

Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*: A Feministic Study

Dr. Neetu Baghel

Assistant Professor (Ad-hoc)
Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidalaya
Bilaspur, (C.G.)

Abstract

Women are the integral part of human civilization. No society or country can ever progress without an active participation of women in its overall development. Although the place of woman in society differs from culture to culture and from age to age; yet one fact is common to almost all the societies that women have never been equal to man; they are oppressed, suppressed and subjected by men. In the matter of sharing her live with her husband, every woman is a slave for the sake of her family, her husband and children.

Moll Flanders is one of Daniel Defoe's masterpieces. The protagonist of novel *Moll Flanders* is a female character from lower class that Daniel Defoe first depicted in his novel. The image of *Moll Flanders* has attracted the attention of many critics since it was created. Critics viewed her as a "whore", because she had been married for five times in the comparatively conservative society. The aim of this paper is to find out the feminist aspects in *Moll Flanders*.

Keywords: Feminism, Criminality, Patriarchal society, Male dominance, *Moll Flanders*

Daniel Defoe is an English writer, trader, journalist, pamphleteer and spy. He is most famous for his novel *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719, which is claimed to be second only to the Bible in its number of translations. His second novel *Moll Flanders* is one of the masterpieces in English Literature. He is the founder of realistic novel. Compared with the contemporary writer, Defoe runs in front of the times by his female consciousness to protect women's rights representatively at early times in England.

Moll Flanders published in 1722 was one of the earliest English novels by Defoe. Like many early novels, it is told in the first person as a narrative, and is presented as a truthful account, since at that time the idea of a long, realistic work of fiction was still new. It is not only an extremely entertaining and action-packed story, but also gives a valuable and lively picture of 17th century society. Although *Moll* is an exceptional character because of her ingenuity and extraordinary life, the problems that *Moll* faces are firmly rooted in her society.

In Moll Flanders, Daniel Defoe portrayed an image of a woman named Moll Flanders. She was born in Newgate prison because her mother was a thief. Since her birth, she lost her parents and was brought up in an orphanage. Under the pressure of making a living, she got married for five times and she even gave up her self-esteem to be a mistress. As time went by, Moll gradually lost the charm of appearance, she also lost the means to support her living. As for a woman like her without enough education, she had no other choice but to be trapped into the fatal cycle to be a thief like her mother. At last she was expelled to Virginia. But what was fortunate was that she finally lived a life she dreamed of with her diligence and wisdom.

Society characterizes woman as an ideally warm, gentle, dependent and submissive. Family life and work pattern convey the idea that, women should be submissive, subordinate and dependent on man. She is the mother of man who subsequently rules over her and wants to protect her and keep her under his control.

“Day and night women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family; in childhood of the father, in youth, to her husband; in old age to her sons... ..even though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure as where he must be worshipped as a God.” (Women, 1983, p.68).

The social lawgivers declared women to be impure, for example in the “Bhagvad-Gita”, women are lumped together with sinner and slaves. The ‘Digambara Jain’, holds the view that woman can never attain salvation except, by being reborn as a man. These are the views which have made women inferior in the male-dominated society. But it was not so in the Pre-Aryen age, when women were free and equal to men. It was only Middle Ages down to present age that the situation has changed for the worse. The male dominated society does not want woman should be equal to man. Men’s mentality is shaped in such a way that they cannot believe in women being equal to them. In spite of educational opportunities and economic independence women are surrounded by domestic injustice and the crude customs of our society. Her position in the family as well as in the society kept on changing all through ages. She is hardly given any freedom. Shanta Krishnaswami explains the position of the woman in society.

“She is a creature who as a child is sold off strangers as a supplier of dowry for her husband’s family, or who as a widow, in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her dead husband’s funeral pyre to acclaimed as ‘Sati-Savitri’ as an immortal.”(Krisnaswami, 1942, p.2)

Women today are determined to realise their full potential capacity and are ready to fight with anything that come on their way. Today, the position of women in society has changed radically because of ‘Feminist Movement’.

