

Wit in Witless: Emergent Feminism in Restoration Women

Dr. Shirshendu Basu

Guest Lecturer, Calcutta University, Technology Campus
sunny.basu4@gmail.com

This article will attempt to demolish two shibboleths conventionally associated with the readings of Restoration Comedy---namely, this sexually charged type of drama was oriented towards patriarchy and misogyny and that it turned some types of women into comic stereotypes. There were vital changes in the attitudes to women in the theatre from 1660 to 1700. A novel space emerged for the female playwrights like Aphra Behn, Mary Pix, Delariviere Manley and Catharine Trotter to write and see their plays being performed. The women as actors on the stage got new freedom from bourgeois assumptions about women being objects of refined feelings, delicacy, purity and passivity. Due to the increasing female presence an anonymous male writer satirized the female dramatists in a 1697 play entitled *The Female Wits*. The eminent male writers were far more ambiguous towards the ladies. In *The Country Wife*, William Wycherley was often querulous about masculine sexual dominance, phallic aggression and female submissiveness. In George Farquhar's plays, there is an instability between a recognition of female freedom and an adherence to patriarchal norms. In Congreve's *The Double Dealer*, the three important women characters, Lady Touchwood, Lady Plyant and Lady Froth are depicted as women who propose a female ethics as an alternative to the prevalent patriarchal ethics. In Congreve's *The Way of the World*, Lady Wishfort is indicated as an educated lady who has a fine collection of books in her private closet. Particularly, what should be probed at are the contexts and the circumstances the female characters were in, their problems, their struggle to attract men of position, their quest for a consolidated identity and their anger at the bondage of stereo-typification. It is interesting to note that there are anticipations in Restoration Comedy of what Luce Irigaray in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* asked of "man---humanity---to glimpse something other. Something not of his world. Not built to his specifications."

It should be remembered that the intellectual temper of the age of Congreve was dominated by the spirit of rationalism. This time witnessed a scientific spirit that undermined religious orthodoxy. It was the age of Hobbes who in his *Leviathan* gave a materialistic and to a certain extent a cynical view of the society with the state being the all – powerful preserver of order and peace. Bronowski and Mazlish say,

"Hobbes took it for granted, as we have seen, that human-beings, in the absence of a state, can only behave toward one another ... Hobbes asserted that no society or community exists before the covenant of submission. More importantly, however, Hobbes was setting up an absolute authority, unfettered by any contractual or 'natural law' restraints (except for the individual's right of self-preservation, which Hobbes treated As a law of nature). True, he did provide for artificial chains, called 'civil law', bind the sovereign, but these, as Hobbes himself admitted, were 'weak'.¹

In such a social scenario there could hardly be any scope for idealized love. In the largely materialistic society of the late seventeenth century the thrust was towards a recognition of the transition that had set an estimation of women from their traditional roles of mother, wife and daughter, female contribution came to be acknowledged in affairs of social, cultural and economic development. David Thomas observes on this situation:

"In many ways the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and its aftermath represented the triumph of middle-class beliefs and aspirations over those of aristocratic society. One manifestation of this was the growing influence of women and women's values within the community. Society's for the Reformation of Manners were founded during the 1690's and in these women played a leading role. Women also played a significant

¹ J. Bronowski, and Bruce Mazlish, *The western Intellectual Tradition*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960, 1963, pp. 240-241.

part in the campaign to purge the playhouse of the
 licence and bawdiness that had seemingly
 predominated on the stage since the Restoration.”²

There was a deep-rooted cynicism against men found in the psyche of several women of the period. This is implicit in the heroines of the late Restoration playwrights. Millamant in Congreve's *The Way of the World* feels that to be a woman in such a society is to be a creature caught in a time of change. In such an unstable world, Millamant is trying to find out a way of establishing stability through binding contracts. Congreve was immensely influenced by the view of Locke that the chaotic world can be made acceptable and habitable by making binding contracts.

