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READING GENDER RELATIONS IN OSCAR WILDE'S "LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN"

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Abstract: The universe was created by God and man & woman are the pillars of its existence and operation. These two forms of life have sustained the existence and continuity of this universe. This primal and basic relationship has its existence in variant and multiple forms and dimensions i.e. husband-wife relationship, brother-sister relationship, mother-son relationship, lover-beloved relationship and several others. Thus we have a wide spectrum of multi-dimensionality that defines and captures the total essence of this relationship.

Index Terms -Gender, Man, Woman, Relation

As literature has always been the reflection of life around, we find various writers portraying life with its varied shades and forms in their works of literature. In a similar attempt, Oscar Wilde has portrayed 19th century middle-class life in his social comedies and Lady Windermere's Fan is one amongst them. Lady Windermere's Fan has volumes to speak about the relationship between a man and a woman with feminist perspective as its background. The play depicts a middle-class setting with educated strata living and enjoying life.

In the beginning of the play itself, the reader is introduced to Lady Windermere and Lord Darlington, who is a mere friend of the lady. The relationship depicted between these two characters has its own unique subtleties. Lady Windermere is a married woman with a wonderful life partner and a small kid, yet Lord Darlington's love for the lady is quite obvious in his remarks. The conversation between the two is also a testimony to this fact. The way Lord Darlington offers her various compliments and the way she receives, speaks volumes about the innate psyche of the characters involved:

LORD DARLINGTON. I wish I had known it was your birthday, Lady Windermere. I would have covered the whole street in front of your house with flowers for you to walk on. (Act 1-137)¹

But Margaret (Lady Windermere) knows her limits and as a female, she knows where to draw the line:

LADY WINDERMERE. I don't like compliments, and I don't see why a man should think he is pleasing a woman enormously when he says to her a whole heap of things that he doesn't mean (Act I-138)

Thus a man-woman relationship is very delicate and sensitive. Though a female tries to mould and live her life the way it is supposed to be lived in this patriarchal world and infact seems to be participating in and enjoying life around, she, nevertheless, understands the subtleties of a male mind. Howsoever, a man may try, his inside always gets known to a female somehow or the other. It's not mere words, but the spirit behind them that matters.

Besides, Lady Windermere claims herself to be a puritan:

LADY WINDERMERE. Well, I have something of the puritan in me. I was brought up like that... I always lived with Lady Julia, my father's eldest sister, she allowed of no compromise, I allow of none. (Act 1-140) And further,

LADY WINDERMERE. Life is a sacrament. Its ideal is love. Its purification is sacrifice. (Act 1-140)

This initial discussion sets the stark contrast between Lady Windermere's supposed initial thoughts and the way life turns out to be for her later on and her response to it. It is always easy to speak of values and principles but the real circumstances put one to test and there one gets to know what one is. In this relationship, we find both Margaret and Lord Darlington to be on very cordial terms with each other. Infact we find Lord Darlington to be very humble and polite and Lady Windermere to be giving full vent to her feelings. Being great friends, these two characters confide in each other but they know and thus observe their limits as well. However in their conversation, the male- female psyche is quite obvious and apparent. While giving an instance of a husband's extra-marital affair, the Lord puts forward his views as follows:

LORD DARLINGTON... -do you think that the wife should not console herself? (Act I-140)

LADY WINDERMERE. (frowning), Console herself ?(Act I-140) And further,

LORD DARLINGTON. Yes. I think she should - I think she has the right. (Act I-141)

And in response,

LADY WINDERMERE. Because the husband is vile-should the wife be vile also? (Act 1-141)

Thus the above discussion is a testimony to the fact that a man always believes that a woman should apologize for the wrongs done even by a man. It is a patriarchal world where a woman is a mere toy and everything moves according to the man's whims and fancies. Men rule the world and women are mere slaves, and exist to feed man's desires and dreams, just a spec to add another colour to a man's life, to entertain him whenever he pleases to be served.