Feminism is by definition is a movement to gain equal rights for women with men in social, political and economic fields. ‘Feminism’ means the difficulties she faces and suffers in the hands of man as well as by society. Feminism is an expression of resentment against the unjust treatment meted out to women. It is the expression of the refusal of women to be treated

as a doormat or a piece of furniture meant for convenience of man. Feminism intends to rebel against the hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. It is a struggle against hardships, neglect and dual moral standards to which women are subjected. Feminism asks why women have played a subordinate role to men in human society. It is concerned with how women's lives have changed throughout the history, and it asks 'what about women experience?' It is different from men's either as a result of an essential or ontological or psychological difference or as a result of historical imprinting and social construction. Feminist literary criticism studies literature by women for how it domination of women addresses or expresses the women's lives and experiences. And it also studies the male-dominated canon in order to understand how men have used culture to further their.

Feminism is a broad term for the advocacy work for equal rights for the sexes. Feminism encompasses social, political, economic movements that aim to establish equality of the sexes. The definition of feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies set at defining and defending equal economic, social and political rights for woman. Feminism can also be defined as the female characteristics of a woman or even a man. Both men and women can show femininity in the features of their bodies and also on how they act.

During the eighteenth century, some literature sought to tell readers that women are rational beings of nature and that the education and customs of society was what led women to be irrational. Compared to her contemporaries, Moll is an unusual female protagonist. Moll is seen to be an intelligent, highly rational, and strong female protagonist. Moll has a few masculine characteristics that truly set her apart from others. Her self-sufficiency, intelligence, defiance, and practical competence are not the normal characteristics of female protagonist of her time. Moll has all the three qualities i.e. female, feminine and feminist in her character. She is extremely beautiful, she is kind hearted and fights for her survival. She never gives up and continuously work for herself even when she is imprisoned for her crime she searches the way so that she can be out of bars.

Moll Flanders can be seen as a feminist novel because Defoe is setting Moll up to not only be a one-of-a-kind female hero, he also sets her up to do almost everything that a woman should not do. Throughout the course of the novel Moll steals, lies and, uses men. It is argued that Defoe makes Moll a thief because it is one way for her to transcend female dependence upon men. It isn't until the end of the novel that she finally gets what she wants. With her last husband Jemy, she takes on the role of being the dominant person in the relationship. She takes on a sense of pride in knowing that Jemy is dependent on her. In this relationship she demonstrates intelligence, independence and once again the sense of pride just knowing that she is finally the dominant person for once in her life.

Moll has the female quality she wants to become a gentlewoman she does not want to be criminal in her life. She wishes bright future for herself and says "I thought it was fine to be a gentlewoman indeed, for I had quite other notions of a gentlewoman now than I had before; and as I thought, I say, that it was fine to be a gentlewoman, so I loved to be among gentlewomen, and therefore I longed to be there again". (p.49) She tries this in her life but society provokes and makes her to be a criminal in life.

She is beautiful and feels that she can impress anyone “I had with all these the common vanity of my sex, viz. that being really taken for very handsome, or, if you please, for a great beauty, I very well knew it, and had as good an opinion of myself as anybody else could have of me; and particularly I loved to hear anybody speak of it, which could not but happen to me sometimes, and was a great satisfaction to me”. (p. 58)

Moll is extremely feminine character according to her, men take women as per granted they feel their rights on women and have it easier especially when it comes to marriage. But the situation isn't without hope, because if women get a bit braver, they might be able to take that "advantage" back from men and gain a more equal footing. But the question is how can a woman express her courage? What options do they really have in the world to express themselves? She expresses herself and says “Thus I convinced her, that if the men made their advantage of our sex in the affair of marriage, upon the supposition of there being such choice to be had, and of the women being so easy, it was only owing to this, that the women wanted courage to maintain their ground and to play their part. (p. 268)

