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Abigail Williams and Louka

The Femmes Fatales

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Abstract

Louka and Abigail Williams, the daring women of the modern plays, arise from their servile positions to knock down patriarchy. Louka, the self-dignified maid of the Petkoff mansion in Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, scoffs at the servile attitudes she is expected of. If Bluntschli is the mouthpiece of Shaw then the dramatist makes Louka his weapon to crush the blisters in the society that have blinded people since time immemorial. On the other hand, set in the solemn Salem in the seventeenth century, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* presents Abigail Williams, the pretty and vengeful seventeen year old who strives to win her lost reputation back. Though Abigail has gained her place ever since as the one who has garnered criticism, it is striking for a teenager to toss the glaring reproach of society and throw her heart out to the man she loves. Both Sergius Saranoff, the devotee of *higher love* and the married John Proctor, the soi-disant responsible husband, are devalued the moment their admirers attempt the insurmountable. This leaves the chivalrous men with a momentary lapsed phase, standing numb. The existences of both the men are marred by the rebellious personas of their female counterparts. The repeated cries and outbursts they receive from the damsels shake the inert minds of the men making them realise that they harbour feelings for the girls which the societal wall bars them from accepting and expressing. For Louka, it costs her a tight grab that earns a bruise whereas Abigail is threatened and labelled a whore. It is the lack of education which helps them undertake deceitful means to blatant truth rather than the more civilised ways of concealment and reserve, the traits women were expected of. The present paper attempts to compare both Louka and Abigail Williams as women who step beyond their class and gender constrictions to achieve what is rightfully their own as femmes fatales.

Key words: patriarchy, society, femmes fatales, class, gender

Introduction

Gender roles in the colonial America of the seventeenth century were opposed to the rights of women. From bearing the responsibility of the private sphere to losing their individual identities, women were regarded as the defenseless community who held their tongue rather than speaking out loud. Sewing, gossiping, spinning, harvesting as well as assisting their husbands in work were expected to serve the norms of every ideal woman. The element of law takes a pivotal role while dealing with the position of women. Upon going through the laws passed during this time, it becomes evident that it was not just the males who made them but also carved them out shrewdly in order to dominate women.

The property of women became that of their husbands' post marriage. Court regulations expected no married ladies to either take legal decisions on their own or appear in the courtroom without a male guardian (Hartman, 2009). Even when singling them out failed to lessen men's fear of losing their invincible command, the women wielded against them with the infamous witchcraft accusations. These charges proved lethal with men of prominence finding themselves at the mercy of women now in power. Things, therefore, changed when this form of allegation was used by the Salem girls in 1692, hence promoting themselves to mass attention from being the absolute 'nobody's. This could be viewed as an attack against patriarchy. The girls are reported to have experienced fits including violent outbursts, falling into trances, and vomiting. Despite modern research, the doctors failed to explain the symptoms then. This resulted into a widespread belief that they were victims of witchcraft. It was not until the courtroom hearings of the Salem witch trials that women could speak for themselves or be believed on the basis of firsthand complaints without further investigations. Yet the disparity lies between the behaviours expected and the conducts actually meted out which ultimately distorts the notion of "idealistic womanhood".

Historically, the eleven year old Abigail Williams and her cousin Betty Parris rose to prominence on becoming the principle accusers of 'seeing' witches and spirits around them. Reasons of such strange activities range from mere pretension to a consequence of menstruation. It was in her 1976 article that Linnda R. Capporael writes about the Salem accusers including Abigail's consumption of fungus ergot which might have had symptoms of food poisoning, hence resulting in hallucinations, and seizures, among others (Capporael, 1976).

The year 1885 marks a tumultuous span of time leading to the gradual development of women in Bulgaria. Besides being an economically independent community with participation in trade, textile, and harvest, the Bulgarian women would go on to register for the voting rights for themselves eventually. However, notwithstanding the classes they belonged to, Bulgarian women were barred from making any form of eye contacts to unknown men as well as talking to them and wearing headkerchiefs, despite the progress (Nestorova, 2006). Although conventional patriarchal family setup heavily depended on a male head, women were not exempted from the important family decisions. The very fact that women participated in large numbers in the agricultural trade hence pumping up the economy, indicates to one of their first emancipatory milestones. This is something that keeps Bulgaria at a bay from the other Eastern European countries which showed little signs of feminism then.

