



UNFOLDING LAYERS OF WOMANHOOD: A NOVEL PERSPECTIVE OF ROALD DAHL'S *MATILDA*

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ABSTRACT

Roald Dahl's novel *Matilda* is one of the famous novels on children's literature of the 20th century. At the first glance, the story may be seen as only for children but delving deeper one can discover that it also concerns women and their present condition in heterosexual society. As it is said that gender is a performance rather than biological identity, this paper aims at rereading *Matilda* from the feminist perspective to uncover the layers of womanhood. Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal text "The Second Sex" aptly writes woman is not born but created as she is trained to take the position of suppressed Other. In this paper, we proposed to critically scan the story in keeping patriarchal construction in mind and how it plays a malicious role in shaping women's psyche in general. In patriarchal construction, women live always in the margin and struggle to occupy the center. The present educational system also plays a crucial role in making the creature called woman. Patrilineal society always keeps the woman away from asserting their identity so to perpetuate the male hierarchy. Women instead of cultivating inner qualities waste their time in enhancing their physical beauty. Patriarchy tends to glorify women in terms of their quality of self-negation for the sake of family and children. Patriarchy looks women as fragile, meek and submissive. It never accepts women who seek to go beyond such conventional rules as it isolates them from the mainstream society. Dahl's novel is definitely of a child; however, it presents some very interesting women characters which also reveal his understanding of women in general. Hence, this paper also examines the novel keeping Dahl's portrayal of women in mind as a writer of children enacts an important role in shaping the young minds.

KEYWORDS : children's literature, feminism, women, marginal identity, patriarchy

Roald Dahl born in the year 1916, an Edwardian writer mostly explores the theme of the harmonious bond between family members in his writings. Dahl's much-appreciated novel "*Matilda*" depicts a thought-provoking narrative which unfolds layers of issues related to children, women and social evils. The tale compels the reader to ponder over the social behaviors of the 90s and its impact on children, women, and society at large. It is said a true picture of a society can be assessed by studying its treatment towards women and children. The story, "*Matilda*" is having a wide range of women characters who represent various shades of womanhood reflecting the traditional heterosexual construction and its demands. Roald Dahl's "*Matilda*" is basically a narrative which sings a triumph of a little girl over tyrant adults. *Matilda* a kid with extraordinary powers emerges as a savior of many other kids even of adults. She takes charge of the situation and out to set things right. There are five women characters in this novel including *Matilda* who behaves like a grown-up adult. Others are *Matilda*'s mother Mrs. Wormwood, her principal Trunchbull, class teacher Miss Jennifer Honey and a librarian.

Marry Wollstonecraft in her seminal work, "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" voices significance of education in overall development of women and society. She also writes how society denying education to women makes her inferior, a burden to herself and to the society. She writes, "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison." (Wollstonecraft chap-3). Educating a woman is like educating the whole family. Hence, mother's education is very crucial in the holistic development of children. A mother plays a significant role in the construction of a family and in the upbringing of children as she is the primary caregiver. In this respect, if we critically analyse *Matilda*'s mom than we will see that she is like any woman within patrilineal construction perpetuating socially established norms. She is no exception gives prime importance to physical beauty instead of intellectual development. Her conversation with Miss Honey reflects the common attitude of women towards life as they take marriage being the ultimate goal of life. She says, "A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books,..." (79).

Dahl sketches *Matilda*'s mother as a self-obsessed, lousy, beauty conscious, and a money minded woman who neglects her duty as a mother. She loves to play bingo and goes out every day to play after her husband goes to work instead of devoting her time to nurture her kids or providing food. She hardly cares about her kids' schooling and forgets the real age of *Matilda* as she thinks *Matilda* to be too young to start schooling. Once, *Matilda*'s class teacher comes to discuss her extraordinary intellect, instead of appreciating the matter, her mother simply turns the issue down saying beauty is most important in getting a good husband, education is simply useless in practical life. Mrs. Wormwood says, "A girl doesn't get a man by being brainy," (80). At the end of the story, *Matilda*'s mother simply leaves her daughter as if she was just a scab whom she was looking a way to get rid of. She tells her husband with indifference, "Why don't we let her go if that's what she wants. It'll be one less to look after" (199).

