

Herstory: Feminizing Historical Narratives in Carol Ann Duffy's *the World's Wife*

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Abstract

Feminists constantly explore the lack of feminine representation in canonical works which underscores the truth that history has also aided in silencing the gender. Women writers seek to write their experiences as women in order to undermine limiting and unflattering masculine portrayals that have come to define femininity. This is writing the self which derives from Simone de Beauvoir's views on sexuality, and gender relations. Some authors utilise revisionism to bring feminine perspectives to compliment the male centric narratives. Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*, artistically explores the opinions of the wives of several legendary characters silenced by history. Through this medium, Duffy gives voice to women, feminizing history- thus her story. Critics like Lanone (2008) and Rees-Jones (2001), opine that voicing neglected the feminine, is an innovation that distinguishes Duffy from other authors. Feminist theory is an appropriate tool of analysis, since its concepts explore gender binaries that result in silencing feminine viewpoints. Duffy's feminine representation of the history of legendary figures gives a realistic picture of the true nature of heroes. The ideas of Helene Cixous (1976), Luce Irigaray (1985) and Julia Kristeva (1982) regarding feminine writing, sexuality and gender relations will enhance the analysis.

Keywords: Herstory, history feminizing, historical, narratives

1.1. Introduction

Duffy's revisionist attempts are provocative and sometimes downright challenging as they interrogate the images of historical and legendary characters through the eyes of their significant others. Any discerning reader must have pondered what the spouses of heroic men thought about these paragons of courage and geniuses. Duffy's *The World's Wife*, gives the reader the feeling that most of the fellows were overrated and some had no heroic virtue or admirable traits. Incidentally, Duffy is not the only one who questions this biased notion of history which is evident in the increasing popularity of revisionism. According to historian James Macpherson, history is a dialogue between the past and the present and "interpretations about the past are subject to change in response to new evidence, new questions asked of the evidence, new perspectives gained by the passage of time. There is no single, eternal, and immutable 'truth' about past events and their meaning" (p.23).

This is true of feminine history as the patriarchal machinery suppressed women by omitting their contributions in records. Yet, historical revisionism is unacceptable to purist because; re-evaluating concepts and past occurrences has the propensity to uncover truths that deconstructs grounded ideologies and this constitutes controversies that many would prefer to leave in the past. Although most people currently agree that women have suffered marginalization and subjugation for ages effected through the failure of documenting their achievements, the prospect of revisionism is still unsettling to the many purists who are the custodians of the patriarchal ideology. Herstory has also come under the scrutiny of several feminist critics like Sommers (1993) who opines that the attempt to push forward a female centred aspect of history is a negation. The critic's premise is based on the fact that promoting a gendered sectioning of history rather eliminates the contributions of female historians in the twentieth century.

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Despite these attacks, revisionists like McPherson (2003) insists that revisionism is not negation but an “unending quest of historians for understanding the past... is what makes history vital and meaningful” (p. 23).

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Feminist revisionism is inspired by post-structural feminists like Cixous (1976), Irigaray (1982) and Kristeva (1985) among others who encourage women to rewrite feminine histories to reflect a woman’s thinking instead of ascribing to patriarchal norms about writing. *Ecriture feminine* emphasizes the contingent and discursive nature of all identities through the combination of the ideas from concepts in Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, deconstruction and the Lacanian triad. Cixous (1976) insists women must write the self by rejecting phallogocentric ideas about women’s bodies and their sexuality. She therefore urges women to:

Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don’t like the true texts of women- female sexed texts. That kind scares them. (p.877).

The chauvinist masculinist ideology has gone unchallenged for so many centuries because women have either been ashamed to deconstruct it by writing the truth about themselves or have been held back by one of the custodians of patriarchy such as the capitalist machinery, publishers or even readers. Cixous (1976) feels that women must construct their own narratives despite this resistance which is what Duffy does in *The World’s Wife* (1999).

