



The Beast and the Beauty: An Exegesis on Historical Romances

Dona Maria Saju, Assistant Professor (on Contract), Department of English, St. Dominic's College, Kanjirappally, Kottayam, Kerala, donamaria95@gmail.com

Abstract

Every woman adores a fascist... the brute, Brute heart of a brute like you

- Sylvia Plath, "Daddy"

There is no topic more discussed in literature, in all its genres and subgenres, than love and romance. It will be an arduous task to list at least ten novels that have no elements of love and romance in them. Every year more romantic comedies are released by film industries of every language. Similarly, more number of romance novels is released every year than the number of all other genres put together. There are romantic comedies, high school romances, historical romances, adult fiction etc. This article focuses on historical romances and how they portray the romance between a man and a woman. Most of the historical romances are appealing to the audience due to the 'steamy' way in which the scenes of sexual intercourse are recounted in them. Another specialty is the kind of characters, especially the protagonists in this genre. Most of these novels concentrate on picturing the English nobility of some period in royal England as the chief characters, with a "macho" male protagonist and a lady who is captivated by his manliness. This article tries to explore the reason why this trope continuously works in the modern society, which drums up for equality between man and woman in every sector. Why does a novel with a handsomely rugged hero and an enamored heroine still attract so many readers? Does every woman adore a fascist?

Keywords: Historical Romances, film industries, audience

I. INTRODUCTION

Historical romances, as the name suggests are set in a different time period, preferably when nobility and its prominence is at the greatest flourish. The 'noble' hierarchy is an important factor in these novels. Most of the time, the hero belongs to the strata of higher nobility, either someone with a title or someone with the possibility of acquiring a title. He is very likely a rake who chases after women, or as the writers put it, is being chased by women due to his irresistible sexual appeal. The heroine, in most of the works is initially immune to the hero. She acts different from others in her community, and is capable to ward off the charms of the man. But a kiss, which too very often forced upon her, would do the trick and all reserve melts away so quickly. It is as if she has been waiting for the man to kiss her to awaken all the sexual needs and desires in her.

According to Sigmund Freud, sex and aggression are the basic traits of every human being. Maybe, that is why violent sex attracts the audience so much. However when we put aside the pleasure-giving aspects of these novels, what is often left is just a celebration of the 'superior male ego'.

The Beauty and the Beast: It's all a Fairytale

"It's a rare woman who actually outshines the sun. Let alone all that business about pearly teeth, the voice of a lark, and a face so beautifully shaped that angels would weep with envy. Linnet Berry Thrynne had all of the above..." (James, 2011, p. 1). This is how the description of the heroine begins in Eloisa James's historical romance *When Beauty Tamed the Beast*. Though not all historical romances stress on physical perfection to this extent, at least they highlight some of the features, such as the colour of the woman's eyes, curves of her body, or the freckles that are scattered on her face like golden dust. In short, physical appearance of the woman is important to a great degree in historical romances. Even if the woman has other potentials such as learning or business skills and is less conscious about the way she dresses or appears before others, the Cinderella-like transformation that they feel when she wears a beautiful dress and does her hair is highlighted with great detail. The novels can't do without the 'ugly duckling' trope. In

short, the woman's attractiveness has so much to do with her physical appearance, which though is no offence, is still limiting when that aspect is highlighted above the rest of her qualities.

Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* says, "The heavier musculature of the male, a secondary sexual characteristic and common among mammals, is biological in origin, but is also culturally encouraged through breeding, diet and exercise" (Millet, 2000, p. 27). The heavy musculature can be said to be an unavoidable characteristic for the protagonist in historical romances. The more muscular and brutishly strong the protagonist is, the more enticing he becomes. A heartless rake protagonist gives the work its thunder. His scars stand for his valor and his ill temper a mark of his impatience with the mundane affairs of the world around him. He can be haughty, arrogant, cruel and glib. These are not only excusable, but admirable.

Dain was heavy artillery, she thought...coal black hair and bold, black eyes and a great, conquering Caesar of a nose and a sullen sensuality of a mouth- the face alone entitled him to direct lineage with Lucifer. As to the body... she had half expected a hulking gorilla. She had not been prepared for a stallion (Chase, 1995, p. 20).

