



GENDERED WISDOM: CLARISSA'S FEMINIST VOICE IN POPE'S SATIRICAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract:

*This research paper aims at exploring the feminist undertones in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* with a focus on Clarissa's significant yet often overlooked speech. While Pope's satirical masterpiece critiques the vanity and superficiality of aristocratic society, Clarissa offers a rare, rational voice that counters the dominant cultural obsession with female beauty. This paper examines how Clarissa's speech anticipates modern feminist thought, advocating for inner virtues over fleeting physical allure. Through this paper, I attempt to draw connections between Clarissa's moral stance and multiple modern feminist theories such as Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism and Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze. Her call for women to transcend societal expectations and assert their subjectivity remains a powerful message, and resonates with feminist discourses on identity and empowerment. Despite being marginalized within the poem, Clarissa's voice endures as a beacon of wisdom, encouraging women to redefine themselves beyond patriarchal limitations. This paper demonstrates how Clarissa is a proto type of feminist thoughts and her forward-thinking insights were not just relevant but groundbreaking, echoing feminist ideals long before their time.*

Keywords: *Women's Identity, Feminism, Inner Virtues, Patriarchal Society, Superficiality, etc.*

Introduction

"If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born slaves?" (Astell & Springborg). Alexander Pope (1688-1744) being one of the prominent figures of Augustan Age, is widely known for his satires and his expertise on heroic couplet. Pope's works are characterised by wit, morality and emphasis on intelligence and reason. The Augustan age saw a significant shift in literature with the rise of satire, focus on realism, development of novel and emphasis on exploring middle class life. This is in contrast to the Restoration age which was focused on aristocracy. Despite such advancement the portrayal of women often continued to reflect the same rotten mentality, echoing the notion that women were submissive to men, a thought that is rooted in biblical and societal traditions of the age. Daniel Defoe remarks about the objective treatment of women and denial of their rights "I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world, considering us as a civilized and Christian country, that we deny the advantages of learning to women. We reproach the sex every day with folly and



impertinence, while I am confident, had they the advantages of education equal to us, they would be guilty of less than ourselves”(Modern History Sourcebook: Daniel Defoe: On the Education of Women, 1719).

The Female Portrait: Alexander Pope's Vision of Women in his Works:

Pope's portrayal of women in his works shed light on the gender biases, social and cultural construct of the 18th century, which sometimes appears contradictory. This illustration of women ranges from sympathetic to satirical. While at times, he mocks at the perceived insignificant role of women in high society, he also recognizes the restrictions that are imposed on women by the social structures. In *Epistles to a lady* (1735), Pope controversially talks about the character of women by generalising them to a few characteristics where he says that all women fit into two categories: either they want power or pleasure. This also reflects how women were viewed in the society of that time. “Most women have no characters at all”(....) *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717) was written in the form of a dramatic monologue from the perspective of Eloisa, where she battles to choose between her love Abelard and her religious devotion. “Ah, wretch! believ'd the spouse of god in vain, Confess'd within the slave of love and man” Here, Eloisa's voice is reflecting the pain and a deep desire to be united with her lover, generating tension between passion and faith as she ultimately wants to liberate herself but cannot. This poem serves as a platform to voice Eloisa's internal conflict depicting how female voices were often silenced or marginalised.

In *Rape of the Lock* (1712-14) Pope gives a satirical portrayal of women of Aristocratic class. It is based on a real life incident involving two prominent families Fermors and Peters. Pope's friend John Caryll requested him to write the poem, recounting how Arabella Fermor's lock of hair is snipped off by her suitor Lord Peter. In context to the poem the word 'rape' means the act of snatching or seizing without permission, it has been used to exaggerate dramatic effects of the poem to mock the trivial nature of high societies. The protagonist Belinda represents beauty, vanity and superficiality in the poem. In contrast, Clarissa offers a more rational and realistic perspective. She is a promoter of the cause that women must focus on their inner values, rather than outward beauty and she also highlights the fleeting nature of beauty. Despite such rational thoughts her voice was ignored reflecting the superficial values of the Augustan age. However towards the end of the poem, Clarissa's character plays an important role by giving a moral reflection about focusing on inner virtues by shifting the attention from trivial nature of the conflict to a much broader philosophical perspective. Her message to women is eternal and many feminist theories align with Clarissa's vision. It holds its applicability even in modern times. Mary Astell says “for not usually fixing our affection so mutable a thing as the beauty of a face, which a thousand accidents may destroy, but in a way good humour and the other graces of the mind”.