The idea that writing belongs to men is central in *écriture feminine*, deconstructing the dogma that “writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great- that is, for “great men” (p.876) should be the prerogative of all women according to Cixous (1976). In addition, Irigaray (1985) dwells on the concept of sexual difference as the root of feminine marginalisation. She looks at the great canonical works from the classics and posits that the binaries that pervade these narratives go to subjugate the personhood of the woman because she can never know a love of self out of which a non-dominated love of the other is possible. Writing for Irigaray (1985) is therefore the only way through which women can clamour for integrity of owning their own spaces of embodiment which is the route to self-love. The woman, as the other, leads to the conundrum of her sexuality thus her denigration as a sexual being. Duffy in *The World’s Wife* (1999), explores aspects of feminine sexuality by imagining the feelings of the significant others of legendary men who are popular for achieving heroic feats. The neglect of their feminine needs is glaring since their heroic husbands would rather perform valiant deeds than satisfy their women. The historical repression of the woman’s needs makes these viewpoints plausible. Herstory is therefore telling the woman’s history, bringing her out of the obscurity that patriarchy has forced on her for centuries.

Kristeva (1982) is another feminist who attempts to deconstruct phallogocentric narratives of history with feminine versions. She posits the concept of the chora which is a maternal space that is nurturing and understanding, just like the mother’s womb. There is no censor since it is protected from the Christian patriarchal symbolic order. Both Kristeva and Irigaray (1985) challenge phallogocentrism by proposing concepts that shows the malleability of language. Chora is semiotic and is pre-oedipal since for the critics, language which is masculine in construction is the cause of the subjugation of women who can only imitate masculine forms of construction. The fact that western civilisation posits a masculinist perception of the world as universal is problematic which is why Irigaray (1985) opposes the Lacanian depiction of the Symbolic order as ahistorical and unchanging. Gods are masculine therefore validating masculine prowess while feminine sexuality is prohibited and shamed which is evident in theories of sexuality like Freud’s and Lacan’s which Irigaray (1985) criticises. The subversion of female sexuality has led to erroneous assumptions like Freud’s depiction of the clitoris as a castrated penis, something of no significance while asserting the penis as “the only sexual organ of recognised value” (qtd. in Oh, 2005). Irigaray (1985) insists that since phallogocentric notions cannot adequately define feminine sexuality, this means that women possess autoeroticism which is ‘self-embracing’ as opposed to masculine precepts that it is ‘pleasuring giving’.

1.3. Literature Review

Duffy has enjoyed a lot of critical acclaim as an activist poet who wants the restitution of the rights of women and minorities in her poetry. This idea cuts across her works from *Female Standing Nude* (1985), through *Mean Time* (1993), *Feminine Gospels* (2002) and *The Other Country* (1990). The controversial manner in which the poet treats the subject has led to different critical opinions. For Catherine Lanone (2008) in “Baring Skills, Not Soul: Carol Ann Duffy’s Intertextual Games” observes that Duffy is a poet who has probed female language and identity by creating dialogic patterns that allow for the feminine perspective to be articulated.

Lanone (2008) further postulates that “Duffy’s early experimentation with intertextuality and ways of voicing forbidden female desire has led her to revisit famous figures, like Charles Dicken’s Miss Havisham, a Victorian version of abject resentment”(p.213).

Mary Louisa Lum (2015) in a PhD thesis titled “Postmodern Apocalypse and the Sublimity of Transgression on the Poetry of Lord Byron and Carol Ann Duffy” explores aspects of the narrative of emancipation prevalent in Duffy’s poetry. History’s biases are uncovered because through an interrogation of the canonical narratives, the perspectives of women are curiously absent. Following Mary Wollstonecraft’s idea that poetry must touch the feeling mind and rouse passions, the emotions that are often associated with women like pity, fear, disgust and revulsion are examined. To Lum (2015) “Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* meets these tenets considering the fact that it gives a different dimension to the experience of the spouses of historical men and an insight to their own worldview... historical accounts have often painted the women as witches in order to assert their own agenda” (p.96). Converting history to herstory is therefore an ambitious attempt on Duffy’s part to expose the biases of patriarchy.

