

Hysteric Sexuality, Prostitution and Womanhood in Emma Donoghue's *Slammerkin*

Shikha Thakur¹ & Dr. Meenakshi F.Paul²

¹Assistant Professor, Lovely Professional University, Jalandhar, Pb.

Email: shikhamittu@gmail.com

²Professor of English, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, H.P.

Abstract

The paper aims at questioning the conventionally established sexuality of woman in Emma Donoghue's *Slammerkin* (2000). Plausibly, it lays bare female protagonist's (Mary) subversion of gender roles, her transgression of boundaries for the reclamation of her dreams and dignity, and the demand for reparation from her for disallowing them. Mary subverts the othered identity imposed upon her by patriarchy, which is conflated with capitalism that identifies her as sacrificial, feeble, and acquiescent. She redefines prostitution as a weapon for acquiring a subject from a treaty of object. To reclaim her autonomous identity, Mary uses her innate intelligence and quick-wittedness, with parody, hysteria, and sexuality to assert her uniqueness and to subvert patriarchy. This in turn, aids Mary to affirm herself as an individual and also to redefine her personhood, vis-a-vis her gender role, social space, and relationships. Reparation is posited with Mary's trial and hanging, which uncover the embedded biases and injustices in English society of the Enlightenment. The end enforces upon society the need to restructure itself and make reparations for the unjustness that subjected Mary, as vulnerable women were and still are, to homelessness, sexual assault, poverty, desperation, and murder; all merely for her wish to have a better life.

Keywords: gender roles, transgression, object, prostitution, othered, subject, hysteria, sexuality, reclaim, patriarchy, Reparation, personhood, vulnerable women.

Assertion of male hegemony over the female often employs the ruse of irrational female desire, the positioning of women as the supposed other, and the perceived biological weakness of women, which together seek to legitimatise reproductive and sexual control over their bodies and lives. Biological differences thus used as means to undermine the woman's position and to relegate her to the margins also serve to term her resistance as 'hysterical'. The patriarchal usage of hysterics thus seeks to authenticate women's irrationality, weakness and dependency, and leads to consequent deprivation of her autonomy and personhood. Toril Moi collates the various views on female hysteria in her seminal article, "Representation of Patriarchy." She refers to Freud, who believed that 'hysterical unsociability' was caused by societal pressures and Lacan, who developed the potential of hysteric acts as political weapons to confront the 'symbolic status of patriarchy in society'. Moi links these to Hélène Cixous and Elizabeth Clément who "discuss the political potential of hysteria" and further to Julia Kristeva who is of the belief that the fundamental exclusion of women from the linguistic order contributes towards hysteria in them (Moi 1-14).

Hysteria is thus understood by feminists as often caused by the patriarchal stranglehold on women's freedom. This thesis is unequivocally presented by Emma Donoghue in her seventh novel, *Slammerkin* (2000). A historical novel, it is set in London during the 1760s, and is inspired by the eighteenth-century newspaper story about a young maid, also a

prostitute, who was executed for killing her employer. Mary Saunders, the poverty circumscribed protagonist of *Slammerkin*, desired the fine life and paid for it with her life. Her character and story demonstrate how far social and gendered positions impact a woman's life.

Set in an age where the values perceived as natural were in a constant state of comparison with the so-called civilised, Mary Saunders is introduced to the reader as an impulsive thirteen-year-old girl, belonging to an impecunious working class family in London. She lives with her seamstress mother, Susan Digot, coalman stepfather, and younger stepbrother, Billy, near the area called The Seven Dials, which is notorious for theft, prostitution, robbery, murders and other criminal activities. In the midst of her poverty Mary longs for vibrant and rich clothes, the desire eventually ends in her adopting prostitution for her livelihood. Despite her mother's admonitions to the contrary, Mary loves to dawdle at The Seven Dials on her way to and from Charity school to watch boys smoking long pipes and girls decked up in vibrant clothes. She is particularly fascinated by a vivid red satin ribbon that a streetwalker ties in her hair. One day, on her way back home from Mercer Street, Mary cannot resist the temptation for a piece of red satin ribbon being sold by a pedlar in a side street at The Seven Dials. Since, she does not have money the pedlar asks for a kiss instead. When Mary steps forward, however, he raises her gown and has quick sex with her. Mary returns home crying with a brown satin ribbon, the symbol of deception and broken promises which she lays under her pillow. Thus, Mary's dream, to make "Something better" (25) of her life is set to be frustrated at the very beginning of the novel. When her mother discovers that Mary is pregnant, she is both afraid of the consequences were her husband to find out the truth and repulsed by her daughter's transgression of the virtues she knew to be essential for a girl to survive in that society. Susan enunciates the importance of the patriarchal values which she had striven hard to inculcate in the girl when she bemoans her daughter's fate, "for all my efforts to raise you right, all my long labours, you've sold yourself into the lowest trade there is. For a ribbon!" (32). Without a thought to Mary's vulnerability of age, sex, and condition, therefore, she expels her from their home. Homeless and exhausted after hours of wandering around, Mary lies down in a ditch at night where she is sexually assaulted by a group of soldiers. Doll Higgins, the prostitute with the red ribbon, rescues and befriends Mary. She mentors her and teaches her the basic lessons of prostitution and also of life. Mary quickly adapts to her new way of life and her delight with the bright-coloured slammerkins that Doll gives her to wear, coupled with the dangerous exciting freedom of the streets are in complete contrast to her earlier life of straitened drudgery.

