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DISGUISE AND DESIRE IN *FANTOMINA*

Simran Sankhla

Masters in English Literature, St Stephen's College, Delhi

E-mail: simransankhla90@gmail.com



Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study the 18th century novel, the various nuances deployed to represent female desire. The dominant trope of masquerade as the expression of desire and female sexuality. The fashion and clothes used to study the same. I have chosen Eliza Haywood's Novel *Fantomina*, to understand the element of disguise to represent desire

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Fantomina or Love In a Maze, is one of the popular novels written by eighteenth century female writer Eliza Haywood which was published in 1725. Haywood occupied a position of importance as she was perceived to be following the traditions of female writers like Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley who were condemned for writing explicitly about passion and sexual desire. This paper will work with the concept of disguise as an essential apparatus which allows the female protagonist the potential of acting upon her sexual desire and furthermore Haywood provides her protagonist with complete agency to weave the plot according to her own satisfaction. The technique used by Haywood in *Fantomina*, is of disguise which is a common technique amongst most of the eighteenth-century female writers like Behn. Haywood uses masquerade and disguise in her other novels as well like *The Masquerades; or Fatal Curiosity*. Therefore even though she is placing her protagonist outside the patriarchal culture of the society, she is very much in conjunction with her predecessors like

Behn, Manley, Barker and Aubrey who even though gives agency to their female protagonist's but that agency is temporary and once that mask, disguise or cover is removed these women writers had not much option other than situating their heroines back within the patriarchal paradigm where the women are punished and 'Desire' which forms the tool for their liberation is essentially repressed by either sending them to a monastery or by basically ostracizing them. The central problem with Haywood is that of this "make believe" freedom which even though allows the woman to fulfill her desire none the less this power is temporary as Haywood was writing for money and in order to get her books published and accepted in the society she had to bring a certain kind of didactic ending to her novel where patriarchy is re-established.

Desire as a term within eighteenth century England is associated particularly with sexual desire which followed the libertinism politics under the rule of Charles II where hedonistic pleasures, licentiousness and gender inequalities were

pertinent in the name of pleasure. The blurring of line between violence, rape and that of pleasure. Haywood's work is heavily influenced by the Restoration plays where it represented the excesses and licentiousness of the aristocratic class. In the novel *Fantomina or Love in a Maze*, the hero of the novel is Beauplaisir which is a French name for "beautiful pleasure" which allows Haywood to situate the hero within the libertine culture of Restoration England as he is constantly seeking for sexual gratification. Haywood consciously defamiliarize the male protagonist by making him a Frenchman as France was seen as a symbol of debauchery and amoral behavior by Englishmen. His character is similar to the protagonist of Behn's play *The Rover*, Willmore who is a wandering rake only interested in sexual pleasures Beauplaisir is a character which Haywood creates in order to critique the Restoration society where men were blinded by lust and desire was used as an excuse for rape and molestation and this is evident from the fact when Fantomina disguised as a prostitute is able to gain Beauplaisir's attention she is a virgin and not sure about whether she wants to have any sexual relationship with him despite her being confused and scared about their sexual union he takes her by force. The conflict arise when Fantomina is weaving and using her wit to form the course of their relationship it is ultimately the use of force on the part of Beauplaisir which reflects over the patriarchal dominance.

"He was bold- he was resolute: she was fearful, confus'd...In fine, she was undone; and he gained a Victory, so highly rapturous, that had he known over whom, scarce could he have triumphed more."(46-47)

The literary language of the novel is provocative of sexual desire and also titillating where Fantomina sighs and moans and her continual desire for sex situates the novel within the Restoration society where Kings had multiple mistresses, sexual promiscuity was the norm, prostitution was widespread and men were unaccountable for their deeds.

"Desire" in the eighteenth century was relegated to the masculine sphere as female

sexuality was considered threatening which needed to be controlled either through marriage or through sending them to a nunnery. Haywood in her novel subverts this masculine acquisition of desire as it is the female protagonist who is in full control of fulfilling her desires even when she is confused about the actual consequences of her actions which ends up in her being raped. Fantomina is in charge of her sexual freedom in so far as she keeps her real identity hidden and uses various disguise's to uphold the attention of Beauplaisir. The clean inversion of the Petrarchan sonnets where it is the male who is the hunter and the female is being hunted in the game of courtship but here Haywood turns Fantomina into a hunter with an aggressive energy as she is willing to go to any lengths to entice her prey where she is seducing him through the disguise of a prostitute, a maid, a widow and finally she becomes Incongnito. *The Female Spectator*, periodical by Haywood reflects upon "Haywood's women as far removed from the standard heroines of contemporary fiction, where men proposed, God disposed, and women waited to see what would happen"(46).

