story, Mrs. Maloney's meticulous arrangement for her husband's daily recreation(drinks) on return home, a patient and "curiously tranquil" waiting for his return, her act of greeting him with a kiss on his return , serving him, his drinks , her compassionate concern for his tiredness etc.. are in conformity to the dictums of "The Booke of Curtesye "(1477), that, "if Woman owes her Being to the comfort and profit of man, 'tis highly reasonable that she should be careful and diligent to content and please him."

Mrs. Maloney's docility and submissiveness are evinced in the modesty and reticence she maintains despite her husband patrick's dour, un-reciprocal response to her obsequiously, almost desperate offer of service. She said pleadingly, "'I'll get you some cheese and crackers first.'" To her uneasiness, Patrick refused it.

Anyway things didn't go altogether dismal for Mrs. Maloney until Patrick had commanded her to sit down as he wanted to have a talk with her. It was at this point "that she began to get frightened". Reference to her fear and her "large, bewildered eyes" is a metaphoric indicator of her servile femininity.

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Patrick informed Mrs. Maloney in just a few words of his decision to walk out of her life. There is in the story an eerie presence of silence of the reason/s he gave for his decision to depart her in her pregnancy. He sounds monstrously insensible, callous and relentless when he offered a recompense in the form of money. He didn't want Mrs. Maloney to make "any fuss" because "it wouldn't be very good for ... [his] job". The reader shouldn't fail to discern the threat hidden in apparently plain words.

Mrs. Maloney, had fitted herself in with the domestic enclosure. A reference to her "sewing" is suggestive of her everyday cultivation of household chores, all designed by the traditional patriarchy as a means of making a mythical Madonna of a woman. So she felt blasted as she suddenly found herself nowhere but an engulfing void of uncertainty and predicament. "She couldn't feel her feet touching the floor. She couldn't feel anything at all – except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit".

Events that followed brings about a horrific topsy-turvy in the entire structure of the story and the role our female protagonist has played so far. Mrs. Maloney murdered her husband, bizarrely with a "leg of lamb" which she had brought out of the freezer for cooking. There are touches of dark humour in the way the murder scene is depicted. Mrs. Maloney found out a "funny thing" "that he remained standing ...atleast four or five seconds, gently swaying."

Mrs. Maloney would have confessed her guilt and accepted the death sentence. --- Infact, "it would be a relief"; but the mother in her recoiled. It was the question of the unborn baby's survival. She didn't know whether the laws killed both mother and child, or waited until the birth of the child. Therefore, she couldn't but evade the penalty, at the same time, she contrived a unique devilish ruse to ensure the security of herself and her unborn baby. She rehearsed a dialogue with the grocer; then went out to the grocery for vegetables, returned and raised a howl, at the sight Patrick lying dead. "All the old love and longing for him welled up inside her, and shebegan to cry her heart out. It was easy. No acting was necessary."

When two detective and two policemen, Patrick's colleagues, came in response to her phone call, Mrs. Maloney told them about her going out to the grocery and her return to discover Patrick dead. She thus convincingly setup an alibi.

Mrs. Maloney assumed a pathetic look, thereby winning the police men's sympathy. We find in her an accomplished manipulator who successfully persuaded those men folks into drinking whiskey and then banqueting over that lamb-leg which she at first decided to be stuff for dinner, and then used as a murder weapon, and finally made it disappear in the stomach of the guardians of the law. Black comedy looms large over the concluding scene where one of the menfolk, while guzzling up the murder-weapon, said: 'personally, I think it's right here on the premises. 'probably right under our very noses.'" Mary Maloney's monstrous giggle only intensifies the comic, horrifying and absurd effect of the scenario.

Conclusion

In the social structure and literary domain under the command and control of patriarchy, women's images are fashioned into a binary of angel and monster. They are either Madonna or Medusa. In the story I have attempted a critique, the protagonist, Mary Maloney had been an emblem of the supposed domestic angel until her husband

cast her out of his "Room" with a baby in her womb. There after, we find Mary Maloney to have been totally transformed into a vengeful, monstrous murderer, a beguiling, persuasive manipulator – one who elevated herself from a victim into an avenger.

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