

METTLE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY: SCARLETT O'HARA IN MARGARET MITCHELL'S GONE WITH THE WIND

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Abstract

Challenges and struggles have been an inevitable part of a woman's life since time immemorial. The present study analyses the character of the female protagonist, Scarlett O'Hara, in Margaret Mitchell's literary masterpiece, *Gone with the Wind* in the backdrop of her struggle for survival. It attempts to comprehend the lead character's grit and determination to emerge out of the challenging conditions with an undying spirit. The methodology adopted involves considering the literary theories, setting, research works and themes like survival and resilience in the work to analyze Scarlett's character. The study implies that one's own strength and conviction can make an individual succeed just as Scarlett fends for her family in the times of distress that the war had brought about. She ensures that her ancestral home Tara is restored after it gets ruined in the attacks. Scarlett is a go getter in all respects which is proven by depicting that she can resort to any means to fulfill her aspirations. Though the means adopted by Scarlett were not considered conservative, the findings elicit that she remained steadfast to accomplish her goals. Analysis of Scarlett's character showcases the motivation that contemporary women can gain and learn from her. Scarlett defied all odds in a patriarchal society to have her way by all means emphasizing on adaptation during times of distress. Tracing out the relationship between the social events at the time of writing and the fighting spirit of the lead character make it an awe inspiring study.

Keywords: Scarlett O'Hara, Margaret Mitchell, Survival, Struggle

Introduction

History has been witness to the decisive force in women to fight in the wake of a challenge when they have reason to believe that their causes are just and necessary. Insightful observations on human nature, powerful characterization and swift narration make a woman protagonist a reason, worthy enough to analyze for a researcher. The present paper deals with how women writers represented women protagonists at the time of the World Wars. The fiery spirit of the lead character, Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* motivates the present study of how women are portrayed in this work by virtue of their strengths and weaknesses. The manner in which a determined female protagonist deals with her circumstances and struggles to overcome hurdles despite her unconventional nature is what makes Scarlett O'Hara a character worth studying. It is the story of a woman with an undying spirit, who aims high in the journey of her life that seem unattainable. She also had to face the unpleasant repercussions of civil war before she could put her plans into action to attain her goals. The fact that she has such a compelling hold on readers for close to a century is remarkable.

Scarlett O'Hara's characterization is a master craftsmanship, which depicts the spirit of an inspired

Southern woman. Southern America, previously, had a tendency to regard women as delicate creatures, who continuously needed the guidance or assistance of men. Most of the Southern women, therefore, did not have to fend for themselves as men took the forefront when it came to taking the responsibility of their families. Due to the unprecedented events, which unfolded in the country, tenderness in women had to make way for hardened souls. The southern plantation underwent chaos that created major changes in the peoples' lives because of the Civil War. Scarlett faces sudden obliteration of her home and country due to the civil war. A pragmatic approach had to be embraced by her even though it offered a dim hope for the future. She is drained out physically and emotionally in an attempt to save her plantation, Tara. The untiring efforts of Scarlett in the wake of challenges and how she faces the circumstances in the diverse phases of her life is worth appreciating. As her personal aspirations intensify, the dire circumstances she is steeped in, drive her to revolt against the Southern values to restore the family plantation. It is interesting to analyze Scarlett O'Hara's ambitions and the means she employs to achieve them. In spite of the conditions that prevail before and after the war, Scarlett does not spare any means to achieve her ambitions. A multi-layered character like Scarlett can be fascinating since every reader can derive a unique interpretation of her personality traits. Her tenacity and uncompromising nature can take on different shades of meaning according to the age and experience of the reader. The characterization of Scarlet O'Hara reveals the feisty aspect in her which is so riveting to the readers, and continues to fascinate even after decades.

