

## STATUS OF WOMEN IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY COMEDY

JAIDEEP CHAUHAN

Associate Professor of English, Sanatan Dharma College, Ambala Cantt

---

### ABSTRACT

The ascendancy of the Parliament in the Seventeenth century and the preponderance of the Scientific philosophy of Hobbes and Locke expounding the contract theory shattered the age old institutions, viz. the state, the church, the family, etc. Consequently, marriage no longer remained a sacrament; husband-wife relationship also evidenced a change. Satirical comedies with marital discord plots pivoting on the clash of temperaments or on mercenary marriages with no consideration of the age, intelligence, like and dislikes of the married couple, had ample scope for providing a glimpse into the abuses of marriage, a problematic institution; with, by and large, abused wives either resorting to adulterous ways or suffering endlessly or striving to reclaim their libertine husbands. The former was the convention of the comedy of manners whereas reformation of the libertine rakes by the virtuous wives was the staple comic device at the hands of the sentimentalists who dominated the stage in the last decade of the seventeenth century and thereafter.

**Keywords:** Family, Marriage, Women, Virtue, Spouse,

---

With the scientific thinking gaining popularity the status of women as equals to their male companions was raised and revolt against the absolute authority of the husband was justified specially in the light of the double standard of behaviour which allowed libertine ways to husbands and expected virtue from wives. Restoration playwrights, therefore, tried to present wives fighting for their freedom from domestic bondage and sometimes, by way of revolt, indulging in extra-marital relationship rendering the husbands the butt of the comic muse. Absence of any legal protection to abused wives perhaps deterred the comedy writers of the late seventeenth century from upholding the adulterous ways of the revolting wives and crowning their efforts with success. On the other hand, they were allowed to cuckold their foolish or tyrannical husbands, on the other, they were made to make pretences of honour, reputation, and domestic sanctity. Seventeenth century society and comedy started questioning the sanctity of their relationship presented in the genesis:

God and Nature hath given the husband Authority to command, and the wife is bound to obey, however unnecessary or unfit she may think it to be...And thy desire shall be to thy Husband, and he shall rule over thee.

The Protestant ideal of marriage as spiritual companionship exhorted by Katharine in *The Taming of the Shrew* that:

The Husband is thy Lord, thy life, thy keeper,  
Thy head, thy Sovereign....  
Such duty as the subject owes the prince,  
Even such a woman oweth to her husband.

was turned a sceptical eye to and the absolute authority of the husband got further weakened after the Civil Marriage Act of 1653 that accepted marriage as a civil contract between the two spouses. Nevertheless, this Act as well as the two contract theories bowed to male superiority and required abject obedience from the wife. Whether the puritan family or the one founded on marriage contract, married women were mere cogs in the domestic machinery run by the superior male. If the husband erred or proved unfaithful revolt to his wife the prevalent law seldom punished him but any from the wife was treated as petit treason. Women were burnt alive for killing their cruel husbands as is evidenced in the cases of Elizabeth Ridgeway in 1684 and Mary Hobry in 1688.

During the Restoration William Wycherley, one of the foremost playwrights, focused his attention on the plight of the miserable wives. With the predominant cuckolding theme, he, in *The Country Wife*, presented a satirical character, Mr. Pinchwife, a perfect whoremaster, who forbids his innocent country wife, Margery, all the town pleasures, such as going to friends or visiting plays, enjoying music, dance, etc. lest she should attract some gallants and cuckold him. Pinchwife does not realise that by denying all the town pleasures to her he sets her longing for them. She grudges that her husband goes, "everyday fluttering about abroad, whilst [she] must stay at home like a poor, lonely sullen bird in a cage". Consequently, she is determined to disobey and deceive him. Thus, it is Pinchwife's restrictive authority bordering on cruelty that opens the path of adultery for his wife and earns him horns. Wycherley, through Margery Pinchwife, teaches the audience a lesson that it is the husband who is responsible for the moral downfall of the unhappy wife. Even Margery Pinchwife's pretence to 'virtue' and 'honour', the only possible comic resolution to the problem of abused wives in the Restoration sexually liberated society still following the double standard of behaviour, is an evidence of the playwright's limitations as well as sympathy for the miserable wives.

