CHAPTER – IV

A Woman Of No Importance

Double (Morality) Standards

Born in 1854 in Dublin, Oscar Wilde stayed in Ireland till his graduation from Trinity College, and like many other Irish artists before him, migrated to England at the age of twenty to study at Oxford where he said “life began” and where he spent his “happiest days”. He soon made a reputation for himself amongst London’s fashionable elite with his wit, aestheticism and brilliant conversational powers. He acquired many friends and was coveted at social gatherings and placed on a pedestal by the London society enamoured by his charms. The period from 1888-1895 was one of his most successful. There was an outburst of creativity with his writing of short stories, fairy tales, a novel and acclaimed plays including Lady Windermere’s Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband and The Importance of Being Earnest.

Lady Windermere’s Fan was Oscar Wilde’s first play in his comedies of modern society. This was a heroine centric play that dealt with the melodramatic saga of a woman with a past. Mrs.Erlynne, the central character, is here looked at from a sympathetic perspective of a woman who sacrifices her reputation to save her daughter. The author brings out different aspects of her personality- a wit, a smooth talker, a practical mother, an advisor and friend all rolled into one, thus making the audience forget her past errors and simply focus on her present sacrifice. She is confidence personified and displays exemplary courage in standing up for her daughter. She aspires to climb the social ladder by marrying the respectable Lord Augustus and succeeds in her mission to be eventually departing with him for the Continent as his wife.
His next play *A Woman of No Importance* (1892), though not as successful and as acclaimed as the first one, was in the same genre. This too, like *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* dealt with “a fallen woman”, but according to Wilde himself this was “a woman’s play” in total sympathy with women. The main protagonist here, Rachel Arbuthnot lives a secluded life in contrast to Mrs. Erlynne. She shies away from society because of her past and dreads going out preferring to be a meek sufferer. This aspect of her character makes her different from her earlier counterpart and in fact more interesting. In the play, her character evolves gradually bringing forth surprising elements of her personality to the fore and making her stand out as a woman who resists patriarchy. Filled with typical Wildean witticisms and humour, the play was hailed by contemporary critic William Archer as being “on the very highest plane of modern English Drama”.

In intellectual calibre, artistic competence-ay, and in dramatic instinct to boot- Mr. Wilde has no rival among his fellow-workers for the stage. He is a thinker and writer; they are more or less able, thoughtful, original playwrights.¹

The play was written in 1892, at a time when English theatre was trying to come to terms with groundbreaking cultural changes especially in Europe. In the 1870’s Henrik Ibsen, a radical Norwegian dramatist was writing revolutionary plays in Europe. When the plays came to England in the 1880’s courtesy translations by scholars like Edmund Gosse and William Archer, they threatened to puncture the hollow cultural fabric of a hypocritical society and shook the theatre going public out of its inertia. His heroines were revolutionary antitypes of the stereotypical women portrayed on stage and idealized in real life. In his play *A Doll’s House* the heroine Nora walks out of her “happy and settled” marital life to do “a greater duty” towards her self while a headstrong Hedda in *Hedda Gabler* is the antithesis of the Victorian
housewife with her selfishness, her apparent dislike of her husband and her desire to control things around her. Oscar Wilde seems to have been influenced by this new dramatist. He went to the first night viewing of *Hedda Gabler* and was so impressed that he went for a second viewing a few days later. The play left a deep impact on him. “I felt pity and terror, as though the play had been Greek”, he confessed in a letter to the Earl of Lytton. The seeds of a new genre were laid. The heroine centric “well made play” structure of Ibsen’s dramas was to be replicated in London by Henry Jones, Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, Oscar Wilde and later more determinedly by George Bernard Shaw.

It is not surprising that Oscar Wilde started writing radical plays from the woman’s perspective at a time when the Victorian notion of womanhood was still the norm. He was an iconoclast and revolutionary, himself doing things that pleased his senses rather than for any didactic purpose. His paradoxical nature is reflected in his works. On the one hand, as an artist he was immersed deep in the *fin-de-siecle* and Aesthetic movements that propagated the importance of beauty, pleasure and the value of Art for Art’s Sake, while on the other hand he created characters that reflected the ills of the age- aristocratic dandies who ruined lives but were still treated with deference, and suffering women who needed to be reinstated in society but were treated as outcasts. Like his later contemporary George Bernard Shaw, he strongly felt that the artist had a duty. In his essay, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, Wilde elaborated that the artist’s duty was to stimulate the audience by disturbing the ‘monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine’.