The conversation between the two characters in this first act throws light on various aspects of a male-female existence in this world. Being a strict puritan, Lady Windermere believes that the women who have committed what the world calls a fault should never be forgiven. Now this statement shows that Margaret is a lady of principles and believes in high moral living but the real belief, worth and philosophy of a person is put to test only in trying circumstances. Thus we find this very lady, who talks of morality and self- discipline in so loud a voice, running away to Lord Darlington's place on observing the intimacy between her own husband and Mrs. Erlynne. Thus we find Margaret to be a self-willed lady who believes in high moral standards, but as is generally the case with all human beings, her own individuality comes into conflict with societal norms and notwithstanding the moment of crisis, she leaves her husband's place to look for a life of love and self-respect with Lord Darlington.

Despite of being very apparent and explicit, the relationship between these two characters brings out the subtleties of human psyche, As these two individuals are friends, we find both of them discussing the things very openly amongst themselves, though invisible taboos always

operate in a male-female talk. How-so-ever obvious and explicit one may seem, yet complete communication is never possible,

We find that Margaret is a feminist, who believes that there should be the same laws for men as there are for women, and she allows for no exceptions and thus the outburst of her emotions and frustration comes in her evening birthday ball when Mrs. Erlynne, the supposed friend of Lord Windermere joins the party. As no one else perhaps is a better option to share her frustration with, we find Margaret giving a vent to her feelings in Lord Darlington's presence:

LADY WINDERMERE. What have I done to deserve this? I gave him all my life. He took it-used it-spoiled it! I am degraded in my own eyes, and I lack courage – I am a coward! (Act II-169)

And here at this critical juncture, in an attempt to console her, we find Lord Darlington opening up the deep recesses of his mind:

LORD DARLINGTON. If I know you at all, I know that you can't live with a man who treats you like this. What sort of life would you have with him? You would feel that he was lying to you every moment of the day. You would feel that the look in his eyes was false, his voice false, his touch false, his passion false. He would come to you when he was weary of others; you would have to comfort him... You would have to be to him the mask of his real life, the clock to hide his secret, (Act 11-169)

And thus after flows out the love that Lord Darlington has beautifully nurtured in his heart:

LORD DARLINGTON. Between men and women there is no friendship possible. There is passion, enmity, worship, love, but no friendship. I love you - (Act II -170), And Lady Windermere's utter negation of this gesture of Lord Darlington shows that men and women think at different levels. It was all love, his personal infatuation for Lady Windermere that was beneath Darlington's every remark and attempt. He indirectly discussed the issue of Arthur's extra-marital affair, just perhaps to know the lady's views about marriage and the relationship involved therein. Even at this critical moment, we find him more of a self centered individual. It's not perhaps the crisis in Margaret's life that is important; rather what is quite evident from his remarks is that it is his own opportunity to declare his love and to be Margaret's. Thus certain things in life are never possible and it will be quite appropriate to quote Dreiser's view: A love affair is little less or more than a drop of colouring added to a glass of clear water, or a foreign chemical agent introduced into a delicate chemical formula."² Whereas as far as Margaret is concerned, Lord Darlington is a mere confidante. Though Lord Darlington is quite obsessed with Lady Windermere:

LORD DARLINGTON. ... I love you-love you as I have never loved any living thing. From the moment I met you I loved you, loved you blindly, adoringly, madly!... (Act II-170) and though he tries his level best to persuade Lady Windermere to concede to her:

LORD DARLINGTON. ...I won't tell you that the world matters nothing, or the world's voice, or the voice of society. They matter a good deal.... But there are moments when one has to choose between living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely- or dragging out some false, shallow degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands. You have that moment now. Choose! Oh, my love, choose!"(Act II-170) and further,

LORD DARLINGTON. ... It is wrong for a wife to remain with a man who so dishonours her. You said once you would make no compromise with things. Make none now. Be brave! Be- yourself!"(Act II-171)

Still Margaret does not concede to what Lord Darlington desires and thus Lord Darlington leaves heartbroken.

However later on observing the over intimacy between Mrs. Erlynne and her own husband, we find Margaret leaving her own home forever to join Lord Darlington. But as luck would have it, she never meets him and Mrs Erlynne's imploring restores her back to her husband.

