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Iswarya M.

Assistant Professor on Contract,

St. Michael's College,

Cherthala, Kerala, India.

menon.iswarya@gmail.com

*Ayesha as a New Face of Woman: A Feminist Reading of Rider Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure**

Abstract

The essay attempts a feminist reading of the much celebrated Victorian novel *She: A History of Adventure* by H. Rider Haggard so as to subvert the archetypal role of femme fatale very often endowed to the main character Ayesha also called 'She-who-must-be-obeyed' and the several misogynist readings of the novel. The portrayal of an omnipotent and omniscient female character heralds the dawn of the late 19th century feminist idea of 'The New Woman'. The essay, by taking the gender based theme identified in the novel by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, shows how *She* displays a disconcerting tendency to transcend the patriarchal boundaries set to contain her and thus problematizes the traditional distinction of masculinity and femininity.

Keywords: 19th century; the New Woman; Victorian society; literature; feminism; patriarchy; progress; power relations

Introduction

When feminist movement evolved as part of fin de siècle at the end of 19th century, it proved to be one of the most destabilizing ones for the Victorian society. The movement attacked

western discourses of culture, philosophy, history which are founded on binary oppositions where the man always enjoys the superior position: “the metaphorical space which the femme fatale occupies in late nineteenth-century culture is a space ‘outside’ normality, order, light, outside ‘masculine’ logic, reason, culture.” (Stott 31). The term ‘New Woman’ was first used by Sarah Grand in 1894 in her article, ‘The New Woman and the Old’ to define what the majority of the population labelled as : “femme fatale, prostitute, suffragette, New Woman, virago, degenerate, Wild Woman, Free Woman”(Stott 49). The emergence of the woman’s movement in general and the so-called New Woman in particular supplemented the very typical Victorian ‘angel in the house’ with the new image of a woman who is “intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting” (Diniejko). Though New Woman was a concept emerged at the end the century, literature had been prognosticating the advent of this figure since at least the 1880’s. Rider Haggard, whether knowingly or unknowingly, integrates the tenets of the New woman into the character of Ayesha who “violates Victorian gender expectations and the natural evolutionary order by her power and immortality” (Doyle) and thus challenges the typical readings of Victorian power distribution.

Ayesha as a True Representative of the New Woman

The novel that begins as a quest romance tracing the adventurous journey of two Englishmen, the young Leo Vincey and his adoptive father, L. Horace Holly, in search of an enigmatic and puissant female figure named Ayesha, She or She-who-must-be-obeyed ,who is ‘the mighty queen of a savage people’, in response to an ancient plea for vengeance, very soon turns out to be a brilliant study of an ‘eternal feminine’. In the words of Gilbert and Gubar, She represents “primordial female otherness” as “an ontological Old Woman” who “brings to the surface everyman’s worry about all women”(9). At the onset of the novel, the quest for She on which the two men embark is to seek a fantastic, mythical and a very ancient

figure whose existence is dubious and frequently dismissed as preposterous. The matriarchal Amahaggert tribe Ayesha reigns over, the sepulchral volcanic chamber where she resides, Ayesha's preserving of the remains of her ancient lover Kallikrates whom she herself had killed serve only to aggravate the "chaos, darkness, death, all that lies beyond the safe, the known, and the normal" (Stott 8). The menacing, disruptive and all powerful female was deemed to bring not just a historically specific menace to Victorian culture rooted in male authority and power, "but She compounds that threat by displaying the unnerving traits associated with womanhood across the ages"(Murphy 747).

When Holly first glimpses Ayesha, he describes her with explicit details that create an image of a woman whose beauty is not of any terrestrial kind. He uses phrases like "serpent-like grace," "awful loveliness," and "the glory was not all of heaven" (Haggard 153). Leo, who is transfixed by her charm can't help himself falling for her. When Ustane is killed by Ayesha, in agony Leo curses himself for the miserable fate that befell on Ustane. Still he does not execrate Ayesha. Leo yearns to leave her presence yet concedes that his feet will never carry him away as he was completely under the spell of her charm: "I know I shall do it again to-morrow; I know that I am in her power for always... I must follow her as a needle follows a magnet; I would not go away now if I could; I could not leave her, my legs would not carry me" (220). Holly's situation is not different: "we could no more have left her than a moth can leave the light that destroys it" (221). The men who represent masculinity and the patriarchal structures of the Western world are petrified by their lack of control and their lack of choice. The way Ayesha stirs fear and unease in the two males with her charisma runs parallel to Victorian society's conceptualization of the New Woman figure, a woman who upsets the patriarchal power structures with her knowledge, power and influence.