Both in real life and as an artist, Wilde was highly sensitized towards women, their priorities and their problems. His own mother Lady Jane Francesca Wilde was a
very dominating woman and was quite influential in his life. She was an early advocate of women's rights, and campaigned for better education for women. She also played an important role in the Irish nationalist struggle for independence, writing patriotic poems and pamphlets under the pen name ‘Speranza’. Wilde looked up to his mother as a powerful literary figure. In 1881 he advocated to the editor of a British newspaper that his mother’s literary genius had not faded with time and was still popular.

I don’t think age has dimmed the fire and enthusiasm of that pen which set the Young Irelanders in a blaze.²

His own love and flair for writing and his empathetic perspective towards women were possibly derived from his mother. Perhaps Lord Illingworth echoes Wilde’s own thoughts when he sums up the role a mother plays in the life of her child, while defending his decision not to marry Rachel.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: …I was influenced by my mother. Every man is when he is young.³

His mother may have also contributed to Wilde’s dandy like appearance and fascination for women’s clothes and “style” that had a cult following. As a child he was often cross dressed as a girl by Lady Wilde who had longed to have a daughter after an older son. When a sister was finally born, much to Wilde’s disappointment she stopped dressing him in a feminine way. However this whimsicality of Wilde’s mother did have its consequences. The aestheticism and elaborate attention to dressing up remained a fond passion of Wilde in his adult life. Add to that his poise, boyish charm and wonderful conversational skills which all contributed to endear him to women.

Wilde did have a serious interest in women’s gift for defining themselves through looks, clothes, style in general. They were doing unconsciously what the artist
Deservedly in 1887 he was offered the editorship of a women’s magazine, the title of which he changed from *The Lady’s World* to *The Woman’s World* showing his disinclination to limiting a magazine to only a particular class of women. ‘Woman’ for him signified a more serious and responsible approach to affairs in general and as editor he intended to make literary criticism one of the important features of the magazine and to give more importance to books and articles written by women. His magazine boasted of articles by serious writers like Olive Schreiner, ‘Ouida’ (Maria Louise Rame), ‘Speranza’ (his mother) and Lady Constance Wilde amongst others and covered issues ranging from fashion to theatre to literature as well as career opportunities for women. However, according to Laurel Brake the fact that there was a male editor for a women’s magazine showed society’s regressive stance towards women as also Wilde’s own contradictory approach to his job. According to him Wilde was torn between femininity and feminism.

Women are constructed as serious readers who want (and need) education and acculturation. It is just these qualities rejected as unsuitable for women- a taste for triviality, dress, gossip and pleasures such as music- which are valorized in Wilde’s own writing.\(^5\)

In the nineteenth century French dramatists like Scribe and Alexandre Dumas fils had successfully portrayed plays depicting the “Woman Question” on stage. British dramatists like Pinero, Wilde and Shaw were taking this issue a step further. According to Wilde’s contemporary critic and writer Henry James, an English audience expected “fair play” in any given situation. The erring women characters of plays from Scribe and Dumas fils atoned for their “sins” with death or disease or a very severe punishment. A woman with a past could never hope to get back into
society as a Mrs. Erlynne or Mrs. Arbuthnot. According to Katherine Worth, English play goers expected a better deal for such women.

English audiences had their own hypocrisies but the hard complacent morality of the French male dominated bourgeoisie was rather too ruthless for them, they had more fundamental tenderness.6

Wilde rightly gauged the more sympathetic viewpoint of the English audience and treated his women with much more empathy. Kerry Powell too believes that Mrs. Arbuthnot is in comparatively easier circumstances. He had in mind the plays of English playwrights like Henry Arthur Jones and Sir Arthur Pinero who depicted sinning women as dying or suffering from worse than death because of their past misdeeds. However as we shall see Mrs. Arbuthnot gets off more leniently than her English predecessors, including Mrs. Ebbsmith, “but not without having to turn her back on England.”7

The patriarchal attitude of society towards women in his time incited the artist in Wilde to revolt. “The Woman Question” became an ideal subject for his ideas on self fulfillment and revolutionary social sentiments. According to him, a change in the position of women was an important movement of the future into which he as an artist would be fully involved as “artists are the future”. His plays realistically covered women of all types- victims and victors, sacrificial mothers and practical wives. There were the “erring” women like Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Erlynne who were to be redeemed and the paradoxical “good” women like Lady Caroline and Lady Hunstanton who policed society on behalf of the male establishment.

