



WOMAN IN WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY'S *VANITY FAIR*

Dr.Kakasaheb Dhondiba Dhaygude

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sant Ramdas Arts, Commerce & Science College,

Ghansawangi, Dist. Jalna (M.S.) India

Abstract

William Makepeace Thackeray's is one of the well-known novelists of English literature wherein the reader can sense the novelist likes and preference towards the rogue elements in society. Besides criticizing the corrupt social systems he also takes arms against the wide spread snobbishness that is pervaded more or less in every society. He also despises of the violence that is caused by the armed conquests and territorial trespassing. William Makepeace Thackeray while presenting his disgust against the moral corruption of his times also follows the Victorian ideals regarding womanhood. He is a vocal critic of the opportunistic world which gives more weightage to materialism and affluence. He believes that over and extreme greed for monetary and pecuniary objects degenerate the human race. The wealth and materialistic culture are the progeny of human misbehavior. The negative traits like pride, arrogance and disrespect creep when the human being has innumerable financial resources. The limitless wealth blinds human being and he starts to behave like Almighty. Wealth creates mentality that underestimates those who are poor and fragile. The feelings like arrogance and pride are the direct result of the limitless hoarding of money. When a person is blinded by the innumerable wealth, he or she never bothers about others and misbehaves and maltreat those who are poor and needy. Besides sternly criticizing the ill effects of materialism the novelist does not spare the women of his times.

Key words: Affluence, aristocracy, morality, patriarchy, rogue, society, values & woman etc.

Introduction

William Makepeace Thackeray is a staunch follower of Victorian tenets and the Victorian concept of womanhood is visible in his women characters. The Victorian attitude towards woman is predominantly patriarchal wherein they perceive woman as a means to further the familial urges which are sanctioned by the existing societal norms and tradition. The nuptial knot is regarded as quite essential and plays vital role in the man woman relations. The age also despise of the naked sensuousness and overt sexuality. The married persons automatically receive social esteem. All these precepts play vital role in determining the traits of female protagonists or other ideal female characters in the works of Victorian writers. These works either present the virtuous woman or the vicious one, as there is no place for mixture of virtue and vice in one character, either they are utterly good or bad traits. They consider the woman pious or utterly damned. This is what Thackeray's female portrayal which a reader can come across in his works. More or less he is considered as unsympathetic towards women and always presents the one sided picture of woman. He is a

staunch supporter of patriarchal social order which always believes in subsidiary position of woman. He never assigns major role to woman who is considered as a mere child producing entity, who always looks after the children and the wishes of her man and his family. He also gives importance to the institution of family and marriage which is an important component of that institution that provides happiness to the man and woman equally. He is more orthodox as far as woman's role and responsibilities are concerned. His portrayal of Becky Sharp suggest his sharp suggest his one sided perception regarding woman who is portrayed as vicious and unscrupulous and in other way through Amelia the reader can get a peep into the novelist's mind regarding his perception of the ideal woman who is more submissive, caring and affectionate. He never admits and appreciate the materialistic women's qualities like the patriarchal order which firmly believes in the inferiority of the fair sex and always apprehensive towards woman and never hesitate to stamp a woman as witch who is more smart and virtuous. The conventions confine woman to the kitchen and warming the beds of their husbands. Woman for them should be beautiful but not bold enough to show her assertiveness and protest. Her importance lies only when she with her male member, as soon as she becomes an individual the whole society questions her character.

William Thackeray's Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* presents the biased views of society regarding the woman who is devoid of better fortune. Her status is measured according to the possession of material things. A poor woman is despised and an ignored entity. Becky Sharp shares her pathetic experiences and the trauma she has undergone because of her moderate financial background with Amelia. She was ill-treated in her childhood even her classmates and the headmistress always makes fun of her only because of her moderate financial condition. Although she is much smarter than that of her classmates she never receives the well-deserved appreciation only because of her destitution. She complains that even the maids are treated better than the treatment which she received. This psychological and physical trauma suggests that the root cause of the societal discrimination is the result of the deep rooted societal prejudice towards poverty. All the demerits are showered on the poor and everything which is considered as good is assigned to the people who are from the well to do sections. This unjust and preferential treatment creates the feeling of anger and revenge among the victims. Even the educational places are dominated by the prejudiced minds who are otherwise supposed to treat every child in impartial manner. It is the ill treatment which creates the future rogues as well as rebels who use every mechanism to take revenge against the society that breeds discrimination and exploitation. The act of headmistress who gives dictionary to every student except Becky creates hatred towards the so called social order because of which the girl child decides to become affluent by any means. As she firmly believes that the only way to end all this humiliation is to become rich and affluent, she uses every person as a tool for realizing her dreams. Her unscrupulous and roguery are the result of the treatment which she receives in her childhood.

It was the time where submissive you women are venerated whereas the insurgents are despised of. The society expects a woman to keep her man and his family happy and joyful. It is the only and most important duty, she must do everything so that her man will be cheerful and satisfied. It is the responsibility of a married woman to become an agent of comfort and joy for her family. In spite of her own sorrow and problems, she should keep her husband happy. Victorians give more prominence to the marriage and this inevitable financial concern play crucial rule at the time of marriage. The financial factor is more looked after phenomenon. The Victorian society gives more attention to the financial background of the family of bride and grooms. It is virtually a commercial enterprise and the novelist scorns of the commoditization of human relations. He asserts that marriage without mutual trust, love and romance remains a mere commercial transaction, where there is no place for emotions and feelings.

