

Moll Flanders Still Alive

Ms.G. Shalom

Teaching Associate and Research Scholar

Andhra University College of Engg. for Women

Visakhapatnam, A.P.

India

Abstract

Daniel Defoe's novel 'The Fortunes and Misfortunes Of The Famous Moll Flanders' is the life story of a woman who never gave up hope however wretched her circumstances might be. It is the timeless story of a woman who had consciousness alive in her soul even though her poverty mocked her. Life is a journey. Each path has roses and thorns. When we see roses, we feast the heart. When thorns come up, we brush them aside instead of letting them prick us.

Moll Flanders is a novel written by Daniel Defoe. He was a 17th century novelist who lived in an age bombarded with political, religious and moral upheavals. Defoe himself was writer, a pamphleteer, a spy, a journalist and a trader. His works [Robinson Crusoe (1719) and Moll Flanders (1722)] have laid foundation to English novels and are among the valued first novels, others being Bunyan's 'The Pilgrims Progress' (1678).

Moll Flanders and Oliver Twist.

The novel 'The Fortunes and Misfortunes of The Famous Moll Flanders' is referred as Moll Flanders for short. It is the story of a woman born poor, born miserable and born to a poor, miserable convict in Newgate (Prison), later sent to Virginia to the plantations as a convicted felon, just like her mother. In Moll Flanders' times if a fellow is born poor, he/she is as sure as the sunrise to have a miserable life. If they take to crime, they will meet their death in Newgate. If they strive to be honest, mostly, they die of starvation. For a woman living in such times, for that matter, in all times, money is her security, her strength and her fail-proof guide to comfortable life, and sometimes, happiness. Therefore, the story of a poor

unfortunate female soul like Moll Flanders was an adventure in itself. Hers is the life story of all women- 16th C London or 21st C Global World.

Moll Flanders is born in Newgate and as she says, was left in bad hands as an infant. Later, she was left in Colchester, in Essex by the gypsies under unknown circumstances when she was perhaps three years old. The parish is compassionate on her and placed her under the care of a woman who earned a little livelihood by taking care of such orphaned children. The real fortune is that the nurse or the caretaker turned out to be kind-hearted and good.

“...she bred them up very religiously, being herself a very sober, pious woman, very house- wifely and clean, and very mannerly, and with good behaviour. So that in a word, expecting a plain diet, coarse lodging, and mean clothes, we were brought up as mannerly and as genteelly as if we had been at the dancing-school.”

The readers must note that this is Moll’s first stroke of fortune i.e. to be brought up in comparatively secure and comfortable circumstances. At this juncture, we are reminded of an unfortunate orphaned male infant Mr. Oliver Twist (written by Charles Dickens, published as a serial in 1837-1839) who was placed by the parish under the care of Mrs. Mann. The parish has provided a ‘generous’ weekly stipend of seven pence – half penny to the caretaker for each infant’s care.

“Seven pence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for seven pence-halfpenny, quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable.”

Mrs. Mann was described by Dickens as:

“The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children; and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was

originally provided for them. Thereby finding in the lowest depth a deeper still; and proving herself a very great experimental philosopher.”

It has to be understood that Mrs. Mann used the funds for herself, even though they are already meager, and left the children to starve. The children in her care suffer from malnutrition and consequently, eight out of ten children died in the following manner:

“...sickened from want and cold, or fell into the fire from neglect, or got half-smothered by accident; in any one of which cases, the miserable little being was usually summoned into another world, and there gathered to the fathers it had never known in this.”

“Occasionally, when there was some more than usually interesting inquest upon a parish child who had been overlooked in turning up a bedstead, or inadvertently scalded to death when there happened to be a washing...”

Therefore, by comparison, Moll Flanders was in a much better state. But lack of human concern as in Oliver’s case continues till date. Infants, teens, adults and the old are neglected by their own family members due to various circumstances.

Flanders, Fantine and Love.

After the death of her nurse, Moll was around fourteen years old and was taken in by a rich lady. This was Moll’s second stroke of fortune. Moll grows up well in that house because the Lady and her daughters treat her with sincere kindness. So, we can assume that Moll Flanders is ‘excellent and thriving by comparison to Oliver Twist who was sold as an apprentice to an undertaker at the age nine. He was passed down from one cruel place to more cruel place and gets involved by force in Fagin’s gang, has an agonizingly ‘twist’ed fate till Lady Luck smiles on him.