In “Notching Machismo: Reading Anti-Establishment in Carol Ann Duffy’s ‘Little Red Cap’ and ‘Queen Herod’”, Lum (2016) equally dwells on the penchant of the poet to valorise powerful historical women through intrinsically feminine actions that subverts male dominance. By giving a counter discourse of the history of Little Red Cap and feminising the three wise men from the East, the critic posits that Duffy notches machismo by creating scenarios wherein poetic justice is rewarded to transgressors as seen in the case of the big bad wolf. Little Red Cap kills the wolf though he has been kind to her but she uncovers the bones of her grandmother whom he had previously devoured.

Hurye Reis (2004), Deryn Rees-Jones (2001) and Peter Cash (2007) are other Duffy scholars who have explored the different themes prevalent in Duffy’s poetry. The attempt to voice feminine subjects that have previously been marginalized seems to be the poet’s outstanding legacy. Cash (2007) sums this thus: If not for *Mean Time*, then it will be for *The World’s Wife* (1999) that posterity will recall Carol Ann Duffy’s work. For its aspirations, this collection of dramatic monologues relies upon a single stroke of genius. Duffy calls up a parade of historical and mythological characters and retells their stories from their wives’ perspectives; not surprisingly, what comes out of these wives’ mouths are nothing less than alternative histories of the world. (p.4)

This excerpt captures Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* (1999) as a poetry collection that gives a different lens through which historical and legendary characters are viewed. Despite the various perspectives taken by the aforementioned critics, there is a consensus that Duffy is invested in articulating the thoughts of women whose voices have been silenced by history in order to create nuance albeit artistically.

2.1. The Questionable Geniuses

In “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Cixous declares that feminine discourse entails women writing themselves. Women “must write about women and bring women into writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (p.875). This is true of history and even literary canon that valorises masculine achievement while the feminine is completely negated. *The World’s Wife* is filled with quips and tongue in cheek humour with regards to masculine figures that history has valorised. Who better to know a man than his spouse or partner? This plausibility is what makes Duffy’s poems realistic and also conform to Cixous call for women to represent themselves in writing. The questionable geniuses are individuals whom history depicts as exceptionally smart men but their spouses think differently. The poem “Mrs. Aesop” gives her point of view of the spouse pertaining to his genius. This is seen in the following:

By Christ, he could bore for Purgatory. He was small,
 Didn’t prepossess. So he tried to impress. Dead men,
 Mrs Aesop, he’d say, tell no tales. Well, let me tell you now
 That the bird in his hand shat on his sleeve,
 Never mind the two worth less in the bush. Tedious. (p.19)

The tone of boredom is set from the first line of the poem which is accentuated with the use of metaphor. By reiterating that “he could bore for Purgatory”, the persona seeks to paint the image of extreme dullness she experienced in the spouse’s company. Purgatory is considered a place of limbo, where nothing happens but waiting, in this kind of environment, it is clear that monotony would be unbearable. Yet, this is the image that the spouse reveals of her significant other.

She goes forward to describe his physical appearance which to her is wanting because he is small in stature and therefore seeks to impress people with wit. She sees some of his idioms as trite and obvious; “dead men tell no tales”. If someone is already demised, it is a fact that he/she should be incapable of speech. The use of sarcasm is evident in the idiom “a bird in hand is worth two in the bush”. To her, the bird in hand is worthless because it defecates on the sleeve of the person handling it just like her insufferable spouse.

