

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Ellen's Revolt in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

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By

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Supervisor's Recommendation

This is to certify that Ms. Kanta Gurung with T.U. Reg. No. 9-2-0274-0199-2011 has prepared her master's thesis entitled "Ellen's revolt in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*" under my supervision following the format as specified by the Research Committee of the Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara. I therefore forward it to the research committee for the final evaluation.

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Approval Sheet

The thesis entitled "Ellen's Revolt in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*" submitted to the Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara by Ms. Kanta Gurung has been approved by the undersigned members of the evaluation committee.

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Abstract

This study is based on the issue of female revolt in terms of getting freedom with reference to Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence*. My thesis argues how females of that era were suppressed, oppressed and subjugated by patriarchal norms and values of 1870, which are patriarchal through the major character of the novel, Ellen. The patriarchal norms and values restricted females from gaining their own rights of making choices and the society was slowly getting ready to fight against such a societal unjust. While fighting against the patriarchy, some females go against their society and have to give up their comfortable family lives and loved ones. This study deals with the problems faced by the central character and the struggle she had made to get freedom from the patriarchal domination. Ellen is such a bold character in the novel who fights against patriarchal ethos and pathos. She leaves her cheating husband and revolts against the established New York norms and values by her surprising decisions.

Chapter 1

Edith Wharton and Contemporary American Society

Issues and Context

This thesis aims to analyze Edith Wharton's novel, *The Age of Innocence* in the light of feminism. Feminism is a theory as well as political, cultural or economical movement that aims to establish equal rights and legal protection for women. The main contention of this thesis is that Ellen Olenska revolts against all sorts of gender discrimination as she knows the contemporary society is quite indifference towards female civilization. Ellen brought up in an American patriarchal society and inside the spectrum of bourgeoisie system. She has been forced to follow all the rules and regulations perpetuated by the then American patriarchal society, but she strongly denies surrendering in front of the male dominated patriarchal society. She has been educated in the European education system and culture where women were taken as secondary entity. Women in such society have been taught to live their subservient life. She was not happy with such social imposition. Such indigestible circumstance creates panic situation in her psyche, which created a kind of revolution against the patriarchal codes and conducts. She gives divorced to her husband. She dares to break all the social rules and regulations perpetuated patriarchal society. So, the main argument of the study was that the modern education system and knowledge of different cultures enable feminists to revolt against to traditional patriarchal system.

The study was primarily concerned with the character and role played by the central character Ellen. Primary objective of the thesis was to explain the situation of female and their attempt of revolution in the patriarchal society of America in the late nineteenth century. To support the primary objective the following secondary objectives lead the study to a conclusion:

- a. To explain why Ellen stood against the wish of Newland Archer.
- b. To point out the factors that are responsible for female marginalization in the novel.
- c. To excavate about how such steps of Ellen affect other women in the society.

Unlike today's world, in nineteenth century marriage and divorce were strong social costume in the aristocratic society of New York. On the other hand, they had clear vision of taboo towards divorce because they interpreted divorce as breaking up of the social norms and even it would affect the family prestige. The Separation between husbands and wives was common, but the case of divorce was somewhat rare and unusual in the nineteenth century American society. In this novel, the major character Ellen was facing the problem of unhappy marriage and divorce in the patriarchal society. In the society, males were free to keep relationship with other ladies outside the family, but females were limited to domestic chores.

Ellen is unhappy with her conjugal life as she finds her husband stealing her fortune by establishing an extramarital affair. She wants to divorce her husband, but her family, friend and relatives oppose her decision and try to persuade her not to break the social norms rather they suggest her to stay separated from her husband because divorce makes women a social scandal of it where especially women have to grinding into a mill. However, later in her life, Ellen establishes herself as an independent woman who was far ahead of time and can control over her own life opposing the existing social norms and values.

Ellen was cousin of May Welland and granddaughter of Mrs. Manson Mingott. She was married to a European nobleman, Polish Count Olenski and becomes a countess. As he gains political power, her better exercises upon female

body. He could not limit with his wife rather, he embedded with patriarchal values that leads with masculine may have hundreds of wives. He maintains an extra-marital relationship with other ladies. She requests him very much about the fact, but he did not pay any attention towards the situation because he did not give any agency to her. Her sleeping psyche erects without paying any attention towards social norms and values. She wants to dismantle patriarchal enigma and dares to live independent life. She gives divorce to him to start her own independent and bohemian lifestyle despite having problematic situations falls on her.

Moreover, he was brutal and abusive. She was outspoken, open, extrovert, drinking free woman. She is frank and open in the relationship with the man. She falls in love with Newland Archer who is her relative and husband of May Welland. Ellen was fully aware about that they could not live outside of the convention without hurting others. She reminds Newland Archer that social, religious, and class standard must be taken into consideration. She has an idea that illicit relationship with Newland neither gives happiness to her nor to Newland. So, she wants to carry it publicly. Newland was also the representative of male chauvinistic society besides Ellen's abusive husband.

On the other hand, May Welland was another female character in the novel. She represents innocence, shallow and uninteresting perfect young lady which was a design of the patriarchal society. She was submissive and does not revolt against her husband in her entire life. She announces her fake pregnancy when she comes to know that her husband has a mistress outside the marriage. Newland Archer was a young lawyer, husband of May Welland and love interest of Ellen. In general, he was the product of the patriarchal society and a particular representative of male dominated society of New York in 1920s.

The Age of Innocence is Wharton's literary persona, through which she writes about what she sees, feels and encounters from Her experience of living in an American patriarchal community. She creates Ellen Olenska as a narrator to depict the problems of American women, as they are suffering in the hand of gender bias society. The hardship she including other women faced as a poor, helpless, second sex, other is expressed through her heroine Ellen. This is the story of American women's conflict directly related to their upbringing. She also depicts cultural discrimination, feelings of alienation and degradation associated with poverty too because American bourgeoisie society has strictly banishes them from it.

