



Violation of the Stereotype of Archetypal Victorian Women in Anthony Trollope's "Malachi's Cove"

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ABSTRACT:

The present research paper makes a modest attempt to explore and contradict the issues of gender and society prevalent during the Victorian era represented in the short story "Malachi's Cove" by Anthony Trollope. A woman during this era was expected to be trained in the domestic sphere to build the family and nurture her husband and children. Trollope breaks this notion through the portrayal of his character Mally Trenglos. Trollope the reformer and the reformation of his female character in relation to gender, social class and genre are the intertwined subjects of this research article. It focuses on the gender and the portrayal of the female protagonist as it emerges in the short story. It also gives a clear picture about the stereotypical Victorian women and how Trollope has violated this notion through his short story.

Key words: Victorian women, gender, society, stereotype

Connell defines Gender as: "the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes (11)". Further the Australian sociologist adds: "gender concerns the way human society deals with human bodies and their continuity, and the many consequences of that 'dealing' in our personal lives and our collective fate (11)". Regarding gender, Simone de Beauvoir said: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman". This view proposes that the term "gender" must be used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity and not to the state of being man or woman in its entirety.

Judith Butler claims that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts (519)." According to Judith Butler gender behaviour is a performance. In general gender is a biological factor that distinguishes between man and woman, but the world does not see it that way. It is a universally predominant factor that men are superior and women are inferior, the Victorian era was not an exception to this ideology.

Victorian era was not characterised by equality between man and woman, but by the apparent difference between them. The Victorian men wanted women to possess lady-like feminine qualities as well as innocence;

otherwise, they would not be of marriage potential. This expectation which men had for women resulted in women preparing for marriage and it gave women no freedom. The desires of the Victorian men pressurised women to be the ideal Victorian women that society wanted them to be.

If a woman did not meet the expectations of the Victorian male, she would end up spouseless. Richard D. Altick, a critic, has stated that “a woman was inferior to a man in all ways except the unique one that counted most her femininity. Woman’s place was inside the home. This was on an absolute pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs (54)”.

The patriarchal society of the Victorian period did not permit women to behave and do similar activities as men. Accordingly, women were given no more than the feminine duties of caring for the home and pursuing the outlets of feminine creativity. The patriarchy system was the norm and women usually led a more secluded, private life. Men, on the other hand, possessed all kinds of freedom. The man was naturally the head of the family and the guardian of his family members. He was the protector and the lord. He was strong, brave and hard-working. In his article, “Victorian Women Expected to Be Idle and Ignorant”, the critic Petrie has argued: “From babyhood all girls who were born above the level of poverty had the dream of a flourishing marriage before their eyes, for by that alone was it possible for a woman to rise in the world (180)”.

He further goes on to explain what a Victorian man was looking for in a woman:

“Innocence was what he demanded from the girls of his class. They must not only be innocent but also give the outward impression of being innocent. The White muslin that was typical of virginal purity, clothes many a heroine, with slight shades of blue and pink next in popularity. The masculine approval stamp was placed upon ignorance of the world, humbleness, lack of opinions, general defencelessness and weakness. Inshort, there was recognition of female inferiority to the male (184)”.

Anthony Trollope wrote convincing novels on political, social, gender issues, and other topical matters. His life as well as his works showed great psychological penetration and depth. One of his greatest strengths was a steady, consistent vision of the social structures of Victorian England, which he re-created in his books with unusual solidity. Trollope said:

“I have always desired to “hew out some lump of the earth,” and to make men and women walk upon it just as they do walk here among us,--with not more of excellence, nor with exaggerated baseness,--so that my readers might recognise human beings like to themselves, and not feel themselves to be carried away among gods or demons (96).”

A number of Trollope's novels and short stories deal with independent women and their relationships. During the Victorian era being independent was not a common trait for a woman and to lead a respectable life in the society. By tracing Trollope's women through his career, the reader can clearly see the changing attitudes of their creator. Not only does he portray women as powerful and liberated thus breaking the conventional norms but also deepens their psychological development.

Trollope's "Malachi's Cove" contradicts the values and expectations of people during the Victorian times as represented by or seen through his characters. Men were typically portrayed as logical, physically and mentally strong with their natural place being in the workforce and the outdoors. Women, on the other hand, were portrayed as emotional, physically and mentally weak with their natural place being the domestic setting the home provides.

