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A Critical Study of the Female Characters in Margaret Mitchell's Novel *Gone with the Wind*

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Margaret Mitchell was one of the renowned novelists of America. Born into a wealthy family, Mitchell lived her entire life in Atlanta, Georgia. Margaret Mitchell's mother was a suffragist who fought for women's rights and her father was a lawyer. Along with her mother and grandmother, Margaret Mitchell visited many of the plantations that had been burnt, or destroyed, during the civil war. As a child, she also heard many stories about the war by her uncles and aunts who were civil war veterans and had lived through the conflict.

Margaret Mitchell wrote the novel *Gone with the Wind* which was published in 1936 and she won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction too a year later. The film *Gone with the Wind* was released in 1939, featuring Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, Leslie Howard, and Olivia de Havilland. Mitchell's novel was much appreciated for its theme of love, war, class conflict, and racial strife, all dealt together in one book.

In the novel, *Gone with the Wind*, there are many events that revolve around the Civil War period of the American History. There was a huge impact of Civil War on the lives of the American people especially females whose life gets completely altered due to its impact. Many such female characters in the novel highlight the trauma and pain of the War and Post War period. The central female character in the novel, Scarlett becomes a puppet in the hands of destiny. Due to the circumstances prevailing in American society, she neither remains what she was during the pre-war period, nor she could prevent the consequences of war during the post-war period. Though Scarlett is one of the very strong characters of the novel, she too becomes a victim to the circumstances.

The portrayal of Scarlett's character in *Gone with the Wind* is a very remarkable example amongst the other heroines in the history of American Literature. Her survival amidst all the chaotic incidents occurring during the American Civil War is possible only due to her courage, her strong will power and determination to fight the challenges of the times. Scarlett is not afraid of breaking conventions and her determination towards her duties defies all the possible difficulties she faces on her way to success. Scarlett was born into the family of wealthy plantation owner Gerald and Ellen O' Hara. Scarlett is beautiful, headstrong, and flirtatious. She is carefree of the outcome of her own actions. Once her love for Ashley faces rejection, she does not feel shameful instead she gives him a tight slap for being rude and blunt in rejecting her. Mitchell writes about this incident, "He put out his hand towards her and, as he did, she slapped him across the face with all the strength she had. The noise cracked like a whip in the still room and suddenly her rage was gone, and there was desolation in her heart (Mitchell 139)". Scarlett is an individually autonomous self who can not bear humiliation at the hands of her love. Not only that but Rhett Butler also increases her pain when he is found there by Scarlett hiding in the room and being witness to everything that took place between Scarlett and Ashley. Her temper was beginning to rise again as he calls her "unladylike" and says, "No one can remain a lady after saying and doing what I have just overheard. . . . But you, my dear Miss O' Hara, are a girl of rare spirit, very admirable spirit, and I take off my hat to you. I fail to understand what charms the elegant Mr. Wilkes can hold for a girl of your tempestuous nature (Mitchell 141)". Such a bitter remark infuriates the highly vain and admirable Scarlett to the extent that she immediately leaves the ball room.

However, Scarlett's quick decision to avenge the rejection at the hands of Ashley and her humiliation by Rhett Butler proves her to be a lady with courage and confidence. Therefore, she decides to marry Charles Hamilton who



has been courting her for a long time and is ready to be trapped into a loveless marriage with him. She even gives birth to his child who is named Wade. Scarlett is a very uncommon female character during that era who looks beyond the things and is not ready to follow the typical strictures of society. Despite being widowed soon after her marriage to Charles Hamilton, Scarlett could not enchain herself in the so-called societal rules to be followed by a widow. She wanted to mingle with people, laugh with them, and cry her heart out with them. Mitchell writes about her:

Just a little over a year ago, she was dancing and wearing bright clothes instead of this dark mourning and was practically engaged to three boys. . . Life was going past her, down a hot shady summer road— life with grey uniforms and jingling spurs and flowered organdy dresses and banjos playing. She tried not to smile and wave too enthusiastically to the men she knew best, the ones she'd nursed in the hospital, but it was hard to subdue her dimples, hard to look as though her heart were in the grave— when it wasn't. (Mitchell 186)

She was often rebuked for the same as mentioned in the novel also. There are various factors which shape the character of Scarlett. Scarlett was taught feminine values by her parents, but she has a mind of her own, “. . . they taught her all that a gentlewoman should know, but she learned only the outward signs of gentility. The inner grace from which these signs should spring, she never learned, nor did she see any reason for learning it (Mitchell 69)”. Scarlett was a woman of sophisticated grace and delicate beauty and Mitchell writes about her: . . . her education was sketchy, but no girl in the County danced more gracefully than she. She knew how to smile so that her dimples leaped, how to walk pigeon-toed so that her wide hoop skirts swayed entrancingly, how to look up into a man's face and then drop her eyes and bat the lids rapidly so that she seemed atremble with gentle emotion. Most of all she learned how to conceal from men a sharp intelligence beneath a face as sweet and bland as a baby's. (Mitchell 69)

Scarlett was beauty loaded with intelligence and she did not let her to be carried away by the situations instead she made her own way guided by self-will and determination.

The novel raises questions pertaining to the issues of marriage and motherhood. With the discussion of Gerald and Scarlett it becomes very evident that the selection of boys and girls made by parents was considered the best way to find the suitable match in marriage. In Gerald's opinion, “The best marriages are when the parents choose for the girl. For how can a silly piece like yourself tell a good man from a scoundrel (Mitchell 43)?” It is a father's concern to secure the future of his daughter by marrying her to a highly reputed and a rich man. However, the choices of Scarlett take her to love a man she could not marry and marry a man who did not survive after marriage for a long time. Moreover, looking at her role as a mother, it becomes evident that she never acts like a typical mother for Wade or for that matter any of her children. Her relationship with her children remains a mystery throughout the novel. The period of motherhood is hardly enjoyed by her rather it passes as any other phase of her life.

The life of Scarlett runs parallel to that of Tara, the plantation owned by her father Gerald O Hara. First, Scarlett's father Gerald owns Tara, and he is seen as one with the plantation. In the later part of the novel, Scarlett herself takes care of it and identifies herself with it. Though the ups and downs in Scarlett's life as well as in the plantation are quite similar, however at the end after the death of Scarlett's father this relationship between Scarlett and the plantation strengthens. She is stubborn, ruthless, and had explosive temper. Scarlett in her teenage in the beginning of the novel corresponds to Tara which is also in its full bloom at that time. Tara, under the care and protection of Gerald O' Hara flourishes. Like Tara, Scarlett too is under the protection of her father Gerald and discusses everything with him. Gerald tended Tara as he tended his other children and Scarlett is the most beloved child amongst all.

The destruction caused by war does not only change Tara, but it transforms the character of Scarlett too. The same adamant, hot headed girl who slaps Ashley for not loving her in the beginning of the novel, becomes so sensitive, caring, and mature that she devotes her life to save others from the horrible impact of the war. It ruins not only the lives of the people, but it also destroys the geographical, socio-economical, and political structure of the society in Atlanta, Georgia. Her instant decision to marry Charles Hamilton and her impulsive temperament went a radical change during the war and post war period. War is destructive and in this not only the men who are enlisted



in the army suffer but also women and children. The rape attacks on women, hunger, and poverty increased day by day in the post war period. Women like Scarlett take to social service during the period of social and political chaos. One of the important things about Scarlett is that she does not appear as a paragon of virtues, but she learns from her own as well as others' actions. Scarlett seeks a lesson from Melanie and those around her and she matures over a period. She commits mistakes but she learns from them and overcomes the difficult situations too.