Review of Literature

Many of Wharton's works incorporate the notion of women as repressed being ready to erupt. Wharton's the *Age of Innocence* revolves around the three major characters, Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska and May Welland and their triangular love relation. It also focuses on the situation of female in nineteen century and their helplessness in the aristocratic society of high norms and moral values for women. There are different types of social taboos in terms of limited them within a boundary of patriarchal society. Patrick T. Reardon in his review of the book state, "May Welland, the young woman who, at the opening of the book, is about to become Archer's fiancé, is twice characterized early on as a "product of the system" (26). May Welland, a young woman of 1870s New York, is characterized just as a "product of the system". Her thinking and actions were too common. She was trained such a way by her society that she cannot raise a question or break any rule of social values.

On the other hand, Ellen is a symbol of those women who wants to live their lives according to their will. She was not a product of the system. Diane L. Schirf makes judgement the novel from the perspective of women's suffering in American

landscape in nineteenth century as:

Countess Ellen Olenska, vaguely exotic, vaguely dangerous, forbidden — primarily because she is not the “artificial product” of society, but a genuine, sensual woman whose independent way of thinking is enough to tacitly and then overtly banish her from the very company that Newland’s life is built around. She is “different,” as Archer will later discuss with one of his children. No one else would say, “Why not make one’s own fashions?” thus giving a voice to what Archer himself deep down believes but can’t put into practice. (15)

Schirf in these lines takes the novel as a social reality where women are taken as goods and things can be produced from industry. Their identity, needs and requirements have no meaning, that's why they are facing dangerous situations in their lives. According to her, Ellen was different from other women of her generation. She was a natural and genuine woman with her own independent way of thinking. She believes in making her own way of living life.

Another major character, Newland Archer, was one of those males in the patriarchal society who was aware of his reputation and tries to defend at any cost. At the same time, he wants to develop an extramarital affair with his wife’s cousin secretly. David Finkle explains Newland’s character in his review, “Archer’s deeper attraction to the Countess is—well, the most applicable word is “consummated”—when she tells him she has just received sheet music for Stephen Foster’s just published “Beautiful Dreamer” and coaxes him (he’s reluctant at first) to sing it with her” (18). Having fiancée of his own, Newland was in relation with someone else’s wife secretly. After marriage too, he develops a relation with his wife’s cousin Ellen. He tries every possible way to get closer to her.

However, the relation of Newland and Ellen meets tragic ending. Archer could not go after Ellen because of his duty as husband. At the same time, May Welland supposes to be an innocent character of novel plots her fake pregnancy to send Ellen far from her husband. Stephen Tall in his review on *The Guardian* asserts, “duty overpowers their love. Ironically, it is May, whom Newland thought to be too innocent to remain interesting, who manipulates the rupture, telling Ellen she is pregnant (before she is sure), and so driving her back to Europe, alone” (32). May seems to be an innocent character who is not interested manipulates things to keep her marriage working. Knowing her husband’s growing feelings towards her cousin, May an innocent woman, also takes a bold step to save her relation and family reputation.

In this way, different critics have interpreted the novel variously and most of them have focused on the cultural dimensions of the novel. It would be a new contribution to look at the novel from the perspective of struggle of women against social inequalities. This thesis argues that the novel presents the struggle of women against gender discrimination.

Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in the then American society. The concept of gender also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of femininity and masculinity. Troil Moi wants to deconstruct the oppositions between traditionally masculine and feminine values onto confront the full political force and reality of such categories. Troil Moi, the celebrated feminist in her famous essay "Feminist, Female, Feminine" rationally defines feminist literary criticism. She clearly distinguished the main cause of women's suffering and reveals how women's subordination or men’s domination is socially constructed. As such, the subordination can be changed or ended. As insists by Troil Moi, in the novel too, all the female

characters are prone to revolt in order to redraw the boundary created by American patriarchal society. They dare to give divorce to their husbands and able to live their independent lives which is quite beyond the imagination of American bourgeoisie patriarchal society. Hence, for analyzing the text from the point of view of feminism, the present thesis will borrow ideas and insights related to self-identity discourse and feminist ideas mainly from Toril Moi. Moi argues that the root cause of female domination is feminist implies anti-sexist and anti-patriarchal position and feminine standards for the exploited marginalized and muted class by ruling social linguistic order. The feminist critics should vehemently oppose the patriarchal critics and thinkers who still from feminist critics.

Organization of the Study

The major objective of this study is to analyses the novel from the feminist perspective although female characters suffer in the face of the adverse situations in their life. The critical review of this very newly published novel was very rare except for a few articles in noted magazines and newspapers. However, the study has organized the chapters on the basis of textual analysis and a survey of the available critical analyses and reviews.

The first chapter of this study introduces the main argument of the thesis. It focuses on the new problems of the modern working women along with brief literature review and the outlines the entire thesis. The theoretical concept of feminism is overviewed in the second chapter. The oppression, domination, marginalization of women, unsuccessful attempts of the major characters in the novel against the patriarchy and crisis in revolt of women are analyzed in the third chapter as textual analysis. Finally, the fourth or the last chapter sums up the main points of this thesis.

This study has aimed to show the pathetic condition of the characters, and their suppression, victimization and so on. That is, it unveils the resolution through an appearance of character, action, narration, evidence, symbols, and representation at the intersection of vital current questions of class, gender and politics. Both primary and secondary sources were used during this study.

Chapter 2

Feminism and Its Practice in Literature

Feminism and Society

Feminism is a doctrine related on image and ideas advocating women's rights for the equality of the sexes, identity and freedom. Feminism tries to redefine women's activities and goals from a woman centred point of view and refuses to accept the cult of masculine chauvinism and superiority that reduces women to a sex object, a second sex or a submissive other. It seeks to eliminate the subordination, oppression, inequalities and injustices. They suffer because of socially constructed masculine and feminine values as Toril Moi believes says, "Initially, I will suggest that we distinguish between 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics" (117). In these lines, Moi asks to understand first how culturally constructed discourses are responsible for women's situation. There is politics behind their subordinate position in the society.