Marriage plays crucial role in Thackeray's novels in determining human relations. The novelist's female perception is an outcome of his personal experiences and his own family background. Although he has mixed feelings regarding the women who are the part of his life, he never becomes cynic in portraying women in his works. It is because of the personal tragedies and the love he receives from some women like his daughter he firmly believes that most of the women are vicious but every woman is not a rogue like Becky Sharp. His works also have the virtuous woman in like Amelia but the percentage of the ideal and the compassionate women are very meager. He also believes that woman when given opportunity descends to unscrupulousness and savagery. By portraying the female characters like Becky and painting them in negative hue he intentionally or accidentally ignores the role played by society in their villainy. They have become wicked only because of the unjust and discriminatory treatment they received from their childhood. It is the feeling of victimization makes them rebel. This aspect, the novelist ignores while shaping the women characters in his works. Becky Sharp ignores the children even though she is appointed as a

caretaker for the daughters of Sir Pitt Crowley. She makes her mind that only financial power can open the doors for her deliverance so she decides to marry a person who belongs to the affluent class. She never bothers about him and she uses her man as a means for furthering her aspirations. The woman becomes so brutal that she does not even hesitate to torment the innocent persons like Amelia and her brother. She uses her physic and her sweet language to dupe persons like Sedley whom she pretends to be in love. She also does not feel the pangs of her conscience while using her best friend Amelia who helps in her adverse conditions and times. Such roguery is the result of direct result of the societal ill treatment and injustice. She behaves against the Victorian norms of ideal womanhood where woman is never supposed to protest against the maltreatment and injustices. On the contrary the women must feel pride and happiness despite of her wretched condition. She should make up her mind in such a way that her existence is there only because of her male members. She is also reared from the childhood in such a way that she digests every humiliation submissively. But William Thackeray believes that the insurgent as well as the submissive women are not good for a better family.

The woman who is vicious and rebel always harms her people, family and society as she wants to take revenge against the brutalities and the submissive and passive woman harms herself by tolerating every form of injustice and discrimination. This woman constantly succumbs to the psychological agonies which are never good for her physical as well as mental health. While portraying the good woman through Amelia, he considers her as an unintelligent and stupid. She is more sentimental and can be easily deceived by the women like Rebecca Sharp. Thackeray comments on Amelia

O you poor secret martyrs and victims, whose life is a torture, who are stretched on racks in your bedrooms, and who lay your heads down on the block daily at the drawing-room table; every man who watches your pains, or peers in to the dark places where the torture is administered to you, must pity you-and-and thank God that he has a beard...if you properly tyrannize over a woman, you will find a h'p'orth of kindness act upon her and bring tears into her eyes, as though you were an angel benefiting her. (*Vanity Fair*, 638-39).

These kinds of women do not have the power of judging others; they judge the persons under the impressions of their feelings. These women are always unhappy inwardly. Even though they get good partners they remain dissatisfied throughout their whole life. The novelist while stressing the imperfections of women does not totally ignore the importance of ideal women in society. He states that every society although treats the women badly, it can't ignore their role in the development of community. Even the man who enjoys the life by following unfair means also aspires for the good girl. The novelist also presents the societal attitude where the privileged class ignores the persons that belong to the lower stratum. But there are women like Becky who never submits to negligence and ignorance, on the contrary these women become more energetic and vibrant because of the maltreatment. She becomes determinant and she never misses a chance to exhibit her assertiveness and disapproval.

It is the tribulations that provide much needed strength to conquer the world. Instead she develops liking for the negative traits and abhors the positive tenets. Her persistent struggle for good fortune and transforming the destitution in excellence makes her utterly wicked woman. She measure success and virtue in terms of financial gain. It is the chain of difficulties that makes her so tough that she becomes a smart woman who can entrap and deceive the man for her ulterior motives. Despite of all her humiliation and harassment she is not disappointed, instead she gets revitalized and becomes ready to bounce back with more power and energy. The failure on one part which directly inspires her for making more efforts as it is found that she fails in wooing Jose Sedly, her next move is towards the more affluent and the person with good fortune Sir Pitt Crowley. Even she does not stop here and does everything to entrap even his son. Despite of her opportunism and selfishness she is a determinant woman who has the power to cross all the impediments. Even in her matrimonial life she becomes dominating and controls the husband who belongs to more affluent background. She has the skill to use every trait of her personality in dominating the man who comes in her life. Even she marries with the man who is from the aristocratic background or possesses a good

fortune and such man even follows her is a kind of revenge by the ever victimized woman on the people and society which is solely blamed for her unscrupulousness. This woman even after her marriage never hesitates to develop relationships with other men who are rich and can become the tools in future for her so that she can enjoy the whole life in luxury and comfort. The acts of Rebecca where she supports her husband for the repayment of his debts show the craftiness as well as the smartness of a woman who never bothers about fidelity and trust. Because of her excellence although the negative one, she is shown as more successful and contented than that of another female counterpart i.e. Amelia. Despite of her shrewdness and wickedness she achieves whatever she aspires. She makes use of every male that comes into her contact for her personal games.

It also shows the utter stupidity of men who are unable to gauge the machinations of women like Rebecca. The men are easily entrapped and deceived by the smart women. Thackeray assigns every negative character trait to Rebecca as she is not loyal to her husband. She also does not become a good mother and she gives more preference to her aspirations than that of her children. She is such a reckless and wicked woman that she contemplates the replacement for her husband who is on the battleground. Even she does not bother about developing extramarital relations. Her only aim in life is to reach the target which is set by her and in achieving it she uses everybody as a ladder which is discarded on attaining her aspirations.

Conclusion

In this way William Makepeace Thackeray presents his notions of womanhood in his well-known work *Vanity Fair*. Although there are ideal women characters like Amelia in this work, he never appreciates her as he considers her as sentimental and stupid. The novelist also follows the Victorian notions regarding women and also digresses often from the chosen path.

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