

**The Politics of Guilt: A Feminist Psychoanalysis of Isabella in Aphra
Behn's 'The History of the Nun or the Fair Vow-Breaker'**

Ms. Prathibha P.

Research Scholar

Department of English, Farook College

Affiliated to University of Calicut, Kerala, India

prathibhakurup2012@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper attempts a feminist examination of the complicated psychology of Isabella in Aphra Behn's novel *The History of the Nun or The Fair Vow Breaker*. Isabella leads her life according to her own will but is grief stricken and disillusioned towards the end of the work. She repents her sinful past and conquers everyone's heart. Negative stereotypes are rewritten in this literary production. Redefining female villainy as a form of victimization, portraying how the actions of 'wicked' women are often the end result of their confinement and suffocation within male-dominated ideologies form the crux of this paper.

Keywords: Guilt, Reputation, Gender Asymmetry, Freud, Psyche, Social construct.

Introduction

The double standards in judging and categorizing women have existed for centuries. The good-bad dichotomy promoted by this double standard encourages the notion that female sexuality should be controlled at any cost, that a woman's worth is defined according to her sexual virtue. Women who give in to emotions are always branded as 'loose' and 'promiscuous' which serves as a justification for scorning, despising and dismissing them. This idea is beautifully blended into the narrative of Aphra Behn's novel, *The History of the Nun or The Fair Vow Breaker* (1689).

The Freudian school of psychology states that the unconscious controls the vast majority of a person's behavior. This Freudian model of the mind, Freud's views on male and female sexuality and the concept of Eros and Thanatos helps to identify and analyze the unconscious psyche and decipher the heroine Isabella, deconstruct her character and probe the conformity- resistance or the Id - Ego clash exhibited.

The Politics of Guilt

Aphra Behn published the novella, *The History of the Nun, or The Fair Vow Breaker* in 1689, and it comes under the genre of amatory fiction. It is the story of Isabella, her desire to uphold society's expectation of being a virtuous woman, her love and passion towards Henault for whom she breaks her vows as a nun, her scheming self trying to maintain her reputation and get away with the murder of two husbands and finally her imminent downfall. This story depicts the transformation of a simple, pious young woman into a despicable, almost soulless murderer. Isabella was brought up in a nunnery which gave her a perspective of life through the eyes of religion. But as a grown up, the outside world begins to exert its influence on her. She is changed and her fall is into the dark abyss of her own guilt. "*The History of the Nun* is a rather wry rumination upon the distance between the image of the

ideal woman as envisaged by society, and the flawed reality stemming from a very human nature” (“The History”, Wordpress).

Though the novel comes across as a sad cautionary tale / lesson on the importance of vows, the narrative actually analyses the victimhood of the titular nun as she overlooks her personal motivations in an effort to maintain social expectations. The crime committed by Isabella can be interpreted as her rebellion against the men in her life (her father, Henault, Henault’s father, Villenoy) who have controlled and influenced her and those who may do so throughout her life. It is a subconscious way of gaining complete freedom from all those who may manipulate her in future. Every step that Isabella takes is horrific and extreme due to a social order that allows women no freedom of choice over their own lives.

Isabella murders Henault out of fear of being shamed for bigamy. “Shame and Confusion fill’d her Soul....She finds, by his Return, she is not only expos’d to all the Shame imaginable; the Scorn of the Town, who will look on her as an Adulteress...” (Behn 312). ‘Shame’ is a huge social construct. Isabella would have been able to embrace her changing values and desires if she could live off the tangent of societal expectations, but in the face of this conflict between her own values and the rules set by social institutions, the conflict proves too much to allow Isabella to think logically that she resorts to murder.

Gender asymmetry or double standards in judging morality is discussed by Tonya Howe as ‘Behn's appropriation of Augustine?’

This Augustine who had made love to women and perhaps to men, who could not control his own sexual problems, who was constantly torn between lust and frustration, who could in all sincerity pray: ‘Give me chastity . . . , but not yet!’ (Confessions 8, 7), who only became devout after he had ravished whores to his heart's content, when his weakness for women, as so often happens to older men in later life, turned into the opposite . . . this Augustine created the classic patristic

doctrine on sin, a morality in which especially sexual desire was condemned.

Augustine has influenced Christian morality decisively, as well as the sexual frustrations of millions of Europeans unto our own day. (qtd. in Howe)

But this same society who upheld Augustine, staunchly believed that a woman's honour was so fragile that once broken, it could never be regained.