Clarissa's Articulation on Womanhood: The Momentous Impact of Her Speech:

A rare voice of rationality echoes out of the Hampton court. Clarissa is a minor but significant character in the poem as she possesses an enduring effect in the minds of the reader advocating the thought that “frail beauty must Decay”, hence standing apart from others. Derived from Latin “Clarus” meaning clear which aligns well with her role. She justifies the perseverance of morality and inner virtues amidst the superficiality of high society. However, Clarissa's



character is often considered ambiguous in nature. Clarissa is first encountered handing the pair of scissors to Baron and later in Canto V she delivers a thought provoking speech on morality that counterbalances the absurdity of the situation. The importance of her character possesses an ambiguous thought if Clarissa's act of handing the scissors to the Baron was driven by jealousy of Belinda's enchanting beauty, a personal attraction to the Baron, or a moral intent to teach Belinda a lesson on the fragility of beauty. However, Clarissa's speech proved to be the timeless beacon of future generations of women. Pope provides us an insight of two contrasting minds— Belinda is a silent, passive, beautiful spectacle that is admired by the men around her opposite to which Clarissa holds a subjective voice in the poem that subtly critiques the superficial values of women's beauty.

Belinda is described as the epitome of fashionable elegance and attractiveness, her beauty holds centrality to her identity. Readers get the idea of the glamour that Belinda's character holds from the simple introductory toilette scene, transforming her beauty routine to a grand, elevated style.

First, robed in white, the nymph intent adores,
With head uncovered, the cosmetic powers.
A heavenly image in the glass appears;
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears.
The inferior priestess, at her altar's side,
trembling begins the sacred rites of pride (Pope).

Pope describes the magnetic charm of Belinda's eyes that can even outshine the sun's rays "eyes that must eclipse the day." Belinda is not merely described as beautiful but flawless. While Belinda is "all innocent in her illusionary world," the implied reader would recognize her lively behavior as flirtatious and identify her as a coquette (Clever, 128). Meanwhile Clarissa's description of beauty is notably absent from the poem rather Pope chooses to highlight her wit and moral insights on inner virtues.

Clarissa's speech throws a light on how Belinda's character is merely reduced to objectivity. It offers us a moral lesson that seems to be unusually modern and progressive of her time, considering the social construct of that age.

Say, why are beauties prais'd and honour'd most,
The wise man's passion, and the vain man's toast?
Why deck'd with all that land and sea afford,
Why angels call'd, and angel-like ador'd?
Why round our coaches crowd the white-glov'd beaux,
Why bows the side-box from its inmost rows?
How vain are all these glories, all our pains,
Unless good sense preserve what beauty gains (Pope).

She questions the obsession of society with superficial beauty standards and advocates the virtues rather of morality and decency. At the time of Augustan age when women were



generally judged by their physical appearance, posing this idea was indeed revolutionary. She campaigns on behalf of female dignity where she says,

But since, alas! frail beauty must decay,
Curl'd or uncurl'd, since locks will turn to grey,
Since painted, or not painted, all shall fade,
And she who scorns a man, must die a maid;
What then remains but well our pow'r to use,
And keep good humour still whate'er we lose?
And trust me, dear! goodhumour can prevail (Pope).

She encourages women to value themselves and to cultivate good humor and resilience. Marking another example of forward thinking where she rejects the idea of attracting male attention through physical beauty. She also disapproves vanity and societal values by saying:

Beauties in vain their pretty eyes may roll;
Charms strike the sight, but merit wins the soul (Pope).

These lines were later recontextualized in many modern feminist thoughts paving the way of a rational thinking. Clarissa's speech was full of wisdom in spite of this her voice was largely ignored in the poem, reflecting the values of the society which priorities such trivial matters over meaningful discussions.

Revisiting Clarissa's speech through Mulvey's concept of male gaze and Voyeurism:

"In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly"(Mulvey). Both Clarissa's speech and Laura Mulvey's theory puts forward a critical interpretation of how women in a man's world are visualised by the lens of male desire. In her essay, *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema* (1975), she argues that women in visual media are often portrayed as passive objects solely for the pleasure of their male viewers. She puts forward the concept of *male gaze*, which reinforces the idea that women are objectified to serve male audience in visual cinema. Her concept of *male gaze* draws its inspiration from psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan's concept of *gaze*. Lacan's concept of gaze focuses on the relationship between the subject and their awareness of being looked at, his concept of *gaze* is more abstract and philosophical. Mulvey aligns it with heterosexual male perspective; she is of the opinion that women in mainstream films are often displayed as an object to male's desire, creating an active/male and passive/female dynamics. Belinda in Canto 1 offers a significant example of this, where Belinda is merely given a direct dialogue or her involvement as an active agency can be observed even though she is elaborately described as a worshipable character. Belinda being surrounded by luxurious items reinforces the idea that her role as a visual object is meant to be praised and admired. Belinda's toilet stand is described as:

This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,
And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.



