

Seeking New Worlds: *Moll Flanders*

Dr. MEHAR FATIMA

Department of English
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi
India

Abstract:

The paper sought to probe the early sparks of class awareness that crept into the English consciousness early on in the 18th century. Moll Flanders is possibly the first undercurrent of social division along the class lines that became more perceptible later on in the 19th century with Dickens lambasting a whole generation of the capitalists and the doom that sedately sneaked into a troubled but seemingly complacent society. Moll Flanders strikes the sleeping conscience of a nation having disdain towards the orphans of storm.

Key words: Isolation, division, capitalism, smitten consciousness.

1. INTRODUCTION.

Hostile world of Defoe makes amiable heroes. Daniel Defoe is known for his *Robison Crusoe*, a hero of wilderness who reforms customary civilization, a man of character, a hero worth the title, pursuing to improve upon the poor conditions of his society, a socialist in making. But when Defoe chooses to make a heroine of such caliber, despite the employment of his utmost artistic caliber and practical wisdom in order to give her the best of the fitting female characterization, he topples the social setting. *Moll Flanders* cannot live a life of conformed virtue in

her existing world. She has to seek new worlds to live life to fulfill her needs and increasing desires with a name given by her mysterious world. Semantically the title “Moll Flanders” is apt, the story is told from an aspiring female protagonist. This is not a scandalous life of a woman, who the novelist painstakingly narrates, but the courage and determination with which the heroine survives her fate makes *Moll Flanders* an artistic and literary masterpiece. Interestingly, in the process Moll, the female character, seems to be defeating its male author.

2. MAIN BODY

Defoe invented a form of writing that was new, sharing the newness of his fictional creations. Defoe, who worked as a journalist created a finely constructed, animated prose style. He had written descriptive, allegorical, illustrative material for publication for many years before he turned to writing for entertainment. He knew it quite well how important it was for his reading world to see characters whose first person accounts sounded reliable, reared as they had been on unbelievable chronicles of famous criminals and their astonishing adventures. Defoe's major novels are written as autobiographies, with the central character narrating the story in a factual style.

Moll Flanders is about the realistic experiences of a woman in the underworld of eighteenth century London. *Moll Flanders* is an assumed name she embraces when she needs an alternative identity for her unlawful life. Having no family, she has been abandoned by her own mother who was a transported felon, and therefore her rearing, education, social station and material security are all constantly unwarrantable. She lives in an unsympathetic metropolitan world which consents for no feebleness governed by social position and wealth as the dominant factors for survival. She lacks these mutually and therefore her life is a struggle to accomplish both. However, her

life fraught with striving, much of it of her own design, her cleverness and indomitable attitude and alert to prospects, survives her by making her rich with material wealth and later repentance.

Defoe displays a strong sympathetic understanding of female essentials in an unlawful world by demonstrating a sense of everyday existence and the apprehensions associated with economic and social insecurities. Defoe himself was an 'outsider,' a Londoner who often had to live by his intellects, chased by creditors and spending time in Newgate prison for debts. Defoe's ethics was at times somewhat questioning. Through his novel we can read accurate fictitious social history of the progressive time. *Moll Flanders* testifies an accurate social history of Virginia and the novel is politically and economically arranged. The themes of the novel are transgression, repentance and redemption, which are to be predictable, given Defoe's dissenting background.

3. DISCUSSIONS

The protagonist's treasures flourish in Virginia, in the new world. Perhaps Defoe was suggesting like his Puritan forefathers that the new world presented some new chances to live differently and efficiently. Referring to the Transportation Act was passed in 1718 there was a common agreement that the transportation of criminals was a means of reform. It was thought that by removing habitual criminals from their past place and environment and assigning them regenerative work in a fresh environment could make them become transformed and productive inhabitants. In spite of some resistance from the colonial immigrants, particularly in Virginia, however eventually many thousands of condemned felons did occupy the American seaboard and ultimately become 'Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution'. Perhaps Defoe did succeed in influencing public opinion with regard to the issue of transportation with *Moll Flanders* intending it as a rhetorical

statement or endorsement of transportation. Undoubtedly Moll and her Lancashire husband Jemmy became prosperous and reformed after their years in Virginia, returning home rich and respectable. However, the process of reform could cost a lot.