Dryden also followed the conventions of the satiric comedy and presented the plight of the unhappy wife in Elvira (*The Spanish Friar*), the beautiful, young, virtuous daughter of nobility married to Gomez, a covetous old man who is "the very quintessence of jealousy" and who allows no "male creature in his house; and from abroad he lets no man come near her". Elvira justly expresses her discontent before Dominic thus:

You know my husband is a man in year; but he's my  
husband and therefore I shall be silent, but his  
humours are more intolerable than his age: he's grown  
so forward, so covetous, and so jealous, that he has  
turned my heart quite from him, and I durst confess  
it, has forced me to cast my affections on another man

When offered an opportunity to escape from captivity, Elvira does not welcome her gallant; rather wants to be satisfied with a proof of his true love for her. Her plight is aptly presented by her when she stands helpless "panting, like a bird that has often beaten her wings in vain against her cage, and at last dares hardly venture, out, though she sees it open". Dryden does not allow the married women in his comedies to violate the marriage vows though he allows them to question their sanctity as Doralice did in *Marriage-a-La-Mode* when she asks:

Why should a foolish Marriage vow,  
Which long ago was made,  
Oblige us to each other now,  
When Passion is decay'd?

Dryden too, like his contemporaries, bowed before the prevalent marriage laws and, therefore, refrained from allowing the abused wives seek either divorce or separate maintenance.

Restoration marital discord plots highly tainted with libertine philosophy, cuckolding scenes or near-seduction situations and characters keeping appearances of honour and virtue seldom reformed the erring husbands. But with the emergence of bourgeoisie morality after 1688 the stage preferred presenting both erring spouses with an eye to reclaim them through some sentimental force whether it be external or inward awakening. The introduction of moral reform required tearful melodramatic situations imbued with remorse as well as penitence and the triumph of virtue over vice. In the case of the abusing husbands, virtue and fidelity of the abused wife aroused the latent good in him leading him to reformation. Some of the abused wives in the comedies of the period follow the negative norms of behaviour to reclaim their erring husbands. Both negative and positive norms of behaviour are followed by the abused wives to reclaim their erring husbands. Resentment is one such corrective measure adopted by the abused wives. No wonder, in the male dominated society, the resentment' of the wife is no welcome, rather, it fixes the husband more in promiscuity and cruelty. The living example of such an effort on the part of the abused wife is presented by Colley Cibber in *The Lady's Last Stake*, or; *The Wife's Resentment*. The clash of Lady and Lord Wronglove's temperaments widens the gap between them to an extent that is irreparable. Lady Wronglove resents justly that:

not a day passes without some fresh discovery of his  
perfidiousness... This usage is beyond patience...Sure  
men think that wives are stocks or stones, without all  
sense of injuries, or only born and bound to bear them.

The more she resents, the deeper he plunges into libertinism which further embitters their relationship. Eventually, she finds that the "bond of wife or husband no longer lies in force against [them]"and agrees to part from her husband. However, the timely arrival of Sir Friendly Moral and his exhortation of conjugal fidelity, an inartistic device necessitated only by the demand of morality, averts the imminent separation. The play ends teaching the audience that:

the man that violates himself the sacred honours of  
his wife's chaste bed... ought at least to fear, as she  
is the frailer sex, the same from her; the injury to her  
strikes deeper than the head, often to the heart.

and the wives are advised "to lure [their husbands] home with soft affection". Both the spouses realise their faults and repent; and peace and amity is restored in the family.