Ayesha is depicted as an extremely wise and mighty woman who learned Nature's secrets and has therefore been able to bathe in the Spirit of Life and attained a prolonged,

almost eternal yet youthful life. Her high level of intellect and prudence excel that of any man who ever lived. Long centuries of life could be the secret of her wisdom; still her eagerness to gain more from Holly proves she is an ardent knowledge seeker. Holly admits that Ayesha behaves like any man with immense power would, and he cogitates: "Now the oldest man upon the earth was but a babe compared to Ayesha, and the wisest man upon the earth was not one-third as wise" (221). Ayesha's plans to return to England with them confound both Leo and Holly. The significance of such an act on her part is revealed through Holly's reflection of the situation: "this wonderful creature, whose passion had kept her for so many centuries chained; as it were, and comparatively harmless, was now about to be used by Providence as a means to change the order of the world, and possibly, by the building up of a power that could no more be rebelled against or questioned than the decrees of Fate, to change it materially for the better" (233).

'The exclamations of horror' of the two men at the power of this immortal queen is a reflection of society's fear in the late their nineteenth century about the emergence of the new woman. An in-depth reading of the character of Ayesha reveals strong undertones of the revolutionary nature of female autonomy and power. Even Holly, the self proclaimed misogynist, who thought of himself as immune to the love of women and determined not to 'creep into the presence of some savage woman' fails miserably before the power and beauty of Ayesha. Casting off his identity as an educated Englishman he falls down to his knees and professes his love for Ayesha once he sees her unveiled face. Ayesha emasculates the two men, but her emasculation of Leo is more intense. She strips off his English identity, renames him as Kallikrates and chooses him as her mate without even considering his choice. All these correspond to the deconstructive nature of female autonomy which poses a great threat to conventional structures of power founded on patriarchal values. It is Ayesha's extensive knowledge, vast power and unflinching determination that have allowed many critics to deem

her as the New Woman. However, the tragic denouement of the narrative gives an abrupt turn to the celebration of female supremacy. Ayesha, in order to make Leo the right match for her in power, eternal youth and beauty demands him to bathe in the Pillar of Fire. In order to alleviate his fear of entering the fire, she herself steps into it only to step out ageing two thousand years all on a sudden and to die.

Conclusion

The climax of the novel sets the annihilation of the threat to the male dominated world that a learned and empowered woman could pose and the restoration of male supremacy. Gilbert explains how She as the New Woman is an enemy of the phallogocentric world and how it wants to destroy her: Ayesha, “naked and ecstatic, in all the pride of her femaleness . . . must be fucked to death by the 'unalterable law' of the father” (Gilbert and Gubar 131). Patricia Murphy also has the same view: “She is also a thinly disguised allegorical admonition to recognize and dispel the threat that the New-Woman posed to Victorian Society” (747). Murphy argues “the novel . . . ultimately strives to contain the New Woman threat by annihilating the unruly She at closure” (748). However, Haggard concludes the novel by hinting at the possibility of the resurrection of She, thereby leaving the readers looking forward to the return of Ayesha in the next sequel. Before falling still, Ayesha assures: “I shall come again, and shall once more be beautiful, I swear it—it is true!” (237). Both Holly, the symbol of male wisdom, knowledge and intelligence and Leo, the symbol of beauty, youth and perfection strongly believe in She’s immortality even after they witness her doom and they hope for her return fully knowing that She can turn the very foundation of the conventional hierarchy of power topsy-turvy. She is to be returned in order to strike a blow at the patriarchal values and to create a world of female autonomy. By challenging the typical

readings of power distribution not only of Victorian society but of the entire western culture, the novel is an attempt to envisage a new order of gender politics.

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