Moll rises from wretched poverty and concealment to riches and security. It is motivating to speculate the extent to which her exploration would have provided dreams to her community of women to live in hopefulness from reading her story of vicarious thrills and her exploits. Her appeal is unfathomable than previous ones in Defoe's fiction. It may be because of the gender of the new chosen hero. Moll interrogates the connotation of acquired and applied rank and honor as the byproduct of the commercial workings of her domain, as well as cross-examining herself about her own purposes and her consideration of them. Moll becomes a subject of an object lesson, she plays a satire on the product of her cruel world, and she teaches her trade to her readers hinting at the possibilities of survival and many different ways of the world. She is seen struggling against men and marriage by embracing the challenges found in both, as a vulnerable young girl and later evolved as a misanthropist of love and marriage.

Daniel Defoe brings forth a woman's correlation to early capitalism in *Moll Flanders*. Defoe uses Moll as an exemplum of a woman who seeks refuge through monetary possession, and creates opportunities to acquire money only through marriage, selling her body, and stealing, there being no fourth profession available. She marries number of times in an effort to secure respectable settlements and wealth. She does so without any concern for any shared affection with her male partners. By her position as a mistress, by whoring, through marriage, and eventually by thieving, apart from money she pursues the morality that can be procured through money. Moll is not compulsively materialistic or a hard core capitalist individual, but simply a woman who seeks out the security of money keeping a clear picture of her conceivable destiny in the patriarchal system of her society.

Defoe in his essay “Conjugal Lewdness or, Matrimonial Whoredom” (1727) penned that “He or She who, with that slight and superficial Affection, Ventures into the Matrimonial Vow, are to me little more than legal Prostitutes” (p. 32). *Moll Flanders* unquestionably maintains this verdict. Moll marries many times in her search for good settlements and money, and without regard for mutual affection. Defoe, as author, illustrates the way her five marriages consequently end hastily or regrettably with abandonment, death, and the encounter with incest. Defoe is convincingly critical of Moll’s willpower to disregard the laws of divorce and marry over and over at her own caprice, and therefore she is eventually thoroughly punished for her matrimonial whoredom. When we try to look for reasons of the actions, we first get to understand a comprehensive chauvinistic view. In a society where marriages meant socio-economic settlement, is it the number of times Moll marries poses the ultimate immoral pronouncement? Marriages were seldom or never based on mutual affections. So when Moll tries to find the suitable settlement for herself (the existing definition of marriage) experimenting more than once shocks the patriarchy beyond endurance. It has been customary for men to make the hushed society of whorehouses and promote the practice in the shadows of respectability, the author, without a genuine consent joined hands with the grey devils for revealing and condemning the female roles played so artfully. All prostitution will remain the same with license or without it. Marriages are rather faithful prostitutions if not a legal one.

On the other hand in *Defoe and the Nature of Man*, Maximillian E. Novak argues that Defoe is critical of eighteenth-century English marriage law. By sanctioning Moll to rebel the restrictions of legal marriage, Novak finds Defoe as sympathetic to the position of women in eighteenth-century society, as he seems to approve of the notion that once a woman is abandoned by her husband, she may seek out to remarry as a way to resolve her economic problems. “In the novel, Defoe illustrates one woman’s relationship to early

capitalism, taking Moll as an exemplum of a woman who is looking for security through money, and has opportunities to acquire money only through marriage, selling her body, and stealing. Moll's many marriages for money suggest that women cannot be self-sufficient in a capitalist society, but must rely on men for their sense of security." (Ya-huei Wang Vol. 1 No. 8; July 2011). But then why does he punish her? Did he get to realize it in the end that he should not lose his paradise in his own opinionated society? His paradise regain could be Moll's paradise lost.

Moll Flanders is clearly divided in three parts. The first part pronounces Moll's youthful years and first love affairs; the second part outlines her efforts to catch domestic and economic security through marriage; and the third part demonstrates her occupation as a thief. Her first affair with a rich young man in Colchester deceits her to believe that her beauty can enchanter him to fall in love with her, even though she is a domestic servant in his house. However, her desire for love is surpassed by her yearning for money only when he takes advantage of her he provides her with five guineas. We find Moll tells us that, "I was more confounded with the Money than I was before with the Love, and began to be so elevated, that I scarce knew the Ground I stood on" (p. 20). On receiving a hundred guineas, she "made no more Resistance to him, but let him do just what he pleas'd; and as often as he pleas'd" (p. 24). At this early point in her business, Moll does not consider the money as an inducement but as an sign of her lover's love for her besides approval of his worthy assurance. She is childlike and fails to realize her status as his kept woman and not his consort.