To a woman, since time started ticking, beauty is of utmost priority, only next to life. Beauty is confidence, joy, strength and at times, a very precious weapon. Women would give

everything they have to be beautiful. Beauty has always been and will continue to be the sharpest

double-edged sword. It can cut right through the heart- of the lover and also the woman. Moll Flanders' beauty is described as follows by Defoe in Moll's own voice:

“...in some things I had the advantage of my ladies, though they were my superiors; but they were all the gifts of nature, and which all their fortunes could not furnish. First, I was apparently handsomer than any of them; secondly, I was better shaped; and, thirdly, I sang better, by which I mean I had a better voice; in all which you will, I hope, allow me to say, I do not speak my own conceit of myself, but the opinion of all that knew the family.”

Moll's beauty happens to catch the eye of the lady's elder son, a cunning gentleman and the pioneer of Moll's misfortunes. He, in Moll's words, captured her as follows:

“...he contrived so subtly, as if he had known as well how to catch a woman in his net as a partridge when he went a-setting...”

Sweet words have an infinite power to persuade others. Moll's gentleman entices her with 'sweet' words and 'strong' money and consequently takes advantage of her.

“...he said he was charmed with me, and that he could not rest night or day till he had told me how he was in love with me, and, if I was able to love him again, and would make him happy, I should be the saving of his life, and many such fine things. I said little to him again, but easily discovered that I was a fool, and that I did not in the least perceive what he meant.”

At this point, another such tragic figure comes into our mind. She is Fantine. Fantine is a character from Victor Hugo's 'Les Misérables.' She is the beautiful working class women courted for a few years and later abandoned by her ugly-looking stinking- rich lover Felix Tholomyes. Hugo describes Fantine's beauty as follows.

“Fantine was beautiful, and remained pure as long as she could. She was a lovely blonde, with fine teeth. She had gold and pearls for her dowry; but her gold was on her head, and her pearls were in her mouth.”

Tholomyes is described as follows:

“Tholomyes was the antique old student; he was rich; he had an income of four thousand francs; four thousand francs! a splendid scandal on Mount Sainte-Genevieve. Tholomyes was a fast man of thirty, and badly preserved. He was wrinkled and toothless, and he had the beginning of a bald spot, of which he himself said with sadness, the skull at thirty, the knee at forty. His digestion was mediocre, and he had been attacked by a watering in one eye. But in proportion as his youth disappeared, gayety was kindled; he replaced his teeth with buffooneries, his hair with mirth, his health with irony, his weeping eye laughed incessantly. He was dilapidated but still in flower. His youth, which was packing up for departure long before its time, beat a retreat in good order, bursting with laughter, and no one saw anything but fire. He had had a piece rejected at the Vaudeville. He made a few verses now and then. In addition to this he doubted everything to the last degree, which is a vast force in the eyes of the weak. Being thus ironical and bald, he was the leader. Iron is an English word. Is it possible that irony is derived from it?”

When ugly Tholomyes had abandoned her, Fantine was pregnant with Cosette. Owing to her destitute condition, she leaves Cosette with the Thenardiers. These inn keepers swindle money again and again from Fantine using Cosette as excuse. In order to meet their demands, she sells her beautiful ‘golden’ blonde hair, her two front ‘pearl’ teeth and finally resorts to prostitution as she is dismissed at Monsieur Madeleine’s factory for being discovered as an unwed mother. She finally dies of disease.

In 2012, this novel is made into a musical drama under the same name by director Tom Hooper. Fantine’s role was played by Anne Hathaway. In the drama, Fantine’s plight was

presented in a song named I Dreamed A Dream.. The lyrics were composed by Claude-Michel Schonberg, Alain Boublil and Herbert Kretzmer. The lament:

[Fantine is left alone, unemployed and destitute.]

There was a time when men were kind
When their voices were soft
And their words inviting
There was a time when love was blind
And the world was a song
And the song was exciting
There was a time
Then it all went wrong
I dreamed a dream in time gone by
When hope was high
And life worth living
I dreamed that love would never die
I dreamed that God would be forgiving
Then I was young and unafraid
And dreams were made and used and wasted
There was no ransom to be paid
No song unsung
No wine untasted
But the tigers come at night
With their voices soft as thunder
As they tear your hopes apart
As they turn your dreams to shame
He slept a summer by my side
He filled my days with endless wonder
He took my childhood in his stride
But he was gone when autumn came
And still I dream he'll come to me
That we will live the years together

But there are dreams that cannot be
And there are storms we cannot weather!
I had a dream my life would be
So different from this hell I'm living
So different now, from what it seemed
Now life has killed the dream I dreamed.

