



# A Gynocritical Reading of Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*

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**Abstract**— Carol Ann Duffy is an award-winning Scottish poet who mainly talks about women in her poetry. Her poetry also engages such topics as gender and oppression, expressing them in familiar, conversational language that made her work accessible to a variety of readers. The collection where her feministic approach becomes clearer is *The World's Wife* (1999), where she destabilizes myth and history by giving women their own voice. In this piece of writing, she destabilizes the phallogocentric tradition of writing. In this particular poetry collection, she gives voice to the overlooked female figures. In this particular poetry collection, Duffy uses the original story lines, but the messages are changed. In Duffy's version the portrayal of women is quite different. In the original version, women were stereotypically described as always being weak, ignorant and incapable. Duffy's version is totally contrary to the original one. The purpose of this paper is to subject select poems of Carol Ann Duffy to a gynocritical study and to present a fascinating glimpse of the feminist perspectives.



**Keywords**— feministic approach, female identity, gynocritical, oppression, phallogocentric tradition

## I. INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the gynocritical theory of Elaine Showalter, this paper attempts an exhaustive study of the prominent themes of Carol Ann Duffy. Gynocritical study is the study of feminist literature written by female writers inclusive of the exploration of female authorship, feminine images, feminine experiences, feminist ideology and the history and development of female literary tradition. Gynocritics, a socio-historical investigation that studies literature by focusing on the historical background, themes, genres, and the structure of literature by women, frames a method of analyzing literature created by women. It provides models of interpretation fashioned on female experience, abandoning male interpretative theoretical models. According to Elaine Showalter, the literature and theory produced by men focus only on what men think women should be like rather than fathoming women's feelings and subjective consciousness. Elaine Showalter argues for the construction of knowledge based on unique female experience—not the knowledge as it is produced by men

keeping in view only their own stature in society. Women should be the creator and consumer of this knowledge. Showalter uses the term gynocriticism to denote this knowledge. Unless we use the language of women writers, it is hard to speak about women's struggles with any degree of precision. The gynocritical study examines feminist literature written by female writers. It is the study of the female's inner consciousness. Showalter's reflections of gynocritics have been taken as the conceptual framework for this paper.

## II. CAROL ANN DUFFY AND *THE WORLD'S WIFE*

*The World's Wife* first published in 1999 talks about the position of women in a society. It deals with significant issues that deals with the plight of women. Duffy destabilizes the traditional myths. In this particular poetry collection, she destabilizes the phallogocentric tradition of writing. In this particular poetry collection, she gives voice to the overlooked female figures. Duffy uses the original

story lines, but the messages are changed. In Duffy's version the portrayal of women is quite different. In the original version, women were stereotypically described as always being weak, ignorant and incapable. Duffy's version is totally contrary to the original one. In this collection, Duffy takes characters, stories, histories and myths which focus on men, to present them anew for us to look at not only the women that were previously obscured behind the men, but important events in history from a female perspective. *The World's Wife* as the name itself suggests talks about the wives of famous personalities. Duffy also tries to portray how these wives would behave if they existed at all. *The World's Wife* exclusively focusses on the woman characters. Duffy longs to build a society that is free of ill-treatment of female, enhancing equality among people. In consequence, we see that so many of her poems illustrate the voice of the neglected and humiliated women. The Western societal and historical traditions have long been male-centred, i.e. this society highlights on men's activities. (Hashim,2017, p. 332) Duffy shows that the title *The World's Wife* refers to a world which is dominated by the males and women are only the wives. Women are characterized as the wives of famous men; they have no identity. The women in society are known through the identity of men. However, in the collection, Duffy explores the wives as more than wives. She proves through her poem of the collection that women also have their own freedom and self-identity. They are equally significant and wonderful as their husbands or male counterparts. (Ali,2024, p.61)

### III. EXPLORING GYNOCRITICISM IN *THE WORLD'S WIFE*

Gynocriticism as the name itself suggests, aims to create a separate branch of 'women's poetics'. Gynocriticism is the study of women's writing. The term gynocritics was coined by Elaine Showalter in 1979 to refer to a form of feminist literary criticism that is concerned with women as writers. There are thousands of women across the globe who have been trying to express their voice either in the form of prose, poetry or verses. Gynocriticism has also given rise to female creative expression. The entire theme of gynocriticism is predicated upon the fact that women need to be established as authors. Women's writing needs to be prioritised to develop a separate branch of Women's literature. Gynocriticism is the branch of feminist criticism that focuses on women's art. Elaine Showalter in *Towards a Feminist Poetics* and *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness* aims to develop two distinct categories in feminist criticism: (a) the women reader as a consumer of literature and (b) the woman author, the producer of literature.