But many an abused wife does not get a mentor like Sir Friendly Moral. Therefore, the problem of moral reformation of the promiscuous or cruel husband requires another device. The abused wives, realising that resentment and adultery on their part can at best revenge but seldom cure the evil, rouse the husband's jealousy so that the erring husbands react immediately and realise the worth of conjugal fidelity. This is closely presented in sir John Vanbrugh's *Relapse* and *The Provok'd Wife*. Vanbrugh, a severe critic of Cibber's fifth-act reformation of the rakish husband presented in *Love's Last Shift*, produced the *Relapse* as a sequel to Cibber's play. The *Relapse* has a virtuous wife, Amanda, who is abused by her husband, Lord Loveless, in spite of his avowed assurances of conjugal fidelity. Vanbrugh, a keen observer of human frailty, I wants to show through Lord Loveless, that vice corrupts men in no time. Lord Loveless, the reformed rake, becomes an easy prey to lustful Berinthia, and has amorous intrigues with her in the true Restoration spirit. The innocent wife knows it well and suffers endlessly. She exposes the infidelity of her rakish husband to none, instead groans thus: "a base ungrateful man, after what I have done for him, too use me thus". No matter how virtuous, she feels like revolting and, therefore, puts her case strongly when she says:

But let him know,  
My quiver's not entirely emptied yet,  
I still have darts, and I can shoot 'em too;  
or through another's heart  
I yet could find the way to make his smart

Nevertheless, when her gallant, Worthy, compels her to yield, her transcendent virtue saves her as well as reclaims her gallant who repents and almost worships her. It is amazing that Vanbrugh, instead of employing the fifth-act reformation scene for the rakish, morally depraved husband has made use of this dramatic device to reform the gallant. Perhaps his thesis that man is frail would have been disproved had he reformed Loveless. The very purpose of writing the play would have been belied. Nevertheless, his sympathies rest with the virtuous, miserable wives. In Amanda, Vanbrugh has certainly raised a woman to a higher plane in the eyes of the audience and the other characters in the play, but he has left her more miserable.

Vanbrugh tried a similar attempt in *The Provok'd Wife*, a forceful comment on repercussions of marriage-de-convenience. His realistic and down to earth approach toward marriage did not allow him to idealise marriage and create platonic characters like Cibber's Amanda, but flesh and blood beings like Lady Brute (*The Provok'd Wife*) who rouses the husband to reclaim him. Her husband, Sir John Brute, a boorish squire with cynical attitude towards marriage typical of the Restoration rakes renders her life unbearable. Stinking with wine, and covered with dirt and blood, the morally degraded 'beast' is scorned by one and all in the play and is a loathsome thing even to the audience. When he finds his wife resenting his vices he forces her, in a most wild manner, to accept his wooing, which is nothing short of a torture to her. Her intrigue

with her 'lover', Constant, to rouse her husband, and her waveringly adulterous gestures during her most vulnerable moments can all be ascribed to the brutality of her husband. This is aptly discussed by Heartfree and Constant:

This proceeding of his is the only thing on earth can  
make you fortunate. If anything can prevail with her  
to accept a gallant, 'tis his usage of her

Lady Brute is so discontented with her married life that she is ready to plead her case even in the court of heaven, as she avers:

I know, according to the strict statue-law of religion,  
I should do wrong; but if there were a Court of  
Chancery in heaven, I'm sure I should cast him

Her resentment that, "he has us'd me so barbarously of late, that I could almost resolve to play the downright wife - and cuckold him" is born of discontent for she is unable to justify her wrong-way means to reform her rakish husband. "But can his faults release my duty?" reveals a dutiful wife in her. Vanbrugh rightly defends her in the *Short Vindication* when he comments on Sir John Brute's character thus:

The ill consequence of his brutality appears in the  
miscarriage of his wife: for tho' his ill usage of her does  
not justify her intrigue, her intriguing upon his ill usage,  
may be a caution for some.

Vanbrugh neither reclaims the brutish husband nor allows Lady Brute seek either adulterous ways or separate maintenance of divorce, which the logical development of the situation required. With Paul Mueschke one can maintain that in *The Provok'd Wife* "Vanbrugh has deliberately created, through the brutish caricature of the husband and the intelligent resentment of the wife; asituation which exposes from a rational and sympathetic, not a sentimental, nor a wholly comic, point of view, the cause of marital in compatibility and infidelity." What Vanbrugh wants to say perhaps is clear in the back drop of the sub-plot; Belinda-Heartfree love intrigue which ends in matrimony based on mutual love and not on money like that of the Brutes.