The various disguises she undergoes become interesting to understand the contradictions in the society of England where female identity, class and gender were in conflict with each other. The novel opens with the line "A Young lady of distinguished Birth, Beauty, Wit and Spirit" (41). The female protagonist's real name is unrevealed in the novel she is called Fantomina when she disguises as a prostitute, Celia when she becomes a maid, Widow Bloomer when she takes up the role of a widow and finally she is called as Incognita. Class becomes an important category as Fantomina is consciously aware of her class, identity, wit and beauty. She knows that she is an aristocratic woman and therefore her class would not allow her to approach Beauplaisir, she is aware of her beauty and intelligence and she uses them vigilantly to fulfill her desire. Her identity as an aristocratic woman comes in conflict with her feminine desire. Therefore in order to overcome this class barrier she descends the social hierarchy by donning the disguise of a prostitute and thereby consciously exploiting her sex by keeping her class identity hidden.

In 1660, Charles II was restored to the throne of London and he reinstated the theatres of London after an eighteen year ban by the Puritans and the break through movement came with woman being introduced as actresses in theatre where the concept of "Performance", makeup and dresses as part of a performance became important. Haywood herself being a celebrated actress worked this idea of a "performance" into the novel. She sympathize with her heroine by giving her full agency to exploit the various identities they were repressed into. The novel opens up with Fantomina sitting in a theatre where she is observing the prostitutes in a pit. Every disguise she takes up is reflective of performing the role of various identities and categories into which women are divided. The use of costume and makeup by Fantomina to fit into the role she is performing is one of the major elements of theatre and performance. In order to look like a maid she follows him to Bath where she puts on her dress and makeup and performs her role of a maid

"The dress she was in, was a round-ear'd Cap, a short Red Petticoat, and a little jacket of Grey Stuff"(52)

Haywood through her protagonist Fantomina raises the issue of prostitution as well as the various stereotypes associated with them. To quote Emily Kathryn Booth, who in her thesis "*Eliza Haywood's Feigning Femmes Fatales: Desirous and Deceptive Women in Fantomina, Love in Excess, and The History of Miss Betty Thoughtless*" talks about how prostitution was rampant, widespread and increasing..... London alone, it is said had more than 10,000 prostitute's(18). Fantomina herself addresses the prostitutes as "creatures" and "who make sale of their favors". This shift in the class from an upper class woman to a prostitute situates Fantomina in two completely different societies where as an upper class woman her class empowers her in a certain sense but her gender disempower her as she has access to the privilege of her class but her sexual freedom is curtailed but on the other hand a prostitute is on the lowest strata of the class hierarchy but she is in control of her own desire. She is unaccountable to the society and she earns her living all by herself and hence she is an independent woman in control of herself. Therefore even though

her class disempowers her, as a prostitute her identity empowers her. Haywood plays this class, gender and female identity beautifully in her novel when it is only when Fantomina disguises herself as a prostitute that she is able to garner the attention of Beaupliasir. The category of a prostitute was evolving through the eighteenth century as it was not just these so called "creatures" who were selling favors but independent woman who were earning for themselves like actresses and playwrights as actresses were seen as provoking the male desire on the stage through their costumes and female writers like Haywood were seen as titillating the readers with sexual desire and passions through their books. Amrita Ghosh in her thesis, *Amatory Fictions of Eliza Haywood: A study of Protofeminism in Her Select Novels*, quotes Ros Ballaster, who considers novels by women writers as "seductive forms" and Ballaster talks about the profession of amatory fiction writers in *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740*:

"...the early woman writer was very far from the modest and amateur lady of letters most histories would have her. She was rather a prostitute of the pen, trafficking in desire for profit and in this respect, no different from many of her male contemporaries. Behn, Manley, and Haywood reveal themselves to be far from subjected by the imposition of an emergent philosophy of 'separate spheres' (politics and romance, masculine and feminine, the coffee house and the boudoir). Indeed they exploit this division in order to construct, against a short history of literary models, a specifically female writing identity form themselves. Their experimental texts dramatize the seduction of the female readers by amatory fictions, exploring alternatives that offer models for the female victim to come to 'mastery' of or resistance to the fictional text through the figure of the heroinized female writer. (29-30).

