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Filling In The Gaps: A critical dialogue with the lacunas in Suchismita Hazra's article "Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest: A Critique of The Victorian Society"

This paper proposes to launch into an analysis of Suchismita Hazra's article "Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest: A Critique of The Victorian Society" and investigate the inconsistency of the hermeneutics of her paper. The paper seeks to take issue with her exploration of Wilde's intent and purport in exposing the double-standards inherent in Victorian society and prove how her analyses, despite extensive quoting from the play and references to other scholarly articles dwelling on the subject, fails to convince the reader/reviewer/critic of her argument. As such, the aim of this paper is, by no means, to demean or lessen the substance of her thesis but indicate the contrary pulls in her paper betwixt the force of good reason that fails to surface in a blatant and forthright manner and the stronger, anatagonistic pull that manages to highlight the lacuna of substantial proof/material to evince her thesis and convince her audience of the validity of her point. Thereby, the paper means to engage in a critical conversation, as it were, with Hazra's article and establish the reasons why such a gap occurs in her paper and seeks to correct it by advancing suitable and appropriate proof of Wilde's aim, vis-à-vis the study of other critical positions on the same subject.

I

Suchismita's article begins by launching into a brief, synoptic background of the play, playwright and the society of the time. She then goes on to expose the sham societal constructs of the Victorian society and the double-

standards prevalent in the society. She explains how such hypocrisy accounts for the snooty, supercilious snobs who constituted majority of the population and quotes critic Siddhartha Biswas from his book *Studies in The Importance of Being Earnest* :

Victorian morality, as we all know, was a storehouse of contradictions

and inconsistencies. It was more dominated by taboos erected by social constructs rather than by any system based on rationality. By the end of the nineteenth century the baggage of this morality was creating pressure on socio-literary fields and a break was quite in the offing. (p. 19)

She then propounds on the social institutions mocked in the rubric of the play, cites examples such as the exchange between Algernon and Lane to prove her case and proceeds to stress upon the undue importance (trivial and insignificant) attached to labels, class or even idyllic fantasies and whims such as the teenager girlish fantasy of marrying someone with the name ' Earnest' shared by both Gwendolen and Cecily. She touches upon how such worldviews are satirised and mocked by Wilde but fails to posit enough convincing reasons.

It is at this juncture that one needs to delve into the task mentioned at the outset to be the primary purpose of this paper- that of highlighting the inconsistencies of Hazra's arguments, the incomplete reasoning of her valid points in case and advancing a more convincing schema for the rationale of her paper.

II

It is a bygone conclusion that any reading of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance*

of *Being Earnest* shall deem the play as a blazing exemplar of the deployment of epigrammatic wit as a contrivance for the veiled intent of social criticism. Also, enough critical material has been produced on the satiric vein inherent in Wilde's most stage-successful play. However, what is important in such a reading of the play is to note the precise mechanism vis-à-vis which such a daunting task is accomplished. The reasons for the same are pretty much straightforward. For anyone familiar with the socio-historical context of Wilde's time and a reading of the play from a biographical critical vantage point shall need not ask why an exploration of the reasons of satire masquerading as comedy is Wilde's chosen mode of social critique. This is exactly what Hazra's article fails to provide- a concerted, cogent and wholesome investigation of the means and agency Wilde employs in the play to attain the perfect blend of the comico-satiric dichotomy. This would entail a full-fledged inquiry into such instruments of Wilde's literary genius. These include platitudinous phrases, inverted on their head, to negate the sentiment of conventional morality to attain the desired effect of giving the audience a jolt, that is brilliantly veiled as jest. An example of such an instance from the play is the description of Lady Harbury's widowhood, " I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger." Also included among the literary instruments that evince Wilde's literary merit and skilful craftsmanship in the form and genre is the clever and ingenious extension of the trick, from existing merely at the level of dialogue, to the plane of social norms and expectations. This is significantly noticeable in the way the gender roles are defined, enacted and re-enacted, within and without. In the Victorian milieu, men would be the active agents of initiation

