



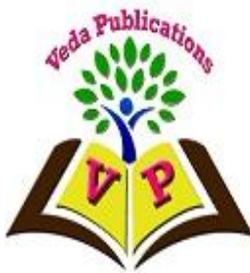
CONTEMPERORY WOMENHOOD IN SOCIETY IN POPE'S *THE RAPE OF THE LOCK*

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ABSTRACT



The literature of eighteenth century is often known as the Augustan period. The Augustan Age was the period after the Restoration era to the death of Alexander Pope (1690 - 1744). Pope and John Dryden in poetry, and Jonathan Swift and Joseph Addison in prose were the major writers of the age. The literature of this period which conformed to Pope's aesthetic principles (and could thus qualify as being 'Augustan') is distinguished by its striving for harmony and precision, its urbanity, and its imitation of classical models such as Homer, Cicero, Virgil, and Horace. Pope particularly focuses on the rituals of womanhood and is highly condescending towards women. His humor is often offensive and points to a more widespread view and interpretation of the value of women in society. Pope manages to marginalize women, in particular Belinda, by turning this incident, the de-locking-into a mock epic, mocking Belinda and discounting her worth. Pope uses Belinda to represent early 18th century women and satirically poke fun at their silly ways.

Keywords: *Women, Love, Fashion, Society, Attitude.*



Pope was born in London to Roman Catholic parents and moved to Binfield in 1700. During his later childhood, he was afflicted by a tubercular condition that ruined his health. In his early years he won the attention of William Wycherley and the poet-critic William Walsh, among others. Before he was 17, Pope was admitted to London society where he was encouraged as a prodigy. Pope achieved a remarkable flexibility in his heroic couplet. He overcame the limitation of the heroic couplet as a complete and closed couplet by making a sense one couplet overflow into the next and so on. The result is that the couplets are linked with each other through meaning and sense. Of the poetic form pope was the master. He perfected an English meter, the heroic couplet. His earlier poems are not free from false rhymes and display that free introduction of an alexandrine line which Cowley had first among English poets permitted himself but which pope afterwards abandoned. Whether pope could have attained to equal mastery over other meters, seems an idle question for none could have equally suited the peculiarity of his genius. In versification pope was as he often said, 'a pupil of Dryden' but he far surpassed his master.

In "The Rape of the Lock", Pope expresses the follies of women and society, and hopes that a few may admit and enjoy the humor within their follies. The underlying picture of women presented in the poem is a genuine one. It is a copy of real womanhood of the age. The poem presents women as beings who are all frivolous and whose genuine interest is in love making. The poem tells us that fashionable ladies like Belinda used to get up very late in the day. Their maids waited in an ante-chamber. The ladies were awakened from their dream of love to the smell of perfume. They went to bathroom and engaged themselves in the task of fashionable dressing and powdering the face. Jewels, cosmetics, powder, rows of pins, scents and paints lay in the magnificent array on the toilet table alone with small nicely bound copies of the bible.

Ladies of the time wanted to make them as attractive as possible and frivolity in every action was the watchword of their lives. They always remained in the company of their admirers the fops and gallants of the day. They loved their lap dogs as much as their

husbands. Flattery was too high and too low for them. They would readily swallow the highest and gratefully accept the lowest. Pope describes every feature of the then ladies very clearly and honestly.

The young gallants of the time have been pictured as beaux or dances. Chivalry was dead among them as is shown when the baron rudely cuts a lock of hair from Belinda's head. The youths of the day were very much fashionable about their dresses. They drove in coaches with women, danced and drank with them. They thought themselves most unfortunate if they did not or could not have half a dozen beloveds at a time.

Love making was the essence of their life. The pursuit of women was their chief object. They used to take pleasure in pretty affairs. They visited ladies and accompanied them to the theatres. Their minds were hollow, their spirit unclean. A fashionable coquet was their goddess, love their altar and their victuals were French romances and love letters of past beloveds. This way pope described all about the then society very frankly. What he saw, he wrote Lowell says, "It was a mirror in a drawing room but it gave back a faithful image of society."

It was not known if pope intended to publish the poem for general reading public in the beginning. The manuscript was originally meant to be confirmed in the two families. Some daring publisher somehow had an access to it and printed a pirated edition. This infuriated Arabella Fermor with whom the incident already occurred as it was her personal affair. Anyhow pope convinced her and after getting her permission she allowed the publisher to publish. So the first version of the poem appeared in 1712.

It had only two cantos then. But its immense and popular reception by public encourage one to add more cantos and thus the poem appeared in the present form of five cantos. On publication it proved to be a meritorious literary work. As a satire, as a mock heroic, as a piece of pure wit, as a display of masterly use of the heroic couplet, as an achievement of style, it is great. Historically it is a great poem, politically it is a read poem and structurally it is a great poem.

The supernatural machinery of the poem has been designed on the Rosicrucian doctrine as formulated by Le Comte in Germany in the



seventeenth century. According to this theory, four elements fire, water, earth and air were inhabited by four kinds of spirits salamanders, gnomes, nymphs and sylphs. We meet all in the *Rape of the lock*. The machines which are supernatural beings are diminutive. They have insect wings. They can change their shape and sex. They can see the future. They can inspect the heart of the mortals. They are airy and unsubstantial and remain invisible to the human eyes. They play an important role in the poem. They hang about Belinda's ear rings and watch her petticoat.

It is Pope's attitude towards sylphs that allows him to develop his whole attitude toward Belinda. His supernatural beings can be compared to Homer's gods and help giving the poem an epic structure. Pope uses the machinery very clearly.

Belinda is a late riser, an ideal, lazy, moony young girl bestowing her affection on her lap dog. Even when it is twelve o'clock in the day she is not in the mood to get up, she still has her downy pillow extremely sophisticated, luxuries and beauty aids and seems to have no other interests in life.

On waking up, the first thing that she must do is to beautify herself with the aid of cream, rouge, powder, Vaseline etc. The toilet table is so arranged that on waking up, her eyes must see the toilet things. In order to suggest that to Belinda toilet is a goddess and applying cosmetics to herself is the best ritual in the service of the goddess. And she herself becomes the goddess of beauty:

"From each she nicely culls with curious toil
And decks the goddess with the glittering spoil."

Pope tells about Belinda late in the morning that when she opened her eyes late in the morning, the brightness of her eyes was much brighter than bright sun in the sky. Even then she is always busy in beautifying herself.

The man who committed the Rape of the lock was Robert, the seventh lord Peter and the baron of the poem. He was twenty two years of age at the time when he ravished the lock. He married Miss Catharine Walmesley in the following March before the publication of the first version of the poem. In May 1712 and died of small pox in 1713.

The baron is also a characteristic young man of the period taking part in the gaiety and abandon of

the Hampton court. He prays to the deity for fulfillment of his desire of possessing Belinda's lock. He makes an altar of love consisting of twelve vast French romances and other love letters of former mire to say stresses. He wants to possess it by force or by fraud. And he is able to cut one of her locks by cunningness. Logically if Belinda is the heroine, the baron should be the hero. But his role is so short and it would be truer to say that the poem has no hero.

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