Whenever we think of children's literature the first thing that comes to our mind is fairy tales written to entertain children. These tales play a significant role in gender construction. Every fairy tale more or less repeats the same story where princes wait for a prince to be rescued. No fairy tale ever projects any women as a hero not ever let any woman rescue a man. It's always the male who is all powerful and controls the lives of other women characters. These tales very subtly infuse the idea of marriage as the ultimate destiny of women. They show marriage as an institution which brings ultimate fulfillment into a woman's life, concealing the subject of subjugations, domesticity, and lifelong slavery very tactfully. Home, money, jewelry, material comforts of all kinds work as luring traps for women that keep them inside illusion forever. They never realize the need for self-actualization. Society in general instead of telling to enhance inner qualities to children especially to girls forces them to adopt the existing societal structure which ultimately perpetuates patriarchy. Forget about the society even family members never accept a girl as she is. We the adults never tell our daughters to set independent goals for themselves to achieve financial independence only preaching them to become passive cattle. There is no harm if a mother wishes for a secured future for her daughter because in a way she wants the best for her daughter. However, the irony is that the search for happy life in a marriage makes a woman dependent on a man and she loses control over her own self. Here,

denying importance of education Matilda's mother in a way tries to impose the same fate as her on Matilda. Matilda's mom is like any common woman who thinks beauty as an ultimate weapon for a woman to have a fulfilled life. On the other hand, Matilda being a highly intelligent kid refuses to act according to her mom's desire. She instead of wasting time in watching TV devotes her time to reading. It is her nature to go against the societal norms raises resentment of her parents especially her mother who eventually decides to leave her.

Among other characters who are most debated and demands investigation is Miss Trunchbull, the principal of the school where Matilda studies. She has been projected as a villain throughout the novel because she takes malicious pleasure in torturing kids physically as well as sexually.

"Miss Trunchbull, the Headmistress, was something else altogether. She was a gigantic holy terror, fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of pupils and teachers alike. There was an aura of menace about her at a distance, and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal" (51). Miss Trunchbull is not simply a tyrant who hates kids and thinks them as disturbing elements but appears to be not quite acceptable within the framework of a traditional woman with her strong muscles and not so feminine behavior. She despises married woman, even beautification of any kind and takes pride in her single status. She exhibits her strength by associating herself with male-dominated sports. She rejects conventional feminine identity; she wears manly dresses, refuses to sympathize the weak and children. She sexually abuses Miss Honey and illegally occupies her property. Her name is quite fitting as she looks like a strong headed bull who is merciless and stubborn. From the very beginning, she has been hated by all her students because of her appearance which makes her not so amiable to children. In the story, she stands in direct contrast to Miss Honey who is everything that Miss Trunchbull is not. The plot of the novel also suggests of having her hands in the death of Miss Honey's father. At the end terrified by Matilda's mysterious powers, she vanishes away leaving Miss Honey's house. "She was above all a most formidable female. She had once been a famous athlete and even now the muscles were still clearly in evidence. You could see them in the bull-neck, in the big shoulders, in the thick arms, in the sinewy wrists and in the powerful wrists...Her face, I'm afraid neither a thing of beauty nor a joy forever" (66).

In the midst of two extremities (according to traditional norms) we have Miss Honey who appears to be a perfect feminine figure with her fragile, pale white porcelain structure. She is educated, beautiful, intellectual, polite, loving, motherly and extremely meek. "There teacher was called Miss Honey, and she could not have been more than twenty-three or twenty four. She had a lovely pale oval Madonna face with blue eyes and her hair was light brown. Her body was so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over she would smash into thousand pieces, like a porcelain figure" (50).

Miss Honey is loved by all her students because of her caring nature and appears to be perfect for those young kids who for the first time leave home to start their journey as students. However, Miss Honey who has expertise the act of handling young kids with extreme care leads a suppressed and traumatic life as she bears the tyranny of her own aunt who sexually and mentally abuses her. She submissively bears all insults and injustice without any protest and leads a miserable life. In the novel, Miss Honey is like a damsel in distress who had no courage to fights her own battle and waits to be saved by Matilda.