Toril Moi, in order to get freedom from patriarchal norms and values, she first of all talks about the social-linguistic order that is responsible for women's suffering. Her main thrust of differentiating between key words "feminist", "female" and "feminine" and defines them to signify important characteristics. She in her essay "Feminist, Female, Feminine" defines the word "Feminist" means a person who supports the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities. "Female" which means being woman or a girl. It connotes biological category and the word "feminine" implies the connection with women. It denotes cultural aspect and category. Moi traces the problem in third one that is "feminine" which is culturally constructed entity in order to enslave whole female civilization. In her essay she

advocates in order to dismantle such socio-culturally constructed discourse which is totally political. Patriarchal institution always creates gender discourse of femininity and masculinity, which problematizes Toril Moi in her essay. The idea of gender that is men made which reflects males are by birth superior and female are their helping hands. Female are by birth submissive, docile, helping, emotional, weak, tolerance and so on, which she challenges and puts the question mark onto the conventional understanding of gender. She further writes that truth and identity are products of discourse and there can be changed when discourses are replaced by newer one and she demands to redraw the gender discourse which is problematic. As described by Toril Moi, in the novel *Ellen Olenska* breaks the patriarchal social norms and values. She revolts against the deeds of her husband and gives divorce. She claimed if her husband kept extramarital relationships, she would not be obliged to stay being his wife. She provides divorce despite being restriction of his family members. She also makes boyfriend in order to get freedom in her life which is quite similar task as theories by Toril Moi.

Feminist theory is the denotation of feminism. The main objective of feminist theory is to acknowledge the nature of gender inequality by examining the roles and responsibilities of women in society. Feminists examine various sectors, castes, race and their experience as their subjects. Feminist criticism prefers breaking the essential images of gender and sex while taking pride in the cultural and gender diversity. Feminism refers to the struggle of women for equal political, economic and social rights. Feminist critics believe that the entire society and culture are ruled by patriarchal social norms and values, which should be broken.

The definition of women and roles to be played in society are determined by powerful men not by women themselves. Women are flung into the margin and their

voice silenced. Jane Freedman contends in her work *Feminism*, “women’s moral voice has gone unheard for so long because their of making moral judgement is deemed inferior to that of men, whose voice is taken as the norms” (19). Women in the past were busy in household activities, so their voice had gone unheard for so long, that’s why the patriarchal voice became the voice for all and mandatory. Later, this process contributed to the male supremacy over female.

Men’s position in the society is at the centre. Men can establish their own identity. They do not need any reference to define themselves. But in the case of women, they are to be connected to men or their husbands for their identity. They are recognized through their husband’s status and identity. They are taken as other. In this regard, Simon De Beauvoir in her most popular work *The Second Sex* states:

Men are considered essential subjects while women are considered contingent beings. Men can act upon the world, change it, give it meaning, while women have meaning only in relation to men. Thus, women are defined not just in terms of their differences from men, but in terms of their inadequacy in comparison to men . . . A woman is not a person in her own right. She is man’s other: she is less than a man: she is a kind of alien in a man’s world: she is not a fully developed human being the way a man is. (96)

In the patriarchal society, women are taken as the ‘other’. Men treat women as weak being and sex object. Women do not have their own identity. They are identified and defined in relation to men. For example, in the word ‘woman’, there is ‘man’ already and ‘she’ becomes ‘she’ by adding ‘he’. In this way, men always keep superiority and advantage. Women are always constructed as inferior and docile.

Feminism concerns with the marginalization of all women: that is, with their

being relegated to a secondary position. Feminists argue that their culture is a patriarchal culture; one is organized in favour of interests of men. Literary critics explain how power imbalances are there in the literary texts. Their goals are to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and re-evaluation of literature and literary criticism. Feminist critics therefore study sexual, social and political issues, which were once thought to be “outside” the mainstream study of literature and literary criticism.

Feminism is a word that evokes different images for people. Many forms of feminism exist to suit many different forms and thought. As with every social movement, feminism encompasses a variety of political tendencies. Feminist ideology can take many different forms. In the 1970s, women started developing a theory which helped to explain their oppression. Pockets of resistance began to organize and challenge patriarchy. By 1980s, however, feminists started disagreeing on particular issues linked to feminism.

For Julia Kristeva, language is of two kinds – semiotic and symbolic. Symbolic means the expression of the words that may have multiple meaning and semiotic means the sound, volume, rhythm and the body gesture of the speaker. For her, symbolic is controlled by patriarchy, but semiotic is free. It means, like semiotic, woman should be free to explore her ‘self’. In the boundary of feminine four walls, she cannot find her way out.

Kate Millett, Germaine Greer and Mary Ellmann’s writing are more political as they raise the issue of injustice, suppression and exploitation by men over women. Women are compared with the black, Jews, minor groups and the working class where they are oppressed and resisted by bourgeoisie. Although Simon De Beauvoir points out “unlike blacks, women are not a minority, and unlike the proletariat,

women are not the product of the history” (138).

Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* sets the voice against the patriarchy. Women are taught in a way that they should be happy in sensual and imaginary world. Even in literature too, women’s position is regarded as lower class and subordinate one. Commenting on the wrong impression that women should be glamorous, charming and beautiful, Wollstonecraft asserts:

Women are subjected by ignorance to their sensations, and only taught to look for happiness in love, refine on sensual feelings, and adopt metaphysical notions respecting that passion, which led them shamefully to neglect the duties of life, and frequently in the midst of these sublime refinements they plump into actual vice. (398)

Many male-centred novels show female as a timid character whereas male as a brave, enthusiastic and active. Such novels give bad impact on females. They make women tender and emotionally moving. Women from such fictional texts learn to marry a strong and rich man. They are content in satisfying male’s desires and sexual passion. Thus, they remain passive and cannot take strong decision. They cannot exercise their intellectuality and are trapped in the narrow domestic walls. Such weak and fragile identity of women is created even by fictional texts.