The artist in him went further and questioned the narrow minded attitude of a society that had double standards in its treatment of men and women. In the latter half of the nineteenth century Liberal feminists like Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill were writing extensively on the issue of women needing to have not only equal
educational and economic rights but also equal civil rights as men. *A Woman of No Importance* can be read as Wilde’s treatise on gender equality through which he emphasizes his belief in a uniform law for both men and women—that men should also bear the punishments that society gives women for a crime they have both committed. His plays cleverly debate issues that were taboo in the Victorian Age and his characters become the spokespersons for his ideas and sentiments. Hester Worsley in *A Woman of No Importance* echoes the Liberal feminist for whom women’s equality was a priority.

HESTER: If a man and woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other there. Let them both be branded. Set a mark, if you wish, on each, but don’t punish the one and let the other go free. Don’t have one law for men and another for women. (36)

At the time that Wilde was writing his play, England had become a superpower. Though it was ruling almost over half the world, a half of its own population was fighting for justice, demanding equal treatment in laws, rules and values. Society was very prudish in its treatment of women. If a woman was unhappy with her situation there was, almost without exception, nothing she could do about it. A woman could not even obtain a divorce from an ill treating husband and, until 1891, if she ran away from an intolerable marriage the police could capture and return her, and her husband could imprison her. All this was sanctioned by church, law, custom, history, and approved of by society in general. Nor was it the result of ancient, outdated laws: the new 1857 Divorce Act restated the moral inequality. Adultery was considered as a reason for divorce but not for a woman; only a man could divorce his wife if he thought that she was cheating on him.

Feminists, though, as early as the 1850’s were championing against these archaic laws. In her 1851 essay *Enfranchisement of Women*, Harriet Taylor Mill
argued that sexual inequality was not a result of nature but of customs and traditions in society. According to her, women would become equal not just by equal education and equal job opportunities but also by having equal rights viz.

A coequal share in the formation and administration of laws- municipal, state and national through legal associations, courts and executive officers.  

Hester Worsley, though new to England has been quick to notice this inequality and the double standards of English aristocracy. No wonder then that she is repelled by this shallow society.

HESTER: Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish. It has blinded its eyes and stopped its ears. It lies like a leper in purple. It sits like a dead thing smeared with gold. It is all wrong, all wrong. (35)

She abhors having met Lord Henry Weston, a philanderer who has so much authority that he is respectfully invited to all the dinner parties in London while the “outcast” women who are ruined because of him are on the streets, shunned by society. A feminist in her own right, she here becomes the voice of thousands of ill treated women when she speaks about the importance of equality in society and actually holds out the promise of a better future for women unjustly punished by double moral standards.

HESTER: You are unjust to women in England, and till you count what is a shame in a woman to be an infamy in a man, you will always be unjust. (36)

At the time that Wilde was writing, England was at the height of its glory both politically and economically. However the major events of the early nineteenth century viz. the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent economic upheavals are hardly seen directly in the play. Political events are mentioned just in passing and the gap between the rich and poor hinted at. The characters are as if, caught in a time
warp where time stands still and the only significant events that take place are in English country houses of the elite and the only people we get to see are aristocrats and diplomats, politicians and parsons indulging in witty conversation with clever and charming women, futilely debating on the importance of morality in private and public life. The setting represents an idyllic England, prosperous and complacent wherein nothing can go wrong.

God’s in His heaven
All’s right with the World.⁹

This brings us to a debatable topic of Wilde’s political leanings. Is Wilde, an Irishman, trying to show that England as a nation is unparalleled? Is he, to use Edward Said’s phrase, a victim of “cultural imperialism”: someone who has so internalized the traditions and values of his country’s colonial master and believes it to be so supreme that he emulates and propagates it. According to Merlin Holland, Wilde’s only grandchild, Wilde had a dual personality that even his closest friends and biographers could not understand.

The duality of Wilde in all aspects fascinates, confuses: the Anglo-Irishman with Nationalist sympathies; the Protestant with life-long Catholic leanings; the married homosexual; the musician of words and painter of language who confessed to Andre Gide that writing bored him.¹⁰

Very few people really understood what Wilde was aiming at- through his elaborately imitative British lifestyle as also through the apparently English plays in English settings. Jerusha McCormack in The Irish & Pictorial Wilde remarked that Wilde redefined what it meant to be Irish- ‘to have multiple and divided loyalties and inhabit a space where contraries meet’.¹¹ The critic Richard Allen Cave believes that Wilde was a nationalist, but a covert one. At the time that Wilde was writing his plays, Ireland was going through a turbulent period especially in its relations with
England. Irish nationalists, political as well as cultural were waging war upon England, but Wilde was not seen as one of them. Apparently he, an Irishman was living in London in complete harmony with his colonizer and as Yeats remarked had used the clever strategy of “becoming more English than the English themselves”. He was writing plays for the British audience, but the plays did smack of native pride and witty sarcasm targeted towards the colonizer.