Also, “Mrs Aesop” captures a relatable scenario, an intolerable know it all husband. People who have opinions about everything especially the obvious often cause irritation. Being in a relationship with such a person is not easy and this is evident in the progression of the poem:

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 swallows
That couldn't make a summer. The jackdaw, according to
Him,
Envied the eagle. Donkeys would, on the whole, prefer to be
Lions. (p.19)

Clichés are trite though Aesop is considered a genius. To the persona, it goes without saying that before a leap any human being will look and a single swallow in the sky does not imply that it is summer. The boredom that the wife experiences become more vivid from the husband's wandering mind. She cannot have a sane conversation with her spouse because of his fixation on mundane things. The persona is tortured with repetition:

On one appalling evening stroll, we passed an old hare
Snoozing in a ditch- he stopped and made a note-
And then, about a mile further on, a tortoise, somebody's pet,
Creeping, slow as marriage, up the road.Slow,
But certain, Mrs Aesop, wins the race. Asshole. (p.19)

From the above depiction, the reader is meant to understand that Aesop was a tiresome fellow and not the genius that history made him out to be. Crafting random sayings from natural phenomenon does not possess any streak of genius. The qualifier in the first line of the excerpt is obvious. Evening strolls with a loved one are supposed to be romantic and not appalling. There is the use of simile “slow as marriage” that shows the lacklustre of the relationship. The fact that he is also unable to satisfy her sexually makes his buffoonery more difficult to bear. At some point she lashes out “I gave him a fable one night/ about a little cock that wouldn't crow” (p.19). This is sexual innuendo that suggests Aesop's inability to give his wife sexual satisfaction. The little cock that would not crow is a metaphor of his lack of performance when it comes to fulfilling his marital responsibilities. It is therefore not surprising that the wife finds him obnoxious. Crafting obvious clichés is his only forte and he is oblivious of the spouse's dissatisfaction as is often the case with pompous men. This is ironic for someone famed for being very perceptive.

History knows Aesop as a great fabulist who is credited for the storytelling tradition. His fables are known to teach moral lessons. As interesting as this fellow could have been, Duffy creates an alternative view point from which he could have been a boring and insipid husband. Creating this provocative hypothetical version of history from the standpoint of the wife is more effective because of the vagueness of details on Aesop as a historical figure. Some authors posit that he was a myth created by the thinkers of the day since his is mostly known through references from authors like Aristotle. This alternative version is herstory, what Cixous (1976) lauds as “speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (pp.875-76). Both genders make up the historical experience and the negation of one is unfair, it is therefore imperative for women to attempt revisionism as indicated by Cixous.

Another poem that questions the genius of legendry men is “Eurydice”. Eurydice was a nymph and the wife of the talented poet Orpheus in Greek mythology. Legend remembers her husband as the spectacular bard who charmed Hades, lord of the underworld with his music in an attempt to bring back his wife from the underworld. Reading of this spectacular legend, one might think that his wife thought the world of him. Incidentally this is not the case as seen in the following:

Girls, I was dead and down
In the Underworld, a shade,
A shadow of my former self, no when.

It was a place where language stopped,
 A black full stop, a black hole
 Where words had to come to an end.
 And end they did there,
 Last words,
 Famous or not.
 It suited me down to the ground. (p.58)

The poem opens in a storytelling mood with the persona addressing herself to other women she feels will understand her predicament. The fact that she sees death as a reprieve is also manifest. There is a fixation on language and emphasis on the bliss of quietude. This love for solitude indicates that the persona sees death as an escape. Eurydice's spouse does not understand that the marriage contract is supposed to be severed by death. The husband comes to the underworld to bring her back to life. As the legend indicates, there is a bargain between Orpheus and Hades with Eurydice as the prize that the winner will claim. Her opinion is not sought and the persona shows resentment when she posits that:

Things were different back then.
 For the men, verse-wise,
 Big O was the boy. Legendary.
 The blurb on the back of his books claimed
 That animals,
 Aardvark to zebra,
 Flocked to his side when he sang,
 Fish leapt in their shoals
 At the sound of his voice,
 Even the mute, sullen stones at his feet
 Wept wee, silver tears. (p.59)

This stanza is filled with hyperbole underscored by sarcasm. The wife is supposed to be an authority in testifying to her husband's greatness. She rather parrots what his book blurbs say of him. This is the idea of hype that sells books and not really talent. The statement that Orpheus's music attracts animals and makes even stones weep is a hyperbole. The use of personification (stones weeping) heightens the exaggeration of the poet's prowess. The social media age of the twenty-first century has given mediocrity the opportunity to surge through hype which seems to be the insinuation Eurydice is making about her husband's art.