Therefore middle class women writers were termed as prostitute because 'Desire' as a category belonged to the private sphere which these woman writers brought out in the open within the public sphere where on the one hand men were dealing with Science and Politics, Women writers were creating an alternative style of writing for

themselves where they were portraying desire through a veil of disguise. It becomes refreshing to read eighteenth century women writers as the eighteenth century male canon highly wrote about the nexus between Science and religion and the construction of the masculine identity whereas women writers through their work were making their presence felt and exploring the various female identities apart from the claustrophobic notion of women as meek, docile and in submission to the patriarchal society.

The second disguise which Fantomina goes through is that of a maid and she becomes Celia. The disguise of a maid is also working under the class and gender identity as a maid is relatively free and independent than a gentlewoman. As a maid she earns for herself and she is closer to the males because it is her job to serve them. This kind of sexual freedom was more pertinent amongst the woman of lower classes than amongst noble woman of high class and same is the case when she disguises as a widow. Widows again have more freedom as they are 'unoccupied grounds' because they have no husbands to control them and they are financially stable nonetheless the stereotypes associated with them is that they are 'lusty' and Widow Bloomer exploits this identity of a widow when she seduces Beauplaisir for the third time by fainting in his arms. The fact that she can have sexual liaisons and pleasures as she is the head of her deceased husband's property and not answerable to people because ultimately when their financial situation became precarious they turned towards prostitution. The case of Angellica Bianca in *The Rover* becomes relevant as she was the wife of a general who died and she turned into a whore. The final disguise is that of Incognita where she writes to Beauplaisir again as a lady of high rank. Her gradual ascend up the social ladder ultimately brings towards the end of the novel. The darkness becomes her disguise where she hides her face and Beauplaisir who could be less concerned is not overtly bothered by that. Even though she is able to have him for the fourth time she comes a long way from the inexperienced virgin to an experienced woman who can plot and scheme but she acknowledges the fact that it was always lust on

Beauplaisir part whereas she only wanted to hold his attention because she was in love with him.

The ending of the novel becomes didactic as the disguise has to fall off and an Upper class lady is pregnant out of a wed lock and she is shunned by the society into a monastery where 'Desire' is curtailed and religion is imposed on her. Therefore it becomes didactic in the sense that it warns the female readership that women should not be so bold as to follow their desire as it's not the men who are punished it is ultimately the women who are punished and therefore the novel works as a moralizing force which makes the reader aware of the repercussions of passion and desire. Even though the disguise helps in gaining greater social mobility initially yet she needs to be punished as she encroaches on the male domain of desire, sexual passion, wit and freedom of social mobility.

To conclude the category of class, gender and female identity are in conflict with each other in eighteenth century as, if the class empowers the women it simultaneously disempowers her as she is not free to make her own decisions. Secondly it is extremely imperative for the disguise to be there if the women are going to take part into the libertine ethics of licentiousness and acting like prostitutes in order to attain their lovers. But ultimately the novel needs to be situated within the eighteenth century society where patriarchy was the norm and the noble women needs to know their position and also the results of their transgressions. To quote Catharine A. Craft in her essay "*Reworking Male Models: Aphra Behn's 'Fair vow-Breakers', Eliza Haywood's Fantomina and Charlotte Lennox's Female Quixote*" talks about :

"The violence of male response indicates that women writers who wished to be radical would probably not have been read. Allowing for the fact that many of the women who wrote did so for money and needed to be accepted by both male and female readers in order to obtain it, it seems natural that women writers who wanted to incorporate new views of the relations between men and women into their works and still get those work past censorship of critics had to proceed by using the talents of hypocrisy and dissembling. (821-822).

Therefore the novel does not limit itself to the portrayal of the aristocracy and the gentelwoman rather it includes the representation of various class identities of women from the lowest strata of class and society.

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