



OSCAR WILDE – THE TRAILBLAZER

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to delineate the contribution of Oscar Wilde, the late nineteenth century Irish writer towards the image of Victorian woman. To do so, the paper analyzes the woman characters of Wilde's plays namely, *Salomé*, *An Ideal Husband*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of no Importance*, *The Importance of being Earnest*, and *The Duchess of Padua*. It is seen that Wilde makes no attempts to define 'New Woman' or a woman per se in any fixed or absolute terms. He sketches them in varying shades of grey and keeps them rooted in the realistic world of human imperfection. Wilde portrays his female characters as individuals who, despite their shortcomings carry themselves with exemplary dignity. Wilde's women characters cannot be easily evaluated on the yardstick of religion, conventional norms or social mores. They are bohemian in their disregard for the subversive attitude of the society that demands the repression of their natural instincts particularly the sexual instinct. Wilde raises women to a level where they become the agents of his artistic impressions and expression or become even art itself. The paper argues that Wilde is a trailblazer in imparting to a woman the predominant image of an individual who is on a continual journey of self-actualization. The concern of 'self or 'identity' of a woman that is so prominent in Wilde's plays is as vital an issue today as it was in Wilde's time.

KEYWORDS: Oscar Wilde, New Woman, woman characters, psychological probings, human imperfection, philosophy of absolutism, self-actualization, sexual desire, theatre, quest for identity, gender issues

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INTRODUCTION

"It was the end of equipoise."¹ (32) Be it the fabric of the society, the legal system, the world of science and religion, or the political set up, by the 1870s, almost every aspect of the Victorian age was resonant with „a new spirit of revolt against status quo subservience and compromise"². (32) This challenge to authority was significantly seen with respect to the traditional image and roles of a woman. The phrase „New Woman“ had begun to

make forays in the writings, speeches and discussions of feminists, journalists, sociologists and writers of the period. However opinions and views regarding the "New Woman" varied. While some writers such as Mrs Eliza Lynn Linton called the New Woman „unsexed by the atrophy of their instincts“, certain woman novelists such as Sarah Grand and New Woman poets such as Constance Naden associated New Woman with immorality and decadence.³ (105) While certain male writers

presented New Woman as neurotic or over-educated, some feminists endowed a New Woman with the image of a militant.⁴(42-43) In this context of the late nineteenth century, the present paper attempts to analyze the contribution of Oscar Wilde, the nineteenth century Irish writer towards the image of „New Woman“ or a woman per se.

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It is remarkable to note that Oscar Wilde, the nineteenth century writer makes no attempt to define „New Woman“ or a woman per se in any fixed or absolute terms. Instead, Wilde treats the idea with the same sense of freedom, compassion and toleration with which he looked at everything in life. His kind and liberal approach towards the issue of changing image of woman is vastly depicted in his plays through his female protagonists whom he provides the liberty and the space to be what they are. Wilde's women characters are presented and projected in the plays in all their variety and versatility. In the portrayal of Salomé of the eponymous play, for instance, Wilde makes a "heroine out of this sublimated sinner,"⁵ (85) though, on the face of it, she is a murderess consumed by her sexual cravings. In this context, Clement Scott, the influential critic of the Daily Telegraph, observes that Wilde "has fascinated us with a savage."⁶ (79) Another illustration of Wilde's toleration is depicted in the acutely narcissistic personality of Mrs Cheveley of the play An Ideal Husband. Mrs Cheveley is presented as a vagrant woman who indulges in frivolous activities such as stealing brooches and disturbing the conjugal harmony of others in pursuit of her personal gains. Yet Wilde holds no contempt for her. In the end of the play, he simply obliterates Mrs Cheveley from the scene "unredeemed but unpunished."⁷ (98) Wilde's female protagonists "step out of their stereotypes into psychological reality."⁸(109) They are portrayed in all their psychological complexities that imparts them an unusual depth. This is particularly true for aristocratic women like Lady Windermere of the play Lady Windermere's Fan and Lady Chiltern of the play An Ideal Husband for whom the pressures in the fin-de-siècle were largely psychological.⁹ (100) In the fin-de-siècle, while the middle-class women were making their presence felt

