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- 12 *Wavering Between Delusion and Reality* Sreelekha Chatterjee 99
- 13 *Diaspora as a form of Multiculturalism: Reading Literary Text on Jhumpa Lahiri's Mrs. Sen and Sexy* Debashis Biswas 109
- 14 *Exploring Nationalism and Nation: A Critical Discourse of Rohinton Mistry's Novels* Raju Ta 114
- 15 *Quest for Self in Kamala Das' My Story And Amrita Pritam's The Revenue Stamp* Manju Singh 124
- 16 *Post Marxism: Form Praxis to Theory?* Udayan Gautam 131
- 17 *Mis-Reading Of The Fairytale: Wand, Sword And Gown* Stella Basu 138
- 18 *Religion, Politics and the Right to the Freedom of Conscience in Robert Bolt's A Man For All Seasons and Rabindranath Tagore's Sacrifice* Bidisha Mukherjee 145
- 19 *Sexualizing Spirituality: A study of Select Poems by Meena Kandasamy* Pratibha Biswas 152
- 20 *Tracing Her Story in His[s]tory: Formulation of the Feminine Narrative of Resistance in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns* Arpan Adhikary 160
- 21 *Deficiency of Asceticism in Moll Flanders* Tushar M. Kamble & Manoj Kumar 167
- 22 *Strength in Solitariness* Sushmindar Jeet Kaur 173
- 23 *Me and My Soul* Mekhala Venkatesh 175
- 24 *Velutha, The God of Small things - The God of Loss in Arundhati Roy's- The God of Small Things* Huma Hashmi 176
- 25 *Can English and Regional Languages be Juxtaposed in Indian Context?* S. G. Dollegoudar (Patil) 183
- 26 *A Rendezvous with the 'Bodiless Heads and Headless Bodies' in the Select Short Stories of Ama Ata Aidoo* Neha Arora 191

Deficiency of Asceticism in Moll Flanders

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This article is an exploration of the importance of ascetic lifestyle for "Moll Flanders". The novel 'Moll Flanders' is the product of the early rise of the capitalism. 'Moll Flanders' has been named after the central character. The structure of the novel indicates that the novel has been written in the form of autobiography. From the opening it is clear that the protagonist herself is telling her story. With the help of narrative, Defoe tries to present the contemporary conflict between the demands of commercial gain and spiritual pursuit to get salvation. It can be easily noticed that the spirit of worldly asceticism was dominant in that age.

According to Wikipedia, Asceticism is "a lifestyle characterized by abstinence from various sorts of worldly pleasures often with the aim of pursuing religious and spiritual goals". (Wikipedia) Asceticism is a path to attain enlightenment or salvation in some forms of Christianity and in Indian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism... but the life of ascetics whose quest is for getting salvation, is based on the extremities of life. They have to renounce their material and sensual pleasures of life to attain liberation in life. It is extremely austere lifestyle. Talcott Parsons points out two types of asceticism 'Worldly' and 'Otherworldly'.

The spirit like Moll in the rise of capitalism might find difficulty in accepting and adopting 'Otherworldly Asceticism' as in this a person has to withdraw from the world to live an ascetic life. But she could accept and adopt the principles of 'Worldly Asceticism' as in this people live ascetic lives but do not withdraw from the world. It helps to control human mind from the dangerous clutches of materialistic world.

In the character of Moll, we find lack of ascetic especially worldly ascetic motives and so she could not repent her sins honestly. Moll is behind earning property. It is the only motive which has been forcing her to be in commercial state of society. To rescue herself from the evils of poverty, she readily and willingly enters in the life of evilness.

Moll is driven by the need for security. Property is the only thing which keeps her afloat in a very commercial society. She constantly seeks enough wealth (or a wealthy husband) to free her from the threat of poverty, destitution and a life of crime. This shows that Moll's world constitutes material wealth. When it comes to relations and emotions, for Moll the act of love itself is no more than a piece of stock-in-track. She never gives the hint of any pleasure and emotional involvement in connection with it. She views all her activities as means of making profit. From the very outset of her career, money exercises an uncontrollable fascination over Moll Flanders. In the seduction episode with the elder son of her foster family, she is given money to accept the proposal. It is money which grips her imagination. "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". (Defoe 23-24) She cannot withdraw her attention from the acquisition. "As for the Gold, I spent whole Hours in looking upon it; I told the Guineas over a thousand times a Day". (Defoe 26) When Moll finally takes her first lover it is the proposal of a hundred guineas a year together with a first payment in advance which overwhelms her.

Similarly, we find it in her account of her first marriage, her first marriage to the younger brother of her seducer. Five years she has been married to him, she has had two children by him. She tells about this in the following words:

"It concerns the Story in hand very little to enter into the further particulars... only to observe that I had two children by him, and

that at the end of the five years he died. He had been really a very good husband to me, and we live very agreeably together; but as he had not received much from them (the parents), and had in the little time he lived acquired no great matters, so my circumstances were not great, nor was I much mended by the match. Indeed, I had preserved the elder brother's bonds to me to pay me 500/-, which he offered me for my consent to marry his brother; and this, with what I had saved of the money he formerly gave me, and about as much more by my husband, left me a Widow with about 1200/- in my pocket". (Defoe 58)

From this context and from other similar contexts, we can understand that what Moll means by a "very good husband" and by saying that they lived "very agreeably": the man had enough money to keep Moll from want. He spent money freely enough to maintain her in comfort and in that kind of social respectability which the spending of money guarantees- therefore he was "good" and their life was "agreeable". Moll has no other perception of character.

