

Moll Flanders: A demythologization of Masculinity

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□ ABSTRACT □

The general impression about *Moll Flanders* is that it is an anti-woman novel. This critical reception is triggered by the identity of the heroine. As the paper demonstrates, *Moll Flanders* is exactly the opposite. The novel is a systematic demythologization of masculinity not of femininity. Most of the male characters have something terribly wrong with them. Moll, playing the role of the catalyst, unmask them and reveals the shocking truth beneath the façade of false appearances. The elder brother is a rapist. Robin, the younger brother, is open-eyed but fatally blind. The Captain is deceivable and defeatable. The banker foolishly runs from the arms of one prostitute into the arms of another. Her own brother goes into a coma after the first trauma. Moll manages to cure the curable and reform the reformable but some of them are unsavable. Robin dies. The banker dies and her own brother also dies. By contrast, after every fall, she stands tall. No wonder, Moll is rewarded by the Hand of Providence. She reverses the roles and rewrites the social symbolic order. She demonstrates that inside man, there is anima but inside woman, there is animus. Metalepsis is complete. Man is demythologized and woman becomes a myth. Man is no longer the norm. In the language of Bakhtin, *Moll Flanders* is about the de-crowning of a king and the crowning of a queen.

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مول فلاندرز: تحطيم أسطورة الذكورة

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□ ملخص □

الانطباع السائد عن رواية مول فلاندرز للروائي دانييل ديفو أنها ضد المرأة والسبب المباشر لهذا التلقي النقدي الخاطئ هو هوية بطلة الرواية ولكن كما سيبرهن هذا البحث، الحقيقة عكس ذلك. هذه الرواية تحطيم منظم لأسطورة الذكورة وليس للأثوثة. تعاني معظم الشخصيات الذكرية من خلل بنيوي. وهذا ما تكشفه البطلة من خلال لعب دور الوسيط الكاشف (كاتاليسست) الذي يميظ اللثام عنهم جميعا ويظهر الحقيقة الخفية وراء واجهة من المظاهر المزيفة. فالأخ الأكبر مغتصب. والأخ الأصغر، روبن، سليم البصر ولكنه فاقد البصيرة بشكل مأساوي، والقبطان الذي يبدو قويا مهيمنا في حقيقته قابل للانخداع والهزيمة والمصرفي بمنتهى السخرية يهرب من ذراعي مومس إلى ذراعي مومس أخرى دون أن يدري. وشقيقها يدخل في "كوما" من أول "تروما". تستطيع البطلة مول أن تشفي الرجال القابلين للشفاء وأن تصلح القابلين منهم للإصلاح ورغم ذلك يموت عدد منهم. روبن يموت والمصرفي يموت وشقيقها أيضا يموت. خلافا للذكور جميعا، بعد كل سقوط أكيد تنهض البطلة من جديد. لذلك ليس غريبا أن تكافئها العناية الإلهية في نهاية الرواية. لقد نجحت البطلة في قلب النظام الرمزي الذكوري وإعادة كتابة ثنائيات التضاد البطريركية وبرهنت أن الذكر في داخله أنثى وإن المرأة في داخلها يقونة الرجولة. الانقلاب النصي كامل. أسطورة الذكورة تتحطم علي يد المرأة والمرأة نفسها تصبح الأسطورة الجديدة. لم يعد الرجل هو القياس أو الأساس. في لغة باختين، رواية مول فلاندرز إطاحة بالملك وتتويج للملكة.

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The general impression about Daniel Defoe's novel, *Moll Flanders*, is that it is a misogynistic, male-chauvinistic, thoroughly patriarchal novel. This reading is myopically based on the idea that Defoe demonizes women by representing most of them as icons of immorality. It is true, some may say, that Defoe celebrates women by making one of them the protagonist of his major novel, but it is also true that this protagonist is a prostitute. However, as this paper will demonstrate in detail, *Moll Flanders* is, episode by episode, encounter by encounter, and affair by affair, a systematic deconstruction of manhood and a demythologization of masculinity. Most of the male characters in this novel are sick, sickening, blind, fragile and terribly in need of remedy or reform. All of them end at the clinic of "Doctor Moll" who cures and reforms most of them. It is true that the text begins with a young, "desolate Girl without Friends, without Cloaths, without Help or Helper in the world," (7) but it ends with a successful powerful woman: A woman with a sword ironically taken from a man who becomes symbolically swordless.

This revisionistic re-reading of *Moll Flanders* is buttressed by the fact that Moll, though a professional whore, is generously rewarded by "the Hand of providence, which had done such wonders for me, who had been myself the greatest wonder of wickedness" (263). At the end of the novel the reader comes to the conclusion that every character in *Moll Flanders* is Moll Flanders except Moll herself.