In 17th c or 18th c or now, penniless beauty is just a toy to the rich. Poor as they are, both Flanders and Fantine sincerely loved their respective partners and only hoped for a secure life.

“...but the mistake lay here, that Mrs. Betty (Flanders) was in earnest and the gentleman was not.”

“We will confine ourselves to saying that the love of Fantine was a first love, a sole love, a faithful love.”

It is sad to mention that Fantine and Flanders are still alive and suffering in all parts of this tech-savvy world.

Lavinia: Our Voice

Suffering of women has remained the same since beginning. Atrocities have also remained the same. Some crimes have upgraded the modus operandi but the essence is still the same. Many women are killed in the name of honor, not to mention that rape has become rampant global problem. Honor killings have become frequent in countries such as Middle East and South Asia but have been occurring all over the world.

In literature, such atrocity was spotted in Shakespeare's 'The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus' written between 1588 and 1593. It includes the story of Lavinia who was brutally raped out of revenge by Dimitrius and Chiron, enemies of her father. They subsequently cut off Lavinia's tongue and hands to prevent her from revealing the identity of her assaulters. Titus Andronicus, the father of this unfortunate woman extracts revenge for his daughter and asks the Emperor Saturninus whether it is right for the father to kill his daughter if she was raped.

Act V, Scene 3

(Court of TITUS's house. A banquet set out.)

Titus Andronicus. An if your highness knew my heart, you were.

My lord the emperor, resolve me this:

Was it well done of rash Virginius
To slay his daughter with his own right hand,
Because she was enforced, stain'd, and deflower'd?

Saturninus. It was, Andronicus.

Titus Andronicus. Your reason, mighty lord?

Saturninus. Because the girl should not survive her shame,
And by her presence still renew his sorrows.

Titus Andronicus. A reason mighty, strong, and effectual;

A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant,
For me, most wretched, to perform the like.

Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee;

[Kills LAVINIA]

And, with thy shame, thy father's sorrow die!

Poor Lavinia had to lose her life, not to mention the humiliation of being raped, the agony of now becoming a shame to the same household to which she was once 'Rome's ornament' and the terrible physical torture of being mutilated. Lavinia is half-killed by her enemy and completely killed by her own father. Her father and her enemies stand in the same light because both of them used Lavinia for their selfish purposes.

Brides and Billions

In his novel, Defoe explains the problems women had to face at the time of her marriage. A woman must have money and nothing but money. Moll Flanders' comments holds true even today.

"...money is always agreeable, whatever the wife was"

Parents of the bride had to give huge amounts of money for dowry to the groom and his family in addition to cars, furniture and jewelry. Thus, the bride's parents are reduced to poverty. In many cases, the happiness of the bride is still in question because the groom's family keeps on pressing for more money.

Moll Flanders sister –in- law in Colchester said

"...if a young woman have beauty, birth, breeding, wit, sense, manners, modesty, and all these to an extreme, yet if she have not money, she's nobody..."

Money, not love is the match-maker and will remain so long as greed lives. Since the dawn of civilization, human suffering has been the same. It has always been the same emotions, same tears, same fears, same smiles, same love, same greed and same situations. P.B Shelley wrote in his poem 'Ode To The West Wind.'

"I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!"

Not Anymore

One of the methods to stop these atrocities against women, bury Flanders, Fantines and Lavinias in peace is to bring change. Each woman must bring in the change starting with herself, right from her home. Each tigress must stand up for herself to make change a meaningful reality. We have suffered long enough in history and in literature. Women must, as Flanders stated,

"...first thing she ought to do was a piece of justice to herself."

Each woman must

- a. Be bold.
- b. Be cautious.
- c. Deny dowry firmly.

Conclusion

Small changes add up and make a big difference. These big differences will influence people around us. Thus, slowly, taking one step at a time, a world where every woman is treated in a respectable manner will be created. P.B Shelley wrote in his poem 'Ode To The West Wind.'

"The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

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