

ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SOCIETY AND PORTRAYAL OF PAMELA IN RICHARDSON'S NOVEL

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Abstract: The present paper highlights the image of an emerging woman in the form of Pamela who is the heroine of Samuel Richardson's novel, and who represents the women race of Eighteenth century England. Richardson was aware of the position of women in the traditional British society, which was basically patriarchal and male dominated. Although he is not explicitly a feminist, he is critically aware of the helplessness and frustration of the women, who are oppressed and marginalized in a society controlled and administered by the male folk. She continues to be aware of her dignity and pure womanhood in spite of her untold sufferings. Of course, finally she is restored and rehabilitated but the sufferings she has undergone and the trauma she has experienced remains irreparable.

Key Words: patriarchal, gender discrimination, renaissance, enlightenment

I

The "women question" has been a topic of debate since time immemorial which raised issues of gender inequality in politics, economic life, education, and social interactions. Since the cradle of the human civilization, there seems to be a certain cultural, traditional belief that men and women are different from each other. Whatever its origin may be, this belief has persisted throughout centuries in almost all civilizations. There has always been gender discrimination in our society where men and women are treated differently under various circumstances. Women followed certain norms which were imparted to them by the patriarchal society.

The 18th century is a very significant period to analyse how the society at that time dealt with women. The idea of the superiority of men and their ownership of women is eloquently supported by a glance at English laws involving women. They were ignorant of politics and such important worldly matters. In addition to financial pressures, the severe restrictions, laws and customs of eighteenth and nineteenth century England placed on women made them look to marriage as a means of stability and made women even more dependent on men. Middle class women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not expected to think of themselves as members of the nation of individuals. It is found that society has generally favoured one sex over the other. And due to its favoured position, this one sex was able to excel in public life, that is, science, philosophy, religion and politics, which in turn justified its preference to begin with.

The truly epoch-making publications of the 18th century feminist movement appear to have been written by men in most cases. A prime example is *The Ladies Calling*, published anonymously in 1673. Today it is commonly accepted that it was not written by Lady Parkington, as assumed by Ballard in 1752, but rather by a certain Richard Allestree, Regius Professor of Theology at Christ Church College, Oxford, and later Provost of Eton. The preface is particularly significant in its treatment of masculine prejudice and the devastating effect it has on the mind of woman. In the preface the author of *The Ladies Calling* argues that women have such a poor opinion of themselves and of the fair sex in general because men have instilled them with those very same convictions.

The World is much governed by estimation; and as applause encourages and exalts, so an universal contempt debases and dejects the Spirit. If it can once pass into a Maxim, that women are such silly or vicious creatures, it may put fair for the making them so indeed. Themselves may imbibe the common opinion, charge all their personal faults on their Sex, think they do but their kind, when indeed they most contradict it, and no more aspire to anything worthy. (n.p.)

Similar ideas are to be found in another polemical pamphlet translated from the French: *The Woman as Good as the Man: or, the Equality of Both Sexes*. Nearly all the major arguments advanced by this publication are taken up again by later pamphlets, and repeated or elaborated upon. Masculine prejudice is the major target: man's opinion of the fair sex is due to nothing more than mere custom, and the male chauvinist viewpoint has

neither a logical nor a scientific stand. The pamphlet goes on to point out that the essence of most masculine arguments is that things should stay the way they have always been and, indeed, as they are in practically every country in the world. If women were truly capable of greater things, surely men would not have held them back.

We shall find their mightiest Arguments reduced to this, That as to Women, matters have always past as now they go; which is a mark, that they are really such, as they are esteemed; And that, if they had been capable of Seiendes (sic), and Offices, Men would not have denied them their shares. (7)

Historical enquiry into the status of women reveals that women have always occupied a subordinate position and enjoyed limited freedom in the patriarchal society. Women in the eighteenth century were treated as the second sex. The status and representation of women for the majority of Western history was oppressive and restrictive. For thousands of years women enjoyed very few economic, legal, or political rights and, in theory, were expected to be submissive to their fathers or husbands. Women were confined to traditional gender roles, which forced them to remain in the domestic or private sphere of society. Women's roles as daughters, wives, or mothers were considered their most significant function in society. For the elite members of society, the reproductive capabilities of women were an extremely important function in determining inheritances and maintaining the family line. Through all classes of society, the social system of patriarchy evolved as the primary way to regulate women's behaviour and maintain social control.

From the Renaissance to the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, women were consistently considered to be inferior to men and their role in society continued to be primarily domestic. However, the representation of and attitude toward women started to gradually improve, particularly through the medium of literature. During the Enlightenment women began to take advantage of new intellectual trends, such as the novel and the salon. These social outlets enabled them to have more of a public voice. Furthermore, the Enlightenment, while continuing to promote strict gender roles in general, saw some of the first signs of feminism, through the writings of figures such as the British writer Mary Wollstonecraft.