of societal change or instituting a proposal/marriage. They were expected to be the practical, experienced men who'd and could take care of their 'ladies.' The women, on the other hand, were expected to be meek, passive and docile creatures dependent on 'the other sex' for all practical purposes. These rules are laid out in the rubric of the play, only to be flouted and mocked at. This is achieved when Wilde lays agency in the hands of his women to organize their own marriage schemes, with the men only being attributed with the accorded status of 'fiance' in the relationship and delegated tasks that emanated from the brains of their lady loves. Such devices abound in the play and Hazra fails to account for them whilst only superficially mentioning the forceful power of the satirical vein in the play. Also, it is important to note that Hazra argues for the 'feminine' as seen in the female characters of the play, in conformity with Victorian norms of morality and social conduct. It is already clear that there is little veracity in the import of that argument, as evinced by the aforementioned argument in this section of the paper. However, a contradictory reading from that of Hazra's is also supported by the fact that the play is viewed in the light of being a literary product of the age of the 'New Woman'- the suffrage movement, women in sport, at the universities, the rational clothes movement etc. Such a reading is also bolstered by several scholarly articles that foreground the play as an espousal of a new aesthetics of social philosophy- one that blows the bulwark of Victorian society (female submissiveness) to the winds and champions the cause of an equal society with considerable freedom of expression and choice. That such independence in volition is both personally and socially desirable is clear and

the myriad associations, inferences and effects such a change shall merit is a step closer to Wilde's utopic vision. Critics like Harold E. Toliver and Arthur Ganz have delved deeper into the question of Wilde's use of the satiric form and how it is metamorphosed in his hands to ammunition that shall wage the social war, that is to Wilde both personal and selfless, to challenge the subscribed societal roles and conduct mores. While Hazra argues for the powerful impact and hold Wilde's play has for contemporary audiences- then and now and its continued popularity, she fails to delineate these reasons for the same.

It is also important that whilst rightfully pointing out the conformity of the several women characters in Wilde's play to established role coda of the Victorian milieu- like Lady Bracknell's aristocratic footing, Miss Prism's corresponding to the vogue of sentimentalism etc, Suchismita Hazra should have launched into a full fledged exploration of the flux imbued in the shifting roles accorded the several women characters in the play, indicative of the transition and change that Wilde felt so strongly about and wished to initiate. This is clear by looking at the gradation of social change that the four types of women in the play are representative nominals of. While Lady Bracknell stands for the stereotypical upper-class Victorian woman, conforming to established social rules and mores, Miss Prism is a closer kin, distorted in her role by her social station and condition in life. Gwendolen Fairfax is the shifting position of 'woman' in the continuum of change, abreast of the redundant and repressive Victorian rules, but not quite at the destination. Whilst Gwendolen Fairfax is the character in flux, Cecily has attained stasis, by being at the destination- that of being and playing the 'modern woman.'

While such a reading of Cecily might be a bone of contention, what with her 'girlish' fetish for the name 'Earnest', it is to be noted that the little freedom and agency she is allowed within the rubric of the play is in keeping with the setting that still happens to be purely Victorian in taste and culture. Thus, it is in this light that the character of Cecily Cardew is to be viewed and noted as inching most close to Wilde's interpretation of the modern woman.

These seem to encapsulate the major gaps in Hazra's correct, albeit partial and incomplete reading of Wilde's play and the plausible and apt treatment to have been meted out to the questions raised therein. It is imperative that critical readings should be critiqued and challenged, such dialogues initiated and continued so as to perpetually pursue the unrelenting task of literary analyses and uncover the gazillion interpretations, significances, meanings and in Wilde's case 'silences' of literary texts. Any such dialogue to the thesis offered herein, is not only encouraged but welcome ground for further intellectually stimulating and refreshing breezes of effective critical discourse.

Works Cited

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