as teachers, nurses and in other professions, there were women belonging to the genteel section of the society who camouflaged their suppression, anxiety and desires behind their extravagant lifestyle and elaborate costumes. Wilde's unique contribution to the English drama of the 1890s lies in presenting the "anatomy of the soul"¹⁰ (108) of such aristocratic women. Wilde exposes the stunted emotional and intellectual growth of these women as generated by the subservient attitude of a patriarchal society. Wilde's plays reveal the fact that since the true intentions and emotions of women belonging to the higher class of the society often lie under the veneer of prudery and complacency, women are liable to be misinterpreted. To cite an example, Mrs Erlynne of the play Lady Windermere's Fan has been severely criticized for her "final choice of brazen independence over motherly duty."¹¹ (107) She is branded as an insensitive woman who abandons her child for an illicit relationship. But such an inference negates her basic attribute of individualism that Wilde strongly believed in. Women like Mrs Erlynne do not deny noble instincts but they resist a sentimental and falsifying reading of their motives. They possess the basic instincts of love and care but do not allow the play of these softer emotions at the expense of their individuality. Mrs Erlynne is repentant for her impulsive act in the past and even tries to atone for her sin. But on realizing the idealistic and unforgiving nature of the society, she moves ahead with the zest to live life on her own terms and to the fullest.

Wilde does not idealize his heroines. He sketches them in varying shades of grey and keeps them rooted in the realistic world of human imperfection. He projects none of them as a paragon of virtue or excellence. A woman's vulnerability to errors may extend from sexual indiscretion to an incorrect ideology of life. The Duchess of Padua of the eponymous play embodies competing elements of humanity, thereby eluding any particular denomination of good or bad. On one occasion, she is willing to risk her life to protect the interests of the people of her kingdom, and on the other, she murders her husband in the attempt to secure her new-found love. If her instincts compel her to defy social norms and satiate her thirst for love outside

marriage, then, her conscience inspires her to give up her life for the ideals of truth and honesty.

Wilde's women characters show themselves to be as susceptible to follies as their male counterparts, and thus resist compartmentalization into categories of good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral. They correspond to and act as the very spokesperson of Wilde's disbelief in the philosophy of absolutism. In this respect they support and strengthen Wilde's assertion of the uniqueness of his art: "If I were asked of myself as a dramatist, I would say that my unique position was that I had taken the Drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the Lyric or the Sonnet...."¹² (42)

What is remarkable about Wilde's female characters is that despite their shortcomings, they carry themselves with exemplary dignity. They refuse to be treated as playthings by men or to be regarded as irredeemable sinners. They prudently exploit their wit, intellect and feminine charm to turn those very men into their admirers who had earlier condemned and ostracized them from the society. They commit a sin, yet they achieve perfection through it. Mrs Arbuthnot of the play *A Woman of no Importance*, for example, reaches the acme of self-realization by going through the winding course of human temptations. She shows a deep sense of repentance and morality by shouldering the responsibility of the child born out of her illicit relationship. Instead of plunging herself into the very depths of despair, she makes consistent efforts towards self-realization. She eventually musters the inner strength that enables her to lead an independent life without the support of a man but with a greater recognition of her own needs and principles. The inner urge to grow and develop themselves emotionally and intellectually remains the motivating force of Wilde's female protagonists. The women of Wilde's plays experience alterations in their responses, attitudes and beliefs that play an important role in their self-enhancement. Hester Worsley of the play, *A Woman of no Importance* matures from a narrow-minded puritan to a person of progressive views. Towards the end of the play, she realizes that her

severity towards human errors deserves to be challenged. She shows the "courage to admit that she was wrong and intemperate."¹³ (128) Mrs Cheveley, the ambitious socialite of the play, *An Ideal Husband* also undergoes a marked diversion in her preferences. Initially she takes every such road that leads to material prosperity and social advancement. But gradually she finds herself getting weary of her lust for wealth and power, and feels deeply the absence of life-sustaining forces of love and affection in her life. These women resemble those feminists of the late nineteenth century who were determined to achieve self-realization through growth and experience. They make and remake themselves in the continuous process of betterment and evolution. They refashion their aims and principles and accept their errors unhesitatingly which shows their perfect synchronization with the dynamic and ever-evolving rhythm of life.