Leading figures of the Renaissance continued to portray women as they were represented during the medieval period—as either virtuous and chaste or seductive and deceptive. Renaissance thinkers perpetuated this traditional representation of women using iconic images from Catholicism, such as Virgin Mary and Eve.

Although women were oftentimes depicted in Renaissance art or literature, the cultural advancements and political developments that emerged from the Renaissance overwhelmingly neglected women. The Renaissance brought a renewal and rebirth of intellect, culture, art, and social advancement that was seemingly only advantageous to men. Women continued to be used in society only for the benefits of men—as daughters who could potentially help the family through an advantageous marriage, or as wives who took care of the home and produced children to help work on the farm or to carry on a family name. The behaviour of women was also an important indication of the social status and reputation of their families. Women's sexuality, particularly among the elite, was highly regulated to ensure chastity before marriage and the legitimacy of heirs after. If a woman was accused of having an affair it could later be claimed that her child was not a legitimate heir to an inheritance, or to the throne.

Throughout the eighteenth century many women took advantage of new literary forms as a way to participate and contribute to society. This was especially true of the novel, which became an increasingly popular form of reading during the eighteenth century. Female authors started to emerge during this period and increased in number over the course of the eighteenth century and beyond. Additionally, a few women started to publish writings or tracts that grappled with the new theories of the Enlightenment and the subordinate position of women in society.

The British writer Mary Wollstonecraft is considered one of the earliest feminists in Western history. During her lifetime Mary Wollstonecraft wrote several novels, treatises, and other works of nonfiction. She is best known for *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), in which she offered a response to the writings of eighteenth-century theorists who argued that women should not receive a formal education. She viewed female education as an integral aspect of the advancement of society as a whole. Women, according to Wollstonecraft, were important in educating children and, as a result, consequential in furthering the strength of the nation. Wollstonecraft believed that women should receive a level of education that matched their social standing, so that they could be both ornamental figures and intellectual companions for their husbands.

Wollstonecraft did not call for equal rights between men and women—she still maintained that women were naturally suited for lives as wives and mothers. Today Wollstonecraft is considered a proto-feminist. She is not considered a modern feminist, in part because the concept of feminism did not exist during her lifetime. However, Wollstonecraft did maintain that women were human beings, and thus were capable of thinking rationally and receiving a formal education. During the Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke wrote on the principles and tenets of natural rights. Wollstonecraft built on Locke's beliefs and argued that natural rights (such as life and liberty) were given to humans by God, and thus women possessed these rights as well. Ultimately Wollstonecraft was instrumental in building the foundations for future feminist writings.

Similarly, another author Virginia Woolf in “A Room of One’s Own” says ‘wife-beating’ was a recognized right of man, and was practised without shame by high as well as low...similarly the historian goes on, ‘the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion. Marriage was not an affair of personal affection, but of family avarice, particularly in the “chivalrous” upper classes...(35)

Life in the eighteenth and nineteenth century England was to a large extent governed by the class system. The status of a person in this society was determined by the birth and the property. Particularly for a woman, the social ranking would be determined by her male provider. When married, a woman would inherit the social ranking of her husband; before marriage, the father’s social status dictated the ranking of the daughter.

As the social status of a woman was decided by her husband, the women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would have no reservations in marrying a man from a higher class. The only consequence for the woman was a rise in social status. The other way around, for a woman to marry below her was, however, almost unthinkable. The way social status was determined meant that a woman marrying beneath herself would lose her social status to that of her husband.

II

Theoretically, it was possible to climb the social ranks in England but it was not a common occurrence. While it was not so difficult to work your way up inside your social group, actually jumping to another, higher, social group was more difficult and rarely achieved if not by a fortunate marriage, as in *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*. But however difficult, people did try to climb the social ladder, and in order to do this they studied the behaviour of their superiors.

Samuel Richardson’s first novel, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, can be best described as an eighteenth-century “happening”. According to Ian Watt, one of the few uphold Richardson as a conscious artist in *Pamela*, the general conclusion about the birth of English novel is “that although Samuel Richardson was undoubtedly the father, his first born child, *Pamela*, was probably an unplanned accident.” According to *The Pamela Controversy: Criticisms and Adaptations of Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, 1740-1750*:

“Pamela vogue and surroundings quarrels that one contemporary wrote of a world divided into two different parties, Pamelists and Antipamelists.” (Keymer,97). According to Henry Feilding and some other literary figures: that Pamela is a woman who first maintained her morals despite he struggles with temptations from her master Mr. B and later becomes the wife of her Master. Pamela seems to be humble and faithful to her religion and have great respect for her family. These traits fit for the traditional definition of virtue. According to Gerald Levin’s *Richardson the Novelists: The Psychological Patterns* “Richardson shows his deeply sympathy for women from things emerges in his presentation of certain and contrasts between the feminine and masculine” (78). According to Mary Leigh’s *Pamela: A Narrative one has two aspects of self*, “Pamela at least has two personalities, one is the social self, another is the narrative self.”

