

A Feminist Reading of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"

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ABSTRACT- Andrew Marvell is one of the most renowned poets of the metaphysical school of poetry and a great name in the Literary Canon. Several critics have focused their studies on the metaphysical aspect of Marvell's poems but not much has been explored and said in the context of gender. This paper intends to capture Marvell's gender biases and the suppression of the female persona in his most celebrated poem, "To His Coy Mistress". This paper also slightly touches upon the rape culture that Marvell has, to some extent, initiated. In the process of exposing the oppressor, the paper entirely deconstructs the image of the 'beloved' and makes her silence appear a symbol of her strength.

KEYWORDS- feminist, woman, sexual, silence, patriarchal.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"... the key to female emancipation lay in woman's release from her bodily identification." (Waugh, 322)

Marvell's verse is not an account of a delightful romance but instead is an outright rape threat. He has woven his perversity slowly and carefully in his verse, blanketing it first with beguiling platonic promises and then by harsh sexual imagery. A feminist reading of "To His Coy Mistress" is of great necessity as Marvell belonged to that Great Literary Cannon which authored books by men for men and also for those women who succumb to the male point of view and start to think like a male. "Such a process Judith Fetterley calls 'the immasculation of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values.'" (Duyfhuizen, 415) Patriarchy has always been an underlying strain that runs through the texts of Andrew Marvell and the female voice is often seen silenced in his verses. His most celebrated poem, "To His Coy Mistress" is an incontestable example of gender discrimination and the patriarchal notion that traps women and forces on them certain gender rules. Marvell's Mistress is 'coy' and 'coyness' is supposedly a significant part of the 'feminine nature'. He associates his mistress with frailty, delicacy, and sheepish modesty. "Let us roll our strength and all/ Our sweetness up into one ball..." (Ferguson, 436) The common idea of "strength" as a masculine attribute and "sweetness" as synonymous to the 'feminine nature' is evident in the poem. Marvell's idea of measuring female worth by physical attractiveness is sure to anger the equality feminists who believe that biological and physical differences between the two sexes do not justify the discrimination against women and that there is no reason why men should consider themselves superior to women. "The Second Sex argued that there was no such thing as 'feminine nature'." (Waugh, 320) This dismisses Marvell's claim of his mistress being coy. It is perhaps his male ego that confuses rejection with coyness.

Marvell in his poem objectifies the lady and regards her suitable only for the gratification of his sexual needs. This is suggested by the very title of the poem, "To His Coy Mistress", where he makes it clear that the woman is not just any mistress but she is "His" property. In the poem the mistress is not the subject, as some may regard her, instead she is an object in relation to the subject which is the man wherefore the title "To His Coy Mistress". Mistress, according to the dictionary of Samuel Johnson is synonymous with whore or concubine. Marvell sees her as a 'plaything'. He addresses her as 'Mistress' in the title and calls her 'lady' in the poem. However, it is not out of respect he calls her a 'lady'. It should be noted that he uses the word 'lady' and not 'Lady' (honorific used for an eminent woman) to address his mistress.

There is a latent sense of the woman being "doubly colonised" in the first few lines of the poem when Marvell relates his woman to the "Indian Ganges's side" and himself to the "Humber" river. One can sense the eternal relationship that is established between colonised countries of the East and women, both perceived as the land of opportunities- an idea later developed into the concept of 'eastern bride' by Conrad in his novel Lord Jim.

"Thou by the Indian Ganges' side Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide Of Humber would complain." (Ferguson, 435)

Marvell sketches the entire character of his mistress against her sexual ability as if there is no more to her and the whole purpose of her life is to satisfy him, sexually, like the 'eastern bride'.

The 17th century regarded virginity as the greatest moral possession of a female which could bring her respect and recognition in the society. The only way other than this to gain respect was through marriage. The

equality feminists have criticised such a belief thoroughly- "For de Beauvoir, marriage is an oppressive and exploitative economic arrangement, which reinforces sexual inequality, and binds women to domesticity. It perpetuates the belief that if the female is protected and provided for by her male partner, she is happy...she (Beauvoir) argued that fulfillment of human potential must be judged, not in terms of happiness, but in terms of liberty." (Waugh, 321) Marvell's coy mistress is reluctant to submit to the mulish demand of the man, perhaps because she is worried about her position in the society as a non-virgin maid. It is unfair for Marvell to regard his mistress' coyness as a crime because "...the Mistress' coyness is her only means of protecting what seventeenth-century society defined as her moral and economic value- her virginity." (Duyfhuizen, 417) If for once, we consider that Marvell has an intention to marry this silent woman, even then it will not do any good to her but instead would put her freedom into shackles of domestic responsibilities and "... she will become her husband's property and be subjected to the tyranny of English Law that sanctioned her powerlessness. As long as she is "coy", she has power." (417)

The poem is structured into three parts, and each part builds up his frustration and the poet soon becomes restless with lust. Marvell begins the poem in a manner of courtly love. He tries to win over her in the Petrarchan style.