With the ascension of Charles II to the throne in 1660, England had political stability. According to a recent critic, Jessica Munns,³ “the Restoration was a period of change, dynastic uncertainty, and intellectual inquiry”. As a result, Restoration drama, especially comedies, reflect “national unease and social alteration,” to put in the words of Munns. The critic Richard W. Kroll also is of the opinion that the age of Restoration “experienced a transformation in the ways the culture imagined and represented itself”. Hence novel thoughts were initiated about topics like nature, man and woman. A reassertion of conventional values as well as progressive modes of thoughts initiated which gave vent to anxiety, optimism and skepticism. With the publication of Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* in 1680⁴ we find the reassertion of the “role of the monarch as father of his people and hence head of his state, indicating that rebellion— in the home or the state --- is not only treasonable but unnatural and, since God created in Adam the father and ruler, irreligious”. However, Michael Mc Keon⁵ is of the opinion that the work “marks not the triumphant ascendancy of patriarchal thought, but its demise as tacit knowledge, the fact that is in crisis”. Consequently, the Restoration comedies display the weakening of the patriarchal trope. Now the ‘patriarch’ or the father figure is shown as incompetent and at times perverse. He becomes a male figure whose authority is open to challenge. Benzayda in Dryden's play, *The Conquest of Granada*, Part-I points out:

When parents their commands unjustly lay,
 Children are privileged to disobey.
 Similarly, in Wycherley's play, *The Gentleman Dancing Master*, the heroine at the end declare:
 When Children marry, Parents shou'd
 obey, since Love claims more
 obedience far than they.

In Congreve's *Love for Love* also we find the heroine Angelica ridiculing and taunting her silly father-in-law, Sir Sampson Legend, for his senseless wish to marry his would-be daughter-in-law. This period saw the evolution of the new laws, particularly the fairly strict marriage settlements which empowered the young ladies as well as the widows to have their own way. Susan Gubar⁶ and Sandra M. Gilbert point out, “an unmarried woman could own property and a widow was entitled to a portion of her deceased husband's estate”, and “women in this period gained greater freedom in choosing a marriage partner”. Etherege's Widow Rich in *The Comical Revenge* and Wycherley's Widow Blackacre in *The Plain Dealer* show how the widows were empowered over men through such marriage contracts. As a consequence, the Restoration comedies constantly mirrored the new concepts of the status of the ladies and their marital relationship, the culmination being the Proviso Scene in Congreve's magnum opus, *The Way of the World*. Furthermore, the idea that the women could be intellectually equal or even superior to men was forging ahead. Congreve's plays can be seen as canvases upon which women create “new woman”.

In so far as the condition of the women was concerned there were vital changes taking place between 1664 and 1700⁷. The women in the society has always been marked by a status of subordination. Simone de Beauvoir says, “throughout history they (women) have always been subordinated to men and hence their

² David Thomas, *William Congreve*, London: Macmillan Press, 1992, p.21

³ Munns Jessica, “Change, Skepticism, and Uncertainty”, *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*: ed. Deborah Payne Fisk, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁴ Filmer Sir Robert, *Patriarcha and other Political Works of Sir Robert Filmer*, ed. From the original sources and with an Introduction by Peter Laslett, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1949.

⁵ McKeon Michel, “Historicizing Patriarchy: the Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760”, *ECS* 28 (1995), quoted in Deborah Payne Fisk, (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.143.

⁶ Gubar Susan, & Sandra M. Gilbert, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985, pp.53,54.

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. & ed. H.M. Parshley with an Introduction by Margaret Crosland, London: David Campbell Publishers, 1949, 1993, p.xiv.

dependency is not the result of a historical event or a social change – it was not something that occurred”. Nevertheless, female voices began to make themselves heard from the latter half of the seventeenth century. Women writers produced prose fiction and Eliza Haywood started a periodical called *The Female Spectator*. Furthermore the female poets of the age continued to write poetry. At the same-time, the women were denied the right to divorce their husbands. They had no rights over their bodies if they married and regarded as dependents upon the male members of the families either fathers or husbands or sons. Even the English husbands could imprison their wives in their homes until 1891. The rise of a prosperous new class produced the ‘ideology of female idleness’, a belief that wives were symbols of their husbands’ status by virtue of their leisure”. Yet between 1664 and 1700 attitude to women changed in the minds of men. Particularly, in the theatre the women found a new freedom for they could now serve as professional actresses. Restoration drama provides an entire range of roles for women to assay. With the emergence of the female actresses the cross-dressed males, the boy actors of Restoration drama, were on the wane. Congreve and his contemporaries could draw upon the desires and fantasies of their audience to see women performing on the stage. This added a new edge to the theatrical elements and the heroines of the Restoration drama became eminent public figures in their own right. The physical charm of some of these actresses attracted the attention of the high and mighty of the land. Mention may be made here of Nell Gwynn, the actress who was one of the most prominent mistresses of King Charles II. Anne Bracegirdle, who enacted Araminta in *The Old Bachelor*, Cynthia in *The Double Dealer*, Angelica in *Love for Love* and Millamant in *The Way of the World* became the beloved of Congreve. Indeed, it can be argued that a new idea of femininity different from the older idea of women as intellectually lacking, developed in the popular mind due to the representation in Restoration drama of women as Truewits capable of holding their own against men in wit-battles.