Doll, however, soon falls severely ill and concerned about ingénue Mary's survival if she were to die, she suggests that Mary leave the profession and begin life afresh in a charity house. Mary thus goes to Magdalen hospital to bide the winters and to decide on the future course of her life. There, Mary learns to sew and attempts to lead a life of discipline and routine enforced by the nuns but soon she chafes at the confinement and boredom, and finding it increasingly intolerable she plans to go to Monmouth for work where her mother's childhood friend, Mrs. Jones, runs a flourishing tailoring business. She decides to see Doll once before leaving, however, she finds Doll frozen to death in an alley. Greatly saddened, Mary does not seek help from the parish men as they would drag Doll's body to the nearest churchyard and throw it in the poor pool. Instead, she decides to give Doll a decent burial by working the streets for a few days to earn enough for it. Mary misses the sisterly bond shared between the two and feels sorry for having to leave Doll's body there for the while. Back in their room, Mary finds her clothes and other belongings that Doll had hidden under the floorboards. She is touched by Doll's gesture who had not sold Mary's things even though she had obviously died in dire straits. Mrs. Farrel, the landlady and owner of the brothel, finds Mary in the room and demands money and her belongings as rent due to her. When Mary argues the woman calls for Caesar, the brutal and much feared henchman. Terrified, she hastily decamps and boards a wagon to Monmouth.

All by herself now, Mary has to rely on her own wits and resourcefulness so when she falls short of carriage fare on the way to Monmouth she pretends to be a virginal innocent girl and cleverly seduces a fellow passenger, a merchant, when they stop for the night at an inn. The remorseful man gives her money and Mary is able to continue her journey. She forges a letter from her supposed deceased mother for Mrs. Jones, requesting her to look after Mary. Mary thus succeeds in seeking refuge at Mrs. Jones' home where she lives like a commonplace maid and also works as an assistant seamstress at her dressmaking shop. Daffy, the manservant to Mrs. Jones proposes to Mary but it turns out that he is the son of Cadwaladyr, the merchant, and also the curate, who Mary had tricked on the way. Mary soon realises that "She was never going to get where she wanted by being nothing but a maid. As fast as she might climb that ladder, it would sink into the mud, or somebody one rung up would stamp on her hands" (303). Caught in the ironies of life, Mary decides to take Cadwaladyr's offer to give her services surreptitiously at his inn to "be able to return to London in style" (303). While harbouring her plan, one day as she helps a client to try out her new *slammerkin*, Mary thinks that instead of the rich Mrs Morgan she would have done justice to the beautiful white velvet *slammerkin* embroidered in silver. Mrs Morgan perceives the contempt in Mary's unconscious smile and Mrs. Jones, who has been affectionate to Mary so far, is constrained to whip her for affronting her most affluent customer on whose patronage the business depends for survival. Later, Mrs. Jones goes to console Mary where she stumbles upon the coins that Mary had earned at the inn. Mary refuses to divulge the source of her income and succumbs to fever, after the whole tumultuous episode of being apprehensive, beaten, and othered as a mere 'servant.' Mrs. Jones puts the confiscated money in the Poor Charity Box and when Mary discovers this she is furious at having been deprived of her bitter earnings. She goes straight to Mrs. Jones' wardrobe, drinks cider, puts on the *slammerkin* being readied for Mrs. Morgan, picks up an armful of dresses, and is all set to leave for London to start a fresh life. However, Mrs. Jones arrives just then and orders her to put back the clothes; in the ensuing struggle between the two, Mary stabs Mrs. Jones to death. The court holds Mary guilty of murdering her mistress and sends her to the gallows.

