

Victorian Notion of Morality in Meira Chand's *The Painted Cage*

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Meira Chand (1942-) is one of the prominent writers in Indian diaspora. Her multicultural practice is reflected in her novels. *The Painted Cage* which is one of her best novels and was short listed for the Booker Prize. She delineates her characters in her own meticulous way. Having spent most of her time in Japan she has depicted it in the novel. It is a portrayal of subjugation, immigration, women segregation, discrimination, homesickness, cultural shock. This paper emphasises on the Victorian notion of morality. She has exposed everything related to obscenity which prevailed at that time. She has given her characters a

real meaning of life. This novel is based on a real story and her dexterity has made her worthy to win readers favour.

Key Words: Immigration, Obscenity, Morality, Victorian, Subjugation.

It is apparent at the outset of the novel that Amy Redmore, is literally on trial for her life. Her offence was the murder of her husband, but the real fact was that she had responded to promiscuity. It is also amply clear that the declining moral reputation of the 'frontier' society, the foreign community in Yokohama, would be re-established by punishing her for her sexual and social violations. Before her arrival to Yokohama she signalled her sexual

precocity by becoming fascinated to a man who was fifteen years older than her, he was a man of “colonial experience” and was chiefly identified with the tropics: “The dissipation she sensed was like the sweet, rotting scent of some carnivorous flower that draws in and consumes its prey”.(p.10) Within the context of provincial English society, Reggie Redmore obtains attractiveness of an exotic commodity: “ Men grouped about him and pressed for facts of trade in silk or tea, for tales of daring and disaster on exotic sounding seas. In the middle of their solid country life, he was as brought” for his hosts. (p.9) Amy Redmore’s expression of her desire dramatically disrupts the known world of her family and as a consequence of his proposal that whole unknown universe of the colonies rose up in insolence to threaten them.

When they arrived in Malaysia after their marriage, Amy Redmore immediately became aware that the association that her culture made between the tropics and the free expression of sexuality was specifically a gendered one, and the narrator recorded her resigned recognition that “exotic ... was a word to be used only in ignorance or retrospect”. (p.15) She became aware to such knowledge after her unsuccessful attempts to take the sexual initiative, at which point she discovered that her husband will re-establish boundaries of propriety within his marriage in order to preserve the differentiation between white woman / wife and native mistress:

Once when she bent to pleasure him in the very way he had taught her to

he flung her from him suddenly in anger. “Good woman” he growled, his face flushed with contempt. “Have you no shame, no sense of yourself? You’re not a common whore!there are limits any wife can recognise. You’d better watch your appetites”.

(pp. 24-25)

Reggie was a philanderer and frequently visited brothel of Mother Jesus namely Number Nine and returned home very late each night while Amy on the other hand taught her daughter things related to obscenity. She made her accustomed to things she had seen in her own life. Their nursery governess namely, Jessie Flack from England, was worried about the children. She knew

that parents were responsible for polluting them. It was Reggie who first taught her to please him in a wild way and when she agreed and gave him whatever he wanted she was called a whore. Not only this, he had an illicit affair with a woman who delivered his son some months prior to his marriage with Amy Redmore. He was prone to these illegal relations from the very outset. Atmosphere played its part and later on Amy Redmore became accustomed to the same. He was worse than Don Juan; a character appearing in many literary works well known for seduction. And when Amy herself became addicted to the same he turned furious and thrashed her. He threatened and rebuked her regularly. During their copulation he behaved like a wild animal. Sometimes she thought she would suffocate beneath his hammering body that she had neither

seen nor heard. It was he who exposed her to the sinful atmosphere. He was dominant and made her a puppet.