The status of women continued to be defined in terms of her relationship with man as daughter, sister, bride, wife, mother or mistress. Many people considered women as mere sex symbols or bodies to be possessed, sexually exploited or enjoyed. They were seen as sentimental or shallow or garrulous or fickle or slow in understanding or gullible or lustful. None of the Restoration dramatists like Sir George Etherege, William Wycherley, William Congreve, John Vanbrugh and George Farquhar were free from the patriarchal ideology because they were the men of their age. At the same time, because they were creative men and were working professionally in the socially liberated environment of the theatre. Congreve and his contemporaries occasionally enabled to gesture towards alternative realizations of women in their plays. Therefore some of the female characters in Etherege thereby adopt a stance of obliquity towards the dominant patriarchal modes of thought and behaviour. In *She Would if she Cou'd* Gatty and Ariana are not the weak and unthinking women of the stereotypical male imagination but intelligent and active. They know that patriarchy has put them to the status of imprisoned birds in the cages of their homes. But they have enough spirit to meet men on equal terms. The best example of this kind of New Woman is Harriet in *The Man of Mode* but a far more ambiguous figure is Lady Cockwood in *She Would if She Could*. She is a comic figure embodying the concept of overaged and therefore inappropriate sexual desire. This denial of sexual rights to the matured among the female sex continued to be a staple theme in The Restoration Comedy. Undoubtedly, this was the product of patriarchal mindset that would relegate the female body to the category of the useless as soon as it loses its sexual allure.

In the plays of Wycherley we can trace a more clear patriarchal outlook. His male characters like Ranger and Dapperwit in *Love in a Wood* indulge in commodification of women. However, in *The Country Wife*, Wycherley becomes more querulous of the male myths of sexual potency, male dominance, phallic aggression and female submissiveness. In this play the women are capable of challenging and violating the norms of patriarchy as far as sexual ethics is considered. But in *The Plain Dealer*, Wycherley makes Fidelia valorize the male – constructed virtue of fidelity, even as he reveals a different norm of femininity in the characters like Olivia and Lady Blackacre. The characters of Lord Brute and Lady Brute in Sir John Vanbrugh’s play *The Provoked Wife* reveal that all husbands are not saints and all women are not submissive and docile. Lady Fancyfull is interesting because Sir John Vanbrugh endows her with enough beauty to ensnare men. Thus she is a male embodiment of women as an Eve or Delilah – the type, the emblem of what Lovelace in Vanbrugh’s play *The Relapse* denigrates as destructive lust. In the same play Amanda conforms to the type of the ‘Angel in the house’ though her husband Lovelace is a philander.

Male domination over women, commodification of female bodies, the rule of patriarchal ideology are themes also found in the plays of George Farquhar. The comic situations and the verbal wit in his plays often contain an undercurrent of both provocative and ambiguous sexual energy. Throughout the plays of George Farquhar we find an instability between a recognition of woman’s freedom and an adherence to patriarchal norms, with the balance slightly tilted in favour of the latter. However, we find in the plays of William Congreve a really fascinating drama of women. William Congreve looked at women from new and different perspectives. This is not to deny the continuities that exist between Congreve and other Restoration dramatists, Sir George Etherege, William Wycherley, Sir John Vanbrugh and George Farquhar but to show Congreve’s women are more sharply edged, dramatically realized and more psychologically true than those of his contemporaries. Right from *The Old Bachelor* Congreve opens up a dialogue on the status of women in the then society. In *The Old Bachelor* Congreve shows how the male characters fix women in a particular gaze. Bellmour, Heartwell and Sharper consider women as creatures to be hunted down and possessed. However, in *The Double Dealer*, Lady Touchwood, Lady Froth, Lady Plyant go to the extent of proposing a female ethics as an alternative to the prevalent patriarchal one. Cynthia and Melefont in *Love For Love* anticipate Millamant and Mirabell in *The Way of the World*. They

reject male stereotypifications of husbands and wives as unequal by opting for an alternative understanding of marriage as a symbolic relation between two equal partners.