Maintaining moral norms, Thomas Grant reasons that Moll's "relationship with the elder brother is a kind of incest because of her figurative family position, and to have a relationship with the younger brother is—in Moll's terms—to commit Adultery and Incest" (474). Compared to her biological brother, the two brothers are closer to Moll as she has spent many years living in the family as "one of their own children"

(27). The eighteenth-century English society did not care much for a servant girl. She was vulnerable if “the head of such households” (Davidoff and Hall p. 329) wished more than domestic duties. Without any choice she was her owner’s possession. The professions for females were confined to curtained well defined arenas and any deviation from it could land them into prostitution or the cold open streets. It is by not repelling the young man’s advances that Moll discovers herself a prostitute, nonetheless she does not perceive herself amoral and accepts the his advances for her sheer love for him. Later and yet before she could mature in age, when she learns the shocking truth that he would never marry her she is disappointed to lose a chance to marry for love and falls ill for some time. Consequently, her approach toward matrimonial prospects grow into practical and cold, leaving her marriages only chains of matrimonial whoredom. Societies in eighteenth-century England were precisely mindful of their social positions, and marriages amongst the wealthy and the poor were not common (Heyck p. 47-64). Marriage of convenience was the custom. The sister of the elder brother (Moll’s first lover) says from her own view point as a woman, “for the Market is against our Sex just now; and if a young Woman have Beauty, Birth, Breeding, Wit, Sense, Manners, Modesty, and all these to an Extreme; yet if she have not Money, she’s no Body” (p. 17).” The elder brother was to become heir to his father’s estate and develops an outlook toward marriage that was quite representative of the thought and practice of the time. He, therefore, look for a wife with money and collective social station. The question is how much evolution has been found since the 18th century. Sadly, not much!

Abandoned children have been a serious issue taken up by government as well as private social work setups globally. Moll happens to be a woman who convincingly withdraws from her maternal responsibilities. Soon after her first husband, Robin’s, death she was dismayed not devastated. She is happy that her two children are under the care of her deceased

husband's parents and not thrown away on the streets. In "A Woman on her Own Account," Miram Lerenbaum writes that it was not uncommon to see corpses of abandoned infants lying on the streets in the eighteenth century, and perpetrators were usually forgiven with light sentence (Lerenbaum p. 43). Moll's choice to authorize her children in the care of the rich, affectionate grandparents can be appreciated as a sign of accountability rather than recklessness. Her next move is to capture a suitable marriage market for which she travels to London. Her consciousness appeals her to believe in her physical attractiveness and some amount of inherited wealth to cash into a suitable marriage. Now she grows up to know the way of the new world she envisaged, a toppled truth. She utters her conviction of herself, "Thus my Pride, not my Principle, my Money, not my Virtue, kept me Honest" (p. 48). And so she adopts a different, unpopular concept of love and marriage, "I had been trick'd once by that Cheat call'd LOVE, but the Game was over; I was resolv'd now to be Married or Nothing, and to be well Married or not at all" (p. 48). Having decided to disassociate love from marriage and rather be well married, Moll thoughtlessly marries a "Gentleman-Tradesman" (p. 48) for neither love nor money, but for her "Fancy to a Gentleman" (p. 48). Conversely, her aspiration to come to be a gentlewoman through marrying a gentleman-tradesman was "betray'd" and "hurried on to Ruin," for the so-called "Gentleman-Tradesman," cries Moll, "used me very handsomely, and with good Manners upon all Occasions, even to the last, only spent all I had, and left me to Rob the Creditors for something to Subsist on" (p. 50). Defoe keeps a quick punishment for her matrimonial whoredom by putting her to fall into another trap to avoid her husband's creditors, and now she lives with poor and criminals for marrying for only the expense of decorum. By becoming a "Gentlewoman" (p. 10) is simply "to be able to get my Bread by my own Work . . . to be able to Work for myself, and get enough to keep me without that terrible Bur-bear going to Service, whereas they meant to live Great, Rich, and High, and

I know not what” (p. 11-12). Her craving to become a gentlewoman is inspired by her fear of “going to Service” again, sans freedom (p. 12).

Another reason to seek new ways was the absence of patriarchy in Moll’s life, she was fatherless. She had no one to depend on for financial sustenance. Moll’s experience of failure with her first love made her clearly understand that a poor woman is supposed to be a “Dear Whore” (p. 31), conveniently shifted from men to men. This bitter experience made it certain to her that money not marriage could be the source of security. And so she continues to acquire security of wealth through several more marriages. Moll regrets on her discovery of having married her biological brother, “it was certain that my Life was very uneasie to me; for I liv’d, as I have said, but in the worst sort of Whoredom, and as I cou’d expect no Good of it, so really no good Issue came of it, and all my seeming Prosperity wore off and ended in Misery and Destruction” (p. 71). On the contrary, Ellen Pollak writes that Moll’s incest made “the ultimate threat to patriarchal authority—a refusal...of the goods to go to the market” (p. 16). Hence, incest disrupts the traditional patriarchal system with its social order and marriage market.