A fierce longing to move ahead in life coupled with an indomitable spirit of rebellion against all constraints and taboos characterize Wilde's self-actualizing heroines. While a few women like Mrs Arbuthnot challenge the social laws in an understated manner, others such as Hester Worsley of *A Woman of no Importance* declare their opinions on matters of sexual inequality or discrimination blatantly. The views and actions of these women demand and inspire a radical change in the mindsets of people of all ages and nations. They present significant social and emotional problems that are universally faced by women. They compel people to think about these problems in a more pragmatic manner by putting forward some very pertinent questions vis-à-vis the fate of a „fallen' woman, the relative rights of a father and a mother over their child, and the societal importance of legal marriage at the cost of a woman's integrity.¹⁴ (57)

Wilde's women cannot be easily evaluated on the yardstick of religion, conventional norms or social mores. They refuse to meekly comply with the age-old conventions and traditions and are governed by self-made rules. They are bohemian in their disregard for the subversive attitude of the society that demands the repression of their natural

instincts particularly the sexual instinct. Mrs Allonby of *A Woman of no Importance* and Mrs Cheveley of *An Ideal Husband* do not desist from enjoying the company of men, sharing flippant jokes with them or even flirting with them. Gwendolen and Cecily of *The Importance of being Earnest* are daring enough to outdo men in matters of love and courtship. They are not only witty but extremely articulate about their feelings, an attribute that is regarded by John Strokes, a critic as Wilde's "most long-lasting, or prophetic contribution to feminism..."¹⁵ (09) They recognize their sexual needs as something natural and thus do not hesitate in accepting and expressing them. In doing so, they contradict those Social Purity campaigns of the 1890s that asked of them absolute absence of all sexual feelings.

Feminine sexual desire is explored by Wilde in its complex and even deviant variations. One such instance is provided by the character of Salomé that has become "an erotic symbol of daring, transgression and perversity."¹⁶ (179) Kerry Powell, a critic has appropriately highlighted Wilde's contribution in reconstructing the idea of female sexuality in the remark that "there was practically no precedent on the English stage for Wilde's portrayal of a morbid, sexually frustrated woman (Salomé) of borderline sanity whose only satisfaction comes from causing the death of a man she vainly craves."¹⁷ (111)

Wilde's heroine is contrary to the ideals of femininity and womanhood of the late Victorian era in not just her blatant declaration of her sexual needs. She also poses a challenge to the status quo by making forays into the areas of commerce and politics that have been considered in Victorian age as men oriented. She has the mental agility and finesse to compete with men in these diverse fields. She enters into monetary transactions with men with ease and aplomb and resorts to threats and blackmails, if required, to further her own interests. Women like Mrs Cheveley even go to the extent of valuing money, social prestige and political power more than human relationships.

Wilde raises women to a level where they become the agents of his artistic impressions and expression or become even art itself. Women like

Salomé represent that feminine beauty and charm that, since time immemorial, has been the source of inspiration of many an artist. Their fascinating and stimulating splendour possesses the capacity to stir creativity and results in exquisite masterpieces in the realm of art. Wilde's objective study of the Biblical character of Salomé infused in him the energy to perceive exotic artistic possibilities in her depiction. Salomé became no less than a muse to him that led him to unleash his Greek vision of beauty and freedom. She made him oblivious of all her religious and social associations. Her bewitching beauty spurred him to imagine her as "totally naked but draped with heavy and ringing necklaces made of jewels of every colour, warm with the fervour of her amber flesh."¹⁸ (78-89) Salomé's entire personality seemed so unusually striking to Wilde that he could not agree to a commonplace stage presentation. He envisioned a highly sensuous and suggestive ambience that accentuated her enticing demeanour. He replaced the hackneyed orchestra with braziers of perfume.

He visualized "scented clouds rising and partly veiling the stage from time to time... a new perfume for each emotion."¹⁹ (323) His interpretation of the legend of Salomé, thus, overlooked the dominant traditional, cultural, religious and moral outlook and transformed into a "utopian aesthetic of erotic and artistic transgression."²⁰ (227) It is owing to Wilde's revolutionary multi-dimensional approach to a basically religious character of Salomé that the "1891 symbolist tragedy (of Salomé)... has had a rich after-life in literature, opera, dance, film, and popular culture."²¹ (08)