Moving on, the persona shows cynicism towards the exceptional talent of her spouse as evident in her choice of words. She continues to address herself to her feminine audience whom she feels will understand her long suffering as the wife of an overrated artist. She will "rather be dead/ but the Gods are like publishers/ usually male" (p.59). The radical feminist sentiment is evident in this utterance. Through the comparison of gods to publishers, the persona exposes the unfairness that comes to play in publishing. Women for ages have been negated in literary canon from the classics till present due to the marginalization of their perspective by publishers. From classical works to the bible and literary canon up to the twentieth century, masculine authors represented the norm because of chauvinism. It is not because women were incapable of artistic creation but mostly because publishers were biased towards publishing women. This is why some women had to publish under pseudonyms. The fact that canon is currently being revised to add great women writers who have been ignored for century is testament of this discrimination. Women are still struggling even today in the field shows that it is still a boy's club. Cixous (1976) insists that women can only deconstruct this double standard by writing "forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune" (p.876). Negation of the opinions of the female is represented in "Eurydice". Orpheus goes to the underworld to get his wife back and during the negotiations no one asks Eurydice if she wants to return to live.

Human beings are usually attached to life, with an existential dread about the afterlife that many wish they could avoid. Yet the persona is "Eurydice" is eager to die and to be forgotten rather than continue an odious existence with a boring husband. This respite doesn't last:

So imagine me there,
 Unavailable,

Out of this world,
 Then picture my face in that place
 Of Eternal Repose,
 In the one place you'd think a girl would be safe
 From the kind of a man
 Who follows her round
 Writing poems,
 Hovers about
 While she reads them,
 Calls her His Muse,
 And once sulked for a night and a day
 Because she remarked on his weakness for abstract nouns. (p.58)

The persona is running away from a boring husband and she feels that the underworld is the best place to hide. There is emphasis on the lack of desire to return to an extremely possessive husband who is also a sensitive artist who craves praise constantly. Eurydice has to stroke his ego and the slightest criticism makes him sulk. This paints an unflattering portrait of the poet which is realistic considering the fact that artists are often temperamental and difficult to live with.

Activity halts in the underworld for this epic performance as evident in the classical allusions to Sisyphus and Tantalus. "Sisyphus sat on his rock for the first time in years/ Tantalus was permitted a couple of beers" (p.59). In the myth of Sisyphus, he is punished for disobeying the gods and giving fire to mankind. His punishment is to eternally push a stone uphill. Tantalus, on his part was also accused of revealing the secrets of the gods to humans when he stole nectar and ambrosia from Olympus. His punishment was to stand in a pool of water underneath a fruit tree. The fruits receded whenever he tried to eat one just as the water when he attempted to have a drink. The fact that these two rebels are given a break on this day is indicative of the artist's fame.

From this euphoria it is clear that Eurydice might not get her eternal bliss because "like it or not/I must follow him back to our life/ Eurydice, Orpheus' wife/ to be trapped in his images, metaphors, similes" (p.60). It is therefore left for her to save herself and avoid this stifling life; and she finds a loophole in the condition given to Orpheus by Hades. He is not supposed to look behind on the entire trip from the underworld, Eurydice makes every attempt to make him look but he keeps going. She is relentless and finally touches him where he is most vulnerable. All she needs to do is appreciate his poetry "Orpheus, your poem's a masterpiece/ I'd love to hear it again..." (p.61). Eurydice is underhanded in her tactics but it works incredibly because "he was smiling modestly/ when he turned/ when he turned and looked at me/ what else?/ I noticed he hadn't shaved/ I waved once and was gone" (p.62). The husband clearly has his head in the clouds since it takes one compliment about his art for him to look back. His attempt at false modesty is registered in his smile; on her part, the wife has no feelings left for her spouse. She only registers that he has not shaved, waving before disappearing shows her happiness to stuck it in his face. This glee is evident when she says "the dead are so talented/ the living walk by the edge of a vast lake/near the wise, drowned silence of dead" (p.62). The wisdom gleaned from being dead is the realization that the dead and the living have nothing in common.

