



A PRO-WOMAN TEXT IN EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: GIVING DEFOE'S "MOLL FLANDERS' ITS DUES

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ABSTRACT

First published in 1722, *Moll Flanders* is a picaresque novel by Daniel Defoe. In this novel, Defoe poignantly underscores the struggle of a lone, unprotected and plebeian woman against a hostile and apathetic society; how the female protagonist moves from one crisis to another, and negotiates them -- sometimes playing straight and sometimes playing crooked. And all of these appear in Defoe long before feminism and feminist movements gripped the public imagination and became effective -- and sometimes more fashionable and tautological than effective. *Moll Flanders* may not be exactly a feminist novel; it does not chart a road-map for the marginalized woman to transcend her marginality. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly pro-woman, investing a female figure with the status of the protagonist in early eighteenth century and portraying her with sympathy and understanding. To today's reader, the novel, in the final analysis, may not appear to be a radical one because it makes the heroine conform and repent at the end of all her life-long twists and transgressions. However, Defoe was ahead of his time in enabling his heroine taking the society for a ride and surviving the odds instead of being bogged down by misery and tribulations.

Key-words: struggle, pro-woman, radical, conformist

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INTRODUCTION

Daniel Defoe's picaresque novel *Moll Flanders* saw the light of the day in 1722. Of course, meticulously speaking, it cannot be called a novel in the strictest sense of the term. The credit of being the first 'proper' novel goes to Richardson's *Pamela* which was published a couple of decades later in 1740. *Moll Flanders* is somewhat deficient in psychological exploration and reads more like a narrative. Hence it would be better to call it a 'rudimentary' novel. However, the objective of this paper is not to debate or discuss the qualities of a novel found in *Moll Flanders*. The objective is to delineate how Defoe's heroine Moll with her own

effort trudges through thick and thin to make the most of a hopeless life. For all her shortcomings, she dazzles us with her tenacity and resilience, buoyancy and boisterousness. *Moll Flanders* remains a novel worth revisiting to this day.

The full title of the novel takes almost one paragraph: "The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, Etc. Who was born in Newgate, and during a life of continu'd Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own brother), Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich, liv'd Honest and died a Penitent. Written from

her own Memorandums." Whether Moll Flanders is 'famous' or 'notorious', should better be left to the individual reader's judgment. The long listing of the heroine's amoral and scandalous deeds is aimed at spicing things up. In the early eighteenth century when public readership had just started to build up, summing up the plot of the novel in the lengthy title to catch popular interest was possibly a necessity. At the same time Defoe had to make sure that his work does not come across as a morally offensive novel. Hence, the expression 'liv'd Honest and died a Penitent' towards the end of the full title is significant. The novel is, after all, not a glamorization of a scandalous life, but a critique of it. The concluding phrase 'Written from her own Memorandums' is note-worthy. Defoe obviously tries to present the narrative as an authentic one; as if it is not a piece of fiction, but has indeed happened in the life of this extra-ordinary woman who documents it in a series of letters. The picaresque mode is thus aimed at taking the semblance of reality one notch higher. The narration is also in the first person, opening with the line: "My true name is so well-known in the records or registers at Newgate, and in the old Bailey...." Three decades later Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) opens with the famous line: "Call me Ishmael". Defoe's heroine is to be called Moll Flanders. Dictionary suggests that the word 'moll' has two informal meanings, and both are applicable to Defoe's protagonist. The first one is: 'a gangster's female companion'; the second one is: 'a prostitute'. She is given the surname 'Flanders'. It sounds almost like 'flounders'. Moll definitely flounders -- struggles in the face of difficulties. Once these difficulties are taken into account, one understands why Moll Flanders stands tall amidst numerous heroines of English literature despite all her deviations.

Moll is a victim of society from her very birth. She is born in jail, and soon after her birth, her mother is deported to Virginia, then a British colony in America. With no parents, no family, no inherited property and no permanent roof over her head, Moll is deprived of the least economic and emotional support from her infancy. It is a grim indictment of the then British social system which had no mechanism in place to take care of orphans

or abandoned children. Neither does the society stand by her in her adolescence and youth. From her childhood, Moll nurtures the wish of growing up as a 'gentlewoman' in the literal sense. But the stumbling block is that she is lacking in resources, and also in dowry! Not having rich parents is a hindrance to getting a rich husband as well. One of the two sisters, in whose house Moll stays temporarily, candidly spells out the situation: "...if a young woman have beauty, birth, breeding, wit, sense, manners, modesty, yet if she have not money, she's nobody." Almost a century of years before Jane Austen, in a 'grimly gay' tone Defoe exposes the mercenary skeleton of what Mark Twain's Huck would call a 'sivilized' society.

Moll learns at an early age that everything sooner or later boils down to money. Hence, love, sex and crime become to her avenues for profit and loss. For her, ironically enough, even acts of sex become means to achieving respectability. When her first seducer, the elder brother, approaches her, she says: "I was more confounded with the money than I was before with love...My colour came and went at the sight of the purse." However, the vulnerability of a woman who has no identity beyond her physical existence becomes glaring as the elder brother entraps her, seduces her, and then deserts her. Even before Moll decides to sell her body, the society pounces upon it. Moll ultimately gets married to the younger brother, though not for long.