This one marriage proves to be different from the previous marriages experienced. She happens to meet Jemmy to try her luck of another marriage for money but is attracted to him and falls in love with him. Paradoxically, their mutual matrimonial calculations hit a common connection of understanding and love. She finally marries for love but recalls her first feelings of sincere affections “This was such Language indeed as I had not been us’d to, and I was here beaten out of all my Measures.... In short, my Eyes were dazl’d, I had now lost my Power of saying No, and to cut the Story short, I consented to be married” (p. 112). This is suggestive of her contention that had her first young lover articulated to her of his proposal of marriage, she would probably had “no Room, as well as no Power to have said No” (p. 20).

Ya-huei Wang in “Love and Money in Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*” notes that: “Now “eight-and-forty” (p. 148), she is past the time of childbearing, and realizing that her sexual appeal and reproductive capacity are in decline, she finds herself in desperate economic circumstances. Considering her “low Condition” (p. 154), Moll realizes that her options are only to go out to service or be a seamstress again at untenable wages. She notes that “I would gladly have turn’d my Hand to any honest Employment if I could have got it” (p. 154) and “gladly I would have got my Bread by the help of my Needle if I cou’d have got Work, but that was very hard to do for one that had no manner of Acquaintance in the World” (p. 155). Moll realizes that society limits women’s means to make money. She finds herself in desperate want of money, and, seeing no other choice before her, Moll turns to committing criminal acts to settle her economic problems. Defoe uses Moll to exemplify variations on the eighteenth-century abandoned woman. Moll’s pursuit of wealth is not to be seen as a quest for riches, but rather a desire to feel secure. Further, her choices are practical, made because she has a clear picture of her fate should she not act. She knows that she is not safe in the eighteenth-century capitalist economy. In the eighteenth-century, there were no social services for deserted or widowed wives. In a number of reports of deaths by starvation in eighteenth-century London, it is significant that all the victims should have been women; there can be little doubt that the hardships of the age bore with especial weight upon them. Social conditions tended to produce a high proportion of widows, deserted wives, and unmarried mothers, while women’s occupations were overstocked, ill-paid and irregular. (Lerenbaum p. 41).” (Vol. 1 No. 8; July 2011)

Through hoarding wealth and governing her own wealth Moll achieves a sense of confidence and personal security. Moll has been calculating profit through various roles in society. She could modify any social role to professional competence and therefore measured people and her relationships to them exclusively in terms of monetary gains. She says, “As for me,

my Business was his Money, and what I could make of him” (p. 177).

4. CONCLUSION

Ambitious to live life and more importantly to live well, Moll upsets or abandons the restrictions the established patriarchy had decided for her, she realizes that immorality and criminal deeds bring her much more money, security, as well as propriety than any customary feminine career could have. When brought back to her roots; her birth place at Newgate, Moll visions new passages of repentance and remorse entering her conscience and she entering another new world. She speculates, “How many poor People have I made Miserable? How many desperate Wretches have I sent to the Devil” (p. 219). She feels a sense of responsibility for Jemmy’s wretched fate: “I was overwhelm’d with grief for him; my own Case gave me no disturbance compar’d to this, and I loaded myself with Reproaches on his Account” (p. 220). Here in Newgate, new Moll finds hope and to resigns herself to “begin the World upon a new Foundation” and aspires to “live as new People in a new World” (pp. 237-238).

REFERENCES

- Brown, Laura. *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Davidoff, Leonore and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Defoe, Daniel. *Conjugal Lewdness*. Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967.

- Defoe, Daniel. *Moll Flanders: The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973.
- Heyck, Thomas William. *The Peoples of the British Isles, A New History: From 1688 to 1870*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992.
- Lerenbaum, Miriam. "A Woman on Her Own Account." *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*. New York: Humboldt Publication, 1980.
- Novak, Maximillian E. *Defoe and the Nature of Man*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1963.
- Olsen, Thomas Grant. "Reading and right Moll Flanders." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 41:3 (2001): 467-481.
- Pollak, Ellen. "Moll Flanders, Incest, and the Structure of Exchange." *Eighteenth Century* 30 (1989): 3-21.
- Wang, Ya-huei. "Love and Money in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 1 No. 8; July (2011). 252-257.