(Mukhopadhyay,2016, p.47). *The World's Wife* is an exploration of feminine identity. The women in these poems, whether real or mythical are given a voice that they have been denied in traditional narratives. *The World's Wife* mainly talks about the negligence of women particularly the wives of famous historical characters. This particular work by Carol Ann Duffy makes an attempt to explore the identities of women who have often been overlooked. The traditional binaries of masculinity and femininity inherent in Western epistemology thrive on the deeply entrenched hierarchisation of male over the female. Femininity is traditionally conceived as the 'other' in patriarchal societies, as men have dominated the public sphere. Beauvoir emphasises that, in order to perpetuate patriarchal ideology, men have always assumed the position of 'universal subject', denying women autonomy and agency. She underlines the reality that women are complicit in the continuation of patriarchy. (Mukhopadhyay,2016, p. 31).

In this particular poetry, Duffy uses the original story lines, but the messages are changed. In Duffy's version the portrayal of women is quite different. She rightly analyses the poems from a female framework, as the theory of gynocriticism suggests. In the original version, women were stereotypically described as always being weak, ignorant and incapable. Duffy's version is totally contrary to the original one. For instance, in "Little Red Cap", Duffy gave the silent girl the right to speak for herself by telling people she is emotional but also rational, intellectual and brave enough to struggle with what she hates.

In *The World's Wife*, Duffy is trying to give voice to the unheard female voices. Her poems give voice to a multitude of characters. Duffy also endows her characters with intelligence and an agency of their own. In this particular poetry collection, Duffy manipulates well known texts to induce a sense of pain caused by patriarchal oppression. This poetry collection explores the presentation of liberated women. *The World's Wife* is a modernized narration of famous myths and fables retold through the perspective of a liberated female voice, depicting feminism through cleverness and humour.

For example, in 'Mrs Aesop', she presents the character in a tone that is suggestive of her anger. In this particular poem, we get to see that Mrs Aesop is annoyed with her husband. The lines also suggest that she has suffered a lot throughout her marriage and has found the experience painful. Duffy wants us to feel sympathy for Mrs. Aesop as she suggests that they never actually get to go out and that she is constantly ignored by her husband, there is no mention of her, only of animals from his tales, in the rest of the stanza. She says,

Going out was worst. He'd stand at our gate, look, then  
 leap;  
 scour the hedgerows for a shy mouse, the fields  
 for a sly fox, the sky for one particular swallow  
 that couldn't make a summer. The jackdaw, according to  
 him,  
 envied the eagle. Donkeys would, on the whole, prefer to  
 be lions.  
 (Duffy)

We feel anger towards Aesop because of his cautious nature ('look, then leap') that goes against the lively and humorous character of his wife. His obsessive behaviour also means that he ignores her when they are meant to be going out. Poems like *Mrs Darwin*, *Mrs Sisyphus* deal with almost the same theme. Both the men shown in these poems seem to be obsessed with their work, which leads to the negligence of their wives. In "Mrs Lazarus", the character Mrs Lazarus describes her life without her husband. Duffy shows in this poem the loss of love and the inevitable temporary nature of a relationship. Carol Ann Duffy in this particular poetry collection rightly talks about giving voice to women who have been neglected. She has rightfully portrayed women who talk about loneliness and longing when their husband is away, thereby challenging the romanticized image of a faithful wife. They are indeed protagonists of their own lives. They are complex, multifaceted individual, each with their own desires, fears and aspirations.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Carol Ann Duffy has rightfully contributed to the field of gynocriticism through her text, *The World's Wife*. Duffy also uses satire to challenge the traditional gender roles. The poetry collection not only focusses on the female figures but also on the male figures and their negligence towards their female counterparts. Duffy depicts through her poems the complex realities of women's lives throughout history. Duffy also rightfully exposes the power structures of the society through the use of satire in her writings.

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