Most of the Bible's teachings about women are based upon the foundation laid in Genesis. God created the woman as an "assistant" for the man: However, being an ‘assistant’ does not mean that the woman was substandard or meek to the man. God created both men and women in His own image, But Adam and Eve, disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. God gave each of them punishments before ejecting them from the Garden: The punishments on both Adam and Eve were clearly enacted by God Himself. God did not condense women to lower status, nor did he command men to

rule severely over their wives. However, in the course of history, it has sometimes been thought that God's punishment of Eve was harsher and suppression of women.

Traditionally, women are considered to be feminine by birth and men are masculine. But these categories are developed by the patriarchal society. The gender role shaped in a society is formed in such a way that it makes hierarchy between male and female. So women are confined within private circle and have no approach to the public and socio-political sphere. In the fairy tales and stories of the past, women are shown as a very coward and docile character. They need a defender and that role is always played by men. In some fairy tales, women are represented in a negative role too like witch, whore, bitch etc. There is also a culture of saying good girl and bad girl in past. Those who obey the patriarchal norms are 'good girls' but those who deny the traditional norms and values are 'bad girls'.

Gender Discrimination and Revolt of Women

Women were even treated as second grade human being in past decades and centuries. They were oppressed. Society was formed in such a way that every new born baby girl was a second class citizen in society. She was provided less care in comparison with boys. Dewan Mahboob Hossain, Nik Nazli Nik Ahmad and Siti Alawiah Siraj assert on their discussion:

The famous French feminist Simone de Beauvoir mentioned women as the 'second sex' (Elliott 2009). In her masterpiece titled 'The Second Sex', she highlighted the issue of women's oppression. Bamberger (1974) in her anthropological work titled 'The Myth of Matriarchy: Why men rule in Primitive Society', by analysing the pre-historic myths prevailing among three different South American tribes, argued that gender discrimination is a historical phenomenon and 'women are

still not free and equal to men' (Hossain 2013a: 116). Women face discrimination in both private and public arenas. (13)

Men used pre-historic myths to control over women first. Women are still not free and equal to men. Even today's world, there is somewhat discrimination in both private and public areas. They got their basic rights but they are still not treated as equal as a man.

Moreover, gender inequality is built into the organisation of marriage and families. It is obvious that woman were treated to go someone else's house after marriage. It is society's structure that is flawed with inequality. Judith Lorber urges about the unequal treatment of society in terms of gender:

The main point feminists have stressed about gender inequality is that it is not an individual matter, but is deeply ingrained in the structure of societies. Gender inequality is built into the organization of marriage and families, work and the economy, politics, religions, the arts and other cultural productions, and the very language we speak. Making women and men equal, therefore, necessitates social and not individual solutions. (8)

Gender inequality exists in work and the economy, politics, religions, the arts and even in other cultural productions, and the very language we speak. Therefore, individual solutions to this existing gender discrimination are not the right solution. We should seek for the social, solution which can really produce an equal status of man and woman together in the world.

Women and men are equal creatures as human beings. But women were excluded from basic human rights. Amina Benladghem writes in her work about the first feminist activist Mary Wollstonecraft;

Mary Wollstonecraft the first feminist and activist on social and

political subjects is spotlighted by her treatise *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that calls primarily for British disregarded women to have all the priorities in private and public life explaining how women and men are totally equal creatures. Significantly, Wollstonecraft fights against those hypercritical of the time who has been bounded in some inequitable thoughts that woman and man are definitely two different animals have disaccorded aspirations in life. (44-45)

The feminist revolution is against those thoughts that woman and man are definitely two different animals have disaccorded aspirations in life. If woman and man get equal rights in society their contribution towards society will double. It will lead to a better social harmony with everyone equally participated in its ups and downs.

Women were oppressed by family, society and system. The voting rights, rights of keeping assets, start up of their own, etc. were prohibited by law. At the same time, talking to a stranger, divorce, having relation after husband's death, etc. used to perceive as immoral activities. They had to be only engaged in domestic work and must not think about public matter and outer world. The study finds out the women struggle when they are aware of oppression for instance in the novel, Ellen raised her voice and go against the boundary created by the male- dominated patriarchy society. Ellen's struggle for coming out of comfort zone and living is her rebellion. It is guided by her interest and intense desires, but social understanding about a woman makes her situation problematic.

This study tries to find the women's struggle in order to establish their position in society because the pre-occupied concept about women manipulates women and throw them into limited society. The subsequent chapter has focused on the efforts made by women characters of the novel to go against patriarchy and their ultimate failure so due to deeply rooted patriarchal norms and values.

Chapter 3

Gender Discrimination and *The Age of Innocence*

Female's Struggle

Struggle of women is inevitable weapon in order to release from patriarchal bondage as "political labels indicating support for the aims of the new women's movement" (Moi, 117). Toril Moi urges for struggle in order to get release from patriarchal sufferings. Therefore, the struggle of Ellen Olenska against the male domination of society can be seen as a beginning point for her independence. The womanizer and gambling addicted husband was her only curse in life despite she belongs to an aristocratic high class family in New York. Lawrence Lefferts and Thorley, two characters of the novel, talk about the on-going marital crisis between Ellen and her husband Mr. Olenska, Wharton shows the conversation in *The Age of Innocence* as:

‘Well- she left him; nobody attempts to deny that.’

‘He’s an awful brute, isn’t he?’ continued the young enquirer, a candid Thorley, who was evidently preparing to enter the lists as the lady’s champion.

‘The very worst; I knew him at Nice,’ said Lawrence Lefferts with authority. ‘A half-paralysed white sneering fellow-rather handsome head, but eyes with a lot of lashes. Well, I’ll tell you the sort: when he wasn’t with women he was collecting china. Paying any price for both, I understand.’ (10)

Ellen left her husband because he was a womanizer. At the time when divorce was almost taboo in society she has done something unimaginable. Her husband was with different woman if not collecting china by paying any price for both. She could not

tolerate the behaviour of her husband and left him.