Literature Review

The author, Margaret Mitchell in her novel, "Gone with the Wind" narrates the story of Scarlett against the backdrop of the war. It is a narration of Scarlett's encounters with life and how she reacts to the chaos of the post-war conditions. *Gone with the Wind* drew a lot of controversies after being published. An in-depth study along with analysis has been done on the transformation of Scarlett from a sixteen year old girl, who is influenced by Southern values to change herself into a far-sighted woman. She was far from being just gone as the South, as she is a decisive, firm and adaptable young woman. Margaret Mitchell portrayed Scarlett as a strong character laced with feminist hues. Personality traits of the female protagonist such as challenging authority and fighting out on their own were etched out well by Mitchell.

Scarlett O'Hara's character has been analyzed by critics and researchers with so many other lead female protagonists. Leading and steering through tough life conditions is evident in other female characters such as Emily from *A Rose for Emily*, Wong Chia Chi from *Lust, Caution* and so on. Her tenacity in distress lets readers to distinguish between the weak and the strong. Pain and conflict is mostly avoided by the weak. They would like to accept the situation as it is rather than have a tough time adapting to the situations. Several thought provoking instances throughout the narration leave one wishing Scarlett could understand the repercussions of her attitude. Her self-interest leads to a series of actions that breed unfavorable consequences. Not surprisingly, all such endeavors of her were not accepted by the society. She is portrayed as a tough spirit who should have been given a fair chance to redeem her. Whether or not she avails the opportunities to the same is a question which is left to the discretion of the readers. She was always short of fulfillment in terms of relationships because she prioritized monetary aspects over people, who mattered to her in life. Her obsessive trait is brought to foray when she exhibits strong feelings for Ashley though she is aware of the fact that she cannot have him. In sharp contrast to Ashley is the character of Rhett Butler who almost borders on being an individual with hedonistic pursuits. In this respect, he and Scarlett are portrayed in a similar manner. The two characters mirror each other in their determination to fight against unbearable odds, and are probably willing to forego ethical considerations.

The protagonist Scarlett's extremely selfish, vain, and merciless nature had not gone down well with the opponents but she remains an enigmatic character in the American literature. Her character is etched in such a manner that many readers believe that she would not bat an eyelid to accomplish her goals. She is an extremely distinct character which reflects the spirit of freedom, American culture, realistic attitude and strength of character. A lot of courage and struggle coupled with a high level of perseverance is required to face reality and the implications that follow in the pursuit of happiness and love. Her wisdom in surviving the war and her deviation from the conventional southern values, show a unique charm of her personality. Innovation and self-confidence can be learnt from Scarlett's role. Also, perspective of feminism can be explored in Scarlett. The character succeeds in fascinating the interest of a large number of readers.

Characterization

Scarlett is rebellious, greedy and vain. She is persistent, strong and determined with the spirit of an enterprising pioneer. Scarlett is bent upon giving herself a new lease of life on the debris of the past world. An ethical character would never succumb to the tribulations of life, despite the misfortunes they encounter. Such a character would always lap up the impetus of their own efforts to steer ahead in the face of adversities rather than being disillusioned. But, Scarlett is defined by her determination to achieve anything she desires by all means necessary. Her self-obsession is a manifestation of this determination to have her way. Just as Molly Haskell in her criticism puts it, "Her flaws are never excused but are somehow extenuated by her remarkable courage and resilience." (Haskell p.12) Her survival instincts paved way for sustenance in the form her ability to run her entire plantation. Readers across the world were taken by a storm with the character of Scarlett which went on to become the most popular motion picture owing to the complex characterization.

Throughout the course of the novel, there is Rhett Butler, the one man who truly loves Scarlett for who she is and also the man who eventually refuses to submit to her. She, no wonder, is obviously more compatible with Butler, but her realization comes too late. Scarlett is the perfect example of a selfish and superficial character, who is different from the routine submissive female protagonists of that age. Since the age of sixteen Scarlett loved Ashley and irrespective of his feelings for her, she always insisted upon their bond. Despite her hope that Melanie should perish during the war, so that she can get Ashley, realization dawns upon her that she loves Melanie deeply. Very soon she comes to regret that she has been unjust to Melanie, Ashley and also to Rhett. Unfortunately, her relationships did not last long as she could not comprehend relationships.

