



## A Feminist Overview of Pope's The Rape of the Lock

### Abstract:

*This paper tries to bring out the negative images of women that are portrayed by Alexander Pope in his poem The Rape of the Lock. His female characters prove the stereo-types right as they are shown flirtatious, foolish, irrational and self-loving. His harsh and biased treatment for the female sex represents the attitude of the society that if an intellectual cannot leave his prejudice against women, there would be no expectation from an ordinary man.*

**Key Words:** *Satire, femininity, Victorian age, stereotyped morality*

The Rape of the Lock is a poem written as a social satire on his age by Alexander Pope. In 1714, Pope revised his first edition of 1712 and published it into five cantos. The subject matter of this poem was inspired from a present prank done by Lord Peter, on Arabella Fermor by cutting her lock of hair. This mock-epic tries to bring out the vices of fashionable circles of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is obvious that he will exaggerate the matter of things to heighten its effect. But, somewhere in criticizing the aristocratic society of his age, he becomes biased for female sex. At some extent, it is also not the fault of Pope as in his age; everyone's mentality was the same. Most of the male writers created women only as fashion-oriented creatures, lacking rationality. So, he becomes the true spokesman of his age. Though he condemns both sexes, his special condemnation for female sex can be felt by a reader as it is evident from many extracts of the poem.

The poem represents the stereo-typed morality concept for women of that age that women must preserve their virginity at any cost but at the same time they should search a suitable male partner. Belinda's guardian spirit, sylph Ariel, inspires her to take part into various types of vanities. But, Ariel strictly prohibits her from falling in love with any man. So, the idea of a woman as a beloved was not at all convenient for the aristocratic class also. The moral taboos on purity for women were so prevalent that women who were not allowed to expose their sexual desires would behave in a strange manner and people made fun on their psyche as Belinda weeps after losing her lock of hair. Actually, those sylphs are various types of institutions which laid stress on female chastity.

Pope generalizes that women's sole pleasure lies into vanities and he says that even after leaving their bodies they overlook for them. But no one is concerned that what about those men who spend their whole time in admiring women, what will be the afterlife of them? Pope nowhere has explained that as he says:

Think not, when woman's transient breath is fled,  
That all her vanities at once are dead:  
Succeeding vanities she still regards.<sup>1</sup>

Woman is presented as a greedy one who does not give her heart to one man but many. She can leave one man at any moment to gain more entertainment from another. She is not a plaything. Men may do whatever they like and can move their eyes from one beauty to another. Women were never been seen as trustworthy persons because men identify a woman with Eve and thus with frailty. In this insecurity, men impel certain heavy moral laws on women. Pope calls women's hearts 'moving toyshops'. It is a total lie that women are coquettes, rather whom they love they can do anything for them.

Pope accuses women for being fashion-oriented and indulging in futile gossips and parties. But, there is no suggestion for what should they do? They were not allowed to take part into serious productive work or into intellectual proceedings. Educational field was also not open for them. The middle and lower class women could at least spend their time into labor or household work. But, what about the aristocratic ladies! Time must be spent and they had nothing to do. So, they diverted their attention to fashion and gatherings. After all, they also had a right to get happiness. And if they were getting pleasure in that way, there is nothing wrong in it. At least, they are not violating the rules of the society. And for their way of pleasure, society is responsible for that.

In Canto-II of the poem, when Belinda is compared to a sun, it means she is available for all men like sun's rays. It is a direct offence for female sex. Belinda's hairs are compared to a trap, laid down on her shoulders for men. This imagery gives support to the ideology of that period that a woman is only a seductress. He says that every woman has by nature some faults, but they make men ignore it by their beauty. As he says:

Yet graceful ease and sweetness void of pride,  
Might hide her faults, if belles had faults to hide:  
If to her share some female errors fall,  
Look on her face, and you'll forget them all. <sup>II</sup>

His comment on Belinda's hair as a tool to attract men is worth noticing. Self-love is another thing and it does not mean that if a woman adores herself, it is for a man. Belinda is compelled to be look graceful by the society and the society wants to poke fun on her either by her self-decorating process or by her not being graceful if she does not do so. Though Pope is showing the attitude of the society, he cannot be exempted from the accusation as one cannot prove his argument right only because other people say the same thing. He refers the male sex as slaves or birds trapped into the beauty of female sex i.e. Belinda. But, in an actual sense these women were slaves who always had to look beautiful to please men as they were dependent on them. Baron wants to win Belinda's beauty by fraud or force, but he never thinks of winning it by his love. Perhaps he has an idea that women are not worthy of love. Here Baron becomes a flirtatious man who burns the earlier love letters of other ladies to catch this new one.