It is worthwhile to reflect on the name of the female character, Lady Wishfort in *The Way of the World*. Congreve gives her name according to her own nature. For instance, Lady Wishfort means 'wish for it'. Here the pronoun 'it' refers to either 'love' or 'marriage' or 'sex'. So, the implication is that the lady who will 'breed no more' shall go on wishing for it. This is indicated right at the beginning of the play by Mirabell who says:

My Lady Wishfort, ... publishes her
detestation of mankind, and full of the
vigour of fifty-five, declares for a friend
and ratafia, and let posterity shift for itself,
she'll breed no more.

Congreve shows that the sexual lack of Lady Wishfort is a matter of social castration: she is lustful but she desperately tries to cover up her social allure through coquetry and pedantry. She is a wealthy woman having leisure. But she tries desperately to prove herself as a lady of accomplishment. She wants a husband and tries to be attractive to men by being a compulsive talker but she does not get the response she wants of the listener because she is old and has no freshness, no possibility of new growth. Again, Mirabell gives us the frightening picture of female barrenness when he speaks of Lady Wishfort:

"The devil's in't, if an old woman is to be
flattered further, unless a man should
endeavour downright personally to
debauch her; and that my virtue
forbad me".

Even her daughter Mrs. Fainall whose life is totally in vain, agrees Mirabell on the same point when she says: "I believe my lady will do anything to get a husband". She also generalizes on the condition of the entire fair sex who suffer mawkishly and are bathetic in the manifestation of their desire: "Female frailty! We must all come to it if we live to be old and feel the craving of a false appetite when the true is decayed". To this Mirabell says ruthlessly "... 'tis the green sickness of a second childhood and ... like the faint offer of a latter spring, serves but to usher in the fall, and withers in an affected bloom." Significantly, Mirabell's words reveal the operation of a typical patriarchal mindset in his pointing out that anatomy is destiny for women. According to him, the women's bodies define their roles which are responsible for their frightening limitations. When Waitwell comes to woo Lady Wishfort in the guise of Sir Rowland, he remarks almost in the same vein to Foible: "Oh! she is the antidote to desire, Spouse". So Lady Wishfort becomes funny in the male gaze. Congreve makes fun of her because he is after all a man and cannot fully overcome the patriarchal mindset. This reminds us of the feminist Mary Shelley who shows in her *Frankenstein* story that the monster's situation parallels that of the women, for women are forced to believe that their biological difference must entail a psychological difference. For instance, in *Frankenstein*, the monster initially is well disposed to others. But due to his repellent appearance he is dreaded by all who attribute monstrosity to his psychological self. Consequently, he adopts their view of him --- that he is a monster--- and he ultimately becomes a monster not only in appearance but also in action. Though a socially castrated figure, Lady Wishfort wants to select her husband, and through her a new, more independent type of woman is emerging. Congreve is showing that she enjoys considerable power and authority over the entire household. The most interesting part is that she does not appear before Act III but her power to control is felt right from the beginning through the references made through her by the other characters made in the play. To modern critics who have noted her power are Norman Holland and Aubrey L. Williams. Holland has observed that at the end of the play, Lady Wishfort becomes a kind of tribunal before whom the opposite forces in the play plead their cases. Aubrey L. Williams recognizes that the lady is "the head however disordered her own head may be, of the large family whose members make up most of the characters in the play; all relationships in the play center on her." When Lady Wishfort appears in this splendid scene in which she is gulping cherry brandy and calling for 'paint for her aged face', we no doubt find her grotesque but also forthrightly honest about her own sexual appetite. Therefore, the scene projects a critique of the way in which femininity is defined in the society. There is a patriarchal strain lying underneath the making fun of the desire of no-longer-young ladies like Lady Wishfort to re-marry and Lady Wishfort's desire reminds us of what an American feminist wrote in 1918:

Feminists are not nuns... We want love and to be
loved, and most of us want children... We want
this precious sex knowledge not just for ourselves,
the conscious feminists; we want it for all the
millions of unconscious feminists ... we want
it for women.⁸

⁸ Freedman Jane, *Feminism*, New Delhi: Viva Books, p.62.