While Hyde, Yeats and their compatriots pursued overtly national enterprises motivated by the need to restore dignity to Ireland, Wilde would attack the bastions of the English establishment from within. …where Hyde sought to ‘de-Anglicise’ the Irish, Wilde set about deconstructing Englishness. 12

In our play he portrays America as a country with better values. He chooses an American girl to portray the abysmal depths that English society has fallen to and contrasts her goodness with the multiple women in Act I, each of whom symbolizes some folly of high English society.

Lady Caroline is the haughty and superficial aristocrat who looks down upon everybody, especially people who earn money rather than inherit it. She is the one most critical of Hester’s frankness and candour and criticizes the hostess Lady Hunstanton behind her back in her thoughtlessness of having guests of different classes at her party.

Lady Stutfield is little more than a shadow to the other women. She gives an impression of being an echo, repeating other people’s words with delight and having no mind of her own.

Mrs. Allonby, “the female dandy” is Lord Illingworth’s equal not only in wit but also in depravity. It is hinted in the play that she too has had a past, but in contrast to Mrs. Arbuthnot, she speaks so much about sin that nobody believes her to be
capable of doing anything wrong. Her conversations reveal the amoral life underlying the superficial artifices of these women.

LADY CAROLINE: As far as I can make out, the young women of the present day seem to make it the sole object of their lives to be always playing with fire.

Mrs. ALLONBY: The one advantage of playing with fire, Lady Caroline is that one never even gets singed. It is the people who don’t know how to play with it who get burned up. (6)

In fact, from a feminist viewpoint Mrs. Allonby may be termed as heroic as Mrs. Arbuthnot and she has the intelligence to turn situations in her favor under any circumstances. However Wilde does not make a hero out of this flirtatious woman and does not develop her character beyond Act II.

Moreover, through these women Wilde portrays the other side of the Woman Question wherein men too were victims in a society ruled by women. Sir John is a classic example of the henpecked husband who cannot move a finger without his wife’s consent while Mrs.Allonby explains to her eager woman audience how it is possible to have a good time because you are a woman.

LADY STUTFIELD: Ah! The world was made for men and not for women.

MRS. ALLONBY: Oh, don’t say that Lady Stutfield. We have a much better time than they have. There are far more things forbidden to us than are forbidden to them. (7)

Lord Illingworth calls this interesting relationship as tyranny in one of his wise maxims to the naïve Gerald.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: The history of women is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known, the tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts. (56)

His words ring true especially in the context of these aristocratic ladies led by the shrewd Mrs. Allonby who is aware of the limitations of men.
MRS. ALLONBY: Man, poor awkward, reliable, necessary man belongs to a sex that has been rational for millions and millions of years. He can't help himself. It is in his race. The History of Woman is very different. We have always been picturesque protests against the mere existence of common sense. We saw its dangers from the first. (30)

Through his varied repertoire of women characters, Wilde is able to maintain a realistic balance between women as victims and survivors, challengers and rulers.

Hester Worsley appears as a breath of fresh air in this suffusedly amoral atmosphere of A Woman of No Importance. She is the ‘New Woman’ from the ‘New Country’, sincere and outspoken who speaks up against the hypocritical society in England.

HESTER: You rich people in England, you don’t know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season. With all your pomp and wealth and art you don’t know how to live—you don’t even know that. (34-35)

The Irishman is here mocking English values, questioning the basis of the claims of England’s high moral ground, examining the ethics of a society that was far more comfortable with superficialities. Though extremely successful, Wilde always remained on the periphery of English society. He had arrived in England as an outsider and though highly successful was never fully embraced by British society. In 1895, thoroughly misguided by some friends he sued the powerful Marquess of Queensberry, father of his friend Lord Alfred Douglas for criminal libel. Losing the case, he was arrested and put on trial on a moral charge. The same society and friends that hung round him during his successful years now deserted him. Richard Allen Cave, in his essay Wilde’s Comedies mentions that Wilde knew the convention of the
English aristocracy of protecting their own against an outsider which he very well portrayed in *An Ideal Husband*. And he was perhaps also aware that he was inviting trouble for himself when he pressed charges of defamation against the Marquess of Queensberry. The powerful Marquess brought counter charges of moral laxity against Wilde. Wilde as Irish was an outsider who had to be punished for his sins.