One cannot resist quoting Mary Wollstonecraft here:

...the grand source of female depravity, namely the impossibility of regaining respectability by a return to virtue, although men preserve theirs during the indulgence of vice. This made it natural for women to try to preserve something that when lost can never be regained, namely reputation for chastity; this became the one thing needed by the female sex, and the concern for it swallowed up every other concern. (72)

The History of the Nun is a sort of discourse upon the unrealistic expectations placed by society upon women in order to achieve the end goal of being termed “good”. Isabella’s vision of herself as a model of immaculateness and religious dedication drives her to unspeakable crimes.

At the outset itself Behn states: “I could wish, for the prevention of abundance of Mischiefs and Miseries, that Nunneries and Marriages were not to be enter’d into, till the Maid, so destin’d, were of a mature Age to make her own Choice; and that parents would not make use of their justly assum’d authority to compel their children, neither to the one or the other...” (Behn 265). The novel demonstrates how children at the age of thirteen are ill-equipped to make life-long vows, even when they are as exceptional as Isabella. At the age of thirteen, she is asked to take a decision that would guide her life forever. It is when she meets the handsome Henault that she realizes that she had made a wrong decision. She gives

in to love and elopes with him. After marrying him, she feels that their love is sinful. This leads to her hardships, bigamy and homicide and she loses complete control of her destiny.

Guilt heaps up- about the betrayal of vows, stealing, breaking the trust of her family, bigamy and she tries to repress it. This makes her a woman who has no control over her senses, cannot take sensible decisions and she undertakes the most loathsome path-from one sin to another, from one heinous crime to another. The reader shockingly witnesses Isabella planning the murder of Henault, executing the crime, attaching his dead body to Villenoy with cruel cunning, and her foolproof plan of concealing the truth to the society and even the maids in her home. She fools even Maria who she is so close to, and witnesses half of the events. Ridden with guilt and fear of public infamy, Isabella single-handedly sets both the murders into motion.

Guilt can either paralyze or catalyze a person into action. Isabella's guilt on breaking her vows to god was always exerting persistent pressure on her from which she sought an outlet in some form. So she found solace in acts of charity after her marriage to Villenoy. Towards the end of the novel, the same guilt paralyses her sensibility leading her to heinous crimes. The guilt in her subconscious mind makes her believe that fate is the reason she commits such horrendous premeditated crimes against the men who loved her more than themselves.

Pleasure and pain are blended in every scene of Isabella's life. Isabella is perplexed in almost every important situation: when she starts her affair with Henault; when Villenoy proposes for marriage; when Henault returns and Villenoy unexpectedly turns up at home just after she murders Henault. "Behn's heroine is extremely fickle, 'directs a capacity for violence outwards', and 'is frantic with conflicting emotions'. In spite of being an excellent, virtuous, generous girl, Isabella stubbornly follows her changing inclinations" (Artal 156). There is a constant struggle between the mind and heart. The torment that results from

following one's heart over doing what is politically correct causes tremendous suffering to Isabella. This struggle turns a passionate young girl, a devout woman into committing dreadful crimes of passion. This conundrum is a result of the cultural stunting that women underwent at that time. Isabella comes across as a woman who makes free, rational choices, in the beginning of this novel. But what follows gives us a picture of an Isabella who suffers trying to conform to conventional gender role conceptions and is baffled and overwhelmed by incapacitating emotions. Finally she rejects the attempts made by religious, educational, legal and societal authorities to make her conform to a morality she found impossible to live by anymore.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory and method which contain important concepts and ideas about socialization into gender roles and about sexuality comes handy in decoding a woman like Isabella.

Psychoanalysis puts into question the modernist idea of the individual 'self' as a coherent agent. In its place is a sense of the 'self' as in a state of inner conflict, as split, as confused and not in full control....The Freudian notion of the unconscious introduces a new conception of the 'self' as disjointed, not in full control of its own desires or actions. (Bocock xii)

Isabella is raised among the nuns and this may be a reason for her denying a preference for worldly pleasures because she is so naïve and inexperienced at the time when she decides to take the vows. Two years she devotes to the demands of her order and then she repents having chosen a religious life, when she meets Henault. Isabella tries to defy her sexuality, but her unconscious mind craves the ecstasy it brings. So, she ends up suffering in her resistance.

Isabella has spent her whole life without a proper family system or parental love. Problems for children who grow without parents are evident not only on an individual level,

but reflect and manifest themselves in a social and community context. They have no stable role models to advise them and whom they can look up to, which makes it more difficult for adolescents to develop a stable personality, and in Isabella's case, the authority or the head of the family, her father, had dodged from a father's responsibilities and duties .