A victim of the much hated and feared McCarthyism himself, Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* attacking the Red Scare that was in fact engulfing most of Europe and America. Based on the infamous Salem witch trials of 1692, the playwright seeks his refuge in parallelism between Abigail Williams' defamation of numerous people labelling them as witches and Senator Joseph McCarthy's blacklisting people suspected as Communists in the 1950s. Abigail could not only be traced with definite historical evidences as someone with such malicious intent but also did practice oomancy and was interested in hearing stories from the enslaved maid, Tituba. Miller makes a classic antagonist of her, so much that opportunity seekers like Thomas Putnam walks on the same path in the aim of land grabbing, which remains to be one of the main elements of the play.

A noted playwright, George Bernard Shaw, was a member of the Fabian society. It is because of his confirmed advocacy of gender equality and the equal earning capacities of both the sexes that some of these elements find mention in his play, *Arms and the Man*. An anti-romantic comedy that condemns the idea of the glorification of war, the play introduces us with the supporting character, Louka, a maid servant in a respectable family who struggles her way up to the social ladder by marrying a noble major in the Bulgarian army. With his deft iconoclastic notions, Shaw attempts to portray how, despite being a member of the working class, Louka's ambition for autonomy succeeds through her relationship to Sergius and being vigilant herself, refuting and finally subverting the gender roles of the time.

Despite the differences in their situations and time, with *The Crucible* set in the seventeenth century America, and *Arms and the Man* in the nineteenth century Bulgaria, both Abigail and Louka symbolise the zeal to better their positions in a patriarchal society through their newfound strengths. These are the characters who blatantly subvert the domestic gender roles assigned to them. This paper attempts to look at Abigail Williams and Louka as femmes fatales who refuse to submit to men.

Femmes fatales have made their appearances in sensational novels, hardboiled fiction, films noir, and detective novels. They are known for their dangerous and attractive selves, all of which are perfect yet starkly opposing to the ideal obedient characteristic that a woman, according to societal standards, ought to be.

The femme fatale is seen not only as a threat to a man but also to the patriarchal establishment of the moral and social law and order. This largely stems from the fear of the society regarding its loss of indomitable power to the grasp of a powerful woman who could not, by any means, be told to be reserved, and locked up in the confines of the house unquestioningly (Hedgecock, 2005). These women, therefore, are defeated by either being saved from their malicious and dark existence to a promising path by a male hero in a romantic novel, outwitted and made to look like a fool by a male detective who would resist her temptations in a whodunit, sentenced to death, or eliminated by either a male or a 'good' female. Besides, a femme fatale is usually the possessor of exquisite beauty which she weaponises to masquerade her rather morbid plans and enchants men with it. This point bleaks the readers of the fact that she is also an intelligent woman as they only remember her for her beauty for which they are being warned, which is none other than a sexist perspective where a pretty woman without reserve is made to torment men.

Abigail Williams

Deprived of parental love, Abigail finds her solace in the farmer, John Proctor, yet faces betrayal; she becomes desperate in achieving her lost respect. The town of Salem, at this juncture, undergoes a fear of the unknown, for which she turns this fear into a reality by fictitious visions of witches and accusing innocent people as practitioners of black magic. Abigail's abominable behaviour could be seen as a result of sexual objectification causing hysteria and depression. Her preoccupation in witchcraft serves more of a weapon giving her excessive control over the society than a mere instrument of hostility. This made-up story of witchcraft offers her a medium to vent out the repression she has been receiving for some time. Though Abigail proves to be the ringmaster of the entire performance, Mary Warren, Betty Parris, Ruth Putnam, all follow the former's step as they find a power for themselves like never before.

The character of Elizabeth Proctor, John's wife, is the prototype that the society wants women of her age to be, the one who would be satisfied in the confines of the private sphere unquestioningly. She saves her husband from further embarrassment when interrogated by the court if he is immoral, which he actually is. In contrast to this, Abigail's perspective of justice for herself is greater than just thinking about the welfare of the man she loves and for whom she has descended herself in the present state. She is definitely a misfit in the seventeenth century America who manipulates the town's superstitions and prejudices to her own benefit. To deal with her, therefore, an entire battalion of legal authorities comes to the fore. This eventually ends up people being hanged, pressed to death by stones, while the rest die in the prison itself.

