

DUFFY'S FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE AND *THE WORLD'S WIFE*

Postmodern Reworking of Poems and Popular Tales

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Abstract: Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* discusses sexism, bereavement, equality and birth, and identifies the 'other' as the significant. The sentiments towards men and their deeds as discussed in her poems are influenced by her own experiences, the outcomes of living in a patriarchal world and voicing the other. The postmodern reworking devised in these poems make them relevant for the employment of subversion. The poems celebrate postmodernism further by deviating from the concept of a hero, a man who is popularly accepted as the 'centre', by giving his tale a renewed trivial or bizarre narration. As Peter Barry notes, "The major effort [of feminist perspective and criticism] went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural mindset in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality". This effort is the key factor that binds various parts of each poem in the anthology. The personae in the poems defamiliarize a familiar narrative by adopting a feminist perspective along with a reworking or rather a subversion of traditional form and content paradigms of poetry, and also of the content and genre of popular tales used in the poems. The paper analyses the poems "Mrs Darwin", "Mrs Lazarus", "Mrs Faust" and "Mrs Icarus" to bring out the postmodern reworking of poems and popular tales as portrayed in them.

Index Terms – Duffy, postmodernism, postmodern reworking, feminist, form, content.

Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* is a witty and thought provoking anthology. The poems in the collection are written from the perspective of women- who are either introduced or revisited- from a new and empowering dimension. These women are integral presences in the lives of certain men whom history refers to as great, good, not so good and legendary. The personae in the poems defamiliarize a familiar narrative by adopting a feminist perspective along with a reworking or rather a subversion of traditional form and content paradigms of poetry, and also the content and genre of popular tales used in the poems. The paper analyses the poems "Mrs Darwin", "Mrs Lazarus", "Mrs Faust" and "Mrs Icarus" to bring out the postmodern reworking of poems and popular tales as portrayed in them.

The collection, *The World's Wife*, which discusses sexism, bereavement, equality and birth, identifies the 'other' as the significant. The choice of a feminist perspective, a choice as controversial as its content, is true to the interest of Duffy to voice the 'other' as she is a feminist and also the first openly LGBT person to hold the position of a British Poet Laureate. The sentiments towards men and their deeds as discussed in her poems are influenced by her own experiences, the outcomes of living in a patriarchal world and voicing the other. The postmodern reworking devised in these poems make them relevant for the employment of the desired subversion of the existing repressive patriarchal order.

The subversion of male perspective and supremacy is the building block of each poem in the collection. "Subversion in literary and cultural theory is usually understood, broadly, as a matter of the reversal of established values, or insertion of other values into them ... Much literary and cultural theory which has developed from a critical standpoint, whether Marxist, Feminist or otherwise has become concerned with debating the extent of subversion's potential or extent" ("Subversion"). The poems celebrate postmodernism further by deviating from the concept of a hero, a man who popularly accepted as the 'centre', by giving his tale a trivial or bizarre narration. "The major efforts [of feminist criticism] went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural mindset in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality" (Barry). This effort is the key factor that binds various parts of each poem in the anthology.

The poem "Mrs Darwin" in the collection is one of a kind in terms of its form. The poem is in the form of a diary entry:

7 April 1852
Went to the Zoo
I said to Him-
Something about that Chimpanzee over
there reminds me of you. (1-5)

The poem is the diary entry of 'Mrs Darwin' and thereby 'history', the very basis of human evolution, in here is documented by a woman. The form of the poem is restricted into that of a diary entry and is more prosaic than poetic. The date of the diary entry, 7 April 1852, is highly suggestive. The date negates the popularly accepted 'fact' that the key idea behind Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*- published in the year 1859- was his own. Hidden behind this ditty in the form of a diary entry is the shadow of Dorothy Wordsworth; there is a strong allegation against William Wordsworth that he published his sister's poems in his name. Thus emphasizing the feminine presence behind the success of every man, that goes unnoticed.

"Mrs Lazarus" describes the grief of the wife of Lazarus, in a rewriting of the biblical story of Lazarus. Mrs Lazarus questions the metaphysical dimension attributed to love by the metaphysics such as John Donne. Donne shuns the "dull sublunary lovers' love/ [that] cannot admit/ Absence" (13- 15). But Duffy breaks these stereotypes by asserting that absence or death of a lover can cause the death of love. Duffy demystifies love by asserting that the sorrow of losing one's beloved persists until one reaches that point where memories fade eventually. Duffy attacks the notion of embracing solitude and self- destruction post the loss of love or lover. 'Mrs Lazarus' remains "faithful/ for as long as it took. Until he [Lazarus] was memory" (24-25). Thus Duffy subverts the existing notions about love in canons.

Duffy reworks the content of poems not just through the mere subversion of norms, but also by maintaining the content of popular tales and then introducing a prologue and epilogue to it. This method is used in "Mrs Faust", which is based on the classic German legend of Dr. Faust. While Christopher Marlowe's 'Faustus' evokes pity and fear in the reader or spectator, Duffy's Faust is a "clever, cunning, callous bastard" (133). Duffy's 'Mrs Faust' marries a very successful man who cares more about money, hobbies, and prostitutes than his wife. He hoards wealth which he eventually leaves behind on losing his soul to the devil. 'Mrs Faust' inherits all this wealth and improves the

quality of her living, “Oh, well/ Faust’s will left everything ... to me” (117 – 125). ‘Mrs Faust’ lived happily with what she had as opposed to her husband who “wanted more” (37). The prologue to the tale portrays Faust as an irresponsible husband, and a greedy and lustful human being. The epilogue follows the carrying of the soul of Dr. Faust to hell by the devil. In the epilogue we find that all of Dr. Faust’s wealth is left behind for his wife who lives a content life with it.

The ‘fall of Icarus’, a tragic episode in the Greek mythology, is an all time favourite theme for poets across the globe. W. H. Auden’s “Musee des Beaux Arts”, inspired by Brueghel’s painting of the fall of Icarus, intensifies the tragedy of Icarus by discussing the world’s response to the fall. Auden emphasises the bitter truth that the world is full of self- centred and self- conscious people who never pay attention to the “forsaken cry” of their fellow beings (16). Duffy’s “Mrs Icarus” is a poem written on the theme of the fall but she subverts the very tone of tragedy and reworks the theme to suit the nature of a comic poem. The poem is written from the perspective of ‘Mrs Icarus’, whom Duffy introduces in order to structure the comic poem. Mrs Icarus narrates the fall of Icarus:

I’m not the first or the last
to stand on a hillock
watching the man she married
prove to the world
he’s a total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock. (1-5)

The five lined poem suggests that the fall of Icarus is not a tragedy, but the aftermath of the arrogance of a “Grade A pillock” (5).

Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* gives voice to those women who were never treated as a part of the grand-narratives. Some poems look at the story of man from a woman’s perspective, such as “Mrs Aesop” and “Mrs Icarus”, whilst others change the story into one about women, such as “The Kray Sisters” and “Mrs Darwin”. Duffy thus celebrates the reworking of traditional form and content paradigms of poetry, and also the content and genre of popular tales used in the poems by letting the women in her poems critically analyse the men in their lives. Each poem portrays a different side of the story compared to the traditional version which is centred on a man, and thereby gives those women who couldn’t voice themselves a chance to do so.

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