...the model of the "only child", being isolated and closed to the social world, is associated with a ~~very~~ in the transition to adulthood. Adolescence becomes longer, and a new phase of the life cycle emerges: the phase of the young adult. It stands between adolescence and maturity, which includes the assumption of responsibility at both a working and emotional level, making the whole process even more complex.

(Mangeli)

It is at this complex stage that Isabella takes a big step in her life, to be a nun, and it was bound to fail and end up a blunder. She is a child who has lived in an environment devoid of resources for physical and psycho-emotional well-being that supports the formation of personality and potential to be expressive. Such situations develop depressive, psychosomatic disorders, phobias, distrust of adults, regressive behavior, inability in the regulation and control of emotions, inability to socialize and play, deviant and delinquent aspects in teenagers (Mangeli) and this becomes true in Isabella's case when she suffers diminished self-concept, and compromised physical and emotional security.

Parental involvement is critical to children's well-being. Children consistently report feeling abandoned when their parents are not involved in their lives, struggling with their emotions and episodic bouts of self-loathing and behavioral problems. In an attempt to disguise her underlying fears, resentments, anxieties and unhappiness, Isabella projects herself as an introvert and never really opened up to others. She always carried the feeling that she was damaged or unwanted. That might be the reason why Isabella goes out of the way to conform to society (even if she had to kill people) and maintain her reputation, just to

be accepted since she feared standing out alone. Isabella yearns for protection when life gets tough, safe male affection and a parental presence at life's milestone events. Lack of parental love, care and concern is what gravitates her towards a relationship with Henault, because of a deep need to be loved and accepted.

This story is in fact a case study of Isabella- her wishes and desires; her experience of piety, love, hate, shame, fear, guilt- and how she handles these powerful emotions. Isabella's mind swings between id, ego and superego. Even though human behavior is created by the combined work of all three, the various phases in Isabella's life shows how her mind is conquered by any one of the three in specific cases and this makes her inner conflict inevitable. When she has to decide her life plan and till she meets Henault she is guided just by her superego. The superego according to Freud operates on the morality principle and thus Isabella is motivated to ensure moral standards and behave in a socially responsible and acceptable manner. Afterwards the Id takes over her mind and she steals and elopes from the nunnery for gratifying and satisfying her desire. After the death of Henault, it is ego that dominates: she decides to marry Villenoy because that is the most sensible decision she can make at that point in life. She gets a reality check, marries Villenoy and carries forward her work of charity and devotion. Needlework and works of charity are Isabella's means of sublimation. The moment Henault reappears, the greedy Id which creates the demands attains prominence and what follows reminds us of Lady Macbeth planning, plotting and executing King Duncan's murder. Isabella commits double murders but she doesn't become frantic or mad like Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth* Act V Scene 1). On the contrary, she is calm and composed till her crime is exposed. The real character of Isabella lies veiled in impenetrable darkness. She is exactly what Freud describes about the structure of the human mind: the tip of the iceberg. The most significant part of her is what one cannot see and sense. Isabella is

evidence to the Freudian theory that the unconscious mind governs behavior to a greater degree than people suspect.

During the seventeenth and early centuries, civilization

... required more sublimation and repression of desires, both sexual and destructive aggressive desires than most people were capable of maintaining for long periods without either physical, or psychological, illnesses developing...too much renunciation of the release of instinctual desires...so that many people became...ill and discomforted, or, as, Freud came to articulate it, 'discontented'.(Bocock xiv)

Libido, the reservoir of sexual appetite and hunger is consciously repressed by Isabella. She does try to conceal her most coveted wish of starting a love life with Henault. "The superego manifests itself in criticism of the ego, which results in the person feeling guilty... the superego uses energy from the death instincts to turn on the ego with its criticisms of the inadequacies of the person...the superego manifests itself essentially as a sense of guilt..."(78). The desire she had for Henault was branded as sinful and wrong according to religious and social morals. Isabella did not dare to express that in actions and even suffered guilt to acknowledge to herself her passion for him.

Conclusion

Behn in *The History of the Nun* seeks to explain the social and psychological origins of what is conventionally read as female wickedness and advocates the need to allow a woman to satisfy her own desires and live a free, non-judgmental life without necessarily being seen as evil. Behn raises an important question: To be accepted by culture as a virtuous woman, what ideologies must they subscribe to and what behaviors, beliefs or customs must they adopt? Behn uses the metaphor of the nun as a means of communicating her own dilemma as a woman writer desperately trying to survive in the patriarchal seventeenth century. . This explains the writer's "unconventional sympathy for the guilty Isabella, whose transgressive desire to escape from confinement finds sympathetic echoes in the woman writer" (Pearson 246).

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