Thus we find that in this male-dominated world, a man can say and do things the way he wants. And somehow the men folk have the liberty to outpour their heartfelt emotions. However, even in Margaret's case we realise that she can dare to open up her heart in front of her friend. But howsoever open and frank a woman may be, her psyche is so tuned that she can't dare to think of developing any relationship outside her wedlock. This patriarchal society only allows a female to worship, revere and be committed to man and that's why even when Lady Windermere dares to be at Darlington's place, leaving her own home, she flickers like a candle-flame:

LADY WINDERMERE. ... How hideous life is! ... Oh! it was mad of me to come here, horribly mad I will go back, let Arthur do with me what he pleases. I can't wait here. It has been madness my coming...." (Act II-181,182)

Thus through Margaret's character we observe that though women sometimes dare to be their own and assert their individuality, yet the women in general, even the educated and enlightened ones can't dare to defy the existence framed for them in this patriarchal world. They are sociologically and psychologically bound to men. Their psyche has been so tuned that they can't think or dream of their independent existence. Though they keep on yearning for a life of their own, where things may happen the way they want, yet somehow the truth is that their very thought process is quite blurred and perhaps they themselves don't know what they want. Over centuries and right from the very first day of their existence perhaps, they have been tuned to live life in the way that makes them dance to the tunes of their male-counterparts. Thus we find similar views echoed by Mary Wollstonecraft in A Vindication of the rights of woman as she puts it this way, "Man, since antiquity, has viewed woman as his property. She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused."³ Women breathe in the world created for them by men. They seem to live life but perhaps their process of living is just an attempt to appropriate themselves to man's wishes.

Thus we can conclude that though at the apparent level Margaret and Lord Darlington have a very open and friendly relationship where both are free to give vent to their feelings and views, yet the female constraints are quite obvious. In this spectrum of relationships, we further come across a husband-wife relationship i.e. Lady Windermere (Margaret) and Lord Windermere (Arthur's) relationship.

A husband-wife relationship is a very pious and true relationship. Marriages are made in heaven and celebrated on earth. It is a bond where the two beings that are involved share everything right from the physical to the emotional or psychological. Thus, Oscar Wilde acquaints us with a beautiful couple in the form of Margaret and Arthur. We find Margaret rejoicing in and feeling happy and proud about her husband's gift i.e. the fan. Women actually worship when they love men. Their love is their adoration. Thus, on being told by Duchess of Berwick about Arthur's extra-martial links with a lady called Mrs. Erlynne, Margaret gets shocked and is not ready to believe:

LADY WINDERMERE. My husband - what has he got to do with any woman of that kind?"(Act I-146)

But somehow the female psyche comes into limelight as Duchess of Berwick discusses the whole matter with Lady Windermere. As Margaret is not ready to believe the truth about her husband's extra-martial affair, Duchess of Berwick shares the male psyche and attitude with Margaret and this discussion being from a female perspective actually highlights the female psyche.

No doubt a woman loves and adores a man but somewhere, she is quite acquainted with male psyche also. Men are flippant; they love and enjoy beauty and charm. Thus just to secure their own selves, women sometimes had to pretend as is quite evident in the following statement:

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. I assure you, my dear, that on several occasions after I was first married I had to pretend to be very ill, and obliged to drink the most unpleasant mineral waters, merely to get Berwick out of town. He was so extremely susceptible (Act I-147) Actually Margaret is not ready to accept the infidelity of her husband, but Duchess of Berwick assures her that all men are bad without exception:

DUCHESS OF BERWICK..... Men become old, but they never become good. (Act I-148) and further strengthening her point she quotes her own experience:

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. It was only Berwick's brutal and incessant threats of suicide that made me accept him at all, and before the year was out he was running after all kinds of petticoats, every colour, every shape, every material. In fact, before the honeymoon was over, I caught him winking at my maid, a most pretty, respectable girl. (Act 1-148)

Thus we find that the initial loving advances bind the two human beings into a relationship forever as Fitzgerald writes, "All life is just a progression toward, and then a recession from, one phrase... 'I love you'.⁴

Thus the remarks by Duchess somehow add fuel to the fire of suspicion that is there in a human heart and this leads Margaret to tear open her husband's bank book and thus she discovers the truth about her husband.