Researchers have drawn comparisons between Scarlett and other women like Wang Xifeng from *A Dream in Red Mansion* and Yao Mulan from *Moment in Peking*. Her total ignorance and disinterest in anything gives her the best advantage to place value only in material things. Troubles of the people around her, showing interest in the feelings of others have no place in the thought process of Scarlett. Tragically, Scarlett realizes the value of home, family and tradition only after losing them.

Feminism

All the experiences of Scarlett, and the processes which she had undergone transformed her psychologically. Simone DeBeauvoir in her pivotal work, *The Second Sex* comments, "One is not born, but becomes a woman." (Beauvoir p.330) Scarlett believes that if she has enough money, she can rise above misery and poverty. She is under the misconception that making money is everything in her life. Scarlett dares to counter the patriarchal world by challenging that women are capable of obtaining

economic independence and have an individual personality.

In “Gone with the Wind,” Scarlett is etched with a strong feminist vibe which is aptly expressed by Margaret Mitchell in this quote “A startling thought this, that a woman could handle business matters as well as or better than a man, a revolutionary thought to Scarlett who had been reared in the tradition that men were omniscient and women none too bright.” (Mitchell p.610-611). A more optimistic interpretation of the character is put forth by the author, James P. Cantrell: In an insightful examination of the importance of Irishness in this work, Cantrell sees in Scarlett an “embodiment of the South.” To Cantrell, Scarlett “tragically rejects what she truly is, her culture, in an attempt to become what she is not. . . . But Mitchell ends the novel on a note of optimism. Scarlett will return to Tara to recoup herself before attempting to win back Rhett. To atone for her mistakes and prepare for her future, Mitchell’s symbol of the South must return to the roots of her Irish heritage.” (Cantrell 14-15)

Self-preservation instincts

Whenever Scarlett does anything good, it is either because of a kind of a benefit that she may have out of it, or because she feels obligated for some reason. Scarlett’s sharpest survival skills are portrayed in terms of her caliber in trade or business on or above par her male counterparts. As Lauren S. Cardon puts forward a constructive approach to good breeding, “Despite opposition from nearly every angle, Scarlett not only starts the business but succeeds at it.” (Cardon, 2007) Notwithstanding the fact that women never had it easy, Scarlett overcame all the hurdles and made it big in a male dominated world. She faced the setbacks and the opposition, lacing all of it with her trademark courage and determination. To substantiate her strong instincts, Cantrell continues: “When exhausted to the point of resignation in her attempt to provide for everyone at Tara, Scarlett recalls family stories of survival against all odds in the face of unspeakable horrors. Her Irish ancestors may have lost physically, but they were never beaten spiritually. . . . Scarlett’s vision does include the French Robillards and Prudhommes on her mother’s side, but the vision itself is Irish. It marks Scarlett as Irish in clan, or family, for the Celtic sense of family considers both ancestors and descendants as important as the living”. (Cantrell 13) To other critics, however, Scarlett’s return to Tara marks her failure to learn the lesson of growth and change.

In contrast to the above analysis, Hayden Maginnis, for example, disdains Scarlett’s obstinate childishness: “Scarlett is filled with a passion for life and a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for experience, but not with a capacity to grow or to become wise. Her energies are directed almost entirely toward a mythical past, a ‘dream remembered.’ . . . And so she ends where she began. . . . The recovery of Tara is an illusion; she has come full circle.” (Maginnis 652-653) Maginnis’ contempt for Scarlett determines her adherence to the past, an immorality that he describes in terms of failed and corrupt motherhood: “Her moral blindness is the compounded inheritance of tradition and of her own failings. . . . She carries nothing forth into the new age but a loss of values and a myth. . . . Not time, nor experience, nor commerce with others has been able to destroy her fantasies of cavaliers and cotton fields, to engender a moral sense, or to make her the lady that the dream remembers.” (Maginnis 653) For Cantrell, Scarlett’s ability to envision “a prior past” is useful, a source of her strength; but for Maginnis, this reliance on a “dream” and “illusion” is damning. Maginnis sees Scarlett’s idealism as dependent on a specific past, the Southern ideal. She appreciates the openness of futurity. In fact, what the most see as Scarlett’s relation to the past is actually only her mediation of men’s relations to the past: Ashley Wilkes, Rhett Butler, and her father, Gerald O Hara. This mediation is especially evident in a scene between Scarlett and Rhett, a scene where the figure of Ashley reappears in his usual ghostly way.