From the very beginning, Mary was deprived of freedom and free choice and the reins of her life were kept on a tight leash by her mother and step-father who marked down her resistance as irrationality and stubbornness. Susan had once wanted to send Mary to Monmouth to Mrs. Jones as an apprentice seamstress and said: "Once you're trained you could come back and work alongside of me. Partners, we'd be" (24) but Mary had defied her mother's wish because she disdained domesticity and desired a better life. This desire becomes the basis of what is dubbed 'hysterical' within the patriarchal discourse as the patriarchal paradigm equates female desire with hysteric disease. Elaine Showalter says that for her as a feminist, the significance of hysteria lies in the fact that, "Above all, the hysteric is someone who has a story, a *historie*" (336). Donoghue furthers Mary's *historie* by making Mary make up stories to make her way up. Mary's presentation of her fabricated story to Mrs. Jones, of being Susan's vulnerable daughter, and the fictional story of an unfortunate oppressed maid to the court during her trial, interweave countless women's narratives into her story. Mary's hysteric hostility to the powers that seek to repress her is underlined in her impulsive and spontaneous series of decisions to: flee from the charity hospital Magdalen, give a decent burial to her prostitute friend and mentor Doll, seduce the merchant curate Cadwaladyr, resort to secret prostitution while working for Mrs Jones, and murder Mrs. Jones. Mary thus exemplifies how hysteria is a result of the repressions and constraints on the women consequent to masculine notions of femininity. The hysteric irony of being included or excluded from the ethics of care is clearly brought out by Donoghue when Mary realises that she would not be able to realise her dreams with only her honest earnings at Mrs. Jones' and resumes prostitution voluntarily to better her station. It is pertinent to note here that Mary had entered into prostitution in the first place to afford the abortion of her resilient foetus which "had survived the soldiers, and

the ditch, and even the dirty fever” (48). The reason that she agreed to abort was Doll’s statement that the child would be born with the clap and Mary could not imagine her baby being born “diseased before its first breath” (49). Also, she knew nothing about childbirth apart from “the terrible panting, and stained sheets hung over the dresser to dry afterwards” at the time of her brother’s birth (48). The abortion, then, signifies the subversion of the ethics of care inscribed into contemporary femininity. Instead, Mary’s later bonding with Hetta Jones and her mentoring of Abi, the servant girl, take her beyond the ethics of care to the realm of eros. Repeated thwarting of this eros leads to all the subsequent rebellions and the murder.

Mary’s eros must also necessarily be juxtaposed with her being a prostitute. The idea of prostitution is severely contested within feminism. Many “feminists seek to be supportive of sex workers while deploring the work itself as inherently wrong” while radical feminists denounce it “on the grounds that it degrades women and furthers the power politics of the male gender” (Bromberg n. pag.). Socialist feminists support prostitution on the premise that a prostitute is the victim of the corrupted societal system of class distinction whereas existentialist feminists consider a prostitute as the quintessential liberated woman. Donoghue first presents Mary in the perspective of socialist feminism as the victim of class and gender hegemony who enters into prostitution first then to survive and to earn her livelihood. Gradually, Donoghue shifts Mary towards existentialist feminism, as she distinguishes sex work from exploitation, “This was no rape; she was letting it happen, making it happen, in fact” (55). Mary uses sex work to further her desire to create a better social space for herself and feels in control in the manner described by Carol Pateman, “the man may think he ‘has’ her, but his sexual possession is an illusion; it is she who has him . . . she will not be ‘taken,’ since she is being paid” (qtd. in Bromberg n. pag.). Laurie Shrage consolidates three main feminist views on the issue of prostitution: the sex work perspective, the abolitionist perspective, and the outlaw perspective. The sex work perspective aims at legalizing voluntary prostitution, the abolitionist perspective aims at criminalizing it, and the outlaw perspective views prostitution as an expression of sexual freedom (n. pag.). In *Slammerkin* Donoghue discards the abolitionist perspective of Mary’s mother at the very beginning and delves into sex work and outlaw perspectives by locating Mary among the ranks of the exploited labour at the beginning and by finally giving her agential room as a sex worker by choice.