Thus in this relationship, which is based on love and affection, we observe Margaret's assertion of her right as a wife and as an individual when she discovers her husband's truth. Lord Windermere also exerts his authority:

LORD WINDERMERE..... You have no right to do such a thing! (Act1-I51) And further,

LORD WINDERMERE. I think it wrong that a wife should spy on her husband. (Act 1-151)

Mrs. Erlynne actually is none other than Margaret's own mother who became an outcast due to the blunder that she committed in her youth by running away with her lover and she is assumed to be dead by Margaret. Lord Windermere knows this truth and is thus trying his level best to bring Mrs. Erlynne back to society but he doesn't want Margaret to be a party to this fact. Thus Lord Windermere is quite helpless. However as Lady Windermere is quite innocent about the true state of affairs, she really feels hurt and is not able to reconcile with the circumstances:

LADY WINDERMERE.... But what I do mind is that you who have loved me, you who have taught me to love you, should pass from the love that is given to the love that is bought. Oh, it's horrible! And it is I who feel degraded.... I feel stained, utterly stained.... (Act I-151)

Arthur tries his level best to pacify her but in vain. Margaret feels enraged that she is not ready to listen to any of her husband's explanations. Thus we find Margaret to be a dominating and assertive character whereas Lord Windermere appears as a pathetic figure in this relationship:

LORD WINDERMERE, Margaret, none of us men may be good enough for the women we marry- that is quite true but you don't imagine I would ever- oh, the suggestion is monstrous! (Act I-154)

But Margaret's response depicts her frustration:

LADY WINDERMERE, Why should you be different from other men ? I am told that there is hardly a husband in London who does not waste his life over some shameful passion. (Act I-154,155)

However, the utter helplessness of Arthur comes into limelight at the end of Act I:

LORD WINDERMERE, Margaret! Margaret! My God! What shall I do! I dare not tell her who this woman really is. The shame would kill her.(Act I-157)

However, the climax of the relationship comes when Mrs. Erlynne actually comes to Lady Windermere's birthday party. Notwithstanding the over intimacy between Mrs. Erlynne and her husband, Lady Windermere leaves her home to accept Lord Darlington's love, leaving a letter for Arthur behind.

However she does all this on the spur of the moment and in a fit of rage and in fact the realisation starts dawning upon her the moment she enters Lord Darlington's home as is quite evident from her self-dialogue:

LADY WINDERMERE. Oh! it was mad of me to come here, horribly mad..... I must go back – no; I can't go back, my letter has put me in their power – Arthur would not take me back! That fatal letter! No!It has been madness my coming... (Act III-182)

Thus we find a great flux of feelings and emotions going on in Margaret's mind. Her life at this critical juncture is just like a ship without a rudder. She does not know what to do, where to go. Her speculations and self-introspection is a testimony to this fact:

LADY WINDERMERE.....And yet which is the worst, I wonder, to be at the mercy of a man who loves one, or the wife of a man who in one's own house dishonours one?... (Act M-182)

However, at this critical juncture, it is the Mrs. Erlynne only (Margaret's mother) - the apple of discord, who comes to her rescue and through best of her explanations and judgements finally succeeds in sending Margaret back to her husband and in fact in the very process takes the whole blame upon herself and degrades herself in the eyes of her son-in-law.

Thus Margaret is restored to her husband and home- life finally and the husband never discovers the truth. Thus we find that as is generally assumed, a husband-wife relationship is really a very delicate one. Though it is quite evident that both are committed to each other, yet both are bound and restricted in their relationship in their own individual ways. Arthur could never disclose Mrs. Erlynne's identity to his wife. Similarly though initially we find Margaret asserting her individuality and her right of being a wife, yet after that horribly gesture (of leaving her home) on her part, she becomes quite helpless. Thus as is generally the case, this husband wife relationship is also being lived in appropriations. Lady Windermere, of course wants to disclose the truth to her husband but she knows it very well that it is not possible at all. Relations have got their own limits and demarcations which cannot be and should not be overstepped:

LADY WINDERMERE..... Actions are the first tragedy in life, words are the second. Words are perhaps the worst. Words are merciless (Act IV-200)

Thus we find Margaret to be speechless as she cannot admit the truth to her husband. This is a patriarchal world in which as Kamala Das writes in My Story, "Women are relegated to the margins while men occupied the central positions. The justification for this power-imbalance was sought in religion and anatomy."⁵ Thus according to Genesis, when God brought a female to Adam, he burst into a formal voice:

This is now bone of my bones,
And flesh of my flesh:
She shall be called woman
Because she was taken out of man
-Genesis⁶

Arthur apparently, though not actually, did something terrible by publicly developing a relationship with Mrs. Erlynne and by inviting her at his place on the eve of Margaret's birthday party, yet he is acceptable to Margaret and is rather loved and revered. But being a woman, Margaret has no right to declare the truth to her husband. Though she did nothing terrible but only dared to desert her husband, nurturing Lord Darlington's thought in her mind and in fact was restored to her husband before it was too late, yet they will live their life ever after with this truth concealed. Thus there are limits to a female existence in this world. The guilt by a woman, even at the level of thoughts is not permissible. She is supposed to observe certain codes of ethics and morality and no women in the world can defy them.