Ellen is the protagonist who is strong enough to fight against social norms and values. She was victimized by her husband, therefore, she goes back to in her husband's country to fight against the circumstances. She fled to America. Taylor Jasmine discusses about her journey to America as, "The story opens on an opera night, with a ripple of excitement caused by the presence in the box of a social leader of Ellen, Countess Olenska. Ellen is an American girl, longtime resident in Europe, who has fled under circumstances of a somewhat compromising nature from her brutal husband in Poland" (30). Ellen leaves her comfort zone and fights against it. She is an American girl and after marriage she moves to Europe with her husband. But she goes back to America to fight against her brutal husband in Poland.

The society of New York was guided by the patriarchal domination. Ellen was the victim of it because her husband who was a womanizer and gambling addict. In fact, she was fighting against her husband and the society. But everyone was pointing towards her luck instead of criticizing her husband's choice of living. There is a discussion between Mrs Archer and Mr. Jackson about Ellen's decision of choosing divorce over compromise. Mrs. Archer believes that Ellen is making a big mistake. She complains in novel about Ellen's decision as:

‘Why not?’ broke in her son, growing suddenly argumentative. ‘Why shouldn't she be conspicuous if she chooses? Why should she slink about as if it were she who had disgraced herself? She's "poor Ellen" certainly, because she had the bad luck to make a wretched marriage; but I don't see that that's a reason for hiding her head as if she were the culprit.’ (26)

Society was seeing Ellen as culprit when her husband was a fault of their collapsing

marriage. In fact, she was a victim of their falling relation. But the society guided by patriarchal norms and values was pointing towards her for the incident.

Ellen does not only run from her house but also breaks the norms of marriage at the same time. There was a gossip of her living together with someone who helped her at the time when her society was not ready to accept divorce. Despite her living together with someone else might be only gossip of town, but the fact is that she was daring enough to take that risk. There is a discussion between Newland a major character of the novel and Mr Jackson about her living together as:

‘You say the secretary merely helped her to get away, my dear fellow? Well, he was still helping her a year later, then; for somebody met ’em living at Lausanne together.’ Newland reddened. ‘Living together? Well, why not? Who had the right to make her life over if she hadn’t? I’m sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live harlots.’ (27)

Living with someone, with opposite sex, without marriage was taboo at the time. The society was so hypocritical that nobody was pointing a finger towards Ellen’s husband who was a womanizer and gambler. But everyone was suspecting her because she was taking help from someone who was not her relative or husband or someone who is opposite her sex.

The New York society was influenced by patriarchal values and norms. It used to believe in stability whether the person is happy or not. Priority of that society was outer stability than inner happiness. Patrick T. Reardon writes about the New York society of *The Age of Innocence*:

All tribes are insular, but New York society in *The Age of Innocence* is particularly so. Its core value is stability, and its primary weapon in the

effort to keep everything on an even keel is a refusal to see, hear or contemplate “unpleasantness,” whatever its guise. For instance, at one point, Archer can tell from his mother’s actions that he and she are evaluating an issue differently but “it was against all the rules of their code that the mother and son should ever allude to what was uppermost in their thoughts . . .” (26)

Apart from social values, there is a huge communication gap between two generations the generation of youth and the slightly old are not fitting into the same frame of thought. Newland and his mother had different a point of view to interpret the same thing. Mrs Archer, Newland’s mother, follows the path of a society which is strongly guided by patriarchal norms, on the other hand, Newland goes slightly beyond the rules of society.

The society of New York was guided by strong values, but Ellen had been a rebel throughout her life. She was a wanderer. She had been wanderer because her parents were wanderers. They never settled in one particular place. They travelled here and there and they studied the society and human nature. With her parents, she also studied how a society functions. How she lost her wanderer parents is described in the novel as:

IT WAS GENERALLY agreed in New York that the Countess Olenska had ‘lost her looks.’ She had appeared there first, in Newland Archer’s boyhood, as a brilliantly pretty little girl of nine or ten, of whom people said that she ‘ought to be painted.’ Her parents had been continental wanderers, and after a roaming babyhood she had lost them both, and been taken charge by her aunt, Medora Manson, also a wanderer, who was herself returning to New York to ‘settle down.’ (38)

After losing her parents, Ellen was adopted by her aunt Medora Manson who also was a wanderer. Before returning to New York to settle down Medora Manson also travelled to different places with her niece Ellen. Ellen learnt different culture and different aspects of life when she was travelling with her parents first and with her aunt later. So for Ellen there was a very little chance to follow hypocritical values and norms of New York.

Where every young girl of Ellen's age is following the fashion trend but Ellen is not aware of that She does not follow the trend, but she follows her impulse. She creates her own design of dressing. She is a woman who can challenge both old and new generation and their thought. Sevinc Elaman-Garner discusses:

In *The Age of Innocence*, from the opening scene at the opera, we are given Newland's perceptions of Ellen and May, highlighting the conflict between the two (authoritative and internally persuasive) opposing discourses: Ellen and May as representatives of "New Woman" and "True Woman" respectively. Newland first sees Ellen in the Mingott's opera box at the old Academy where she appears as "the lady in the Empire dress" (9) wearing a dress more daring than the dictates of New York fashion allow in that year. (11)

Ellen is a way ahead of her time. She can challenge the society. She does not follow what her society tells her to follow. Not only her thinking, but also her other day to day activities not necessarily falls into the social code of conduct of the time. She is a woman who is independent in her choices and in her thinking, too.

Ellen does not like a sophisticated lifestyle. She belongs to some of the finest family line in New York, but she chooses to live in the middle to low class society. She does not own a beautiful and exotic house instead she lives in a room. Her room's

description goes in the novel as:

What he saw, meanwhile, with the help of the lamp was the faded shadowy charm of a room unlike any room he had known. He knew that the Countess Olenska had brought some of her possessions with her-bits of wreckage, she called them- and these, he supposed, were represented by some small slender tables of dark wood, a delicate little Greek bronze on the chimney-piece, and a stretch of red damask nailed on the discoloured wall-paper behind a couple of Italian-looking pictures in old frames. (45)

Even she has not brought her possessions with her. She is comfortable with very few things that are most necessary for a room. She has a table of dark wood, little Greek bronze on the chimney-piece and Italian-looking pictures in old frames.

