

Exploring the Condition of Erudite Women of the Puritan Society Through Anne Bradstreet's Prologue

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Abstract

This paper attempts at exploring the pitiable condition of the scholarly women of the puritan society of the 17th century through the intensive study of Anne Bradstreet's universally acclaimed literary piece, Prologue. Anne Bradstreet has preensely depicted the deplorable condition of literate women in the male chauvinistic abode of the contemporary conservative puritan society in her well known poem, Prologue, with a subtle tone of irony, modesty and humility. This particular poetic gem of Bradstreet has kept attracting the critical attention of the astute literary critics since its publication for the critical assessment of its societal and literary value from different point of views or perspectives. The point of interest of the poem lies in its ironic treatment of the reverberation of the difficulties and limitations faced even by the educated women in the male dominated contemporary puritan society. The speaker of the poem sarcastically gives vent of how she has not dared to claim to be a poetess because of being a woman and having her a "wounded brain" to do justice in dealing with certain sublime topics such as War, Captains, King, Commonwealths and Cities which are normally hailed to be the poetic materials of epic poetry of the most eminent male writers. She also embodies with ironic shaft the hypocrisy of men of the contemporary puritan society in the poem by indicating the fact that male artists seek artistic inspiration from the inspirational goddesses i.e. classical Muses even though they "despite" to acknowledge the achievements of the women. She lavishes praise so highly on the artistic accomplishments of the great French male writer, Du Bartas, that it often leads the readers to raise the pertinent question whether she is indirectly making up her mind to drive home the fact that women can also write "suger'd lines" only if they are allowed to cultivate their talents or potentialities to contribute in the canon of poetry rather literature. What the speaker of the poem wishes to shed light as a message through this particular poem is not to "wage war" against patriarchy as a reaction to their getting suppressed, oppressed and dominated in the contemporary puritan society but to make a congenial ambience in the society where women can flourish their inner creative potentialities in every sphere of life especially in literature along with the male writers. She also asserts that men should acknowledge and recognize at least the true and genuine artistic accomplishments of the women writers.

Keywords: Woman, men, puritan, suppress, potentialities, acknowledge.

Introduction: Anne Bradstreet is one of the distinctive literary figures of the American Literature writing in English. She has penned many a gem of literature in the form of poetry. Anne's poetic excellence is exemplified in the collection, *Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America* which contains her distinctive poem, *Prologue*. John Woodbridge who was the brother in law of Anne Bradstreet published this collection of her poetry in England in 1650.

Before assessing the poem, *Prologue*, critically to trace the exact state of women in the puritan society in the countries like America and England in the time Anne was composing poetry, it is important to have a basic idea on puritan woman. A puritan woman was a member of the puritan sect among the Protestants of Christianity. Puritans had sought reformation in the protestant church of England. They, being the sole believers in the God and His scriptures, intended to remove all the extra ceremonies, festivities and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church from the Protestant Church of England and other countries. They were very conservative, strict and disciplined people. M.H. Abrams rightly pointed out how strict puritans had closed the theatres in England to avoid the danger of being sinned in the eyes of God in the 17th century, "...the Puritans closed the public theatres in September 1642, not only on moral and religious ground, but also to prevent public assemblies that might foment civil disorder." Their conservatism and sense of discipline laid the foundation of the oppression, suppression and subjugation of women in the society by patriarchy. Women of the puritan society had to undergo certain strict ritualistic rules and regulations. Many limitations were forcibly imposed on them. They were confined to the four walls of the house with the assignment of such duties as to take care of their children, to engage themselves in cooking, cleaning and "needle" work.

Anne Bradstreet has dealt especially with the issue of the women writers of her time in the poem, *Prologue*.

The speaker of the poem at the very outset points out modestly her incapability of giving poetical treatment of such subjects as war, captains, kings, Commonwealths or cities. She implicitly reveals that she doesn't have enough potentialities or skills to deal deftly with those "superior" subjects. Although, it apparently seems a kind of self depreciation of the speaker but ironically it suggests that women can excel in the art of using sublime subjects in the corpus of their poetry only if they are provided with privileges and opportunities which the male writers enjoy hitherto. She doesn't even claim the honour of being called a poetess as she thinks her poetic creation as "obscure" with a tone of self condemnation. The renowned critic Eileen Margerum brings out the idea of this poem to be in the tradition of humility or self depreciation that was very common in the poetry of the other writers of Bradstreet's time.

The speaker of the poem expresses her wonder in going through the "suger'd lines" of Bartas, a great French Protestant poet, and becomes "envious" of his poetic craft. Is she jealous only because of her inferiority to Bartas in terms of poetic potentialities? She perhaps has been suggesting that women are after all envious of men as only women are suppressed, oppressed and dominated in the society and never given the opportunity to put their inner thoughts into paper.