Louka

A mark of demeaning attitude towards the working class is how Louka is stripped of her surname. She redefines her profession, the role of a servant, not as someone looked down upon but the one serving in all earnestness. She bangs the plate of letters in front of Bluntschli, the Swiss soldier, resolute that she would not be civil to an enemy. Shaw restores such firmness thereby endowing upon her, traits of masculinity coupled with the heart of a true patriot, something that the idealistic Sergius lacks. The key to compatibility between Louka and Sergius is authenticity, which of course comes from Louka's end. Her critical attacks make Sergius question his self-proclaimed heroic self. On the one hand, Sergius tries to flirt with a beautiful impoverished maid but is infuriated of her insolence. Louka, on the other, condemns his platonic love with Raina Petkoff, the daughter of her wealthy employer. Their courtship scene is more of a battle of sexes than an ideal Ruritanian romance. She sees through both Raina and Sergius. Notwithstanding his superficial ignorance to Louka, he feels comfortable whenever she is around as he is exempted of the great mental taxation while talking of higher love with Raina. Though the manservant Nicola's mercenary attitude might be more pragmatic than Louka's wayward behaviours, the latter never lets her soul to be corrupted to the level of servility. The constant switch between her actual self of radicalism and her pretentious being of compliance brings out the humanistic element possible in a maid servant, someone who has been thoroughly dehumanised. The spirit of independence in Louka's character reminds one of the concepts of New Woman. Coined by Sara Grand, New Woman was a Victorian term that referred to women who challenged the imposed gendered limitations (Mendes, 2011). Though not educated, Louka's authoritative stance leads the 'civilised' Petkoffs to consider her as a degradation of the Victorian women further leading her to tread on the path of her own upgradation against patriarchy.

Arms and the Man certainly portrays the duty and valour of army personnel like Bluntschli and Sergius but the play has a yet another unsung soldier. From keeping her mistresses, Catherine and Raina, updated about the war to being thoroughly patriotic, Louka is the soldier without uniforms who believes in swift strategic moves rather than the servile commitments of Nicola which only buys him dishonour. She safekeeps Raina's secret on her letting in Bluntschli in her bedroom late at night only to break it off to Sergius at the right time, hence

gaining his credulity. Unlike the gradual development in the character of Raina, Louka remains the stock character who speaks in the language of a desperate soldier trying to save his life till the end. A woman who cannot be gagged with money, she reflects Fabian principles of implying to the needs of advancing equality within the social classes.

It is, therefore, understandable how the reformist sides of both Miller and Shaw make their heroines, Abigail and Louka, as mediators of social mobility and pose them as winners of a doubly oppressed body – a woman and a working lady.

The Femmes Fatales

Although the term ‘femme fatale’ was first coined in the mid 1800s, it has its depictions in as early as Homer’s *The Odyssey*. A femme fatale is used to refer to a woman who chooses to be active instead of being reserve, knows what she wants as well as the ways she could achieve it, most of which are shrouded in enigma to those around her, hence demanding both attention and fear. She is a woman, who, according to the male gaze, is the object to be conquered but remains irresistibly unconquered and becomes an unsolved puzzle. The element of ambition is followed by the manners in which it is executed, from sexuality to manipulation, charisma to creativity, it is manifold. The birth of a femme fatale is, therefore, associated with the sole reason to crush a man (Hu, 2023). She embodies all those characteristics that a chaste woman is not, and is, therefore, a fallen one without principles. A French term, the femme fatale carries the very idea of fatality with itself foreboding the destruction of the ideas, ambitions, and the dreams of the man allowing the woman to conquer hers. It is the independence of the femme fatale which lets her have her own way through the obstacles inflicted on her by the same men, no matter their importance in the society. Besides, her vigilant self should be taken into account as she is completely aware of three factors that her presence inevitably leads to; to be desired, to be feared, and to be confident of the abilities of her own.