From the very beginning of the novel, Moll meets the two brothers of the aristocratic family: The elder brother and Robin. The first *looks* so noble, disinterested and altruistic. The second, a lawyer, looks so romantic and so honest. This gives the impression that the novel is pro-man and anti-woman. But a rereading of the identities will reveal that the story of these two brothers intertextually recalls the story of Cain and Abel. The elder brother will cause the death of his younger brother. More importantly, the name "Robin," is not only a feminine name but also the name of a bird. Both connotations encode Robin's emasculation. Indeed, what the elder brother does to his younger brother is worse than what Cain does to Abel. The elder brother rapes young Moll in his sister's bedroom on his sister's bed and transforms her into a whore (prolepsis of the incest later on in the novel). Worse still, he gives his own whore as a wife to his own younger brother: "If you find him hearty and in Earnest marry him" (30). Moll "gave him a look full of Horror at those Words" and turns "Pale as Death" (30).

The satanic scheme of the elder brother prevails. Robin happily gets married to his brother's whore without knowing anything. The elder brother "fuddles" him so that he cannot know "the difference between a Maid and a married Woman" – a common denominator in most of Moll's encounters with male characters (46). No wonder, he pays the price and dies. This episode is a demythologization of masculinity. It is the first fall of man, indeed two men, in *Moll Flanders*. Other falls will follow until metalepsis is complete. As a matter of fact, the novel itself can be divided into two parts: Men Before Moll and Men After Moll: (MBM and MAM).

More importantly, this episode, in the language of Simone de Beauvoir, foregrounds the fact that a woman is not born a prostitute. She becomes one or rather she is transformed by society into one (Humm 48). Society is nothing but an institution of prostitution. It is so ironic that man himself is the cause of it all. He is also the victim of his own devices. Man, in *Moll Flanders*, always wants a rich wife no matter how ugly she might be. "Between 17th and 18th centuries, it was a custom for a man to choose to marry the woman who had a fortune" (Liu Xi and MA Wen-ying 178). To become rich, the woman has to become a prostitute. No prostitution, no marriage. Everything is upside

down. The wife must have the qualities of the whore while the whore must have the qualities of the wife: "Money only made a Woman agreeable" (Defoe 53).

Moll's sister-in-law explains this reversal of roles: "it was requisite to a Whore to be Handsome, well shap'd, have a good Mien and a graceful Behaviour; but that for a Wife no Deformity would shock the Fancy, no ill Qualities, the Judgement; the money was the thing" (54). Dorothy Van Ghent calls it "virtue in the till" (Van Ghent 40). No wonder the cash nexus dominates, commodification prevails and everything, as Michael Shinagel points out, is for sale: love is for sale; bodies are for sale and even children (Moll's) are for sale (Shinagel 406). The result is that most characters, including Moll, start to have what Robert A. Donovan calls "a mercantile mind" (Donovan 397). They are always counting and calculating. They are not to blame. They live in a society where, as Juliet Mitchell confirms, "Property became King" (Mitchell 10). This commodification of women is engineered by man himself who ironically and unknowingly is engineering his own catastrophic and historic downfall.

Such a volte face is the crux of the banker's story. He discovers that his own wife is cuckolding him and decides to divorce her. The only way for the divorce is to call her "*non compos mentis*" (141). As the story unfolds, the reader will realize that the banker himself is "*non compos mentis*." The image of man is deterritorialized to be differently reterritorialized. The banker is in trouble and needs someone to save him. A man needs a woman not to entertain him but to save him. The roles are reversed. The weakling is male and the savior is the female. The irony is that the woman this time is not any woman. She is Moll, the professional whore. The poor banker runs from one prostitute to another. He does not see, does not understand and tries to remedy his first fiasco with another fiasco. He wants to marry Moll. No wonder she comments on his proposal saying: "how little does he think, that having Divorc'd a Whore, he is throwing himself into the Arms of another" (142). She makes a long list of the things to which this open-eyed man is so blind. He will marry a woman who "has lain with two brothers, and has had three children by her own Brother! One that was born in Newgate, whose mother was a whore... one that has lain with thirteen Men, and has had a Child since he saw" her (142). The child is ironically by another man and the banker does not know.