The malignant aspect of the play is crystallized in the character of Mrs. Marwood who becomes an epitome of an energetic sexual self. She belongs to that category of women who try to seek a coherent identity through sex and are annoyed at the bondage of outgrown stereotypes. It can be said that the playing of her role reveals the way that in patriarchal society femininity is playing a series of roles – particularly those of daughter, wife, housewife and mother. In enacting the role of the mistress of Mr. Fainall and simultaneously loving Mirabell is absolutely challenging. She is going against the patriarchal setup and is establishing the fact that the women can act independently and can court secretly beyond the knowledge and control of men. Her grotesque nature and mental distortions reveal her unique female vision. At the beginning of Act II we find Mrs. Marwood talking to Mrs. Fainall. She says that she pretends to hate men in order to be free to do what she likes and Mrs. Fainall replies, “You profess a libertine”. It is precisely in the arena of sexual action that we may contrast Mrs. Marwood with Millamant. In the case of Millamant, the freedom is of rational action but in the case of Mrs. Marwood, it is the freedom of ‘licence’ as the male dominated society stigmatizes it. Mrs. Marwood reveals her hatred of mankind and says that she would like to carry it further by actually marrying in order to be revenged. In life, she has no particular aim except to catch a man : she cannot support herself economically or emotionally and loses her wealth because of her desperate nature. Congreve assumes that a complaining female protagonist is automatically less noble. So he makes her hide in the closet while Lady Wishfort interrogates Foible. Later on, Mrs. Marwood indulges in a soliloquy steeped in bitterness:

“Man, man! Woman, woman!...Man should have his head
and horns and women the rest of him.

In The Proviso Scene of *The Way of the World*, there is another very interesting framework with which we can situate Millamant and her provisos. The growing influence of women in the period after the Glorious Revolution was evident in the change in the architectural layout of London’s New Town House. Before 1690, the architectural layout mirrored the patriarchal values of the then society by providing the rooms which opened into each other. Through these the lord of the house had unrestricted access. But a few years later, by the 1690s, the town houses were constructed around a central grand staircase with separate rooms giving off the staircase and with corridor, rather than interconnected rooms. This design gives priority to the privacy of the ladies of the house. This boosted the social and psychological effect as is evident in the Proviso Scene of *The Way of the World* where Millamant commands Mirabell: “...wherever I am, you shall always knock at the door before you come in”. Here Millamant is attempting to fight against the cultural biases which caused the marginalization of women. She is also trying to establish her own way in the world. The simultaneous projection of Mirabell’s provisos and his criticism of the then practice of married women to wear corsets during pregnancy only to keep up the shape of their figure, reveal his attempt to put a curb on some of the personal independence that Millamant has demanded.

As the new emergent woman, Millamant realizes that trust, dignity and mutual respect rather than false declaration of devotion and love are the true bases on which a successful marital relationship can be established. And Congreve obliquely but very artistically makes Mirabell complete the couplet of the song that Millamant is singing at the beginning of the Proviso Scene to suggest that the cooperation of both is needed to make marriage a success. Millamant is attractive, intelligent, entertaining and very conscious of asserting her feminine identity. Simultaneously, she is full of a genuine wish to love and be loved. Her last words in the play reveal her positive sexuality. She ironically and jocularly uses male patriarchal language at the end of the play when she asks Mrs. Fainall, “why does not the man take me? Would you have me give myself to you over again”? Although Congreve was sympathetic to female liberation yet as man of his time he could not go beyond certain typifications of women. So he infuses ambiguity into the character of Millamant and incorporates in her stance a compromise between stereo-typification and the seeds of revolt. She is actually assuming male values and ways of feeling to the compromise of her feminine identity. In the play *The Way of the World* Congreve presents the vision of a beneficent personal and social stability based on consent and contractual commitment. Thus Congreve foreshadowed almost two centuries earlier, the approach that Ibsen, the playwright of social affairs would take up later.

Works Cited:

1. Bronowski J, and Mazlish, Bruce, *The western Intellectual Tradition*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books,1960,1963,pp.240-241.
2. David Thomas, *Congreve William*, London: Macmillan Press,1992,p.21
3. Munns Jessica, “ Change, Scepticism, and Uncertainty”, *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*: ed. Deborah Payne Fisk, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
4. Filmer Sir Robert, *Patriarcha and other Political Works of Sir Robert Filmer*, ed. From the original sources and with an Introduction by Peter Laslett, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1949.
5. Mckeen Michel, “ Historicizing Patriarchy: the Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760”, ECS 28 (1995), quoted in Debroah Payne Fisk,(ed). *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,2000, p.143.
6. Guber Susan, & Sandra M. Gilbert, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985, pp.53,54.
7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. & ed. H.M. Parshley with an Introduction by Margaret Crosland, London: David Campbell Publishers, 1949,1993.p.xiv.
8. Freedman Jane, *Feminism*, New Delhi: Viva Books, p.62.