On the contrary, Melanie, the other prominent female character, is representative of the traditional society and is unable to adapt to the changing conditions. She clings to the old times and values and therefore she is not able to survive. The novel *Gone with the Wind* is regarded as a feminist text as it is written from women's point of view and largely portrays women's lives especially white women from the rich plantation owners' class. The author also seems critical of the patriarchal society of the Antebellum South and shows how a historical event affected women's lives. Melanie was shy, modest, and she seldom uses her wit. Her simplicity and kindness, truth and love make her a paragon of virtues.

Ellen the mother of Scarlett is another strong female character who feels suffocated in the strong patriarchal set up of America. The text details her character in the very beginning and informs the reader about her roles and responsibilities in managing O'Hara's household since the day she got married and entered that house. As mentioned in the book:

From the day when Ellen first came to Tara, the place had been transformed. If she was only fifteen years old, she was nevertheless ready for the responsibilities of the mistress of a plantation. Before marriage, young girls must be, above all other things, sweet, gentle, beautiful, and ornamental, but, after marriage, they were expected to manage households that numbered a hundred people or more, white, and black, and they were trained with that in view. (Mitchell 66-67)

Looking at the character of Ellen, one can say that she is extremely talented, compassionate, and helpful woman who puts her heart and soul into doing something. She extends her helping hand to anyone who comes to seek help from her whether it is a slave or a maid working in her family as Mitchell writes, "Ellen O' Hara always carried the bandages and medicines she used in doctoring the slaves" (Mitchell 44). The novel throws light on a woman's willful surrender to a man and his choices despite being capable enough to rule the roost. Her life was controlled by her husband which made her unhappy at times. Mitchell describes about Ellen:

Ellen's life was not easy, nor was it happy, but she did not expect life to be easy, and, if it was not happy, that was woman's lot. It was a man's world, and she accepted it as such. The man owned the property, and the woman managed it as such. The man took the credit for the management, and the woman praised his cleverness. The man roared like a bull when a splinter was in his finger, and the woman muffled the moans of childbirth, lest she disturb him. Men were rough of speech and often drunk. Women ignored the lapses of speech and put the drunkards to bed without bitter words. Men were rude and outspoken; women were always kind, gracious and forgiving. (Mitchell 68) Mitchell's depiction of Ellen is an example of women's stereotypical role and status in society.

Apart from other female characters who generally belong to the upper strata of the society in the novel, Mammy is another female character who is dominated on the basis of class and race both. She has been portrayed by Mitchell as "a huge old woman with the small, shrewd eyes of an elephant. She was shining black, pure African, devoted to her last drop of blood to the O' Haras. . . . Mammy was black, but her code of conduct and her sense of pride were as high as or higher than those of her owners (Mitchell 26)". Mitchell succeeds in sketching the character of Mammy by attributing her human values. However, her faithfulness and loyalty to O' Hara's makes her completely dependent on them and relegates her to the inferior status forever. Mammy is very well aware of the peripheral status of hers and her children. That is why she teaches her daughter how to behave when she accompanies Scarlett during her departure from the house. She tells her, "You must be more gentle, dear, more sedate, Ellen told her daughter. You must not interrupt gentlemen when they are speaking even if you do think you know more about matters than they do. Gentlemen do not like forward girls (Mitchell 69)". By depicting the character of Mammy and



showcasing her relationship with the hegemonic white women, Mitchell brings in light the racial conflict prevailing during the era of Reconstruction.

Thus, the paper successfully deals with the feminist issues, social hierarchy, the social construct of femininity, racial conflict, and woman's claim to the political world. Scarlett's words with which Mitchell ends the novel "I'll think of it all tomorrow, at Tara. . . . After all, tomorrow is another day" (Mitchell 1198) leave the reader with the hope of a better tomorrow. Scarlett's identification with her land Tara cannot get over because whether it is Tara or any other woman like Scarlett, their strength to claim their right to freedom cannot be silenced.

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