Rhett Butler starts out as a betrayer, but he, too, comes to wish for the Southern pre-war way of life. Scarlett is reminded of Ashley when Rhett leaves her; there was something in the quality of his calm voice which brought back memories to her. He does not say that he has ceased to consider his past opinions, he just wants something different. Rhett Butler, the greedy and immoral blockade runner, is now concerned about “values,” and “respectability & quote” - all the things he disparaged previously. The above analogy leaves Scarlett as the only forward-looking character. She maintains this position despite her resolve to return to Tara: she hopes to merely use Tara as a resting ground for her next endeavor, the getting back of RhettButler, and she insists at the close of the novel that and quote “tomorrow is another day” quote. In this whole scenario, Scarlett merely serves as an association between Rhett and Ashley. This is what enables her success in the new economy, while the South is figured as stuck in the past, the North is the sign of the future.

Methodology

As the character of Scarlett evolves with the social themes prevailing at that time, a sociological approach and a qualitative method are needed. By resorting to this approach, a detailed observation, analysis and understanding of the selected character is necessary. Considering the authors, who came up with strong women characters and relevant research works leads to gathering of interesting and intriguing facets of war and how it brought changes in the women of those times. Contextualizing the critical perspective of others with regard to these works also enables us to arrive at strong methods to appreciate our chosen character.

The present study focuses on a character or two from the primary source that is the novel itself and finds connections based on the characters of history. Also character interpretations from secondary sources such as, reviews, articles or discussions helped in analyzing the character that is proposed for study. Discussing the time period or historical events which are focused in the novel and when it is set can be even more fascinating for researching a topic. Studying the women protagonists for their endurance and the power of perseverance that helps them deal with their lives in tough times reflects on the complex nature of these women and the constant conflict in their behavior.

Conclusion

“Somewhere, on the long road that wound through those four years, the girl with her sachet and dancing slippers had slipped away and there was left a woman with sharp green eyes, who counted pennies and turned her hands to many menial tasks, a woman on to whom nothing was left from the wreckage except the indestructible red earth on which she stood” - Margaret Mitchell. The study of Scarlett’s Character in Margaret Mitchell’s work “Gone with the Wind” attributes a lot of significance in the context of a modern woman’s growth and transformation in a progressive way. Through this research one can find a better understanding of the characteristics or personality traits that define Scarlett. From being a spoilt teenager to a hard-working and wealthy opportunist is a reflection of the South’s change from a leisure society to a compromised survivor. Scarlett is an embodiment of both the Old and the New South. Scarlett adapts wonderfully to the harsh and opportunistic world of the New South. Part of what drives her actions is the desperation and her biggest nightmare of being poor again. Though the means adopted by her were not always legitimate, her grit and determination in testing times is worth a mention. History bears testimony to the fact that the most women are but power houses of constructive energy and bear the potential to move mountains. Scarlett is undoubtedly one such character who has the prowess to fight the conventional norms of the society and bring out her best as the situation demands. She emerges

as a winner overcoming all the obstacles which were otherwise unfathomable considering the prevailing circumstances of that era. Her parting shot in the work almost sums up her persona when she says, “After all tomorrow is another day” which conveys her fundamental optimism about the future and the belief in herself to survive in the face challenging situations like chaos and threat.

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