2.2. Biblical Macho Men or are they?

The bible is an authoritative discourse that has encouraged the marginalization of women for ages. This is because this book, gives negative perceptions of women as the cause of humanity's fall from Eden as seen in the story of Adam and Eve in the *Book of Genesis*. Some women are considered wicked as seen in the character of Jezebel in the tale of Nabob's Vineyard in the *Book of Kings*. Also, other women are considered witches evident in the portrayal of the Witch of Endo, and vixens in the *Book of Judges*. This negative portrayal has caused many feminists to consider the bible as an ideological track that gives justification to the violence meted upon women. With regards to the biblical vixens, Delilah is one considered to have orchestrated the demise of the hero of the Israelites, Samson. Duffy in a poem of the same name gives Delilah the opportunity to vindicate herself:

Teach me, he said-
 We were lying in bed-
 How to care.
 I nibbled the purse of his ear.

What do you mean? Tell me more.
 He sat up and reached for his beer.
 I can rip out the roar
 From the throat of a tiger,
 Or gargle with fire,
 Or sleep one whole night in the Minotaur's lair,
 Or flay the bellowing fur
 From a bear,
 All for a dare.
 There's nothing I fear. (p.28)

The affection is palpable between the two as evident from the above excerpt. The persona reminisces about the relationship she shared with this hero who was formidable and feared. The strength of this individual is evident through images like tearing the roar from a tiger. This is a hyperbole but it goes to support the legend of Samson. There is the use of classical allusion with the reference of the Minotaur's lair. Ovid describes this creature as half man and half bull; a result of a union between a woman and a bull. This creature was known for its ferociousness and the ability to devour human beings. The fact that the persona's lover can actually spend a whole night in the lair of the Minotaur without being devoured is a testament of dexterity. He has a problem and he wants the woman he loves to teach him to "be gentle, or loving, or tender" (p.28). When a person is in love, satisfying the partner becomes an imperative. Delilah knows her lover wants to be gentle and tender, probably because he is no longer at ease with the strong man image he is known for. Love also has the tendency of changing people, maybe he feels if he can have these characteristics; his relationship will stand a chance.

It is rather love and the yearning to bring happiness that Delilah performs the head shaving ritual. She knows that there will definitely be objections to the act so "before I fetched and sharpened my scissors/ snipping first at the black and biblical air/ I fastened the chain to the door... then with deliberate, passionate hands/I cut every lock of his hair" (p.29). The concept of selfless love deconstructs the biblical discourse that projects Delilah as a traitor. The intention to blame Delilah is clear from her name which is Hebrew for "she who weakened". She brings down Samson in order to stop the Israeli conquest. Samson loved her although she was the enemy and her betrayal is a moral to caution men from love because women are traitors.

What does the coming back to life of a death spouse entail for the widow who has moved on? This is the view explored in "Mrs Lazarus" which negates the joy of the miracle of raising the dead in the *New Testament* of the bible. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is celebrated as one of Christ's major miracles. In the *Gospel of John*, the narrative emphasizes on the great friendship Jesus shared with the siblings Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The fact that he wept at Lazarus' funeral is also underscored thus the incentive to wake him from the dead. In this narrative, nothing is said of Lazarus's wife which inferring to Hebrew tradition was a norm of a man of that age to have a wife. In this herstory, the wife's plausible experience is described:

I had grieved. I had wept for a night and a day
 Over my loss, ripped the cloth I was married in
 From my breasts, howled, shrieked, clawed
 At the burial stones till my hands bled, retched
 His name over and over again, dead, dead. (p.49)

When a loved one passes there is an episode of grief which is experienced by the persona. Considering that this is a traditional society in which women are expected to wallow in misery at the passing of their spouse, Mrs Lazarus has to go through the public elements of mourning like ripping her wedding gown, shrieking and howling like an animal. The dehumanization in the name of mourning is still witnessed in many African traditions. In fact a widow is supposed to spend the mourning period lying on the bare floor and eating only once a day. She also has her hair shaved off and is not expected to take a bath. Any woman who tries to avoid these mourning rituals is considered a witch or the murderer of the husband.