This is how the heroine feels on her first encounter with the hero in Loretta Chase's *The Lord of the Scoundrels*. In another part it says, "In Dain's case, the book could be judged by the cover, for he was dark and hard inside as well....Anyone with half a brain could see the signs posted: "ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE" or, more to the point "DANGER QUICKSAND" (p.18). These are examples that show how texts grant great liberty to men regarding their behavior. External body is described as "a text of culture: it is a symbolic form upon which the norms and practices of a society are inscribed" (Lee, 2003, p.82). But the idealization of the brutish strength of the male body as well as the darkness of character has become more of a text of universal culture.

It is easy to predict the plot of historical romances from its characters. If the characters are of the aforementioned type, then the plot involves the transformation of the heartless rake as he falls for the woman. Love and trust, which were so distant to him, slowly find their way to his heart through the woman. The ending is indeed a fairytale ending, where the lone wolf is finally conquered by the beautiful princess. Only a few things are different, such as the details of the body and sex, but the trope remains the same; the heart still craves for the old fairytale. Maybe this is again the reason why the characters are made to belong to the noble circle. If it's not a prince and a princess; it will be a duke and his duchess or at least a viscount and viscountess.

There may be a savior complex operating inside every woman, which attracts them towards dark men. This can also be one reason why there is a greater female fan base for historical romances. It is said about Sylvia Plath that her father, Otto Plath influenced her writings in many ways. So was her husband Ted Hughes. In his *Birthday Letters*, Hughes explains how Sylvia used to be a bullet in her father's gun. "Your worship lacked a god. / Where it lacked one, it found one...Your daddy, The god with the smoking gun." (Hughes, 1999). Just as Plath worshipped her father who she knew possessed a brute heart, every woman or to avoid generalization, most women seem to admire dark male figures. It may be the psychological instinct to tame them that steer them towards such men. If it is not possible in real life, novels come as a means to assuage this craving. This is only an assumption, but whatever the reasons may be, the allure of historical romances serves to further inflate the dominant male ego.

Germaine Greer, the Australian feminist writer in her work *The Female Eunuch* criticizes the historical romance writer Georgette Heyer for creating stereotypical romantic heroes, the heroes "invented by women cherishing the chains of their bondage" (Greer, 2008, p.281). There is already politics operating between genders. All social, economic, political, cultural and even biological factors are made and interpreted to bolster this dominance of male over female. In addition to these, the psychological operations that are carried out through books like the romances ideologically operate to internally acknowledge and even embrace the male superiority and authority. At a time when technology can substitute the physical superiority of men, this attention towards sexual lure of the male body as well as the darkness of character that can make any woman's heart skip a beat, need to be looked at skeptically. The romanticisation of the fair maiden or even a fiery maiden surrendering before the dark stallion or Beelzebub, only serves to trigger further the submissive female ideal, while allowing so much liberty to the man to venture in his arrogance and haughtiness.

Going back to Freud, the basic instinct of a human being is sex and violence. But the superego operates on the “id” to control it and gives a balanced “ego”. However, the heart still enjoys and craves for these primitive instincts. This may be why there are so many readers for works that depict violent sex and toxic relationships. In historical romances too, violence and toxicity are encouraged to a great extent. A revenge-seeking hero can abduct a woman of the rival family, force him on her and rape her or can even present her before a cult as an offering. But the man will be excused and forgiven if he refrains at the final moment when he sees another man touching the body that he arrogantly believes to be his property. He is granted a hero image as he carries the woman out of the room and into his carriage. And even while the female reacts strongly against these insults meted out to her, it is seen that she finally gives in, as always, to the irresistible appeal of his tamed lion-profile. This again is a grandiloquent celebration of the male superiority, compromising the agency as well as the dignity of the woman. As Simone de Beauvoir says, man is everywhere the default and woman the “other”.

II. CONCLUSION

Romance may be an inevitable part of life as well as literature. But more than the gentle romance, people tend to prefer violent and sometimes obsessive romantic portrayals in literature. Though such works often relegate women to submissive position, they enjoy great readership even among women. The attractiveness of the heavy musculature and the darkness of character may be culturally and ideologically ingrained and this cultural or ideological topos has a great bearing upon literature. The ‘savior complex’ in women can also be another reason for the demand for such works, which oftentimes run on the same plot structure and tropes. Therefore one can, without compunction agree with Sylvia Plath who quips “Every woman adores a fascist...”, if not in real life, at least in literature.

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