

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re- reading of Popular Fiction with special reference to Marie Corelli's *Vendetta*

Dr. Nitin Jarandikar, Associate Professor, Radhanagari Mahavidyalaya, Radhanagari, (Affiliated to Shivaji University, Kolhapur)

Abstract: Marie Corelli (1855 – 1924) is a British novelist who was so popular during her time that the web sources claim that the sale of her novels outnumbered the combined sale of Arthur Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells and Rudyard Kipling. Despite this fact, after the World War II, she vanished from the public memory instantaneously. The canon of the British literature does not take any cognizance of her contribution. The literary output of Corelli is abundant, and her second novel *Vendetta* (1886) is believed to be the most popular one.

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The canonization of literature has often ignored the 'genre-fiction' or the 'popular fiction' at the cost of 'high' or 'serious literature'. The dichotomy between the 'classes' and 'masses' pervades in all the societies through all the ages where 'classes' govern the 'masses'. It is the post-structural thought that has highlighted this 'difference' and the pendulum is now shifted to the consciousness of masses and their culture lingering on periphery. The new discipline of Cultural Studies that has been emerged in the 1980s concentrates on the culture of the masses, and attempts to analyse the governing forces of the mass culture. The Popular Fiction Studies, which is still in the developmental stage, is considered under the broader umbrella term of the Cultural Studies (Mayerson, 21). The theoretical framework of popular fiction by way of the discipline of the Cultural Studies befittingly focuses on the influencing socio-cultural traits. The Popular Fiction Studies prior to the 1980s primarily relied on the conventional aesthetic tools and ignored the socio-political context. However, the post-1980 scenario of the Popular Fiction Studies shows the tremendous impact of the socio-political schools of thoughts like feminism, New Leftism and Cultural Studies. In one sense, it is a strong reaction against the "myopia of New Criticism" (Murfin). Popular Fiction Studies and Cultural Studies focus not only the

'text', but also takes into account the 'discourse' of publishing houses, bookstores, and reading communities. It has been assumed that the popular fiction caters the expectations of the masses wherein lies the main objection of the feminist critics. The feminist criticism argues that the popular fiction which heavily relies on the 'masses' is predominantly governed by the patriarchal ideology (Nayar 72). It nurtures the notion of female as "propriety" and expounds the norms of ethics and moralities authorised by the fair sex. Naturally, the gynocritics raised their voice against such female characterization. The very first strong reaction against the popular fiction from the feministic perspective was raised way back in the 1970s by Germaine Greer who through her polemic book *The Female Eunuch* (1970) argued, "Romance novels pacified, deceived and manipulated their female readers and should be shunned by women" (Mayerson 26).

In the light of the above discussion, the researcher intends to explore in what way the popular fiction adopts certain strategies of novel form in forming the narrative, the characterization and the plot construction and how these accepted strategies lead a woman artist to internalise this aesthetics to confirm her role as a novelist in the general canonization of literature. In this regard, the researcher has chosen a typical popular novel *Vendetta*, by Marie Corelli, which represents the Victorian novel tradition and is also considered as a great entertaining novel.

It has been observed that even before the inception of the British novel there runs the stream of popular fiction along with the 'serious literature'. The tradition of the romance novella, gothic novels and several fantasy tales have contributed significantly in the formation of the novel form, keeping its distinct identity as entertaining literature. It is again remarkable that certain women novelists have also contributed in the development of this genre. Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, or the novels of Ann Radcliff, and other women novelists exemplify this

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fact. The instances of the women writers increased in the Victorian period. But the canonization of literature has denied any place to these romance novels written by the women novelists. Marie Corelli (1855—1924) is one such British novelist who was so popular during her time that it is believed that the sale of her novels outnumbered the combined sale of Arthur Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells and Rudyard Kipling. Despite this fact, after the World War II, she vanished from the public memory instantaneously. The canon of the British literature does not take any cognizance of her contribution. The literary output of Corelli is abundant, and her second novel *Vendetta* (1886) is believed to be the most popular one.