Revolt of Ellen

Ellen has rejected the roles of female given by the society of New York. She was a rebel all her life and is against conventional ways of New York. She refused to conform to the categories that are prepared for her by old New York. Garner further argues about Ellen's nature:

All the female roles that have been presented to Ellen in the novel she has rejected; in doing so, she seems to persistently defy convention, a New Woman who refuses to conform to the categories that are prepared for her by Old New York. Her rebellion against conventional obligation reaches its climax when she finally begins to search for new ways to live her life, a life that will allow her to escape from the restrictions and conventions of Old New York. (11)

Ellen's ways to live her life is freedom. She opposes the conventional obligation of

society because she wanted to live free. Her choices are uncomfortable for those who are following the tradition carried out by New York.

Ellen maintains a good amount of distance with relatives, too. She does not believe in fake friendships. She strongly believes that there is nobody who truly cares for her. When Newland tells her that there are lots of her relatives who really care for her and want to help her, she replies:

She shook her head and sighed. ‘Oh, I know-I know! But on condition that they don’t hear anything unpleasant. Aunt Welland put it in those very words when I tried . . . Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!’ She lifted her hands to her face, and he saw her thin shoulders shaken by a sob. (50)

Ellen believes her relatives who show care for her, but it should be a condition that she will not speak something unpleasant. Her relatives will help her but she has to act as ‘yes anut medora’ to them. She must pretend that everything is ok to get help from her relatives which she does not like at all.

Ellen’s other relatives are among the richest citizen of New York. They possess lots of goods and wealth. They use their wealth to maintain the social status. They follow a strict social code because they believe that the outer appearance is everything. Victoria Patterson writes about Ellen’s relatives and their status in the New York society:

Within the Mingotts, the Mansons, the Van der Luydens — who prevail at being rich and retaining their wealth, using social conformity and, most importantly, making sure to keep these codes enforced — Wharton plants Newland Archer, who belongs deeply to family and

tradition, yet who also finds himself in growing conflict with these forces, craving more from life, and wanting to rebel. (30)

Social comfort, following the rules and force to keep social codes are most important things for Ellen's relatives. They never fail to show that they are happy. Their thinking belongs to traditional values and norms which also guided by patriarchy. They take a pride in their social standard. They are enjoying the latest fashion, gathering and being accepted by the society is a big thing. They are willing to do anything to be accepted in the society.

Ellen goes against her relatives and stays firm about her marriage. Every relative of her goes against her idea of divorce, but she does not care about other's opinion over her marital relation. She is a fearless high colour and high sprit. Her strong commitment of getting divorce with her womanizer husband can be heard in the novel:

'They have. The matter has been gone into by the family. They are opposed to the Countess's idea; but she is firm, and insists on a legal opinion.'

The young man was silent: he had not opened the packet in his hand.

'Does she want to marry again?'

'I believe it is suggested; but she denies it.' (60)

Ellen not only goes for divorce but she also denies the possibility of marrying again. She dismisses the idea of getting married for lifetime. At the time New York getting divorce was a big issue. Every relative is against the idea of divorce, but she has no intention of second thought over divorce.

Ellen does not only bring scandal of her potential divorce, but also she had an affair after she had left her husband. She breaks social norms of the society after she

decides to get divorce. She even goes beyond unthinkable for the hypocritical male dominated society of New York. Scott Manley Hadley argues:

She brings with her a whiff of scandal, not only because of her potential divorce, but also because rumours circulate that she may have had an affair after she had left her husband. When Newland and Ellen meet as adults (they knew each other briefly when children) there is an immediate attraction, an immediate intensity. So spooked by his desire, Newland gets his marriage pushed forward by about six months and then slips into an awkward domesticity with May, a woman he thought he wanted but a woman that, alas, he really doesn't. (15)

Even Ellen is the reason for Newland's pushing his marriage forward. With her arrival and immediate friendship with him, he lost his emotional dignity and moral values he carries from his society. She is not among those women who think thousand times to be a friend of a man. She breaks the rule of getting intimacy with only husband.

Ellen was not guilty for her collapsing marriage. She was the one who was a victim. But her husband accuses her of getting in relation with someone else. Her husband does not want to accept the fact that he was responsible for her escaping from home. It is described in the novel as:

Archer had left her with the conviction that Count Olenski's accusation was not unfounded. The mysterious person who figured in his wife's past as 'the secretary' had probably not been unrewarded for his share in her escape. The conditions from which she had fled were intolerable, past speaking of past believing: she was young, she was frightened she was desperate- what more natural than that she should be grateful to her rescuer? The pity was that her gratitude put her, in

the law's eyes and the world's on a par with her abominable husband.

(74)

Ellen was young, frightened and desperate when she left her home. She stayed with her rescuer at the time when she was away from home. She was frightened of her abominable husband. She had no option, but to leave home. She would never left home if her husband had treated her properly.

Ellen is a type of person who enjoys present rather than lamenting on past or worrying about future. She enjoys the small things in life. She laughs when she is happy. Once she wrote she is unhappy but when Newland arrives she forgets all her unhappiness. The chat between Newland and Ellen proves about her enjoying little things:

'You're laughing now; but when you wrote me you were unhappy,' he said.

'Yes.' She paused. 'But I can't feel unhappy when you're here.'

'I shan't be here long,' he rejoined, his lips stiffening with the effort to say just so much and no more.

'No; I know. But I'm improvident: I live in the moment when I'm happy.' (86)

Ellen tells Newland that she cannot feel unhappy when he is with her. She stays away from her relatives, but she enjoys the company of him. She is not a lover of loneliness. In fact, she is someone who loves the company of those who understands her. She knows him cannot be with her forever, but she understands the fact and enjoys the moment.