This paper deals with two such characters, both of whom are attractive, seductive, are aware of the discriminatory ways they have been treated in, yet dwell at the unassuming positions of the social strata. The femme fatale challenges expectations of the readers as an evil without an ounce of justice but greed (Mercure, 2010). But unlike a femme fatale of a hard boiled fiction, these women do not desire to destroy the man but the patriarchal system at large. This is evident as both desire to marry the ones they have set their hearts for, a commitment that a femme fatale is usually not known to have made. Ending a man, therefore, does not refer to its literal sense here but it is this desire to get him married to herself by losing his own codes of conduct which, according to the society, is enough for a man’s honour to be lost forever.

Despite her introduction as a vulnerable orphan as she steps on the stage for the first time, Abigail has a darker side to her otherwise innocent appearance. A beautiful orphan, working as a maid for the Proctors, Abigail is fired after she is suspected of having being involved in a sexual affair with Elizabeth Proctor’s husband, John. She is “soiled” to the extent Elizabeth does not want to sit near her in the church and rarely goes there. Abigail is in complete control of her temperament as the situation demands. From being furious at Mary Warren’s accusing her to being moved to tears, it is, as a femme fatale, the tool of deception that she employs to deflect herself from blames (Muñoz, 2008).

Louka, on the other hand, is a maid too, and therefore, is expected to keep the secrets of the family as well as take false blames to cover up her mistresses’ blunders, as any true servant would do, without thinking of her honour, as she is not supposed to have any. But Louka, flouts every expectation thrust in her way, does her household duties but also leaks secrets to Sergius to pose herself loyal to him as opposed to Raina. A femme fatale also knows the value of knowledge as a result of which the readers find both Abigail and Louka making full use of any information they might possess for their own good. This would include telling half truths by keeping things to themselves, flirting to engage the men for further information until next time, using falsehoods, being observant, and disregarding the class distinctions.

The character of a femme fatale stands out better when she has a foil, a rival who she can compete for her ambitions. Abigail’s foil, Elizabeth Proctor, is also known as Goody Proctor. She is everything that Abigail is not; from being loyal to her husband despite his betrayal to being quiet and reserved with restraints that a female should practice as a Puritan. This makes Elizabeth stand typically in contrast with her being the ‘good’ whom every woman should follow whereas Abigail remains as ‘bad’ and avoided at all costs. This, however, is not the case in *Arms and the Man*. Louka maybe a scheming maid but that does not make Shaw portray her employer, Raina, without senses. Raina is brave, going out of her way to save Bluntschli, in her bedroom in the

middle of the night, not letting Sergius know about his betrayal until she confronts him for it, and choosing Bluntschli as her husband instead of Sergius, the one chosen by her parents (Sattar, 2014).

Spiteful yet ambitious, opportunist but true to their love, Louka and Abigail Williams, the women of the aforementioned plays come up as shocking admirations to the readers. Speaking of her deepest and darkest desires of what seems to be an audacious move for a maid servant, Louka does not hesitate to be her true self despite her profession unlike Nicola, the man servant. Although applauded for being pragmatic for being a silent witness to the stupidity of the Petkoffs, it is his female counterpart whose rebellious actions demand attention. Though Sergius is shaped as the ultimate caricature of idiocy, Proctor has a different story. The latter, however, does not get away with it so easily, as he is eventually hanged. The independent stance of both Louka and Abigail amaze us as they continue to hatch plans in order to complete their mission. The lack of education plays a significant part here as neither is ashamed of being regarded as 'flawed' and 'runied' given the fact that they are already from the lower strata, nor facing the truth. It is their affluent male counterparts who fear their honours and ranks in the society instead, only to be reminded of responsibility later. It is interesting how both the plays project the males as either god fearing, inactive, weak, lacking common sense, and indolent, all of which are in sharp contrast to their powerful female counterparts, who, knowing the flaws of the former, choose such gullible men to better their own positions (Sattar, 2014). For instance, John is suddenly reminded of his duty towards his wife, Goody Proctor, and attempts to turn a blind eye to the unfortunate Abigail, only after he had had an affair with her. It is unwise to make a hero out of Sergius either, as he expresses his love for Louka, because that is something, he should have done in the first place and would make him a hero. Crowning men of virtue overlooking their vices and recklessness are recurrent in literature, something that finds its presence in the 1996 film adaptation of Miller's play. The film attempts to make a hero out of John Proctor, who gains sympathy for his misfortune and portrays Abigail in the light of a liar, thief, and immoral character. The society disowns her for her outgoing ways, too passionate for a woman, as she makes an escape, never to be found, whereas it respects John Proctor like a martyr, who is hanged to death in the end.