Resentment on the part of the abused wife may rather fix the husband to aversion causing further damage to marital felicity; rousing jealousy may or may not lure the erring husband back to his wronged wife but may sometimes be disastrous to wife herself; but how patience, understanding and virtue may cause inner awakening, remorse and repentance leading to reformation is the staple of sentimental comedies. The triumph of virtue over vice through sentimental situations can best be seen in Colley Cibber's *Love's Last Shift* and *The Careless Husband*. *Love's Last Shift*, the first sentimental comedy of the time, presents Loveless, a rakish husband, drawn after the extravagant rakes of the *Comedy of Manners*. Loveless like Dryden's Rhodophil (*Marriage-a-La-Mode*) has a cynical approach toward matrimony, and has forsaken his virtuous wife, Amanda, for the "staleness of her love" and the quest for variety. To Amanda "the rules of virtue have never been ever sacred" and she longs for her husband's love. Young Worthy,

her husband's friend, aptly describes her case as:

Poor Amanda, thou well deservest a better husband;  
thou wert never wanting in thy endeavours to reclaim him.

She had tried her best to "lure this falcon back to love and virtue" but in vain. Hence, she is advised to follow the apparently wrong means to gain her end, *i.e.*, an intrigue in which she should act as her husband's mistress. Young Worthy justifies this intrigue for "it is less criminal to let him love you as a mistress than to let him hate you as a wife". After great scruples she agrees to act as Loveless's mistress and succeeds in luring him back. The whole exercise and the moral exhortations from Amanda fill him with remorse and penitence and he says:

And yet your words are uttered with such a powerful  
accent that they have awakened my soul and strike  
my thought with horror and remorse.

The seasoned rake, by the end of the play, not only promises fidelity to his spouse but also preaches and practises virtuous ways. His penitence is in the true spirit of sentimentalism and must have brought forth tears of joy from the audience as it did from the other characters. Virtue is acclaimed and a confession is made:

Oh, thou has roused me from my deep lethargy of  
Vice! For hitherto my soul has been enslaved to loose  
desires, to vain deluding follies, and shadows of  
substantial bliss, but now I wake with joy to find my  
rapture real. Thus let me kneel and pay my thanks  
to her whose conquering virtue has at last subdued  
me. Here will I fix, thus prostrate sigh my shame, and  
wash my crimes in never-ending tears of penitence.

Though at the price of "unconvincing improbability" which Vanbrugh accused Cibber of in *The Short Vindication* the virtuous love of the abused wife was rewarded in the restoration of her long lost marital bliss.

Amanda puts an end to her sufferings by reforming her husband through "immoral" ways whereas Lady Easy, the abused wife in Cibber's *Careless Husband* wins her rakish husband through virtuous ways. Lady Easy, a paragon of patience and understanding, instead of finding faults with her husband introspects:

And duty, too, forbids me to insult,  
Where I have vowed obedience, Perhaps the fault's  
in me, and nature has not formed  
Me with the thousand little requisites  
that warm the heart to love.

Finding that "continual jealousy may tease him to a fixed aversion" she is determined to reclaim him by patience and virtue. Her wish, "If I can make him once think seriously, Time yet may be my friend" is soon fulfilled. On finding Sir Charles Easy without his periwig sleeping by her maid, Edging, the abused

wife, like her counterparts in Restoration comedy, for once feels like exposing him:

I'll throw this vizard of my patience off  
Now wake him in his guilt,  
And barefaced front him with my wrongs.

but duty and virtue refrain her; and, instead, she takes a stein irk from her neck and places it gently over his head lest an unkind wind may harm him. On waking, the erring husband broods over his wife's forgiving gesture and is filled with remorse. His confession: 'the thought has made me despicable en'n to myself, and his realization that "she has been long acquainted with my follies, and yet with what amazing prudence has she borne the secret pangs of injured love and wore an everlasting smile to me" make him reform himself. He puts an end to his love intrigues with lady Graveairs and Edging and kneels before his virtuous wife exclaiming:

Let me be therefore pleased to tell you now, your  
wonderous conduct has waked me to a sense of your  
disquiet past, and resolution never to disturb it more.