The tortoise here and elephant unite,
Transformed to combs, the speckled, and the white.
Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux,
Now awful beauty puts on all its arms (Pope).

Pope describes Belinda as a “heavenly image in the glass,” which extends Belinda’s position as an object of voyeurism for the male gaze. The mirror is a symbol of Britain’s capitalistic economy that recognizes social status based on material possessions. As a result, not only is Belinda judged by the world surrounding her, but also by her own self as she views her reflection in the mirror. Just as Mulvey’s theory calls for women to stand against this objective treatment, go beyond passive role and no further should be called as an agency without a voice primarily functioning to be seen, rather to act. Similarly, Clarissa’s speech also hints women to assert their voice against oppression and foster in them qualities of good sense and moral virtues. Clarissa acts as a proto-type of feminist ideology that reminds us all that “merit wins the soul”.

Clarissa’s call: Beauvoir’s Existential feminism:

“He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (de Beauvoir). History has been unkind to women and the evidences speak volume about this notion. The cultural and materialistic expectations of the society has subjugated women by confining them to narrow roles and expected them to primarily act as an object of beauty, desires or consumption. French existential philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir presents her argument in *The Second Sex* (1949) where she elaborates on how women’s identity is being reduced to ‘the other’ an object for male consumption. Inner self of women is often neglected or suppressed and they are valued on how appealing they appear to men, reducing them to become passive objects rather than being an active agent of their voice.

These gender differences are a human-made construct and not a natural divide. “This duality was not originally attached to the division of the sexes; it was not dependent upon any empirical facts. It is revealed in such works as that of Granet on Chinese thought and those of Dumézil on the East Indies and Rome. The feminine element was at first no more involved in such pairs as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night than it was in the contrasts between Good and Evil, lucky and unlucky auspices, right and left, God and Lucifer. Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought” (de Beauvoir).

Clarissa’s speech foresees this existential feminist belief by offering a suggestion to women that they must evolve “inner virtues” and assert their subjectivity so as to become capable enough to transcend the role assigned by society. “To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal – this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste” (de Beauvoir).

On a deeper level, Clarissa’s speech echoes the existential concerns of female identity. She talks about the identity crisis that women were absolutely unaware of, where their identities are not self-constructed rather it is imposed on them by societal structures. She emphasizes about how they have lost the sense of self and purpose beyond their looks in a patriarchal society. Clarissa thus empowers the women of her age by suggesting a path, where



women can define their identities based on their choices and become an active agent. The same idea is resonated in the writings of Beauvoir, when she asserts: “A man would never set out to write a book on the peculiar situation of the human male. But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: ‘I am a woman’; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man”(de Beauvoir).

Beauvoir explores the long standing struggle for finding women’s identity in a male dominated society. She argues that women have been historically defined as an *object* in relation to men, who considers them as a mere *subject*. Men hold a central position in society whereas women are seen as secondary, performing a passive role. She suggests that true freedom waits when women shatter the shackles of convention and boldly redefine their own identity.

Conclusion:

The Rape of the Lock subtly unveils the oppressive constraints placed on women during the Augustan era through Clarissa’s enlightened voice. Pope’s satirical masterpiece may focus on trivialities and vanities, yet Clarissa’s speech emerges as a striking critique of societal superficiality and a call for women to cultivate virtues beyond mere beauty. Despite giving rational advice, her voice is largely ignored, especially when Thalestris dismissively calls her a ‘prude,’ undermining her wisdom, continuing the social brawl. Clarissa proceeds how it is ultimately up to women, to rise above these barriers and forge their own path of liberation, her perspective offers a timeless appeal, connecting with modern feminist thought by highlighting the need for self-assertion and inner wisdom over external validation. “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential”(de Beauvoir). It highlights how Clarissa subtly questions the objectification of women which remains strikingly relevant today, a timeless issue that continues to persist in modern society. Clarissa’s words echo across centuries, urging women to transcend the roles prescribed to them and claim their agency in a world shaped by patriarchal values. As we revisit this satirical landscape, her feminist voice stands as a beacon, challenging the reader to reconsider the roles women have played-and continue to play—in the intricate social fabric. Not only women, but both men and women should work towards dismantling these societal constructs, fostering equality by recognizing women’s worth beyond superficial measures and enabling a world where both genders can thrive on equal footing creating a world where equality is the norm and every person is valued not for their gender but for their virtues.

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