These stereotypes are rigid in the genre of a love story, and it is certainly not typical for a man to be in any way weaker than a woman. Taking this into consideration, "Malachi's Cove" is a very unusual love story. The most extreme case of natural enemies, fall in love in this remarkable story. The setting is the turbulent coast of northern Cornwall, and the heroine is the least 'feminine' of Trollope's creations. Mally Trenglos supports herself and her grand-father by collecting seaweed and selling it to the farmers as fertilizers. Trollope subtly links Mally to her wild setting and compares her unkempt and dishevelled looks to the waves which simultaneously threaten and endow the Cornish landscape. When a neighbouring farmer's son decides to come to the cove and acquire the seaweed Mally resents the intrusion; but her hatred for Barty Gunliffe turns to love when she becomes the source of rescuing him from the treacherous rocks by dragging him out of the dangerous big hole into which he had fallen.

In "Malachi's Cove" Trollope, celebrates femininity in an unusual way by introducing Mally as an uncivilised, barbarous and ill-natured vixen who would no way be controlled nor civilised, but towards the end the author tricks his readers by providing a twist to the plot wherein she marries Barty, a suitable groom which is associated with one of the major characteristics of the Victorian era thus concluding the story with a happy end.

The lead character, Mally Trenglos, is a complex, animated character, while retaining the basic stereotype Trollope does defy a number of other constraints laid during the Victorian times. The first direct encounter the reader has with Mally, paints an awful image, although the basic principle of a pure woman is invested within her character, much of this encounter shows how Mally does not fit into the expectations of the Victorian society. She is portrayed as a "wild looking, almost unearthly creature, with wild-flowing, black, uncombed hair, small in stature with small hands and bright black eyes but people said that she was very strong, and the children around declared that she worked day and night and knew nothing of fatigue (Malachi's Cove 2)", an image that does not conform at all to the stereotype of a proper Victorian woman.

Mally's dressing sense was appalling. She wore a thick red serge petticoat and a brown serge jacket, with no sense of fashion or variation. Mally's clothes were suited for her work in the treacherous conditions. She did not care about her looks and even refused to go to church well dressed. She was short tempered, ill-natured and never had a good word for anyone. She led a secluded life without any friends. Mally stood in par with Barty's strength

and masculinity when it came to work, she never gave up because she was a woman. “Barry was meditating how he might best accomplish his purpose of working beyond the reach of Mally’s feminine powers, and Mally was resolving that wherever Barry went she would go farther (Malachi’s Cove 9)”.

In the Victorian era, women were seen, as belonging to the familial sphere, and this stereotype required them to provide their husbands with a clean home, to provide food on the table and to raise their children. The ideal Victorian woman was pure, chaste, refined, cultured and modest. This ideal was supported by propriety, etiquette and good manners. Middle-class women's hobbies included in traditional pastimes such as reading, embroidery, music, and traditional handicrafts. It was believed that physical activity was dangerous and inappropriate for women. Girls were taught to reserve their delicate health for the purpose of bringing forth healthy children. The women of the Victorian society had one main role in life. This role was to marry and take part in their husbands’ business and interests. Before marriage, they were learning housewife skills like weaving, cooking, washing, and cleaning, unless they were from a wealthy family.

Trollope violates all these traits through his protagonist Mally, She does not possess any of the benevolent qualities expected of a Victorian woman, yet Trollope has succeeded in creating the perfect independent woman: liberated, strong-minded, intelligent who made choices as to how she would spend her life. She may have been inappropriately dressed, but the ridiculous convention of judging women solely through their appearance certainly does not prove true in Mally’s case. In spite of all the draw backs there is some goodness in her which cannot be denied. She looked after her old grandfather and is contented with her life.

Trollope has, however, attempted to give an explanation for Mally’s general behaviour, and lack of conformity. The justification is that Mally has been isolated from society, both by her social status as a member of the working class, and her physical location, being situated well away from civilisation. It can also be understood that the lack of a sufficient role model has contributed to Mally’s lack of concern for Victorian conventions, having no mother, or proper father figure, just her grandfather, who, whilst having good morals, failed to teach her the intricate workings of Victorian society. Thus, Mally has been brought up lacking the basic skills needed to produce someone knowledgeable in the way one must operate.

Trouble came to Mally’s grim hardworking existence in the form of competition. Her malice was directed towards Barty when he came to the cove to collect sea-weed, she abuses him verbally and tries all possible means to stop him from coming there “That he may be drowned then!” said Mally, in her anger. ‘If he was in the big hole there among the rocks, and the sea running in at half-tide, I wouldn’t lift a hand to help him out (Malachi’s Cove 8).”