The hearts of the moralists and lovers of marital fidelity must have been warmed at their reunion.

There are plays that suggest that this sort of reconciliation is not possible in every situation. There are spouses who do not follow Lady Easy's thinking that "errors from want of thinking might be bore, at least when probably one moment's serious thought would end 'em" and there is no scope of adjustment between the spouses. Therefore, separate maintenance or divorce as the last resort, is sought, although it appears too radical a step even for the promiscuous society of the Restoration. Moreover, it was not easy to get a divorce decree. Therefore, the playwrights tried to please the audience with reconciliation scenes, the demand of the changing ethos. Shadwell and Farquhar championed separation through mutual consent, permissible under the old Teutonic customs. Milton also had advocated divorce in his treatise, *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1644) against unworthy bondage; thus ushering modern thinking. Divorce in the modern sense was unknown before 1700 when the Duke of Norfolk was granted divorce by the Parliament. Till then the common way of release and succour from unhappy marriages was mutual consent to separation, requiring no legal procedure. Cromwell's Act of 1653 also did not refer to divorce except in case of minor's marriage through fraud or abduction. Lord Roos case in 1671 is a major landmark in the history of marriage laws for it supported a woman's right to divorce a husband. Even the Hardwicke Act of 1753 hardly provided for divorce in the modern sense. It was only in 1801 when Mrs. Addison got a divorce decree against her husband that abused women won their cause.

The prevalent legal code with regard to husband-wife relationship deterred the playwrights from presenting the logical solution to unhappy marriages. Credit goes to Shadwell who came to the rescue of the abused wives by providing Mrs. Woodly divorce by mutual consent in *Epsom Wells*. Farquhar followed the suit in *The Beaux Stratagem* and presented before the audience the most rational attitude toward matrimonial abuses, when he allowed Mrs. and Mr. Sullen to seek release from the marriage bonds by mutual consent. Both the plays, significant as they are in the history of comedy, need a detailed study.

*Epsom Wells*, much applauded by Charles II, presents Mr. Woodyly, a libertine rake who has made his wife's life miserable. She complains:

Thou inhumane Beast, to sit up anights late, and come  
home drunk and wake me, and lye like a statue by  
me all the rest of the night, flesh and blood can't bear it.

Her discontent expressed in the vein of a Lady Brute reveals Mr. Woodyly being no better than Sir John Brute. He is not only a Sottish beast but also a libertine who is pursuing his own niece, Caroline. The double standard of behaviour on the part of the husband together with a deep scorn for him goads Mrs. Woodyly seek happiness the immoral way. She not only plans assignations with the witty gay heroes, Bevil and Raines, in vain, but also wishes her husband's death as a good riddance. Her reaction to the news of a duel between the hero and her husband reveals her bitter scorn for her husband:

If he kills Bevil, I am reveng'd if he kills him, he rids  
me of the worst Husband for my humour in Christendom

Indeed, she too is to blame, yet all her faults seem to originate from her husband's ill-treatment of her. The action of the play also shows Mr. Woodyly's "lewd disorderly life" violating matrimonial vows. The abused wife has neither the satisfaction of cuckolding her husband - the practice which the eighteenth-century sensibility denounced - nor like Amanda can she reclaim the incorrigible rakish husband. Therefore, by the end of the play, Woodlys, in a proviso scene, infused with the spirit of the comedy of manners, agree to part.

Another play bearing much resemblance with *Epsom Wells* is Farquhar's *The Beaux Stratagem* which allows the abused wife to seek divorce as a release from a loathsome wedded life. Mrs. Sullen, unlike Lady Brute, a victim of marriage-de-convenience, is married to Squire Sullen, "a Sottish drunkard who exasperates his wife by his brutish manners". He has married her only to "beget an heir to his estate" while she accepted him for "protection and happiness". Their hatred for each other springs forth from the fact that both had failed to get what they expected of each other. Like Lady Brute, Mrs. Sullen, in order to rouse her husband, connives with Squire Sullens' sister, Dorinda, to have an intrigue with a gallant. The lover intrigue first with the French Count and then with the spark, Archer, instead of bringing the Sullens closer confirms the adultery of the wife in the eyes of the husband who finally consents to divorce her.