Each item in the list above emphasizes man's blindness. It is ironic that the banker runs from one whore to another, from one failure to another and from one scandal to the same scandal. Masculinity becomes a joke. Virility is a farce as if he were beyond resurrection: He dies. The irony is that blindness, as Moll philosophically puts it, is good for man. "O! what a felicity is it to Mankind, said I to myself, that they cannot see into the Hearts of one another!" (142). The banker, like Robin, the younger brother, gets married to Moll without knowing anything, and like Robin, he dies without knowing anything. The woman knows but the man does not. The woman sees but the man does not. The woman wants to save man but man does not want to be saved, as will be seen later on in the case of the Bartholomew fop. The novel is not against women as some people think. It is, as this paper demonstrates, a systematic demythologization of the mythical masculinity.

This demythologization creates what the Formalists call defamiliarization or *ostranenie* (Bennett 20). Man has preserved his phony masculinity because man has always been seen through the eyes of man. For the first time, there is a new focalization, which engineers the textual estrangement. Man, for the first time, is seen through the eyes of a woman. The irony is that she is not any woman. She is, to double the V-effekt, what they call a "prostitute". Even in the eyes of a prostitute, man is no longer man. He is either a prostitute, like the elder brother, or a gullible, rapable "female," like the younger brother

or a “blindablewoman” like the banker. According to this performativity of gender, if women are the fair sex, men are the blind sex (Glover and Kaplan 157). A different way of *seeing* leads, in the language of Formalism, to a different way of *saying*. What Moll has achieved is a categorical metalepsis of the patriarchal binary opposition. All the pejorative projections attributed to women, “passivity, nature, emotions” are now ascribed to men and *vice versa* (Moi 104).

Defamiliarization and demythologization are deployed together like anagnorisis and peripeteia in the story of Moll and her own brother. They do not know that they are brother and sister. They get married and have children. Moll’s mother-in-law tells her a story to entertain her. From within the story (Anagnorisis), Moll discovers the truth: Her mother-in-law is dialogically her real mother and her husband is ironically her own brother. Both are confronted with the same dilemma. Both receive the same blow but the results are not the same. Both have the same mother, the same heredity, the same milieu and it is, in terms of psychological realism, the same ordeal. The only difference between them is that he is biologically male and she is biologically female. However, and as Toril Moi confirms, the same experience does not create the same identity (Moi 207). The reader waits for the melodrama to unfold to discover which one will collapse and which one will endure; which one will die and which one will survive. More importantly, the reader wants to know which one will accept and which one will reject this immoral and unnatural situation: The “good” mythical man or the so-called devil “whore?” This is the greatest challenge to patriarchal stereotypes.

The most important element of this episode is that Moll herself, not her brother, discovers the truth. She is a discoverer. This is the first sign of her superiority. The second sign of superiority is that she successfully and painfully manages the whole affair until she breaks the news to him as cautiously as possible. The third sign is his inferiority. He misreads everything, her coldness and her desire to travel without him. He calls her “unkind wife” and “unnatural Mother” (72). He tells her that she is “Mad” and he would put her “into the Madhouse” (73). He even accuses her of having “another Husband alive” (74). These misreadings represent the myopic contaminated patriarchal concept of womanhood. It never occurs to men that a woman’s attitude might be moral, noble and altruistic. No wonder, when she gives him a hint he starts hallucinating. She tells him that she is not treating him as a husband because “there might be more in it than he understood at present” (74). He looks “Thunder-struck” and faints. The contrast between her encoding and his decoding, her high perspective and his low perception is an objective correlative of the demythologization of masculinity.

First of all, it is ironic that man, the icon of morality and the symbol of power, is crushed, while woman, the symbol of sin and the epitome of fragility, triumphs and stays alive. This is the triumph of femininity and the defeat of masculinity. The episode is the greatest demythologization of man and the greatest mythologization of woman, as the thesis of this paper states. Inside man, as Jung says, there is anima whereas inside woman, there is animus (Kralingen). Indeed, Ian Watt confirms that the core of Moll’s character and her actions is “essentially masculine” (Watt 127). What happens illustrates Moll’s power and man’s weakness, Moll’s rise and man’s demise. The myth of man is shattered. The pejorative projections of women are also shattered. He flounders, loses his mind and dies. Moll preserves her integrity, goes back to Britain and restarts her life from scratch. Moll is the phoenix woman. The end is the beginning and metaphorical death is metaphorical rebirth. From her own ashes, she rises younger and stronger, as in this episode and every other episode in the novel.