Slammerkin explores the dual effects of Mary’s social class and her sexuality. Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1984) examines the relationship between the two to challenge the ‘repressive hypothesis’ advocated by Western philosophy with the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. He refutes this repressed ideology of sexuality and establishes the significance of its discourse as the means to thwart hegemonic and patriarchal control (Crossman n. pag.). The sexuality of women is thus targeted incessantly by patriarchy to debilitate them. Donoghue maps prostitution in *Slammerkin* to re-contextualize some of the stereotypes associated with it, viz., a beautiful girl with a golden heart fallen in the trap of bad times; a helpless victim pimped in a cage; or the wicked seductress witch. Mary and Doll do not fit into any of these stereotypical definitions of the prostitute. Indeed, they struggle to reclaim the social space and their selfhood denied to them by the disruptive effects of prostitution. They bend towards the subversion of the societal labelling of the prostitute that corresponds to haplessness, evil, vice, immorality, or submissiveness, to a term that corresponds with spunk, strength, energy, articulation and assertion. Mary furthers her own advantage and creates a form of counter-narrative by repeatedly transgressing the patriarchal boundaries and debilitating forces that seek to confront and overwhelm her. She emerges as an individual who is committed to live on her terms and rapidly grows in strength, cunning, and doggedness as the plot develops.

Deprived of formal education since age thirteen, Mary learns quickly from her lived experiences as she charts every prospective step of her journey. Her reply to Matron Butler’s

well-meaning advice sums up Mary's volition: "I've right to my liberty. . . ." she says (112). The Matron attempts to persuade her to continue at Magdalen: "I know you to be a young woman of great capacities. Your education is solid, your wits are original and your will is strong. In less than two months, with my own eyes I have seen you blossom into a seamstress of remarkable skill. But still the shadow hangs over you" (113) but Mary rejects the offer and states gravely that she is "Uneasy under confinement" (115). Her rejection of the suppressive nature of the institutionalised discipline of Magdalen is augmented by her battle with Madame Farrel who tries to snatch away her clothes, "Mary crossed the room and shoved Mrs. Farrel so hard her head cracked against the window-frame . . . A trickle of blood [an echo of the red ribbon] zigzagged down the Irishwoman's wrinkles" (131). At the Joneses, she fights Mrs. Ash fiercely when she threatens Mary with disclosing her secret. By now Mary is strong enough to combat anyone who comes in the way of her seeking liberty and autonomy. This resistance finds culmination in the murder of Mrs Jones who reduced her vaunted maternal love for Mary to the equation of the mistress-servant, divested her of her money, and wanted to take away the dresses Mary had stitched painstakingly. She stood in the way of Mary's liberty and selfhood and when the white slammerkin tears in the skirmish, Mary realises that everything is "*Spoiled, all spoiled*" (381). The murder, riding on three years—a lifetime—of frustration, negation, and brutalisation, bears their inexorable weight: "It happened before Mary knew it/—as if the cleaver had taken its own simple revenge on behalf of the dress" (380-81). She goes towards her execution having lived her short life fighting the tyrannies of the established hierarchies. Her desire to seek liberty from the enforced norms of gender and class has led her to defy every confinement and subvert every attempt to suppress her, even if it is at the cost of her life. Her rejection of Daffy's marriage proposal, resumption of prostitution to earn her way out of servitude, and death with 'chin and head high', thus, locate her in the space of asserted womanhood, where she has "nothing to fear" (12). The strivings and achievements of her life are encapsulated in her physical and mental state on the way to the scaffold: "She was soused by the time she climbed on to the cart outside the gaol. She felt no fear" (409). Hence, the targeted 'hysteric' sexuality becomes the means for claiming liberty and womanhood.

Notes and References

- Bromberg, Sarah. "Feminist Issues in Prostitution." *Feminist Issues*. 1997. Web. 3 January 2016.
- Crossman, Ashely. "The History of Sexuality: An Overview of the Series of Michel Foucault." *Sociology.about.com*. About Education, 4 December 2014. Web. 1 January 2016.
- Donoghue, Emma. *Room*. 2010. London: Picador, 2012. Print.
- Moi, Toril. "Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's 'Dora.'" *Feminist Review*. COPE, 1981. Web. 30 October 2015.
- Shrage, Laurie. "Feminist Perspectives on Sex Markets." *The Stanford Encyclopedia*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. Plato Stanford, 18 February 2015. Web. 15 January 2016.