After the short-lived marriage with the younger brother is over, Moll enters into multiple hetero-sexual relationships. Like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, she has had five husbands, 'without other company in youth'. Moll is cunning in getting into strategic marriages -- marriages which have got very little to do with love and a lot to do with money. In her narration, she commodifies herself in a most unambiguous way: "When a woman is thus left desolate, she is just like a bag of money or jewel dropped on the highways, which is a prey to the next comer". However, this is expressive more of helplessness rather than a willing surrender to pelf. Even amidst the densely populated society, Moll feels no less isolated and wretched than the other Defoean protagonist Robinson Crusoe who is left to

himself in a god-forsaken island. Robert Alan Donovan points out: "In this respect Moll is very much like Robinson Crusoe; both are centrally concerned with the elementary problem of survival, and beyond that with whatever material amenities a hostile environment can be made to provide."

We get more than a glimpse of Shaw's Mrs Warren as Moll takes to prostitution to make both ends meet. The issue of gender is crucial here as one realises that being a man and being a woman in the same circumstances are different. A man of Moll's age in early eighteenth century might have had adequate opportunities to earn livelihood in a decent way. But being a woman is Moll's insuperable setback. The body-politics is at work in a glaring way. Moll here manages to work the 'disempowered' female body in her favour in a most ironical way. She makes her sexualised female body the source of livelihood. Defoe deserves credit in eliciting the reader's admiration, though not necessarily approval, for Moll owing to her resilience of spirit despite her obvious debauchery.

For Moll and for anyone else, 'Youth's a stuff [that] will not endure'. The circle comes a full round as Moll, bereft of beauty, takes to what her mother did -- stealing. However, Moll is yet to be a hardened criminal. Robbing a poor woman of a few goods, Moll says: "I confess the inhumanity of the action moved me very much...and tears stood in my eyes." One recalls Nora's remark in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*: "One must live, and so one becomes selfish". As in Galsworthy's play *Justice*, so in *Moll Flanders*, the society is the real culprit. The first homicidal tendency in Moll surfaces as she says after robbing a child: "...the devil put me upon killing the child in the dark alley, that it might not cry." Finally, Moll runs out of luck one day while stealing brocaded silk. History repeats itself as Moll lands at the Newgate prison -- the very place where her mother had once been imprisoned and where she was born. It may be recalled that Moll's mother had landed at the Newgate prison for stealing three pieces of holland -- 'a petty theft, scarce worth naming'. In Defoe's time, legal system was exceedingly harsh; even petty crimes were punishable with death or deportment. Once someone was born destitute, it was very difficult to

get out of the vicious cycle of poverty and imprisonment. To Moll, the prison is 'an emblem of hell itself' and the inmates are 'a crew of hell-hounds'. Arnold Kettle aptly observes: "Newgate is reality, the eighteenth century world with the lid off, the world from which Moll set out and to which she returns after six decades, defeated, to emerge as a conformist." It is a home-coming for Moll in a most pathetic and ironical sense. Interestingly, Defoe himself found himself at the Newgate prison for his notorious pamphlet *The Shortest Way with Dissenters* (1702).

All's well that ends well. It would be poetic injustice to end such a narrative of struggle and resilience on a tragic note. Defoe bestows happiness on septuagenarian Moll. He employs a classic *deus ex machina* to make Moll meet her mother in old age and inherit a part of her mother's property. Moll, for the first time in her life, finds a stable and comfortable position. And now all the middle-class values pour in. Penitent Moll starts visiting the church to enter the mainstream of life. So long Moll has never cared for any of her twelve children; they were nuisances in her thorny path of life. But now for the first time Moll experiences a resurgence of maternal affection. She says of Humphry: "...he brought the writings of gift...and I delivered them to him with a hundred kisses." This is a newly developed facet of Moll -- Moll the mother. *Moll Flanders* is not exactly a feminist novel; it does not chart a road-map for the marginalized woman to transcend her marginality. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly pro-woman, investing a female figure with the status of the protagonist in early eighteenth century and portraying her with sympathy and understanding. The novel, despite its conformist ending, is way ahead of its time.

Noticeably, the novel includes a number of female characters apart from Moll -- her mother, the two sisters, the nurse and the governess, to mention a few. These other characters are assigned certain roles in Moll's life at certain points, suiting the picaresque mode. Nonetheless, the presence of so many female figures within the space of a single narrative was rather a rare phenomenon in Defoe's time. Srividhya Swaminathan makes a valid point when she says: "Analyses of Defoe's narratives tend

to dismiss his secondary characters because they lack well-developed personalities. The extensive cast of women in *Moll Flanders*, for instance, has been ignored largely because twentieth-century critics privilege interiority and psychology, and discount stock or 'flat' characters."

CONCLUSION

Moll's life, in a sense, culminates in a familiar trajectory – the deviant woman reclaimed. Nevertheless, Moll in her eventful life creates more than a storm in the tea-cup. She also points to a bunch of female heroines in eighteenth century fiction – through Richardson's *Pamela* to Fielding's *Becky Sharp* before the sophisticated genteel women would come to occupy the spotlight in the hand of Jane Austen.

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