The passing of a loved one is generally traumatic along with the stages of grief that come into play. Making peace with the passing of the spouse is actually the final stage and it is now an opportunity to move on. This is what Mrs Lazarus does and after the appropriate mourning period, she finds comfort in another man, a school teacher. It is therapeutic because it is incredible to feel the touch of another human being after a long period of loneliness.

The exhilarating experience is described as “the shock of a man’s strength under the sleeve of his coat” (49). It is therefore traumatizing when the husband uncharacteristically comes back to live as seen in the following:

... then notice the village men running towards me, shouting.
 Behind them the women and children, barking dogs
 And I knew. I knew by the sly light
 On the blacksmith’s face, the shrill eyes
 Of the barmaid, the sudden hands bearing me
 Into the hot tang of the crowd parting before me. (p.50)

The coming back from the dead of any human being is epic and the villagers express this feeling of excitement as they rush to meet Mrs Lazarus in the field where she is having a romantic stroll with her new suitor. Seeing a crowd of villagers bearing down on you is potentially scary and this woman has a premonition that something nasty is about to happen. Not everyone has good intentions in the crowd as seen in the “sly light on the blacksmith’s face”. This is an imagery that suggests that the blacksmith in question might have been a jilted lover.

Marriage is definitely a contract that is conventionally broken by death, a dogma that Orpheus and Lazarus do not seem to comprehend. The husband has no business coming back to live just like the villagers have no right to expect Mrs Lazarus to go back to him. Her disappointment is made manifest “he lived.” There is also a feeling of disgust which is rational since he is a former corpse. She says “I breathed his stench; my bridegroom in his rotting shroud/ moist and dishevelled from the grave’s slack chew/ croaking his cuckold name, disinherited, out of his time” (50). The choice of words makes the persona’s feelings evident. There is no joy in the prospect of the reunion. At best, the husband is now a zombie, still attired in the rotting burial clothes. No one should be subjected to this kind of trauma but in this traditional society, a woman’s feelings are not taken into consideration.

2.3. Narcissism is unflattering

Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* (1999) is full of anecdotes of women’s resentment towards spouses who are out of touch about the feelings of their significant others but are ironically celebrated as geniuses. Their fixation on their work makes them famous and this indicates the potential for self-involvement and anti-social skills being by-products of genius. The wives have to bear with their insufferable ways but the world will always know only the great deeds and not the mundane or overbearing aspects of their lives. Self-absorption is one of these traits that make them lousy partners. These men are incapable of taking time off their great endeavours to learn what actually stimulates their spouses. This is what makes Duffy’s historical revisionism very plausible as legends like Aesop, Orpheus, Sisyphus, Charles Darwin, Freud, Icarus and more are scrutinized under the hypothetical lens of their partners.

Self-absorbed people are known to be selfish and narcissistic; a survey of many great characters in history has proven this assertion right. This is why poems like “Frau Freud”, “Mrs Icarus”, and “Mrs Darwin” are so hilarious and realistic. The three poems focus on the lives of some great minds, Darwin is credited with the concept of the evolution of humans from lesser species. Icarus is the classical inventor credited for inventions like the maze, and gifting his son Daedalus with wings of wax who flies too close to the sun and has a tragic crash in to the ocean. Sigmund Freud is the father of psychoanalysis and his theories on sexuality and neurosis are hallmarks of his career. The fact that Frau Freud could have been a little bored with his overt obsession with sexuality is conceivable. Most times people who talk about sex a lot are considered perverts and the fact that most feminists have deconstructed the Freudian idea of the penis envy validates this perception. Freud’s spouse seems to be one of them as seen below:

Ladies, for argument’s sake, let us say
 That I’ve seen my fair share of ding-a-ling, member and jock,
 Of todger and nudge and Percy and cock, of tackle...
 As Ms. Lewinsky- equally sick up to here...
 Don’t get me wrong, I’ve no axe to grind
 With the snake in the trousers, the wife’s friend...
 Ladies, dear ladies, the average penis- not pretty...
 The squint of its envious solitary eye... one’s feeling of pity... (p.55)

This poem covers every possible name for penis and the persona’s intention is not to be vulgar but to expose the level of sexual fixation of her husband. She dismisses any assumption that she might have been a frigid woman though she insists that too much of a good thing can become disgusting.

There is the use of historical allusion when the persona reference Lewinsky. Monica Lewinsky was a white house intern who had an affair with President Bill Clinton in the nineties. This scandal almost got Clinton impeached from office. The court of popular opinion painted Lewinsky as a scarlet woman who seduced a helpless married man though she was only in her early twenties. Like Hester Prynne, Lewinsky was virtually ostracized from polite society. Freud's wife equates her loathing for her husband's fixation with sexuality especially penis envy to the disgust Lewinsky must have experienced. The age of #metoo has changed societal perception about sexual harassment that has vindicated Lewinsky since many women are outing their bosses for using their power to make sexual overtures.

In "Mrs Darwin" the wife is out rightly insulting in her attitude towards the husband's theories. This poem is short and brisk and is in the form of a diary entry, a feminine form. 1852 represents the date of publication of Darwin's two monographs originally thought to be published in 1851 and 1854. In this diary entry, Mrs Darwin notes a zoo excursion with her husband; "went to the Zoo/ I said to Him/ something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds me of you" (p.20). There are two levels of meaning that can be derived from the poem. The first is the fact that Mrs Darwin shares the idea of human beings evolving from lesser species because the husband resembles a chimpanzee or that she thought the idea was absurd. Both possibilities give the poem a hilarious tilt. "Mrs Icarus" describes the feeling of a woman who knows that she married a world renowned 'pillock'. As the wife of an inventor of such renowned, one would feel that she would take great pride in her husband's work. Yet, the fact that her son's dead comes from one of her husband's ambitious inventions justifies her feelings of resentment. A pillock is an English colloquialism that refers to someone who is inconsiderate about the feelings of others or is not as smart as he assumes. The tone is filled with resignation:

I'm not the first or the last
To stand on a hillock,
Watching the man she married
Prove to the world
He's a total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock. (p.54)

Spectacle is not something many women cherish and having a husband like Icarus whose inventions were definitely too innovative could lead to embarrassment for the wife. Simone de Beauvoir insists that "representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth".

3.0. Conclusion

Duffy's *The World's Wife*, provides a revisionist feminine version of history intended to give nuance to narratives that valorised masculine prowess and negated feminine effort. Although her creations are purely imaginary, she crafts them in such a probable manner that has a ring of authenticity. The spouse or the significant other is always the better judge of the character of the individual and the fact that history hardly mentions the women of the great men it valorise shows a lopsided representation that is not so credible. Using typically feminine modes of narrative like diaries and gossip, Duffy writes the woman as prescribed by feminists like Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva. Although the poet makes use of humour, hyperbole and burlesques in her attempt to satirise these great men, the underlying message is clear, women have been subverted because history refuses to acknowledge them and this travesty can only be rectified if women learn to write themselves fearlessly. By giving voice to the wives of these paragons of greatness, Duffy exposes their limitations and brings to the limelight the experiences of women that history has silenced. Telling her own side of the story therefore makes history inclusive; it becomes herstory and she is no longer the voiceless other that can only be seen and is not permitted to speak.

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