As the title suggests, the novel *Vendetta* is a story of vengeance. The novel is full of drama, suspense, coincidences and chance elements, the prominent features of the popular fiction. The novel begins dramatically when Fabio Romani, the protagonist of the novel claims, “I, who write this, am a dead man. Dead legally—dead by absolute proofs—dead and buried!” (1) In the cholera epidemic of 1884, in Naples, Count Romani dies, rather appears to be dead. Assuming him as dead, his coffin is kept in the cemetery of the Romani vault. The next day, when Fabio Romani regains the consciousness he breaks his coffin and finds himself surrounded by the other coffins belonging to his family. He manages to escape from the vault. Now he is very eager to meet his dear wife, Nina and his bosom friend Guido Ferrari. Fabio recalls how Ferrari had supported him all through his life, how he was reluctant to get married, and how Ferrari had convinced him for the marriage. At the same he remembers his lovely wife, Nina, and remembers the happiest moments that he had spent with her. With these thoughts, Fabio is excited, and is very much eager to return the home. But he doesn’t know that the one day of his life in the coffin in the Romani vault is going to be disastrous for him. The trauma of the so called death of Fabio brings a drastic transformation in his appearance. The one day in the vault makes him exceedingly old. With the wrinkled face and white hair no one recognises him in Naples. The moment he enters his Villa Romani, he is confronted with the stunning picture. He finds his dear wife, Nina in the embrace of his bosom friend, Ferrari. Fabio overhears them, and is bewildered because of the treachery on the part of his wife and the friend. He is terrified looking at his Nina who was for him a “Flawless diamond-pearl of pure womanhood” saying to Ferrari, “I am glad, he is dead” (48). Burning with the fires of vengeance, Fabio decides to avenge the situation.

He re-enters the life of Nina and Ferrari in the guise of Conte Cesare Oliva, the nobleman. He befriends with Ferrari who is very much impressed by the wealth of the nobleman. Ferrari leaves Naples for a couple of months. He asks Oliva to take care of Nina in his absence. Nina, who is attracted by Oliva’s appearance, falls in love with him again. After the return of Ferrari, Oliva makes the public announcement of his engagement with Nina. Frustrated Ferrari challenges Oliva for a duel, and in the doors of death Ferrai comes to know the true identity of Oliva. Oliva makes the grand arrangements of his marriage. On the eve of the marriage party, he invites Nina to the cemetery of his family. Surprised Nina fails to understand the intentions of Oliva. There he discloses his identity, and punishes Nina by murdering her. In this way, Romani avenges his disloyal wife and the treacherous friend.

It is interesting to observe that Marie Corelli, though a woman writer makes a male character the narrator and the protagonist of the novel. Not only that, she justifies the avenging nature of her protagonist. She knows that she is addressing the Victorian audience. And in that way, she is ‘internalising’ the dominating force of the patriarchal ideology. The protagonist has to be ‘masculine’ in every sense of the term. Count Romani’s death experience brings complete transformation in him; even then he remains a charming personality. While leaving Naples to execute his plan of vengeance, Romani informs a mariner that he is “a coral-fisher”, and the mariner replies instantly, “But the hands are not those of a fisher of coral.”(58) Romani thinks about the smoothness and pliant shape of his hands. While disguising himself as Conte Cesare Oliva, he is worried about his dark and troubled eyes. Nina has to be attracted by the elegance of Oliva. On the contrary, we find no expression of Nina in the whole narrative. The protagonist depicts the personality of Nina only in a typical black and white colour where she can be either a star of the sky or the dust of the earth. She appears as a charmer but also tantalized by the other’s charm. The protagonist informs us of her three time love as if she is the creature victim to the earthly love and fascinated by the masculinity of man. Romani, who is at first reluctant to get married even after the consistent appeals of his friend falls in love instantly when he is confronted by Nina:

—and then all suddenly the picturesque beauty of the scene danced before my eyes in a whirling

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blur of brilliancy and colour from which looked forth—one face! One face beaming out like a star from a cloud of amber tresses—one face of rose-tinted, childlike loveliness—a loveliness absolutely perfect, lighted up by two luminous eyes, large and black as night—one face in which the small, curved mouth smiled half provokingly, half sweetly! I gazed and gazed again, dazzled and excited, beauty makes such fools of us all! This was a woman—one of the sex I mistrusted and avoided—a woman in the earliest spring of her youth, a girl of fifteen or sixteen at the utmost. Her veil had been thrown back by accident or design, and for one brief moment I drank in that soul-tempting glance, that witch-like smile! (7)

At first, Nina is associated with innocence and loveliness. As the narrative proceeds further, she has been projected as the embodiment of disloyalty, unfaithfulness and frailty. The portrayal of Nina exposes the stereotype representation of women in the Victorian romances.

