



Staging an Encounter: Citizenship and Resistance

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Abstract— Maxim Gorky's 'Mother' has been hailed as a timely intervention by a writer in exile that succeeded in rallying the flagging hopes of a citizenry that was reeling under the failure of the first Russian Revolution. The novel offers a different perspective on the ways in which women resisted attempts at repressing revolutionary voices across classes. This paper attempts to look at the differences in the depictions of the Russian and French Revolutions in Gorky's *Mother* and Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities' respectively. Comparisons will also be drawn between the two novels as ones that vary in their representation of women as participants in a revolution. The paper also proposes to scrutinize the strikingly unusual manner in which the French Revolution itself has been presented by Dickens with a very deep-rooted patriarchal agenda that aims at disempowering women's agency through characters such as Madame Defarge, La Vengeance, Miss Pross and Lucie Manette. The paper will seek to validate the position that Dickens' representation of the French Revolution unlike Gorky's depiction of the Russian Revolution is guilty of a stark gender bias that is evidenced in his "extreme portrayal and rejection of Madame Defarge and his exaggerated depiction of Lucie as a desired feminine form" that also demonstrates patriarchal anxiety about powerful women and a fear of revolution itself (Robson: 329).

Keywords— citizenship, empowerment, gender bias, patriarchal anxiety, resistance

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically women have been left out of the exercise of political power. While they were denied suffrage in Western democracies for a long period of time, they continue to be significantly under-represented in formal political forums and seminal decision-making bodies all over the world. Politics has therefore been and continues to remain a male-dominated arena and activity. A standard argument used to deny women the right to vote or participate in political decision-making is that they are naturally irrational. Theorists and philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Aristotle, Plato and Rousseau have argued that men are naturally rational and therefore ideally suited for political decision-making while women are emotional and more suited to the private, affective and domestic sphere of the home. In order to resist this exclusion, women had to claim that they were not in fact different, but were men's equals; in that, they were equally capable of being rational and of taking part in the political sphere.

On the other hand, paradoxically, in mobilizing as women and claiming rights for women, they were affirming their identity as women and thus reinforcing the existence of sexual difference. Thus, though women have acquired suffrage in democracies the world over, they have found that the right to vote does not automatically lead them to the road of full political citizenship. An important element of political citizenship is political participation, and this must translate into far more than a mere chance to vote every few years.

II. METHOD AND DISCUSSION

A thorny issue with most feminists has always been that of political representation. Despite having the rights to eligibility and the right to vote, women are still terribly underrepresented in most parliamentary democracies the world over and also in decision-making bodies that count, both locally and nationally. Women have been very

successfully engaged in grass-roots activism the world over. However, this kind of political action at an informal and associational level has often been rendered invisible by classist, masculine definitions of power as a top-down concept. Feminists have protested this exclusion of women from full and active political citizenship. All through history, both the liberal and the republican traditions have rested on a fundamental dichotomy of the private and the public spheres.

The liberal tradition perceives the private sphere as a domain characterized by individual freedom where the individual is unfettered by the power of the state. The republican tradition on the other hand, views the public sphere as the area of true freedom for it is here that the individual has the potential to attain his true humanity through active citizenship and political participation. However, in both these traditions, a woman's role has been delimited to the private domestic sphere of a life bound to the family where she is socially conditioned and acculturated to subsume her will, interests and individuality in favour of the desires and interests of her family members. The private sphere of family life has historically been perceived as outside the purview of the legal guardians of the public sphere of politics.

Pateman (1988) has forwarded an interesting and significant critique of the liberal contract theory where she argues that theorists of the social contract have been oblivious to the fundamental basis of women's subordination that is, the sexual contract. She contends that the patriarchal domination of the realm of the active public sphere rests on the assumption of a fundamental sexual difference that women are assumed to naturally lack the attributes and capabilities of individuals and are therefore denied personhood and civil freedom. Sexual difference thus also translates into the difference between political freedom and suppression.