The masculinity of Louka is coupled with her manipulative side. She is good looking, observant, authoritative and stands for herself. This is something amiss in the chivalrous Sergius, who only cares for his status and nobility and is more of a coward than an efficient soldier. The interesting part about Louka's character is her dual image; a servant in the exterior out of dire needs but a rebel within. They contradict each other for which the owners find it difficult to put up with her insolence. It might be difficult to draw parallels between the women from the historical context to the ones portrayed in the plays because of the disparity between the position of women as submissive beings and the ones in the path of daring modern women. Yet thanks to the playwrights, both Miller and Shaw give voices to the otherwise mute and all accepting women hence bringing them to walk in the path of dissecting the characters of Abigail and Louka.

Besides achieving their goals, the two women have been made into femmes fatales by their respective authors because of a couple of reasons. As mentioned already, a femme fatale is the one who needs to be punished to bring her back on track. This is essentially why her character is made to appear, to portray the dark side femininity and to be felt sorry for it eventually. With John Proctor hanged to death and her desire to marry dwindling, Abigail flees Salem, never to be seen again. Louka, on the other hand, gets married to Sergius. Although the differences in their situations might indicate a defeat at Abigail's end and a triumph at Louka's, it is far from so. Abigail's departure not only brings a relief to the villagers who would eventually face truth but also refers to how her fate is reduced to uncertainty and ambiguity. For an ambitious woman who became "God's tool" and let men in power feel her dominance in a matter of moments, it is a sad ending. Despite her marriage to a higher station, the socialist Shaw punishes his femme fatale in a different light. He marries off Louka and lets her get what she dreamt of but for an intelligent woman, marrying a foolish man, is a punishment that she realises and is ready to accept.

Conclusion

The aspect of gender discrimination is not new. This paper has been written keeping in mind the performances and dialogues of the damsels as a direct result of their prolonged grievances. Abigail Williams and Louka are heroes in their own rights by daring to grasp life above their stations, something which is so unlikely of the women according to the social judgement of their respective times. It is not just the male predicament that is prevalent here but the biases that they receive from the members of their own sex as well. Simone de Beauvoir writes in the introduction of her book *The Second Sex* how women fail to have a concrete community and has largely remained the 'other' to men because of the former's sporadic organisational capacity (Beauvoir, 1952). Though Abigail's journey is more tragic than Louka's as while the former escapes, the latter has a happy ending

by marrying Sergius after much rebuke and conundrums, both pay for stealing the limelight from the males to achieve what *they* really want.

On an apparent note, the two eponymous characters might be deemed more of vamps than victims but on a closer look, it becomes clear how they take up the roles as caretakers of their families or their workplaces. In case of Louka, she is freer to be present in front of unfamiliar men than her mistress Raina, as the former lets her know before the Bulgarian soldiers enter Raina's room at the dead of the night.

Abigail and Louka, seek vengeance, expose hypocrisy, disregard servility, combine knowledge with sexuality to taste authority and power, and see life in their own terms, something that the women have been strictly shunned from doing for a long time. This paper has, therefore, sought to look at how they appear as femmes fatales, representing the sexual repressions of women, hence challenging sexual and cultural ideology.

History has always remembered those who make a difference in their own might. Although *The Crucible* and *Arms and the Man* cater to historical incidents with differences in time, space, and political perspectives, yet they are made to echo the modern problems that had lead suffrage movements in the 1920s. With Suffragists like Elizabeth B. Canton and Alice Paul fighting for the right to vote by the formation of organisations such as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and National Woman's Party (NWP), supporters of the movement were able to make a mass appeal so as to convince President Woodrow Wilson in passing a women's suffrage amendment guaranteeing women's right to vote (Schuessler, 2019). These plays, therefore, could be aligned with the contemporary socio-political movements that were to bring transformation in the path of modernity.

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