The different nature of their sexual encounters with Japan highlights the sexual inequalities that are integral to imperialist visions of colonial peoples. For Reggie Redmore, 'the East' is, in Rana Kabbani's words, "a sexual space offers a voyage away from the self, an escape from the dictates of the bourgeois morality of the metropolis". His wife however, as a woman was seen as the guardian of virtue and culture. She must either remain trapped within her marriage, or should risk bitter reprisal. Author's solution to this complex issue, on which its effect reinscribes the myth of the sexualised Orient, was to present Mathew Armitage as a figure of mediation, and means by which Amy Redmore can experience the sexual

freedoms of the east while remaining racially within the boundaries of convention. Their second encounter occurred when Amy Redmore was at rest during her walk in the mountains. There she had taken off her stockings and shoes, her skirts above her knees and her feet hanged in a stream, she became aware of what seems to be "a foreign man, crouched, half – hidden behind a clump of shrubs." (p.33) Both of these characters indigenised at this point, but it was the white man who has 'gone native' - a transformation that was legitimated by his "scholarly interest" – who was able to act as a conduit for Amy Redmore's experience of Japanese culture.

There are many reasons which lead the protagonist towards her downfall. First was her own sensuality which consumed her every time;

secondly, her wicked husband who accused her for everything. Her thoughts were centred regarding those moments alone with her husband. He taught her such things from which she could have died from shame to learn about prior to her marriage. But her each new learning seemed only incited her. Then there was her friend namely Mabel Rice who poisoned her ears right from the beginning of their friendship. She was a cunning woman and Amy fell in her trap as she could not understand her until she met her doom. She incited her through out the novel. In the beginning when they met Amy thought she would be her best friend but Mabel had other intentions. Amy was pleased, particularly for the reason that there was age difference in their husbands. At the very outset of their meeting she began to shatter her innocence by narrating her

stories of wicked men and women.

While listening Mable Rice innocent Amy was surprised and did not understand what she told her. She continued with her vicious stories and made Amy convinced that nothing wrong happened with those men and women as they persuaded each other and things ran smooth for them. She was an evil and crafty woman. She herself being married to Patrick Rice had kept a lover too. She lived according to the lifestyle in Japan and made Amy to follow the same. Before listening all this Amy was happy with her husband who had got a nice post at the club which he thought was a prestigious one. He convinced her that they would live a blissful life in Yokohama. She was also eager for the same. But her friend kept on continued misleading her and being innocent Amy fell for the same. From that day Amy

began to notice her husband's whereabouts. She found him around many women and realised that he did not have any interest in her and made her mind to desire other men as he desired other women.

It was Guy Le Ferrier by whom she was fascinated and people thought him as an indolent and arrogant man but to her these features enhanced his charm. He was a French counsel in Yokohama. Their illegal relation started in an inn and after that Amy became a symbol of adultery. She was called by her nursery maid, Jessica Flack as a harlot because she caught her many times red handed with her lover in her bedroom and not only that she saw her making her daughter Cathy addicted to the same. She felt ashamed on her part. Redmores were so demoralised that she herself was assaulted by Reggie, and that moment

always resounded in her ears. She prayed that he should be punished for his wickedness and when finally she got the news of his death she became happy. But so far as the Mabel Rice was concerned her intentions were to get Amy spoiled in wickedness and she incited her in such a way that Amy became worse than the worst.

To sum up, it can be said that *The Painted Cage* is a story of emergence of the 'New Woman' who refused to be tied in a domestic trap of obedience, sub-ordination and ethical values. The woman asserted not only her individuality but also her sexuality. She did not want to remain confined to the Victorian modesty and was willing to throw away the veil of hypocrisy. She refused to remain the doll to satisfy her husband's lust but demonstrated that she herself would decide who/when to share

her bed with. Her liberation from the chains of religions, ethical virtues made her an independent person who had no sense of sin. The novel also established how one realised one's predicaments when thrown in an alien land. One, then, can realise one's potentials in full. It is based upon a true story and historical facts which provided a framework for the tragedy of Victorian woman who ultimately became a victim of her own sensuality.

Works Cited:

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