As a single woman she is not afraid of the threat but fights single -handedly with all her might. Mally uses the law to get her own way with the Gunliffes but to no avail. Trollope describes Barty as a handsome young bachelor, “Barry Gunliffe was well thought of among the girls around. Everybody liked Barty,—excepting only Mally Trenglos, and she hated him like poison (Malachi’s Cove 6)”. Here the author makes it very clear that she does not

intend to marry Barty, otherwise she would have been nice to him. Unlike the Victorian women her standard of life is totally different where there is no room for marriage and children.

Trollope does not sentimentalize her or ennoble her. She is a survivor and as such does what she believes necessary to ensure that survival. Her life is not a performance for the benefit of others; she reacts to any situation according to the way she perceives it. Initially she curses Barty that he should die, but when he is in trouble struggling for his life she helps him risking her own life. “Had he been her brother, her lover, her father she could not have clung to him with more of the energy of despair (Malachi’s Cove 12).” Mally experiences a transformation as she sits with the unconscious Barty after he nearly drowned. She was so focused on despising him that she battled with her own internal feelings in order to change her mind.

Old Glos, her grandfather warns her that the Gunliffe’s might suspect her of murder, which turns out to be true. After rescuing Barty she decides that she must go to the farmhouse and get the help of Mr and Mrs Gunliffe. Mally is in awe of farmhouse with its elegance and comfort as she has been used to a draughty and shabby hovel, not a brick built warm house.

As soon as she informs the Gunliffe’s, as per her grand-fathers predictions she is suspected of murder but that does not bother her, she did what she felt right according to the guidance of her own consciousness. “They might drag her and her grandfather to Camelford gaol, and then to Bodmin, and the gallows; but they could not take from her the conscious feeling that was her own. She had done her best to save him,—her very best. And she had saved him! (Malachi’s Cove 16)”

Reassuringly, in Anthony Trollope's short stories, virtue is rewarded. As soon as Barty regained consciousness, the first word he spoke was ‘Mally’. Then farmer Gunliffe realized he had wronged Mally; in truth the man knew that she had saved his boy's life, and that he had chastised her instead of thanking her. He held her hand as though she were his child. The forlorn and lonely waif had finally found love. “Old Glos was brought up to the top of the cliff, and lived his few remaining days under the roof of Mr Gunliffes house; and as for the cove and the right of seaweed, from that time forth all that has been supposed to attach itself to Gunliffe’s farm, and I do not know that any of the neighbours are prepared to dispute the right (Malachi’s Cove 21)”. What an amazing way to end this story.

Mally Trenglos, is a vibrant example of a combination of defiance and conformity in relation to gender stereotypes and genre conventions in the story of “Malachi’s Cove”. The first character encountered by the reader is Malachi Trenglos who is known in the locality as ‘Old Glos’, a poor crippled old man who is the soul guardian of Mally, his granddaughter. It is through him that the character of Mally is introduced indirectly. And even before the reader is directly introduced to Mally, the very way in which she is referred to shows typical elements of the constraints of genre, as well as gender stereotypes. The reference to Malachi’s habitation being wisely built not upon the foundation of sand, but upon the foundation of rock ; could be quoted as a metaphor which proves the strong character of Mally without the external influence of the Victorian society.

Trollope violates the conventional norms of the Victorian society by providing a very suitable and handsome bachelor, Barty as a husband for Mally who barely possessed the traits of a Victorian woman. Through this story he contradicts the image of an archetypal Victorian woman with that of an uncivilised woman who lacks femininity yet strives in life. Being an unconventional working-class woman excluded from the rest of society, it is of course predictable that Mally will have a bleak future, however, a glimmer of hope for the ‘taming’ of this wild woman is seen in the character of Barty Gunliffe.

Barty is a more conventional male character, constructed in a stereotypical way who reflects the constraints of the love story genre. Mally, although being represented as a young woman who defies the stereotypes of her gender in Victorian times, is ultimately unable to avoid conforming to the basics of these gender stereotypes. She is free and wild spirited and submits to Barty according to her own will. She chooses to be his bride according to the stereotype of the Victorian era, mainly due to the genre of the story needing such an ending in order to fit with its conventions. A different ending would have been too controversial for the time period in which it was written. From this we can also draw the conclusion that it was Mally who rescued Barty literally from the merciless grasp of the waves by which he was almost overpowered likewise it was Barty who rescued Mally more figuratively from the ruthless grip of being an unconventional working class woman who would have had no other option but to live her life as an outsider from the society. Hence the act of kindness is mutual; wherein the author has derived the conclusion by bringing forth equality between them both without any gender bias.

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