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“Drapes” and “new dress”: A Feminist Analysis of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*

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Neither Melanie Hamilton Wilkes nor Scarlett O’Hara is born a woman but become so due to the social constructs around them. However, Scarlett is the rebel who emerges above the womanhood she was born into. Set in the backdrop of the American Civil War, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* invites a feminist analysis for its delineation of the paradoxical women characters like Melanie Hamilton Wilkes, the traditional Southern lady and Scarlett O’Hara, the belle-gone-bad.

If one portrays the Damsel in Distress, the other is the femme fatalè. Scarlett represents the new woman who knows how to survive as the fittest creature in this world like a Darwinian human. Melanie and even Scarlett’s mother are the misfit ones due to their psycho-physical frailty and superficial femininity. The society for which they offer their frailty and weakness fails to save them from death and destruction. The ultimate death of these ladies symbolise the downfall of the conventional womanhood and gives space for the rise of the strong, independent woman that Scarlett is.

Melanie is portrayed as innocent, affectionate and submissive. She "Spoke kind and flattering words from a desire to make people happy" as Mitchell puts it (Faust, 10). She is too naive to fathom the evil around her like Jane Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*. Melanie’s character, however makes the readers uncomfortable especially when she eagerly forgives Scarlett’s affair with Ashley. As the foil to Scarlett, she is criticised for being an escapist who fears any disapproval from her Society as a woman (Clark, 133). Scarlett is the belle-gone-bad whom

Mitchell describes in a letter as, "My central woman character does everything that a lady of the old south should not do." (Faust 8-10)

Scarlett's unconventionality results from the values she inherits from her father, the haughty Gerald O' Hara. Her possessiveness about the land - Tara is seemingly masculine. This is a rejection of the patrilineal regulations on inheritance. Also, she destabilises the gender norm of acting weak to attract men by such unnatural and wants freedom from such superficial adherences (Fox- Genovese 395). Being spontaneous is more important to her and she would not eat beforehand to fake a small appetite to attract a husband.

As an empirical woman she experiments with the feminine mannerisms of a Southern Lady so far they suit her advantages. She is "fully aware of her sexuality and violates her culture's code of moral purity by openly relying on her sexuality to achieve some sense of power." (Manning 174) She is the dominant personality in the man-woman relationship unlike Melanie's submission.

Scarlett's physical vitality is reminiscent of Athena- like embodiment, protector of land, goddess of war and practical reason, in Greek and Roman mythologies. She attacks Ashley for hurting her ego by marrying Melanie and kills a Yankee to protect her family and land. She deconstructs the institution of marriage by trying to attract Ashley, a married man and going on to marry men for financial or vengeful reasons. Also, she destabilises the filial norms by snatching away her sister's beau, Frank Kennedy.

The rights on parental property is yet another aspect of which Scarlett is fully aware of. She owns the land of Tara and proves to be productive enough like any man of the house. She is the landlady who reminds us of Thomas Hardy's Bathsheba Everdene of *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Melanie, on the contrary adheres to marriage and motherhood at the cost of her life. Her death in childbirth is ironical in the sense that she does not survive to play the role of mother, for which she stakes her life. Rather, Scarlett survives as a mother of her own and Melanie's kids. Also, Mitchell ensures that Melanie is not celebrated as martyr but is only sympathised for her weakness and frailty which even men like Rhett was to admit.

Scarlett's position is acknowledged and welcomed in the post-war era even by conventional characters like Melanie. She trusts Scarlett more than her husband Ashley in terms of practical ability, proving Scarlett's Athena-like persona.

Therefore, Scarlett O'Hara is the unconventional but the fittest of all women in *Gone with the Wind*. She is the protector of her land, Tara when everything else is destroyed in the Yankee – lead civil war and manages economy even during national crisis. She transcends the conventional women like Melanie and her own mother who depended on the shallow societal norms for survival. So, she emerges as the Darwinian and Machiavellian character, the *femme fatale* and survives with dignity till the end, reminding us of Simone de Beauvoir's statement, "one is not born, but rather becomes, [a] woman" (p. 283).

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