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the justification of the title of the novel as *Virtue Rewarded*. Was Pamela’s virtue really rewarded? Or was it a mere compromise? Being a male author Samuel Richardson tried to make his anti-hero Mr B as hero towards the end. Richardson, an avowed moralist and realist, confronts a real life plot dealing with a battle of the sexes which ends happily and he knew well that the only morally and socially acceptable conclusion of a happy love story is marriage. But marriage between Squire and his maid servant is a misalliance, a shocking violation of accepted class distinction which Richardson the author must not only justify as an exception but also make realistic and credible. There has been a lot of debate over the fatal words *Virtue Rewarded* where the critics have neglected the novel itself. The subtitle also has focused debate on the “virtue” of Pamela rather than on her total characterization and solely on her reward rather than on the reward of others.

There is no doubt that Samuel Richardson intended Pamela to be an example of virtue, a role-model for every woman’s behaviour, an instrument to teach proper conduct. In his preface he solemnly declares that he hopes “to incalculable religion and morality” (31) with his book. In order to achieve this he “paints vice in its proper colours, to make it deservedly odious; and sets virtue in its proper amiable light, to make it look lovely”(31).since our “practical example” of virtue in this is Pamela the following description applies to her : she is regarded as “worthy to be followed in the most critical and affecting cases, by the virgin, the bride and the wife”(31). In short Pamela is a didactic representation of virtue.

This virtue is presented to us in the story of Pamela’s resistance against the sexual advances, Mr. B. makes to her after his mother’s death. Her unwillingness to comply with his desire-with or without payment is motivated by her determination that she “will die a thousand deaths, rather than be dishonest in any way” (47). She is “resolved to be virtuous” (54).and remains virtuous through all the temptations Mr. B creates for her.

Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded is a story about a young lower class girl who becomes victimized by her master’s attempt to seduce her and her struggle to free herself, which ultimately facilitates her marriage and subsequent rise in social status. Mr B is the son of Pamela’s former mistress and takes a liking to her. Mr B tries to seduce the young, poor Pamela and she protects

herself the best she can. Not being able to seduce his servant Mr B under the pretence of helping her get home to her parents kidnaps her. She is taken to his Wiltshire estate where she is kept under the watchful eye of the horrible housekeeper, Mrs Jewkes. Pamela protects her virtue throughout the novel even after she finally realizes that she has fallen in love with Mr B. After many attempts to seduce Pamela, Mr B also realizes that he cannot live without her. They get married and Pamela shows herself to be quite the lady. She fulfils her duties just as well as any noblewoman would.

Pamela rejects the proposal offered by Mr. B which states that for her virtue is the most important factor and the proposal goes against what she believes in. Her answer reflects this :

Give me leave to say, Sir. I am not to be caught by a bait so poorly cover'd as this! (192)

She is not willing to compromise herself by giving in to Mr. B's wishes. Pamela tries to escape Mr. B several times but fails. At one point of time she even thinks of committing suicide but later on realizes that it is God alone who has the right to decide over life and death.

But later Mr. B realizes that he would not be able to seduce Pamela and he allows her to return to her parents. On the way there, she receives a letter from Mr. B saying that he is in love with her and asking her to come back .

If you are the generous Pamela I imagine you to be, ... other person's favour(250-251)

Pamela finally realizes that she really does love Mr. B and decides to return to him. And they get married without any pomp ceremony in a little chapel on the estate. But some time after wedding Mr. B presents Pamela with 48 rules dictating her behaviour in the marriage. This shows the typical patriarchal society. How men wanted the women to behave in the society? But Pamela does not comply with all the rules dictated to her. She says she will try her best to do what is expected of her but not at the expense of going against herself. She has never been afraid to tell Mr. B what she means and she does not intend to stop that now. Pamela continues to be true to herself even after her marriage.

Pamela is shown as a strong, wilful girl of the lower class who stands up for herself. She fights back against all odds in her life and wins the battle. She holds firm to her values and believes in them and defends them with all the strength.

The purpose of this article was to find out the attitude towards women in the eighteenth century society and how the character of Pamela fits in there. I have found enough elements of similarities between the women of the eighteenth century and the character of Pamela. I have also tried to question on the justification of the title *Virtue Rewarded*, which I felt was missing somewhere. As far as her virtue is concerned she could protect it till the end but I don't feel that it was rewarded because she had to marry a man who tried to molest her and seduce her several times. Marrying Mr. B was only a kind of compromise she made with herself.

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