What is ironic here is that the private sphere has historically been viewed as a necessary and important part of civil or public life. In fact, it is usually viewed as rather foundational to society. Many feminist writers (Pateman 1988; Lister 1997) have argued that the segregation of women from citizenship was a fundamental feature of their having internalized notions associated with the private, the familial and the emotional. Modern liberal contract theory also assumes a natural separation between the public and the private although feminists have for several years, persistently argued for the interdependence of the two spheres.

However, Pateman realizes that it is not enough to merely claim that the individual is gender-neutral in order to ensure complete political citizenship for women as in

doing so one would be ignoring the interrelation between the public and private spheres. She comments insightfully on the dangers implicit in de-prioritizing the issue of sexual difference:

To argue that patriarchy is best confronted by endeavouring to render sexual difference politically irrelevant is to accept the view that the civil (public) realm and the 'individual' are uncontaminated by patriarchal subordination. Patriarchy is then seen as a private familial problem that can be overcome if public laws and policies treat women as if they were exactly the same as men (1987:17).

Fraisse (1995) also forwards a similar critique of French republican thought by noting that although women were active participants in the French revolution, they were completely excluded from active citizenship in the post-revolutionary regime. She focuses on three areas of exclusion in post-revolutionary theory. Firstly, democratic thought which excluded women from active citizenship; secondly, republican thought which excluded women from political representation; and thirdly, feudal, or monarchical thought which ensured the continuing symbolic representation of political power as masculine. She contends that the essential fear that gripped democratic theorists was that bringing about parity between the sexes would lead to friendship replacing love and this would destroy the balance of sexual relations which has traditionally favoured patriarchy. The segregation of the private and public spheres was thus incorporated to maintain the boundaries of sexual difference. According to Fraisse, patriarchy then came up with an alternative strategy, "that of no longer finding in women the other to themselves, the other who assured their power" (Fraisse 330).

Even radical philosophers such as Rousseau felt that women should confine themselves to domestic government and not concern themselves with the public space of politics. Feminist theorists have persistently engaged themselves in pointing out that the boundaries between the private and the public spheres are arbitrary in nature and that the very basis of this dichotomy must be challenged. Second wave feminists in the 1960s and 70s challenged traditional views on the family and personal life as being outside the purview of politics. They argued that the private sphere was in fact a crucial and primary site of power relations and of gendered inequality. These theorists emphasized the idea that personal circumstances are in fact structured by public factors. For instance, women's lives

are regulated and conditioned by government policies on childcare and by the allocation of welfare benefits, labour laws and the sexual division of labour. Laws on rape, abortion, sexual harassment also influence women's lives. So-called personal problems can thus be solved only by means of political action. The intertwining of the private with the public is thus inevitable and the two spheres cannot be separated from each other.

Feminist theorists such as Ruth Lister have also challenged the moral boundary erected between the public and the private suggesting that there is a tendency to see justice as a public value and care as a private one. This, for instance, explains why nursing as an occupation is dominated by women; so is teaching, primarily because it allows women the time and the flexibility required to balance both their home and their career, the private and the public. Lister comments on the manner in which the dichotomy "contributes to the opposition of justice and care" and becomes an incapacitating force through its "convenient camouflaging of men's dependence upon women for care and servicing" (1997: 120).

The dynamics between women and revolutions have always caught the interest of researchers and sociologists worldwide because of the inherent tension between the apparently effortless manner in which women are expected to slip in and out of these passionate but temporary roles as they straddle the public and private spheres. It is in the light of these critiques that a comparative analysis between two literary texts set against the backdrop of a revolution becomes illuminating. The context of a revolution immediately suggests agency. While Dickens seems to contest it even while he hyperbolically exaggerates it in the characters of Madame Defarge and La Vengeance, Maxim Gorky offers a point of view that is ensconced within the scope of socialist realism. A marked difference exists between social realism and socialist realism which needs to be elucidated in order to clarify why the method enables a vivid depiction of the Russian revolution in *Mother* without romanticizing it or melodramatically aggrandizing its pioneers. The hero of the novel is purportedly the working class son of Pelageya Nilovna Vlasova, a woman who has consistently been the victim of domestic violence. She has raised her son Palev singlehandedly, determined to give him an upbringing that did not culminate in a life that wallowed in drink and aggressive behaviour unleashed upon women and children. However, Gorky does something that demonstrates how it was necessary for women across classes to participate actively in order to make any revolution a success. He shows women from

different strata of society contributing in their own way, quietly creating a revolution, empowering themselves with agency in a self-appointed inspired manner.

Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* is a novel with intricately woven plot lines driven by intriguing characters. The women characters are often primary forces in driving the other players and advancing the plot. Dickens seems to have a very definite patriarchal agenda in her depiction of his women in the novel. He apparently portrays how women can make men act according to their will. The women, especially Madame Defarge and La Vengeance appear to be calling the shots in planning and meticulously executing the French Revolution and its resultant coup. Dickens systematically feminizes the revolution itself going to the extent of calling its instrument of death, La Guillotine. As a work of historical fiction, this novel is fascinating for Dickens's imaginative handling of what could be viewed as monarchical propaganda against the French revolutionary fervour. Published in a climate that was fraught with the fear that a similar civil war could break out in England if the English governance did not take remedial measures, the novel has been seen by critics such as Lisa Robson, as one propelled by a definite patriarchal agenda that is not only chauvinistic but also supportive of a classist monarchy.

Charles Dickens systematically uses women characters throughout this work to represent the moral climate of a nation, class and family. For instance, Madame Defarge is depicted as a woman who knows no remorse and is merciless when it comes to personal vendetta. Her rather unethical nature seems to have been predominantly highlighted by the Victorian novelist to denounce France as a nation and this is allegorically represented in the loyal Englishwoman who is servile to her mistress Lucie Manette, Miss Pross's symbolic victory over the Frenchwoman in her almost epic battle at the end of the novel. Both these women, Madame Defarge as well as Miss Pross are also portrayed as being rather masculine in their behaviour and temperament. This fine line being violated is also disapproved of by Dickens in his authorial dismissal of these two women characters. Miss Pross is rendered deaf and Madame Defarge is tellingly killed (albeit accidentally) by Miss Pross.

The characters around whom the action revolves in both the settings around which the novel is organized are women namely, Lucie Manette, Madame Defarge and Miss Pross. These three women form a complex triangle. Each woman, according to the researcher, Lisa Robson, corresponds to the other two either as some form of double or as an antitype. If Madame Defarge represents a French peasant who is vengeful and unforgiving, Miss Manette

represents the perfect angel who symbolizes the golden thread of hope to which all humanity must cling if they are to stop themselves from becoming cynical, while Miss Pross represents the lower class comic counterpart of the English woman. Miss Pross does all that Lucie as a middle class woman cannot do. Madame Defarge and Miss Pross, two women of similar social standing on opposite sides of the novel's personal conflict appear to have little in common yet are deceptively similar. The one quality that links them in an apparent lack of conventionality. While they are shown as breaking free from traditional sexual boundaries, Dickens also seems to show how patriarchy, both English as well as French, recontains them in traditional positions according to Robson.

III. CONCLUSION

Dickens portrays his women in ways that follow stereotypes of the period. He pairs strong minded women with negative personality traits. The Guillotine, for example, has been afforded a feminine character by referring to the weapon as "the sharp female called La Guillotine" (Dickens: 320). In the words of the researcher Lisa Robson, "Dickens raises La Guillotine to near mythic status by suggesting her timelessness and universal familiarity, and clearly identifies as female this symbol of the bloodthirstiness of revolutionary vengeance" (Robson: 329). In stark contrast, Gorky's protagonist, Pelageya Nilovna Vlasova, although politically ignorant, becomes an agent of consciousness raising by generating awareness of the revolution by transporting pamphlets that she smuggles on her own person, the only resource available to her. Through this action of his central character, Pelageya Nilovna Vlasova, Gorky also highlights his central theme, a mother's awakening from a life of fear and ignorance. Pelageya Nilovna Vlasova has suffered as the wife of a drunkard, has raised her son against all odds, only to see Palev take to drinking too. Her awakening as also Palev's is linked to the revolution, which inspires both to make their lives count to the extent of becoming ready to sacrifice themselves for a noble cause, awareness raising.

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