Ellen's priority is her happiness. The New York society was possessed with hypocrite. They valued family happiness and social comfort. But she is not among

those who could sacrifice her happiness to make others comfortable. Hadley further states:

The lesson for me to take away from this work of fiction (in regards to my own personal development) is the validity and importance of mutual desire: it is not something that can be ignored. Lovers who are never excited by each other will not become so, desire must arrive organically, it cannot be forced by circumstance. One should follow ones instincts more, and-thankfully-society has grown up enough in the last century and a half to understand that divorce is a lot better than long term domestic unhappiness. (15)

Ellen is firm on her decision over where her married life will go. She knows that if she starts to think about everybody in her family, relatives and society, she must live the rest of her life in unhappiness. But she cannot tolerate injustice and cannot spend her life in disdain. To spend her life happily she chooses divorce over a long term domestic unhappiness with an abominable husband.

Women's Effort to Independence

The society of New York was guided by patriarchal norms and values. Even women were not in favour of other women. Ellen never gets any support in her decision from fellow women. The story of her loneliness in her fight and other women's negative attitude towards her decision can be seen in Mrs Mingott's expectation:

The old lady received him with unusual warmth; she was grateful to him for persuading the Countess Olenska to give up the idea of a divorce; and when he told her that he had deserted the office without leave, and rushed down to St Augustine simply because he wanted to

see May, she gave an adipose chuckle and patted his knee with her puff-ball hand. (97)

Ellen is alone in her fight against the society. She is fighting against all the society for her happiness. Everybody knows about her husband's addiction of woman and extravagant lifestyle, but no one is blaming him. Instead, women of the society are also in favour of patching the relation between her and her husband. They are against the idea of divorce.

Ellen's aunt Medora tried to set her with a handsome guy to hook up, but Ellen got angry and goes against her. She does not want to marry or be in relation with someone who does not know her properly. Her idea of not getting either in relation or married is something unthinkable for her age group of girl. When a man sends her a flower she got furious and asks her helper to get rid of that:

‘Here- throw this into dust-bin!’ and then, as Nastasia stared protestingly: ‘But no- it’s not the fault of the poor flowers. Tell the boy to carry them to the house three doors away, the house of Mr Winsett, the dark gentleman who dined here. His wife is ill- they may give her pleasure...The boy is out, you say? Then, my dear one, run yourself; here, put my cloak over you and fly. I want the thing out of the house immediately! And, as you live, don’t say they come from me!’ (104)

Ellen strongly opposes the idea of getting into a relationship. She tells her helper to throw the bouquet into the dust-bin. Even more, she urges her to give the flower to her dark gentleman neighbour who lives three doors away from her home whose wife is ill. She says that it is not the flowers fault to be there but it is the intention of the sender. She values flowers more than the one who sends it to her.

Ellen is among those women who voices for women’s fundamental

empowerment by her actions. She might not voice it loud in her statement but what she does is revolutionary for her time. J. Davis talks about Ellen's characteristics:

Although she came from the New York society so vividly portrayed in *The Age of Innocence* and other books like *The House of Mirth*, she was very independent. She believed women should be educated and elevated herself above the standards of education typically applied to women of her time and societal standing. She was obviously very autodidactic in that way, as she had to find a way around the barriers put up around the classic female education. (13)

Ellen is an independent in terms of her thoughts. She does not follow norms and values provided by the society of New York. She is more rebellious than other women around her. Her revolt is above the standards of education typically applied to women of her time and societal standing.

Ellen is frustrated with the society of New York. Her society never accepted her opinion and lifestyle. She had grown tired of that society because New York had welcomed her kindly but was too oppressive. The narration of Ellen's frustration has been presented in the following extract:

She had grown tired of what people called 'society'; New York was kind, it was almost oppressively hospitable; she should never forget the way in which it had welcomed her back; but after the first flush of novelty she had found herself, as she phrased it, too 'different' to care for the things it cared about- and so she had decided to try Washington, where one was supposed to meet more varieties of people and of opinion. (151)

Because of the strict and biased societal code of conduct, Ellen chooses Washington

over New York. She goes away from her relatives and starts to live in a new place and meet more varieties of people with varieties of opinion. Living in a new place gives her a different feeling. She is not only opposes the old school of thought but also embraces varieties of new ideas of different people.

Ellen not only breaks the norms and values of New York society but also disturbs the comfortable of it. New York is comfort in following traditional values but she disturbs it as Bernard Norcott-Mahany views “The countess disturbs the comfortable world of 1870s New York society, because she has come home hoping to attain a divorce from her husband, a Polish count” (4). She has come to New York hoping to attain a divorce from her husband, which is irregular for the high class New York society.

Ellen is the most practical woman in the novel. She knows what to do and what not to do. She prefers her happiness when she had options of whether to divorce her husband or choose her freedom. There were options of whether to stay in a romantic relation with Newland or let him live the life of high society. When he asked her to fly from the New York society and go somewhere far where the social categories like mistress or illegal relation do not have any existence, Ellen responds to him,

She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. ‘Oh, my dear- where is that country? Have you ever been there?’ she asked; and as he remained sullenly dumb she went on: ‘I know so many who’ve tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations; at place like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo- and it wasn’t at all different from the old world they’d left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous.’ (183)

In this way, Ellen knows there is no place on earth where people do not judge them. She believes in search of a place where categories do not exist as people land on the places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo. She even asks Newland if he had ever been to a place like that or country like that.

Newland wants to be in relation with Ellen but Ellen does not want to give him up the class in which he is living. She refuses the option of living the life as his mistress. Norcott-Mahany further argues: "He cannot achieve satisfaction because the tribe of upper class New York society conspires against it, and because the countess refuses the option of living the life as Archer's mistress, and hates the idea of causing the hurt a divorce between Archer and May would cause" (4).

She does not want to disturb the life of May Welland who cares for her by eloping with Newland. She is not a selfish woman. When she had left her husband it was her husband's fault that ruined her life. But she does not want to commit the same mistake and live happily by snatching May's happiness.

