



Feminine Sensibility In Austin Clarke's 'The Polished Hoe'.

Dr. Gollapalli Shalom, Assistant Professor, AU College of Engineering for Women, Visakhapatnam

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the discrimination and the internal struggle faced by exploited women, focusing on their story from their own words.

Keywords: Feminism, sensibility, rebellion, respect, champion.

INTRODUCTION

Austin Clarke, an award winning author voiced the discrimination against immigrant Blacks in Canada. His work talks about alienation, racial victimisation in the postcolonial period, confrontation of two different cultures and its effects on the female characters. His award winning work 'The Polished Hoe' depicts the suffering of a young Caribbean woman, like many of his works. Austin Clark is an advocate of the suffering immigrant, a champion of the underdog and the defender of the victimized woman. This paper seeks to focus on the feminine sensibility in Austin Clarke's 'The Polished Hoe', the novel that got him the Scotiabank Giller Prize in 2002, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Canada and the Caribbean in 2003 and Trillium Book Award, also in 2003.

Literature and society are intertwined. They mirror each other. Each is a cause and result of one another. Some of the best works of literature have been influenced by it while some are the result of the course of life excellently penned. The faculty of letters has become a source to channelize and weaponize the sufferings of the underdog. He has found a release in speaking, singing and writing about his plight, which has, in course of time, compelled the kinder souls of the society to respond with sympathy, bring about changes and to contribute to a constructive society. Without literature, the plight would have been a dry detail devoid of the power to stir the human emotion and bring to light the finer aspects of the human soul. The female has been one such underdog who has found solace in the tender embrace of literature. She seeks an escape from her truth, her whole truth and nothing but her truth. Her dreams, however colourful and boisterous they may be, immediately die at the feet of her truth. Her truth is harsh, cold and dead. She, despite the obstacles, responds to the world and the world responds to her. More so the Black woman, who faces two fold discrimination - for being Black and for being a woman.

Barbados is a small island country in the Caribbean. The Barbadian society first saw the English settlers in 1627 when forty English men arrived to cultivate tobacco. With them came their black slaves. Slowly the social hierarchy placed the Whites at the top while the Blacks were the last ones in the pecking order. Needless to say, the Whites controlled the money and the sources of making money. The majority of the Blacks are forced to feed from hand to mouth and their only source of income is manual labour and

menial jobs which is barely enough to keep the body and soul together. Seeking work and a better life elsewhere was the only option. The black immigrants saw Canada as a better source of income and a comfortable life to overcome the substantial unemployment and depressing living conditions. F. A. Hoyos in *Barbados* points out that the immigrants send money back to their relatives or their family left in Barbados, enabling them to improve their living circumstances, to educate the children and if possible, to purchase lands.

However there is a price to pay. The immigrants paid their dues not only with the sweat of their brow but also as Clarke voices in his novels, with the consequential mental degradation, silently enduring the exploitation and cruelty meted out to them and with the Domestic Scheme of 1955, the immigrant black women paid the price with destruction of her self - both her body and her psyche. She is not a woman, not a human being in the first place. She is a thing, a tool, a prey, a creature and just a game.

Feminism as commonly perceived advocates for equality of the sexes and for women's social, economic and political rights. Feminine sensibility speaks about how women are influenced and impacted by the society they live in and in general by the world around them. The purpose of the movement was aimed to provide an amicable environment for woman so that they are able to realize their full potential without discrimination.

THE WORLD OF MARY-MATHILDA: HER CAPTURE AND RELEASE

Mary-Matilda, in *The Polished Hoe: A Slave's Revenge* presents a woman whose entire existence has been a series of abuse, dehumanisation and objectification. She has been able to liberate herself only through murdering her abuser. The novel is set in the agro-based economy of the British Empire, in the island of Barbados, a.k.a Bimshire and the village Flagstaff and in a timeline between World War-II and 1966, when the Caribbean declared independence.

The plot revolves around a woman named Mary Matilda's murder confession at the local police station. The confession begins at evening, continues into the night and concludes in the morning, signifying the protagonist leaving her dark past behind her and entering into new beginnings and new life, reminding us of the Sanskrit sloka 'Tamasoma Jyothirgamaya', which translates : lead me to light from darkness.

Mary Matilda has murdered Darnley Bellfeels, the plantation manager of the fields her family worked in. The plantation manager, Mr. Bellfeels, is a rich and powerful man is violent towards his workers. Mr. Bellfeels has singled her out and ear marked her to be his mistress since she was a young girl and exempts her from manual labour on the plantation. Their first encounter occurs at a very young age. Mary describes how she was objectified.

Mr. Bellfeels put his riding- crop under my chin, and raise my face to meet his face, using the riding crop; and when his eyes and my eyes made four, he passed the riding- crop down my neck, right down the front of my dress, until it reach my waist. And then he moved the riding- crop right back up again, as if he was drawing something on my body. (11)

She continues to narrate how she was horrified to see her own mother's inability to protect her daughter.

“and Ma, standing- up beside me, with her two eyes looking down at the loose marl in the Church Yard... looking at the ground... Not on me, her own daughter”
(11)

She was subjected to continuous physical, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse at the hands of the plantation manager, Mr. Bellfeels, who turns out, to the absolute horror of the readers, is her biological father. She is acutely aware of the lustful gazes of Mr. Bellfeels and that she is a thing to be used, “young, sweet delicious piece of veal, to feast on, at [his] heart’s delight” (59) and not a human. Mary’s son, Wilberforce, who as luck or Karma would have it, was the only son of Mr. Bellfeels, and was given birth at the age of nineteen, after Mary’s mother and grandmother had induced two abortions with herbs. Mary and her family is housed by Mr. Bellfeels, at the outskirts of the plantation, while he resides with his legal wife and their two daughters. Paradoxically, subjugated as she was, she was financially provided for by her abuser.

