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GENDER EQUATION IN WILKIE COLLINS' *'The Woman in White'*

- Dr Pranjali Kane

Abstract

The 19th century ushered in major societal changes in England. The gender equation tilted in favour of the weaker sex to a more or less positive degree. Literature also played a pivotal role in changing the mindset of people albeit to a smaller degree. The Gothic novel of Wilkie Collins 'The Woman in White' is a classic example of this. This paper explores the various gender equations that Collins presents in front of the readers. This novel definitely takes the 19th century towards woman empowerment.

Keywords: Gender, strength, characterisation, detective genre, feminine, masculine

Wilkie Collins, one of the pioneers of the Detective genre, during the middle of the 19th Century, is known for his two great Classics: 'The Moonstone' and 'The Woman in White' (1859). Popularly known as the 'sensation fiction', the books had instantly gained fame and laurels for the writer. 'The Woman in White' was first serialised in Charles Dickens's journal 'All the year round' from Nov 1859.

The story of 'The Woman in White' begins with the chance encounter of the protagonist, Walter Hartright and Anne Catherick, and the subsequent employment of Walter in the house of the Fairlies as a drawing teacher. The story takes a pleasant turn when

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Walter falls in love with one of the two students that he teaches, Laura Fairlie. Unfortunately, Laura is engaged to be married to Sir Percival Glyde, a middle-aged respectable gentleman of 45 years, chosen by her dead father. Laura is twenty-one years old and though nothing is said between her and Walter, both of them understand the intense feelings generating between them. Laura moves away, thereby increasing the woe of Walter. This is in accordance with the patriarchal society of the 19th Century, where the women of the family were dependent on the wishes of the males. Had the story been set in the later centuries, Laura would have broken the alliance. But since she belonged to a respectable family of the 19th century England, she had to bear the burden of marriage and follow the dictates of her husband. It represents domestic servitude in marriage. She gets married to Sir Percival only after letting him know of her involvement with someone else. The subjugation of the female gender primarily resides within the female's sexual morality, social obligations and domestic labour enforced by their opposite gender.

Sir Percival acts in a gentlemanly way, fooling Laura and her half-sister Marian that he appreciates her honesty. He assures them of his increased regard for Laura after the disclosure. They get married and go away for their honeymoon during which time Laura sees his real self. She is unable to tell Marian about the reality of her relationship with her husband. In the meantime, Marian helps Walter go away from Laura for six months.

The characters of Count Fosco and Madam Fosco are the highlights of the novel. Madam Fosco is the aunt of Laura and Count Fosco is the friend of Sir Percival. Collins has described

the Count as a man capable of possessing opposite qualities. The Count hatches a plot wherein Sir Percival and he himself would benefit a lot of money and pay off their debts. There is a marked likeness between Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie. This likeness is cashed upon by the Count and Sir Percival. Anne suffers from a deadly heart ailment. When she dies, they portray as if it is Laura who has died. As a result, Sir Percival inherits the money from Laura's side. In reality, she is put in an Asylum in Anne's place. It represents that cynical men can manipulate modern laws about married women's property rights. Marian, who is a staunch supporter and protector of Laura, goes out of the way to find out the reality of Sir Percival and the Count. She falls sick and is laid in bed for a long duration because of the doings of Count Fosco. In the novel, 'The Woman in White', there is no one central character, because of the fact that the three characters who play a major role, namely, Ms Laura Fairlie, Ms Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright, are all equally important to the story. We cannot exclude any one and still carry the story forward. Had there been no Laura, the whole issue of love, marriage, inheritance and the likeness with Anne Catherick, would have been negated. There would be no story. Had there been no Marian, the substance of the story would get diluted. There would be no accomplice, no heroine to support Walter and take the story to completion. Had there been no Walter, the drawing master, who employs detective tactics to bring out the truth, the story would not have met its happy ending. All three central characters face two equally powerful and scheming villains and the situational dilemma to weave the wonderful tale of love and greed.