Finally, we have Matilda the protagonist, is a special child with some supernatural powers. She behaves like an adult and takes the responsibility to punish people who are immoral. She is a rebel. She engages herself in reading, refuses to act according to her parent's demand, and prefers solitude rather than watching TV. She takes charge of her own life, even decides to punish her parents and

principal as they treat her badly. Matilda helps Miss. Honey to get what she rightfully deserves. Eventually, she takes life-altering decision to make Miss Honey her legal guardian and rejects her biological parents realizing their incapability to give her a good upbringing. In a way, we see Matilda as a female character who becomes the hero of her own tale. Here Dahl's attempt is appreciable as Matilda emerges as an intelligent, rational, and self-assertive girl. However, like many other children writers, Dahl in the process of showcasing the triumph of good over evils somehow ends up in stereotyping other women characters in the novel.

All the women characters in the novel point out some serious issues. Matilda's mom stands for those who take their children for granted and neglect their education especially girl child as they think that they are nothing but a burden. Miss Trunchbull's behavior towards children reveals how some adults treat children as a nuisance and wish to get rid of them. Her issue also raises the question of the teacher-student relationship as teachers play a prime role in shaping young minds. Miss Trunchbull's abusive nature and her harsh treatment towards children instead of making her close to her children install fear and hatred in young minds. Here Miss Honey's method of teaching children should be taken as an example, how young students can be taught easily without making the process dull or boring. The story also points out the worn-out educational system which refuses to improvise teaching techniques to make the learning process enjoyable and finally it brings out the issue of child abuse which has remained a hush-hush subject in our society until now.

If we read the novel as a piece of children literature than the story appears to be simply a tale of a kid possessing mysterious powers punishing few adults who mistreat her. However, the story is much more complex than that. A feminist reading of the text makes the women characters of the novel appear as stock characters who stand in binaries, either white angelic or black evils as the heterosexual construction perceives them. Matilda's mom is not an ideal mom because she gives more importance to her own pleasure rather than becoming a selfless mother. Miss Trunchbull has been portrayed as evil because she refuses to look feminine and her activities are quite opposite to her gender-assigned role. Miss. Honey is a perfect woman because she is white, fragile, meek, and motherly and satisfies all patriarchal demands. However, the truth is that anyone who mistreats children and abuses them should be condemned irrespective of gender. The way Matilda's mother and her principal treat her is unjust because they torture her and deny her a healthy home, school and a society at large where she can breathe without any fear and grow independently.

The children books are a source of knowledge as well as a medium to infuse morality. However, sometimes it works as an agency to infuse certain notions which shape their psyche in certain ways. If we re-read the story from women's perspective than the interpretation will be completely different as Matilda's mother may get projected simply as a victim of patriarchal construction which preaches women to put emphasize on superficial beauty to attract men and Miss Trunchbull may be seen as a lesbian who wish to open other gender choices. She hates women because they are powerless and mimics men as they are strong and powerful. Miss. Honey all white and fragile structure may become a grave concern for black feminists. However, in any circumstance, the treatment of Trunchbull or Matilda's Mother towards Matilda is not appreciable. Simone de Beauvoir writes, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (330). The day a child is born, society seals its fate by judging it according to its gender. We give dolls to our girls and guns to our boys embedding a sense of segregation even before they could hardly behave rationally. Roald Dahl as a writer of children has presented an engaging tale with morality as children see their lives in binaries of white and black. His message is simple regarding life as bad people must be punished for their wrongdoings. However, unknowingly Dahl stereotypes women in the novel which could take him to trial. If a woman takes out time from her domestic burden and do what her heart's desire, it should not be condemned

or looked as a selfish act. A woman should not be judged according to her body shape or color as she is simply an individual wishing to live life according to her desire. It is not only the woman who is responsible to care about kids selflessly but a man should also take equal responsibility in their upbringing. A woman should aspire to cultivate a strong personality, as men and women are equally responsible in the positive progress of children and in giving them a healthy society. Hence, in that sense Matilda as a novel falls short as it lacks portraying women in general in a positive light. In most of the cases it is the adult who speaks on the behalf of children in any book; therefore instead of voicing the actual reality they tend to present their own narrow prejudices about life. Keeping audience in mind, a writer for children should not use his writing as a space to preach any propaganda. A writer of children literature has to be extra cautious while creating any character as they shape young minds while giving them various life lessons. One should not use literature as an agenda to pollute young minds with certain pre-conceived notion. He must try to think like a child for writing for children. As Tagore's writes "do not limit child to your own learning, he was born in another time."

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