Mary’s murder confession to Sergeant Percy Da Costa Benjamin Stuart, or Sarge, is her life story. It is an inside version of her life, her suffering, how she came to terms with abuse and how she overcame her torment. She bravely insists she has to have ‘something to leave behind’ and she leaves the legacy of owning the power to repair her battered vital force.

I still have to tell the story.... I still have to leave the history for Wilberforce, and one to be left back to the people of this village, and people coming after me so they would know what happened. And I still have to save my soul.... A legacy of words behind me so people will know. Not that it was wrong. Or was right. I don’t want people to see my act in such a simple way. In such black-and-whiteness. But if I don’t leave something behind, anybody, anytime... will know only what happened from word of mouth, and from the Bimshire Daily Herald; and the words from the lips of Village gossip. There won’t be anybody to tell the pure history of my act. (100-1)

In her narrative, we sense that she seeks acceptance and approval from other islanders. She asks Sarge “How do you really see me?”(238) to which he replies:

I see you as the lady-of-the-house. As a person close to Mr. Bellfeels. As a woman of this n’ighbourhood. People in this n’ighbourhood feel you is the best person living on the plantation. Only today well- yes A lil earlier this evening. I happen to be exchanging few thoughts with many at the Harlem Bar & Grill, over a snap. (238)

The first step Mary takes to overcome her subjugation was to own her physical self, take back the ownership of her colonised body, conduct her own actions after her mother, Ma, who was also abused and exploited souted her away at a tender age of fourteen or fifteen. She willingly traded her body, in Ma’s words an “even exchange” (428) for daily survival, for a piece of land and for a social and financial security, focusing on her pragmatic approach to her suffering. She recounts:

“I wasn’t so young not to also know that the man (abusing) me by force was a man of means, and privilege, able to put me in a category which not one of the boys I grew up with, and who, later on as men, were after me, could” (67).

In her mind she is the decision maker, the master of her destiny, the provider and the protector. Mary is not the traditional picture of the surreal heavenly woman, a damsel in distress, a Princess, a demure, petite and doe-eyed lady, the white feathered bird with a twig in her beak or other similar attributes.

Mary was not alone in her suffering. She represents all victims of Bimshire - the victims in the tunnel, the victims in the plantations, the victims who worked as kitchen help to name a few. Her suffering is not only her own but also an precise representation of all the victims like her. Her journey to emancipation reaches a new height when she states that one of the reason for her murder is that she wants to avenge the crimes committed in the tunnel.

Mary says “I can tell you the things that take place in this underground dungeon. Ma used to narrate me about when even more stranger things took place on this plantation. “always blood being shed and blood flowing. Ma says one time, when the worker rebel and asked for a couple – more pennies-a – week, in wages, the plantation pick out who they thought the ring leaders were, namely Golbourne father, pounce father, Manny grandfather. brought three of them down here in this tunnel”. (339)

The reasonable explanation for the atrocity committed without a second thought, in the words of Gertrude, Mary’s servant are:

“If you’re white,” Gertrude said “you’re right. “If you’re brown, you can stick around. If you black, you gotta stay a waaaaay back” “where you here that?” (331)

She wants to stand up for all the lives lost for petty reasons, for seeking justice and for speaking the truth, which, in a post-colonial, poverty stricken Barbados spelled out death. Mary’s tolerance hits a breaking point when she has learned a dark secret from her mother, that she herself is the daughter of Mr. Bellfeels. The islanders are aware of this fact but were silenced due their fear of Mr Bellfeels who had the power to hurt, maim or kill anyone and not suffer the consequences. Mary snaps when she learns of the truth, polishes her hoe she used as manual labour in the plantations as a child of not yet eight, kills Mr Bellfeels by hitting on the head and by maiming his privates. She has lived and endured his abuse for thirty eight years. She could not endure the suffocation anymore. She ends it.

... I went back to a hoe, I had-first-used when I was a girl, working in the cane fields, not quite eight years of age. The same hoe weeding young canes, sweet potato slips, ‘eight-week’ yams, eddoes, all those ground provisions. This hoe that I used all those years, in the North Field, is the same hoe I used this Sunday night. (6)

Sarge notes that Mary is not a murderer but a victim and a sacrifice. The fact that her own father kept her as a mistress was too much for Sarge. In appealing to the kindness, sense of justice and humanity in the Sarge, Mary and other victims seek the same from the entirety of humanity.

All I ask you, Sargeant, when people including the Commissioner of Police, ask you to repeat what my evidence is, tell him what you know about me. Just as I am. Without one plea. You would know what to leave in and what to leave out. Let your conscience be your guide. Tell him about me, not out of malice, but as a woman who did what she do, did, to save her soul. (450)

Mary was not alone in her disgust of Bellfeels. He is a merciless arrogant oppressor and is the most hated person on the island.

Mary notes : Who in the village did not know, and wish for, and hope that ‘the son of-a- bitch who inhabits the Main House, don’t deserve his throat slit; and the sooner, be- Christ, the better? And who would raise a hand of censure, or answer a call from the Plantation or the Solicitor General, to take the oath and give evidence against Miss Mary- Mathilda. (395)

Having ended the colonizer with the hoe, a colonial object, Mary is akin to the oriental knight, who singlehandedly slays the oppressive dragon and frees the people. Mary emerges as her own defender, a champion, a powerful rebel and a radical feminist.

Bibliography

Hoyos, F.A. Barbados. London : Macmillan Caribbean, 1978. Print.

The Polished Hoe. West Indies : Harper and Collins, 2003. Print.