Ellen is bold for her generation. She is bold enough to reject and accept those things that make her happy. She knows what makes her happy and what things are right to do. When Newland was so much involved emotionally with her she was pushing him away. She asked him whether she should come with him once and then to go her husband's home:

‘Shall I- once come to you’ and then go home?’ she suddenly hazarded in low clear voice. . . . Then her last phrase struck his ear and his face clouded. ‘Go home? What do you mean by going home?’ ‘Home to my husband.’

‘And you expect me to say yeas to that?’ She raised her troubled eyes to his ‘What else is there? I can't stay here and lie to the people

who've been good to me.' (197)

She knows that her happiness is not with her husband. But she knows that Newland is not also the one with whom she can be happy forever. She accepts the fact that if she continues her relation with him it will be harmful for everyone. She does not want to lie to those people who have been good with her and stay with him for the sake of her happiness.

The problem with the society was that women have to follow the rules of society but men were free to break it. The societal norms and values were the chain to bound women. The society Ellen lives was biased towards men. Batuman discusses:

In many ways, "The Age of Innocence" feels more current to me now than it did in the 1990s. Criminals like Julius Beaufort and Count Olenski are protected by an invisible safety net, while Ellen lives under constant threat of destitution, dishonour and homelessness. In the past two years, new reporting has brought to light the existence of a social and legal system in America that protects powerful male sex abusers at women's expense. Many of the abuses took place in the 1990s, and were already known or suspected for decades. (12)

Women like Ellen used to live under a constant threat of destitution, dishonour and homelessness and criminals were free. She opposes that particular norms of the society. She challenges the society and its value that was guided by the New York high class society as it is also guided by patriarchal norms and values. Her challenge disturbs the comfort of the New York society.

Ellen's final stroke towards the society comes as her rejection to Newland even after death of May Welland. It was not Newland she had rejected before but it was the relation which bound people. She rejected him because she had no intention

of hurting people who cares for her by eloping with Archer. But at the end of the novel she rejects him because she had no intention of being in relation. He is waiting and her rejection can be seen in final the paragraphs of the novel:

He sat for a long time on the bench in the thickening dusk, his eyes never turning from the balcony. At length a light shone through the windows, and a moment later a man-servant came out on the balcony, drew up the awnings, and closed the shutters. At that, as if it had been the signal he waited for, Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel. (229)

Newland was waiting outside of Ellen's home, expecting that she might come out and receive him. But she sends her helper to close the shutter of the balcony. This act of her is her final blow to the values of society. Her rejection of meeting with him is heart wrenching experience, which leads to an analysis of tragedy from the angle of him but it is the true rebellious act from her.

At the age 57, Newland tries to meet Ellen. But she does not show any kind of hasty reaction towards him. In fact, she does not bother to welcome him by coming outside of the house and greeting him after knowing he is waiting for him outside. She got more mature with time. She had already given up with the time that there is only restriction with their relation. If she had to live free she must be free. Batuman further argues:

The novel is a constantly evolving technology, always finding ways to convey more reality, to articulate more truths, to identify new equivalences. Underlying this project is the optimistic belief that seeing the world more clearly can make individuals more free, and societies more just. Wharton is not generally viewed as one of

literature's great optimists, and yet, by the last chapter of "*The Age of Innocence*," people are a little less hypocritical, a little more willing to see and accept the world. (12)

Ellen is the lone soldier in her fight against the society. She wanted to be more free and her society to be more just. For that she sacrificed someone who she loved and someone with whom she married.

As a representative of feminist revolt in the novel, Ellen has aggressive perspective towards the nineteenth century women's difficulty. She strongly rejects their forces and ignores consequences that force to bound women. She faces a lot of challenges while going against those social norms. Because of established social norms and values, she has to sacrifice her physical comfort and her dear one, too.

Chapter 4

The Impact of Feminist Revolt

Every society is governed by a particular socio-cultural system, which has a direct impact upon the lives of the people. Edith Wharton writes about the high class patriarchal system of New York, male heroism and its domination and oppression against women in the 1870s. There was domination and oppression over women. The novel depicts the extrinsic and intrinsic nature of patriarchy and shows the subjugated, stereotyped and subordinated hopeless condition of women. It portrays the reality of the American society and also the story of hypocrisy in the high class society of New York, America. It not only dismantles the irrationality and over-valorization of patriarchy but also evokes a sense of resistance against patriarchy to overcome such tyranny, the problem with representation, and the subordinated condition. The author develops the themes and ideas in the novel as the critique of patriarchy as it shows the struggle to hegemonic power, hopefulness, resistance, subjugated and subordinated condition of women.

Ellen, belongs to the high class family of New York. Frustrated with her womanizer and extravagant husband Mr. Olenska, she runs away from home and wants divorce. There is a gossip about her extra marital affair with someone who had helped her. As a child, she travels to different places with her wanderer parents. Everyone in her relatives tries to convince her to withdraw the opinion of divorce, but she is firm in her opinion. She never gives up her passion and pursues her dream. She believes that one can seek her-identity as a female living in the old New York society and find her own position rather than being merely an ornament of male-centred society. She places herself in her own separate wings. The novel does not only talk about the individual story of her characters but of all the women in the world, who are

doomed to suffer misfortune, separation, frustration and failures. Wharton has unveiled the realities of women of that time by arguing contentious and enterprising spirit within the point of gender and representation in the novel.

To sum up, the novel successfully expresses the need for a change in the social system to upgrade and uplift feminine instincts. It advocates for feminine potentialities and independence. The novelist provokes for the anti-patriarch pursuance until the condition of women is improved and transformed. The novel eloquently expresses the misrepresented, misinterpreted, deprived, ignored and stereotyped conditions of women. Lastly, it is a work of art that depicts the novelist's belief in the justifiable society, which can be established through the action of resistance and revolting to overthrow the patriarchy and their ideologies responsible for the plight of womankind. Thus, the novel is a red mast/flag on the ship of war against the society entangled by different anti-women (for that matter anti-human) ideologies and practices.

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