She then proceeds to expose her anger against the Muses who, she thinks, pours out "over fluent store" of inspiration to male artists only and deprives the women artists of the same. What she implies here is that only the male artists receive recognition as skilled artists in the society where as women are not allowed to harbour their individual talent in the puritan society. She then goes on to compare herself to an immature school boy who is incapable of being the expert of an eloquent speech and a broken musical instrument which fails to produce sweet music. She admits that she as a poetess is naturally defective and can't produce anything worthy piece of literature. Although she doesn't mention the irreparable "main defect" overtly, the readers can easily infer that it is nothing but her status as a women in the society. What she means to state here is that women are made to believe themselves as naturally inferior, weak, meek, subordinate and submissive and are beyond of making any improvement of their status. Ironically, she also refers to the fact that women can achieve the end they intend to if they get rights and privileges and there are many well educated women in the society who can't be compared to an immature school boy. Simon De Beauvoir rightly states that women are treated as "Other" in the society and while men are defined as subject. Women are considered as the flawed version of men.

Again, the speaker of the poem hammers on the fact that men were able to improve their physical disability by the art of practice and hard labour as it is evident in case of the great Greek orator, Demosthenes, who overcame his speech defect by mere practice and hard labour in the form of putting pebbles in the mouth, reciting poem and practicing speech before mirror but women, as already noted, cannot flourish themselves as great artists because of their incurable "wounded brain." Their brain is wounded for being treated in the puritan society by patriarchy as incapable of harbouring intellectual activities.

Women are often the target of criticism of the critics. They are never encouraged to engage themselves in intellectual endeavours rather they are advised by patriarchy to carry out domestic chores such as cooking, sewing and cleaning houses. The speaker is also made to think whether it would be worthy or not to do justice to poetry by stretching her "lowly pen" on paper. She is sure that men will never acknowledge her literary contribution. Even if she is able to compose poetry by using her poetic talent, men will think that she has come up to do so because of sheer "chance" or she may have stolen the ideas of her poetry from some other writers. Women are never thought to have possessed potentialities to produce literary works. Virginia Woolf in her famous essay, *Professions for Women*, points out the plight of

women because of her submissive nature in society-"She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly selfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it."

In the next section of the poem, the speaker ironically refers to the hypocrisy of men. In ancient Greek Mythology, there were nine inspirational goddesses in the name of Muse. They presided over various arts and served as the source of inspiration to the artists for the fresh creations of art. Irony lies on the point that men invoke to one of these Muses for artistic inspiration but they are not ready to acknowledge the achievements of women of their society. It reminds one of the great remarks made by Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own*- "A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance ;practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover....."

The speaker then admits the superiority and "preeminence" of the male writers. She is not thinking of competing with them rather she believes in the existence of literary pieces of both the male and female writers in the society. She makes a kind of appeal to the male writers that they should grant "some small acknowledgement" to women writers. Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* has given out her idea of androgynous creative mind by going beyond male/ female binary-"In each of us two powers preside, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together ,spiritually co-operating." According to Woolf great artists are always "man-womanly" and "woman-manly" as she termed it. The speaker of the poem, Prologue, means to say that women also deserve praise for their artistic accomplishments in the society and men should not be intolerant to it.

The final section of the poem brings out the speaker's earnest appeal to the patriarchy to extend their praise or honour to her by giving at least the plants used in cooking such as Parsley or Thyme as a symbol of her literary achievement instead of wreaths of laurel. Even though the speaker doesn't talk of equality she wishes to have the rights of women just like men in the society of contributing in the development of the corpus of literature. She admits that her poem is not so refined or polished as that of men but she is sure that it can help shine more brightly the " gold" or rather so called great writings of male writers. It echoes more or less the idea of binary opposition of Structuralism. Structuralists are of the view that meaning is created out of difference as for example Idea or meaning of red colour arises because of its status of not being black colour. In the same way, what the speaker means to say is that a comprehensive body of literature can be produced by the efforts and contribution of both the men and women.

Conclusion: The speaker, representing the poetess Anne Bradstreet of the poem Prologue, brings out deliberately the limitations and shortcomings of the well educated females of the countries like America and England in this poem. Prologue is the prologue of the voice of an educated woman on behalf of all the literate women with a tone of modesty against the injustice in the form of being denied of the opportunities they required meted out to the women writers for having the stigma of being women. What she wishes is nothing but the peaceful coexistence of poetry rather literature of both the male and the female writers in the society. She appeals to the patriarchy that women writers should be given credit for their contribution in the field of literature. Women know, as she states in the poem, that men enjoy superiority in every sphere of life but they should not denigrate women rather honour, acclaim and acknowledge their literary pieces. Prologue by Bradstreet doesn't only expose the plight of the literate women of the contemporary puritan society but also extends the view that well educated women should no longer be treated as wives or mothers by patriarchy rather as companions. Instead of being placed in the periphery of the society, educated women should have the opportunity of enriching the mainstream of literature of the centre through their constant literary contribution along with the male writers of the contemporary society.

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