The Sullens' plight much like the Brutes, is aptly described in a scene of altercation between them:

Squire S: One flesh! rather two carcasses joined unnaturally together.  
Mrs. S. Or rather a living soul coupled to a dead body.

Mr. Sullen, in a Lockean vein, pleads her case with Dorinda:

Casual violence is a transient injury; and may be  
repaired; but can radical hatred be even reconciled?  
No, no, sister; Nature is the first Law giver; and when  
she has set tempers opposite, not all the golden links



of wedlock nor iron manacles of Law, can keep 'em fast.

The play reveals them as "united contradictions, fire and fury" and that confirms their views. Nelson James in his detailed study of the play shows more sympathy with Lady Brute (*The Provok'd Wife*) than Mrs. Sullen and holds her responsible for her disastrous marriage as he avers:

Mrs. Sullen is not altogether innocent in this matter,  
just as the provok'd wife, Lady Brute, is not altogether  
innocent in the failure of her marriage.

Amplifying lack of virtue on the part of the abused wives Nelson James forgets that it is the brutality of the husbands combined with the urge to revolt against the double standard of morality, prescribing codes different for men and women, which virtually throws the abused wives into the arms of their gallants who they still spurn in favour of their virtue and honour. He reiterates:

In a way, Mrs. Sullen, is more to blame than Lady Brute  
for the dissolution of her marriage, for Lady Brute has  
more provocation.

To him Sir John Brute is a brute, according to the action of the play while Mr. Sullen is a brute only in the eyes of his wife. Indeed, there is a difference in the degree of their brutality. Sir Brute is too provokingly brutal and loathsome, whereas Squire Sullen is too freezingly sullen. Both of them forget nature of women which Mrs. Sullen describes thus:

I own myself a woman, full of my sex; a gentle,  
generous soul, easy and yielding to soft desires, a  
spacious heart, where love and all his train might  
lodge.

It is love which is denied to them and which is the foundation of the citadel of domestic felicity as is illustrated in Belinda-Heartfree (*The Provok'd Wife*) and Dorinda-Aimwell (*The Beaux Stratagem*) matches which set off the unhappy married couples in the plays. Both the playwrights emphasise the significance of love in marriage alliance, the lack of which results in disastrous endings of Sullens' and Brutes' married life. It is beautifully summed up by Sir Charles Freeman (*The Beaux Stratagem*) in the hand imagery:

Squire S: I always thought that we were naturally one.

Sir Charles: Sir I know that my two Hands are naturally one, because they love one another, kiss one another help one another in all the Actions of life; but I could not say so much. If they were always at Cuffs

The only logical solution to the problem then is to separate decently with mutual consent as Archer puts it in the last scene:

Both happy in their Several states we find,  
Those parted by consent, and those conjoined.  
Consent, if mutual, saves the lawyer's fee -  
Consent is law enough to set you free.

Although the decision is logical still, "it would be hard to guess which of these parties is the better pleased, the couple joined, or the couple parted". Nevertheless, it is better to end the experienced misery if the two hands (husband and wife) find their life unbearable. If mutual love does not join the hands together it is better to separate, is the message given by Shadwell as well as Farquhar. *Epsom Wells* and *The Beaux Stratagem* are the two plays which are perhaps far advanced for their time, that supported the abused wife in the male dominated society and have ushered a new era of thinking that finds full expression in the later centuries

#### WORKS CITED

Heywood, Thomas. *The Woman Killed with Kindness*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Vanbrugh, John. *The Works of John Vanbrugh*. W.C. Ard, London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1893.

Mueschke, Paul. *A Re-evaluation of Vanbrugh*. PMLA, Vol. 49, 1934.

James, E.N. *The Development of Farquhar as a Comic Dramatist*. Mouton, 1972.

PURVA MIMAANSA