At this point it becomes necessary to observe that in what circumstances the writer Marie Corelli was handling the novel form. It was a period when the puritan anxieties were still rampant. ‘Immorality’ in the novel was considered as ‘one of the greatest evils’ and ‘almost an apocalyptic vision of society’ (Graham 1). Poetry was considered as “the crown of arts”, and novel-reading was considered as ‘opiate and time-waster, [and was obsessed with its] potential dangers for women and the young”. It was a phase when the novelists were struggling hard to establish the novel form. There were pressures from the moral champions. Obviously, the novelists attempted to highlight the moral and ethical world through their novels. In that way, novel was truly a social form. If the novel form loses its moral ground, its supporters feared that it would turn into “the harbinger of chaos” (Graham 77). *Tinsley’s Magazine* in 1873 defined the true function of the novel as the illustration of moral principles ‘in their practical working’, and *the teaching of lessons in religion, politics and social philosophy*, ‘not merely in dry dissertation, but in vivid and humanised description’ (Graham 71) (Emphasis added). Trollope also defends this dimension of novel saying, “The object of novel should be to instruct the morals while it amuses”. And that is why he praises Jane Austen: “a sweet lesson of *homely household womanly virtue* is ever being thought” (Graham 72)

(Emphasis added). In this way, the novel form emerged as “an agent of social and moral reform” (Graham 73).

Marie Corelli is confronted with these challenges. She has to internalise these social forces. Though a great entertainer, her prime duty as a novelist was determined by the social pressures. She has to highlight the moral – ethical conducts of the social world. She has to show the tragic consequences of disloyalty in the marital relationships. In the introduction to the novel, she expresses:

We know well enough, by the chronicle of daily journalism that the infidelity of wives is, most unhappily, becoming common — far too common for the peace and good repute of society. Not so common is an outraged husband's vengeance—not often dare he take the law into his own hands—for in England, at least, such boldness on his part would doubtless be deemed a worse crime than that by which he personally is doomed to suffer. (2)

It won’t be incorrect to argue that Marie Corelli’s (or in that matter, her contemporary women novelists) challenges were doubly intensified—clamour for establishing the moral values and the pressures of the patriarchal ideology. The novel *Vendetta* manipulates the so called notion of ‘poetic justice’. Nina commits the sin of adultery, for which death is the only punishment. As the novel is in first person narration, and the world is seen from the point of view of the male protagonist, it leaves no place to comprehend the world of Nina. The deliberate attempts are made to glorify the hero’s justification of his deeds. To intensify his notion of ‘poetic justice’, he has been placed in the true Christian tradition. His regaining life from the cemetery has the resonances of the ‘resurrection’. He gives the justification to his act even on religious grounds. He maintains at one place in the novel:

Christ never loved a woman! Had He done so, He would have left us some special code of justice. (56)

This is how it appears that Marie Corelli needs the social and religious sanction for her novel writing. Unaware of the social and particularly patriarchal domination, she succumbs to the order of the day, and represents the crisis of her female character in merely black and white shades.

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The feminist perception helps us here to explore how the dominant male understanding of what is loyalty and adultery is made to be internalised by the woman writer. Her preface and the depiction of the male protagonist as the central character reveal very clearly that how the woman writer is made to adopt the typical modes of characterization and plot construction to confirm her identity as a writer in other way male dominated scenario of literary art. It is very debatable issue, that had Romani and Nina been changed their roles, in what way the reading community would have been accepted Nina doing 'poetic justice' with her husband.

To conclude, it can be said that the popular fiction right at its infancy was by and large not only governed by the masses, but also the product of the male domination. It relied on the masculinist/patriarchal (Nayar, 70) constructions of women. It held women responsible for maintaining the moral – social order. The further scope of the present research paper aims at a proposition with the

hypothetical position that the cotemporary popular fiction or 'the airport novels' or 'the bestsellers' still manipulate the same assumptions of moral – ethical values, her stereotypical representation and all in all the patriarchal domination on the women's part.

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