"An hundred years should go to praise Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze...An age at least to every part, And the last age should show your heart." (Ferguson, 435)

However, when the lady does not respond to his praises he takes the help of philosophy of life which suggests that death is an inevitable truth, and life a transitory state. He, in a manner, tries to play with what he thinks the puny head of his mistress. He thinks she would be perplexed by this intellectual philosophy, and out of fear of losing the good things in life, she would agree to go to bed with him. However, his devious plans prove to be a fiasco when the mistress keeps silent and then he resorts to 'textual harassment'. Such a pattern is also seen in Bollywood films with stereotypical heroes chasing heroines who feign coyness and wear a scolding expression only to fall in love with them later. However, "To His Coy Mistress" does not represent a reel life but the reality. Men try to woo women and when the women do not reciprocate, they force themselves on them. Rape, acid attacks, and harassment done to women are an outcome of such an uncontrolled rush of hormones. This poem is not an expression of passionate love but of excessive lust which blinds the poet. Towards the end, he discards all morality and chivalry, and verbally molests the women by giving an intricate description of inappropriate feelings-

"... then worms shall try
That long- preserved virginity...
Now let us sport us while we may
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour..." (436)

This is no less than a rape threat in disguise of a glorified verse. "The juxtaposition of tear and rough strife with the image of the iron gates pertains to time, but beneath there is a deeper and more unsettling suggestion of violation, even of rape." (Hirst and Zwicker, 72) Marvell tries to strip her of her morality by forcing her mentally, if not physically, to indulge in sex with him. "Rough strife" is used interchangeably with rape. He attacks her "marble vault" (vagina) and gets past "the iron gates of life" (hymen) with his piercing words.

Marvell may have also entertained the idea of procreation in this poem. The "iron gates of life" may stand for the way to the womb of the woman where life originates. Marvell feels that the only way to make a woman useful is to plant the seeds of life in her. He associates women only with their birthing role and this is against the feminist notion of freeing women of their reproductive function that "has placed woman at a disadvantage.", (321) and giving "free access to abortion and contraception." (323) However, for Marvell, the main and only purpose of women is to reproduce and give the man a child, preferably a son, after which she is no more needed. Marvell in the poem assumes that the woman is as passionate and tempted as he is - "... thy willing soul transpires/ At every pore with instant fires." (Ferguson, 436) His "vegetable love", a reference to his penis and fertility, is competent enough for giving her both sexual and social completeness. Male superiority is vividly expressed by the concept of "vegetable love" which stands for his ability to proliferate and woman is just a medium in the process, a fertile land.

The male plot in the poem is further supported by the concept of "Time". Time in the poem is given an absolute masculine description: like a war-lord Time is seen riding a chariot "hurrying near" them and it is almost unbelievable that it is only the woman who is a slave to time. It is she who will perish with time and her ancient integrity along with her genitals would be devoured - "And your quaint honour turn to dust/ And into ashes all my lust." (436) Marvell's time only ticks for the mistress and it seems as if he is unbounded by time and has the power to eternalize her through physical contact. He calls the love making a "sport" which denotes that it is a fun activity for him. His casual attitude is explicated in the end couplet- "Thus, though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run." (436) He clearly admits that he cannot stay with her

forever but he would make love to her so that each second of their togetherness would seem like eternity. "... with a sufficient intensity of loving in a brief time the equivalent in experience can be achieved of slow-paced loving over a vast eternity." (Sedelow, Jr., 7) This is the kind of power assigned to the male and it is expected of the female to feel obligated to such a man. Marvell in his overconfidence pronounces that if the woman rejects him she will have to let worms eat up her virginity, here worms can be a reference to undeserving men who are considered unmanly as their penises are of the size of a worm. "The worm, a treble signifier (phallic joke/ Edenic serpent/ agent of decay) is able almost literally to deflower the woman and remove her, not restore her, to a grisly naturalness she can hardly help but shun.... her virginity cannot last forever." (Hirst and Zwicker, 72) Such phallic jokes are a way to demean the choices women make in their lives. Her rejection is unbearable to him because she being a woman is not allowed to have a say. A man wants what he wants, and he frustrates if he does not get it. The sexual images echo that women, though are weak creatures, are objects of attraction for men and they have the power to render them helpless with the passion to possess them. This shows femininity in a very negative light- "they can only draw power from sexual relationships rather than having autonomous potency of their own." (Robbins, 27) The limited power offered to women is also snatched away once the man has accomplished his goal.

The woman in this poem is an ambiguous character. She is eternally silent but her silence itself is the most perplexing feature of her persona. Her silence can either mean that she is petrified by the way Marvell has devoured her body and fears to be an object of male gaze or it can mean that she is a woman with a voice, which may not be heard but certainly is felt by the readers at every verse. "I postulate Mistress' coyness strictly as a symbol of her own power.... The plot of her refusal of love is powerful in its own terms and demonstrates her conviction to love only on her own terms." (Duyfhuizen, 419) She is often seen as Medusa, by critics, as she can turn the man into stone by one quick gaze. This is signified by the "marble vaults". "...women frequently appear as objects of men's desires or fears- metaphorically virgins or whores- but never complex autonomous individuals." (Waugh, 321) Hence, time and again women have just been represented as subordinate to men. Women, either become an object of lust for men or an object that arouses in them a 'castration fear'. They are never shown as free individuals with a sense of identity.

Finally, the poem, "To His Coy Mistress" is disturbing and offensive to a female reader who tries hard to exist in the male-dominated world of texts. The woman is always in a fix in such a space. She is subjected to eternal doom and her punishment is inevitable. She is spoken cruelly of when she tries to protect her honour from male predators, at the same time she is punished brutally when she gives in to her sexual needs. Society "punish(es) women associated with sexuality and lust... transgressive female is eventually penalized for her actions, and the patriarchal moral code is reasserted and actually strengthened." (Waugh, 327) Hence, silence is assumed to be the best weapon of a female. The woman in the poem, a smart lady well aware of her situation, resorts to silence and uses it as her weapon to frustrate her predator. Not once in the poem, it is mentioned that she succumbs to his needs. A feminist critic would regard this as a victory for the female sex and an inexcusable act of self-assertion.

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