She next marries a tradesman who looks like a gentleman. She enjoyed his company but parts from him because of his poor management of money. She then chooses a husband for herself because he has money. She thinks that he is a good natured man as according to her reading he will not abuse her when he discovers that he has been tricked. But he turns out to be her brother. Her next liaison is at Bath. Here she is neither married nor planning to be faithful.

Her next relationship is with bank clerk. She keeps him ignorant of her marriage with Jemmy, the highwayman. When Jemmy proves to be impoverished, she deserts him. Her marriage to the clerk gave her tranquility that she experienced since her youth. The Banker, who helps her with her finances, treats her with greatest decency and frankness in every respect. But she sees him wholly in terms of how much profit he will bring. All her adventures in the marriage institute reveal that her feelings are compromised by greed.

At the crisis of her career, she is taken for thieving. Moll's first theft is one of the most intense experiences of her life. She passes into another circle of her materialistic hell. In this phase of life once Moll robs a child, comes near to murdering the infant, and draws a moral from the adventure thus:

"...as I did the poor child no harm, I only thought I had given the parents a just reproof for their negligence, in leaving the poor lamb to come home by itself, and it would teach them to take more care another time..." (Defoe 194)

Later on she takes risks beyond reason, stealing anything, even a horse that she cannot use or sell. She steals what she does not need, even while she is terrorized by the possible consequences of her theft. It shows that her attraction towards the temptation of criminal life. Though she has earned enough money, property and requisites of life but the temptation keeps her on stealing.

When she finds herself in the hell of Newgate, she is awakened about her sinful life. With the intervention of the Minister, Moll says that she is "perfectly changed" and she becomes "another body". But the heaven of her repentance is inept.

It is the face of death because of which she decides to repent but her repentance cannot solve the problem of living. So, she learns again to deal with her world. After she leaves Newgate, she begins to transform her past. She becomes a prudent planter, not a thief. In Virginia, she presents a gold watch to her son, but did not tell him that she had stolen it from a Gentleman. Here Moll's relation with her brother turns into loathing; with Jemmy, into good fortune and true love. In both cases, Moll's object is a fortune. After her repentance, money and love are again joined to her. She is reunited with Jemmy, and becomes a wealthy planter. She has then returned to her earlier condition-but with a difference. She now has the shrewdness that she then lacked.

Daniel Defoe tries to present Moll as a reformed soul at the end of the novel in which he fails. To be the genuine penitent, Moll should be characterized by abstinence from various sorts of worldly pleasures with the aim of pursuing religious and spiritual goal. But Moll never wants to lead an ascetic life though her life is poisoned by materialistic interests. To repent genuinely Moll should renounce the worldly pleasures which have been haunting her since childhood. After going through the dark side of life in which materialistic interest plays its evil role, Moll could have headed towards ascetic life. But her repentance is skin-deep and what matters in her life are wealth, property and security and prestige. Her attitude towards money

making and role of the money in the social life create doubts about her sincerity and legitimacy of her so called "true" penitence in Newgate prison.

It is important to look into the inner world of Moll. The deeper we explore into what Moll is, the more we are confirmed about the absence of any real repentance. Worldly Asceticism could be the best option for Moll to repent her sin. At the end of life, Moll could have enough of life's basic requisites for instance, food, water and shelter to live safely and healthily. But Moll's long career is characterized by her duty to the increase of capital.

At the end, we discover that Moll turns virtuous only after a life of vice which has enabled her to do so with social, economical, material security. Her philosophy of life makes the path of self-denial difficult for Moll. So, she never wants to come out of the frame of materialistic pleasures of materialistic world. Moll's constant moral resolutions, her efforts to reform are a kind of hypocrisy and self-deception. She has genuine motives to change her worldly self. But the temptation of wealth and social status kills her aspiration of attaining her true self. She is always torn between conflicting desires and impulses.

Moll never pays attention to the inner reality. Her conscience is awakened time to time but she either neglected or repressed that awakened soul. This forced her to lead a life of evil being. Material pleasure is the soul of Moll Flanders. Ascetic lifestyle is very difficult to follow for such an evil soul. Thus, the lack of motive to get rid of materialistic things, insisted Moll to play with the religious principle of Confession.

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Who am I?
Nothing
But the silence in each pause
The untraveled road
With no footprints
No leads
The heartbeat of an infant
Fast and restless
The breeze by the sea shore
Salty yet incomplete
The broken bridge Between lust and love
The wrinkle
Holding an unsaid story
The attic With tin trunks
Of creaky secrets
The saliva And it's sticky truth
The goose bumps
And it's reasons

I am her, she
Anything but 'it'
The disregarded axiom
Misinterpreted mathematics
Less understood grammar
The under-estimated woman.

-- Poornima Laxmeshwar



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