And yet it is in case of Marian Halcombe that Collins has perfected his art of characterisation. He has skilfully delineated a character which is the epitome of his philosophy in life. Collins was a propagator of women's rights. He even belittled the need for women to get married as marriage, according to Collins, ends freedom for women. It makes them dependent on their husbands financially and socially. In case of Marian, Collins has created her as he wanted women to be. The skill of the writer lies in the fact that he has used the phoenix method in case of Ms Marian to create a greater impact of her personality on the readers' mind. The portrayal of Marian in the first part of the novel is done in a very strong, positive light. She proves to be a match to the two villainous characters of the novel, Sir Percival Glyde and the dangerous Count Fosco. Count Fosco perceives this extraordinary personality trait in Marian. She is likened to a man when it came to consider her as an opponent by Count Fosco. He never underestimates her. On the contrary, he is in awe of her personality. He is, to a large extent, fascinated by Marian because of her intelligence, presence of mind, strength of character and determination. She acts as a guardian of the beautiful and feminine Laura Fairlie. She is protective to the extent of being possessive of Laura. She is Laura's strength and her better half. She saves Laura throughout and nurtures her in her illness. She is Laura's mother, sister, brother and friend. Her tremendous chemistry with Walter Hartright enables both to persevere till the end. When Walter risks his life to find out about Sir Percival and in the end Count Fosco, Marian silently stands like a rock. She looks after Laura and the household. She works like a man. They have little money and they cannot afford any servant.

The novel was published in 1860. It was the same period in which Emily Dickinson also wrote poetry. The societal change in the Victorian England was ushering in the modern feministic mindset. Dickinson believed in freedom; freedom from the patriarchal domination of the past era. In Collins, though, one can see the focus on the detective genre so much that even though the story revolves round the domination of Sir Percival, Count Fosco and Laura's father, there is a kind of acceptance of patriarchy. Laura accepts her father's decision of marrying Sir Percival. She accepts the self-centredness of her Uncle. She sacrifices the love of her life and accepts her new responsibilities. Madame Fosco is fascinated by her husband. Even though she is fierce, she is very obedient of her husband's commands. It is only in case of Marian Halcombe that we see the combination of feminine and masculine qualities. She does not oppose patriarchy. She supports Laura in her trial against fate. She manages the moods of the Uncle of Laura never ever criticising his self-centeredness. She knows that the world goes awry when paternal authority is weak, perverted or absent. There is subservience in her nature; subservience to Laura, and not to male domination. She acts like a sister to Walter and stands solid in face of danger.

Marian is the hero of the story. It is her sheer brilliance of character, her courage, her immense feelings for Laura that actually lead her to spy upon Sir Percival and Count Fosco at night while it is raining. She catches severe cold and falls sick. She is not an active character in the story for some time. The burden of finding truth lies on Walter. Yet Collins makes his character Marian surmount all difficulties and rise like a phoenix.

The capabilities of a woman which the society was not acknowledging, was brought forth by Collins.

We have Anne Catherick – Laura Fairlie – Marian Halcombe on the one hand. And Count Fosco – Sir Percival Glyde – Walter Hartwright on the other hand. Anne is shown as very weak while Laura has her feminine weakness. Marian is the strongest of the three. Her ability to recall the details of the events and her presence of mind to jot them down for further reference spell the strength of her character. In case of men, Count Fosco is the vilest. He is followed by Sir Percival who is bad but not crooked. While Walter is Collins himself. The detective Collins wanted to be. Yet his ability and intelligence would not have received success had there been no Marian. Marian remains faithful to Laura till the end and a sister to Walter. She doesn't marry since marriage is not necessary. She was independent in thought and also had enough means to look after herself. Rather she takes care of others and helps sustain.

So it can be rightly said that Wilkie Collins was a staunch supporter of the Feministic movement. And the delineation of his female characters is a testimony to it. The males though powerful and intelligent to subdue others, lack the moral uprightness that the females have.

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