Wilde's realistic portrayal of women and issues closely related to them transcends the limitations of time or place. It has left an indelible stamp on theatre in ways more than one. Though the problems of Wilde's characters belong to age other than the contemporary age, his "characters do not seem dated."²² (08) The concern of "self or 'identity' of a woman that is so prominent in Wilde's plays is as vital an issue today as it was in Wilde's time. As women enter into the economic, educational, technical and political spheres of modern life, they find it increasingly difficult to

successfully juggle the roles of a wife, a mother and a professional. Like Wilde's protagonists, any or every woman also confront the persistent question, "Who am I?" Wilde's preoccupation with investigating the most elusive of subject matter namely, the self²³ (07) is way ahead of his times. His inquiries gain further credence when juxtaposed with the exhaustive research that is currently taking place on the subject of identity. Though Wilde "anticipates Sigmund Freud"²⁴ (01) in his psychological probings, he also invites comparison with the modern-day psychologists. Wilde also deals with the serious issue of gender bias that remains greatly relevant in the present century too. The battle of sexes that appear conspicuously in his plays is very much a current phenomenon of the modern society.

Men and women constantly struggle with each other on the question of sexual, financial and political equality. Barbara Belford has succinctly remarked about the far-reaching implications of Wilde's maturity and vision in incorporating these issues in his writings: "... he (Wilde) sums up what is past, embodies what is passing, and intimates what is to come."²⁵ (25) Wilde's continual interest in the subject of identity and exploration thereof has also left considerable impression on the modern playwrights such as Noel Coward (1899-1973) who frequently discuss about gender and identity in their works. Coward, in particular, had won immense fame by exploding stereotypes in comedies such as *Private Lives* in 1930. The dramatists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries like Howard Brenton (b.1942) and Tom Stoppard (b.1937) too have not been able to escape Wilde's influence²⁶ (xix) A serious consideration of class and gender relations by these dramatists establishes the fact that "Wilde remains a potent force in theatre."²⁷ (109) Epifanio San Juan has also paid tribute to Wilde's perennial significance in theatre in the observation that while Wilde's plays, *The Duchess of Padua* and *Salome* look forward to Yeats and the Abbey theatre, his comedies pave the way for Bernard Shaw.²⁸ (109)

Wilde is a trailblazer in imparting to a woman the predominant image of an individual who is on a continual journey of self-actualization. His

woman exemplifies his scientifically based belief: "It is in the brain that everything takes place. We know now that we do not see with the eye or hear with the ear. They are merely channels for the transmission. It is in the brain that the poppy is red, that the apple is odorous, that the skylark sings."²⁹ (129) A woman of Wilde's ideal makes her own world. Her purpose is individual psychic freedom and independence. Society, tradition or culture is merely peripheral to her as is the eye or ear to a human being. Whether it is faith or agnosticism, nothing is external to her. She seeks refuge neither in religion nor in morality. It is within her own 'self' that she finds all the answers. She feels no need to argue or dispute with others or to prove and explain things. Her beliefs and actions spring from a deep conviction in herself. Her happiness does not depend upon societal acceptance. Her judgments and decisions are not based upon conventional ethics. She "stresses the necessity of a personal not a social religion, and replaces the forces of custom and the dread of censure with an invitation to selfhood."³⁰ (929) But 'selfhood' is attained by a woman of Wilde's imagination in radically different ways than those laid down by various feminists and writers of the late nineteenth century. The likes of Grant Ellen, a feminist projected a liberated woman as a champion of free love while the conservatives such as Eliza Lynn Linton called her a man-hater who is "unsexed by the atrophy of their (her) instincts."³¹ (231) Some writers have also presented an emancipated woman as being affectedly mannish in dress and appetites, and still others have reinforced her association with immorality or decadence.³² (105) But Wilde does not attempt to alter a woman's innate or basic self. His plays depict that women attempt to enter the so-called male domains of activity not to assert themselves but in order to widen their own circumference of action. They intend simply to be themselves, not just their little female selves, but their whole big human selves.³³ (105) A self-realized woman does not ask for the absence of fears or inhibitions but she summons courage to gain victory over them. She does not try to stifle her emotions of anger, disappointment or love but to release and express them more freely.

She retains her true „self' thereby realizing Wilde's visionary belief:

"Know Thyself" was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world, "Be Thyself" shall be written."³⁴ (1085)

Endnotes:

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