The sylphs, who are imagined as souls of dead women, do not indulge in any useful activity but take care of the powders and perfumes of ladies. In the supernatural world also, they are shown as indulging into useless tasks. Pope also makes fun of woman's petticoat, which is a very private thing of women. He uses it as a tool to give a mock-heroic treatment to the poem and gives a long description of petticoat like the shield of Achilles. In canto – III of the poem, Alexander Pope uses the word 'Amazon' for a woman and contradicts his own argument. On one hand, he mocks on her for her feminine traits and then calls her somewhat unfeminine. Pope shows in the poem that Clarissa provides scissors to Baron and thus the whole blame will fall upon Clarissa. Pope protects the male sex by showing that there is a woman who inspired a man for such irrational act. The sylph leaves Belinda on her fate when he finds love in the heart of Belinda. From the ancient times, there is so much insistence on women's virginity that all the Gods or supernatural elements help women only till they are virgins. It is surprising that there is no God for men's chastity.

In the cave of spleen, Pope represents the view of his society for women, who looked at women either as ill-natured maid or as an attractive lady, full of pride and melancholy. He says that when a female writer writes, she must have been in the state of hysteria and under its effect, under its fits, she writes plays as poems.

Parent of vapours and of female wit,  
Who give the hysteric, or poetic fit,  
On various tempers act by various ways,  
Make some take physic, others scribble plays;<sup>III</sup>

In this way, Pope breaks a moral of those female writers who even after so many problems try to write their ideas in that age. Pope satirizes women of all ages. He says that old women always say prayers but their hearts always curse and satirize others. While the young ones look sick and arrogant and faint often. He believes that women are by nature melancholic and it can be expressed through their physique or literary attempts. He criticizes women by saying that their hearts contain sighs, sobs, passions, and the war of tongues only. Pope wants to give message to the female sex through this poem that if they fail in saving their chastity, it is their fault and they must regret for that as Belinda mourns and thinks that it would have been better if she never have visited Hampton court and if she had concealed her beauty from people. It indirectly suggests that women should better remain into the house for their own sake. Being beautiful was so much necessary and thing to be proud of that after the loss of mere lock of hair, Belinda feels ashamed in front of public. Nothing has changed in that case as today also society makes a woman feel guilty for her rape. And the rapist (of lock) is presented as a victim of her beauty. She was offered happiness from society only through these social gatherings and thus though this is not a big issue it must have been a great loss for her. Baron shows this hair as a symbol of his victory which is again a shameful act, to commit a crime and to be proud of that. Again through the mouth of Clarissa, Pope advises women to be good housewives with virtues and to leave self-admiration. On the another hand, it is said in the poem that,

And she who scorns a man must die a maid;  
 What then remains but well our power to use,  
 And keep good-humour still, whate'er we lose? <sup>IV</sup>

It simply means that a virtuous lady must lead a single life as she does not pay attention to men's proposals. A woman should learn to laugh on herself and always be in a good mood whatever she feels.

In the combat, women are shown as foolish and trivial fighters. They kill men with their glance metaphorically and when they smile, men revive again. Belinda is shown as an incapable of winning by fair means and thus she overcomes Baron with a pinch of snuff and bodkin. Pope also gives a mocking history of that bodkin. At last, Baron confesses his love for Belinda and agrees to return the lock to her. It cannot be possible for Baron or any man to join that lock again to Belinda's head. A woman's dignity is also the same; once it is attacked upon no one can heal that injury whether it is physical or mental and no woman can forgive that attacker. When Pope assigns some manly tasks and features to women and suggests that if they try to cross their original womanly spheres, they will look like the strange fools as the women of the poem *The Rape of the Lock*. Pope advises Belinda at last not to mourn for that lock as beauty is temporary and thus decreases the value of Belinda's honour. There is no such a phrase where he directly attacks on the males or their superiority may be questioned. It is highly doubtful whether Arabella Fermor had really enjoyed this poem who has been insulted in this poem ruthlessly.

By showing futile activities of women, Pope supports that stereo-typed mindset which always sees a woman as a subordinate to man. While criticizing women for their womanly traits, Alexander Pope forgets the fact they used to judge women at that time only with this criteria of beauty and grace. Through turning the serious issue of an honour of woman into a trivial one Pope becomes unfair to women and can be called a true man of his age who could see a woman only with spectacles of inferiority.

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