Further she expresses “I found by experience, that to be friendless is the worst condition, next to being in want that a woman can be reduced to: I say a woman, because 'tis evident men can be their own advisers, and their own directors, and know how to work themselves out of difficulties and into business better than women; but if a woman has no friend to communicate her affairs to, and to advise and assist her, 'tis ten to one but she is undone”. (p. 480)

Society has made the restricted rules for livelihood for women. Society expects typical stereotype behavior from women; they are not free for doing anything, they are oppressed, suppressed and the puppet in the hands of men. For a woman of this time period, the image of her "virtue" matters way more than whether or not she actually has it. In other words, acting and appearing like a virgin is more important than actually being one, so maybe there's some hope for Moll. She is, after all, skilled in making people believe she is something she's not. “[...] you may see how necessary it is for all women who expect anything in the world, to preserve the character of their virtue, even when perhaps they may have sacrificed the thing itself”. (p. 533)

Moll is feminist too in her character. She fights for her survival and dressed as the man. Here again she is doomed to dress like men because the manly dress save her from police as well as men and society. After all her talk about women's rights and more equal relations between genders, Moll wastes no time in talking about how dressing up like a man makes her kind of uncomfortable. You'd think she might get a kick out of wearing the pants, maybe a rush of power, but instead she says that it's "a dress so contrary to nature." So while she wants the sexes to be more equal, she wants them to be absolutely separate. She expresses “I was tall and personable, but a little too smooth-faced for a man; however, I seldom went abroad but in the night, it did well enough; but it was a long time before I could behave in my new clothes – I mean, as to my craft. It was impossible to be so nimble, so ready, so dexterous at these things in a dress so contrary to nature” (p.823). Moll knows that the world she lives in is just that – sexist. And it probably won't do her any good to pretend otherwise. So maybe she figures she might as well make the best of it and use whatever tools she can to get what she wants and needs. “I used

the utmost of my endeavour to persuade him, and joined that known woman's rhetoric to it – I mean that of tears”. (p.1109)

After explaining some of her incidents from life we can find out that in the money-obsessed society, a woman like Moll from a low social status merely has no property so as to live a tough life in the patriarchal society. However, in order to survive, she tries every possible way to support her life. In the beginning, she deems that marriage is the best choice. However, five failures in the marriages make her know that she has no other choice but to be independent. Later, she realizes that being independent seems not to solve all the problems that life brings to her. Thus, she begins to pursue the equal rights between men and women. She is so courageous that she is not fettered by the social situation of that time. Indeed, she does so much that can't be accepted by the cotemporary people and the society, it has to be admitted that what she has done is driven by her pioneering feminist thoughts, and her courage to break the traditional rules in the patriarchal society is worthy of encouragement.

Moll Flanders as an intelligent, independent, and self-sufficient woman throughout the novel. This portrayal is in sharp contrast to typical portrayal of women in literature in the 18th century. It has real feministic novel of 18th century although at that time Feminism was not in the genre. Without knowing anything about feminism Defoe has created one of the best and unique characters in the form of Moll Flanders.

Works Cited

- Women's Studies Collective, Hunter College, (1983), Women's Realities: An Introduction to Women's Studies, New York; Oxford University Press.
- Krisnaswami Shanta, (1942), Glimpses of Woman in India, published by Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi.
- Daniel Defoe. "Norton Critical Edition : Moll Flanders" . Daniel Defoe. Moll Flanders. Ed. Albert J. Rivero. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2011. 176
- Anonym (Author), 2013, The clash of femininity and criminality in Daniel Defoe's "Moll Flanders", Munich, GRIN Verlag, <https://www.grin.com/document/370814>.
- Eleanor Hubbard, author of ClassicNote. Completed on May 01, 2000, copyright held by GradeSaver.
- Daniel Defoe. "Norton Critical Edition : Moll Flanders “. Daniel Defoe. Moll Flanders. Ed. Albert J. Rivero. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2011. 176
- Defoe, Daniel. Moll Flanders published in 1722.