This central episode is not only a dramatization of the patriarchal situation but a dramatization of the reversal and the transformation. Man insists on incest while the whore abhors incest. Her brother reminds us of the elder brother, who rapes Moll in his sister's room and on his sister's bed, as already quoted. In addition to the ethical failure, there is the linguistic failure. As mentioned above, he calls her "unnatural wife" and "unnatural mother" not knowing that what he is saying is dialogically the truth itself. Man does not understand his own words. In the same way, he does not understand his own sister-wife. The natural, not the unnatural, is her own law, which she refuses to transgress. From the beginning of the novel till the end, she has never embarked on anything unnatural. The reader will never forget her scream, "I could almost as willingly have embraced a Dog" (78). Everything is upside down. The man who is going mad calls the woman mad. The man who terribly needs hospitalization wants the woman to be hospitalized. The man is man no more, and the whore is whore no more. The case is not *The Mad Woman in the Attic* but the mad man in the attic (Gilbert and Gubar).

In spite of the *Sisyphean challenge*, Moll remains in control. From the beginning of the revelation, she, like an artist, carefully selects the proper setting and the proper language and the proper manner to break the news to him as mercifully as possible: "I *am* your own Sister, and you my own Brother, and that we are both the Children of our Mother now alive, and in the House, who's convinced of the Truth of it, in a manner not to be denied or contradicted" (81). He turns "pale", looks "wild" and "faints". He tries suicide twice and in one of them he is ironically saved by a woman, his own mother (82). The diametric contrast between the discourses of Moll and her brother-husband dynamites the mythical masculinity. He becomes the patriarchal "she" and she becomes the patriarchal "he". Metalepsis is accomplished.

This reterritorialization is the crux of the episode with the Bartholomew man: the "Gentleman extremely well dress'd and very Rich" (175). The irony is that he introduces himself to Moll as "a Man of Honour" (175). The signifier "honour" is immediately stripped off its own signified and resemanticized: Honour contronymously becomes dishonour. This "honorable" man is not only drunk but he is charmed by Moll and he sleeps with her, not knowing, like Robin, anything about her. Similarly, the signifier "man" is fissured from its signified and demythologized. It means anything and everything except "man". This "Fop" is so "blinded by his appetite" that he does not "know an old Woman from a young" one (176). In the eyes of the so-called whore, this so-called man looks "so absurd, so surfeiting, sordidulous" (176).

The systematic demythologization of masculinity is unstoppable, which indirectly rebaptizes the woman as savior and reformer. The Bartholomew man, in Moll's language, picks a common woman, that is Moll herself, without knowing whether she is "Sound or rotten, Clean or Unclean, whether Ugly or Handsome, whether Old or Young" (176). He is both blind and incurable. He is possessed not by one evil but by two: Drinking and Libido. The myth of man as mind, head, day, culture, savior is shattered. At the same time, as in the episodes with every other male character, there is a reversal not only of symbolism but of roles. Man becomes Moll and Moll becomes Man.

This deconstruction of masculinity is metonymically represented by stripping the Bartholomew fop of everything he has. While he is literally and metaphorically asleep, Moll "disarms" him and takes everything from him: "a gold Watch, with a silk Purse of Gold, his fine full bottom Perrewig, and silver fring'd Gloves, his Sword, and fine Snuff-box..." and leaves him alone (176). The sword is polysemic. It symbolizes, as Steven Olderr points out, "liberty, strength, knighthood, authority, leadership, the masculine" (133-

4). By taking this phallic symbol from him, the Bartholomew man becomes, in the full sense of the word, swordless and Moll becomes polysemically the woman with the sword. The reader knows that at one stage in the novel the polymorphous Moll plays the male character and calls herself "Gabriel Spencer" (170). Her polymorphousness is her prowess and her survival. The moral of the immoral story of the Bartholomew man is that he does not repent. He keeps coming back to remedy sin, like most men, by more sinning. It is Moll who worries about him and his family. Her friend comments with the most ironic words: "Child, says she, the usage may... do more to reform him, than all the sermons that ever he will hear in his Life, and if the remainder of the Story be true, so it did" (178).

By transforming herself from a sinner into a savior and from a prostitute into a priestess, Moll rewrites the symbolic order of the patriarchal culture. Mary Ellmann makes a list of eleven characteristics of femininity: "formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy and finally the two incorrigible figures of the Witch and the Shrew" (Moi, 1885, 34). Moll transforms most of these stereotypes. Formlessness becomes polymorphousness. Passivity becomes non-stop activity. Confinement changes into freedom. Piety, materiality and spirituality merge into unprecedented pragmatism. Compliancy metamorphoses into leadership. More importantly, the Witch and the Shrew become the doctor and the savior. John Richetti believes that society is undefeatable and argues that Defoe "issues a warning against inversion of social order" (Richetti 52). Moll demonstrates that society is defeatable and a new order is inevitable. In the language of Bakhtin, *Moll Flanders* is not only a "decrowning" of a King but a crowning of a Queen (Bakhtin 124).

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