However as a deep penetration into the concept of Morality, we can consider Lawrence's conception of it as he says in his essay, 'Morality and the Novel: "The only morality is to have man true to his manhood, woman to womanhood, and let the relationship form itself, in all honour."⁷ But things of this sort perhaps do not exist in reality and thus howsoever loving the relationship may be and howsoever adjusting the husband may be, a wife can never disclose certain facts, certain truths about her life because being a female, she is not supposed to do so. A woman always lives her life in margins. She is the other. Her existence is there only for her counterpart. She must live her life in the shade of her husband. She is not supposed to have any will of her own. She must dance like a puppet to the tune of her husband. Thus we find that in this apparent loving and cordial relationship, there are many pretensions. The relationship will never be lived in its fullest. Thus there remain certain contradictions which never get resolved in human life as life has no easy answers to offer to all its complexities and entanglements. And as literature is the mirror of life, 'A successful work according to Theodor W. Adorno, 'is not one which resolves contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure."⁸

In this patriarchal world, men have their own dimensions and thought processes. Arthur was all full of pity, help and respect for his mother-in-law but the moment he discovers the truth about Mrs. Erlynne (i.e. her being found in Lord Darlington's room), his very attitude towards Mrs. Erlynne changes:

LORD WINDERMERE. Margaret, I thought Mrs. Erlynne was a woman more sinned against than sinning, as the phrase goes. I thought she wanted to be good, to get back into the place that she had lost by a moment's folly, to lead again a decent life. I believed what she told me - I was mistaken in her. She is bad - as bad as a woman can be. (Act IV-214)

Thus the very man who was earlier trying his level best to bring Mrs. Erlynne back to society now looks upon her with degradation:

LORD WINDERMERE. You came, and within an hour of your leaving the house, you are found in a man's rooms - you are disgraced before everyone (Act I-206)

And further,

LORD WINDERMERE. Therefore I have a right to look upon you as what you are a worthless, vicious woman. I have the right to tell you never to enter this house, never to attempt to come near my wife- (Act IV-206)

Thus Arthur never realises that because of this lady only i.e. his mother-in-law, that he is having a safe family life. Without realising this fact, he nurtures all the evil thoughts about this lady in his mind.

Thus again, we observe the helplessness of a female, a mother. She cannot dare to open her mouth to declare the truth and thus happily accepts the blames thrown upon her despite the fact that they never belong:

LORD WINDERMERE..... A mother's love means devotion, unselfishness, sacrifice. What could you know of such things? and very pathetically, Mrs. Erlynne- an apostle of all these virtues, accepts all this:

MRS ERLYNNE. You are right. What could I know of such things?..(Act IV -210)

Thus we find that though men and women live their lives together in the same world, yet they are never together at the level of thoughts. Women have their own world and their whole life is an attempt to be a fit into the men's world i.e. to be a better acceptable part. Women are silenced by circumstances. They are not supposed ever to give voice to the truths that are not acceptable in the men's world. Thus we find Mrs. Erlynne, as a mother, giving advice to her daughter:

MRS ERLYNNE. Then pay your debt by silence. That is the only way in which it can be paid.....Promise me that what passed last night will remain as secret between us... Love is easily killed. Oh, how easily love is killed! Pledge me your word Lady Windermere that you will never tell him.... (Act IV-212,213)

Though finally as the things settle between Lord Augustus and Mrs. Erlynne and they plan to marry, the conception of Arthur and Margaret assumes a new and a final form for ever as on being told by Lord Augustus about his marriage with Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Windermere comes with a spontaneous response:

LORD WINDERMERE. Well, you are certainly marrying a very clever woman. (Act I-216)

Whereas,

LADY WINDERMERE. Ah ! you're marrying a very good woman. (Act IV-216)

Thus the varied relationships depict the intricacies of a woman's existence in a male - dominated world.

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