He was sent to Reading Gaol prison for two years hard labour and imprisonment. His stint in prison however worked to the advantage of certain sections of society. Wilde was an activist at heart unable to bear injustice of any kind. He was deeply affected by the inhuman treatment of prisoners especially children and after his release he advocated for their rights, helping in bringing about some badly needed prison reforms. The precursors to this social streak were already visible in the plays he had written during his most successful period.

In *The Importance of being Earnest* Wilde is absolutely partial to his orphan characters while in *A Woman of No Importance* we see him putting his weight behind the underprivileged and the outcasts viz. the Arbuthnots as also the orphan Hester Worsley. Rachel Arbuthnot is here the “woman of no importance”. Belonging to a poorer family she was misled in her youth by an aristocratic man who promised her marriage. She is betrayed by her lover and has a son out of wedlock. The lover, Lord Illingworth leaves her alone to lead a life of shame and punishment, while he prospers in society without any regrets. This “fallen woman” syndrome was quite common in the literature of the period.

Mrs. Arbuthnot represents the ‘fallen woman’, a literary type of the century which reflects in part the insidious effects of a double standard of morality, the ruthless indifference to feminine welfare and the seduction of lower class girls by ‘gentlemen’ of the upper class.13
When she first appears in the play, she is a meek and scared woman bogged down by guilt. Hester Worsley’s words just as she appears make her feel even more guilty, “Let all women who have sinned be punished” (35). All her life Mrs. Arbuthnot has lived with the feeling that she has committed a crime and because she is a woman she would suffer for it.

Mrs. ARBUTHNOT: There is no atonement possible. I am disgraced: he is not. That is all. It is the usual history of a man and woman as it usually happens, as it always happens. And the ending is the ordinary ending. The woman suffers. The man goes free. (80)

Mrs. Arbuthnot is here the ideal Victorian woman upholding society’s double moral standards that consider women as criminals. Mary Wollstonecraft called this state of being “cultural conditioning”, in which the woman, brought up in a misogynistic society with patriarchal notions of “good” behaviour believes that she as a woman is more of a sinner than the man who has shared equally in her sin.

In 1969 Carol Hanisch, an American feminist gave the term ‘Personal is Political’ in an essay of the same name. The term was taken over by the second wave feminists to refer to a variety of women’s problems that though intensely personal become political. It basically means that many of the personal problems women experience in their lives are not their fault, but are the result of systematic oppression. This theory advocates that women are not to be blamed for their bad situations. The ‘personal is political’ proposed that women are in bad situations because they experience gendered oppression and massive structural inequalities and women should understand that their oppressive situations were not their own fault. However Mrs. Arbuthnot mutely accepts the societal value codes that deem her unfit for a decent life because she has committed a sin. Ashamed of her past she lives a life of oblivion and loneliness shunning society and friends.
Mrs. ARBUTHNOT (to Gerald): You made many friends and went into their houses and were glad with them, and I, knowing my secret, did not dare to follow, but stayed at home and closed the door, shut out the sun and sat in darkness. What should I have done in honest households? My past was ever with me...And you thought I didn't care for the pleasant things of life. (83)

The continuous evocation of regrets and the stubbornness to cling to the past mars her character. Mrs. Arbuthnot it seems is determined to remain morose. Katherine Worth believes her to be “trapped in time, someone who does not question society’s conventional judgements but takes up her role as martyred outcast with a passionate will”. The play has often been criticized for being too melodramatic and for the protagonists being too fickle in changing their stand. Mrs. Arbuthnot who has always maintained her composure, breaks down when Gerald is about to hit his father. Similarly she does not repent of her sin priding herself in Gerald being “the child of her shame” while she has shunned society for this very reason. She displays many facets of her personality in the play, some even detrimental to her character.

This aspect of her character has always come under negative scrutiny. Even William Archer who otherwise thought very highly of the play felt that Mrs. Arbuthnot’s character with her long speeches of self pity was excessively morbid and undeserved.

With all respect for Mrs. Arbuthnot, this is mere empty phrase-making. I am sure she has slept very well, say, six nights out of the seven, during these twenty years; or, if not, she has suffered from a stubborn determination to be unhappy, for which Lord Illingworth can scarcely be blamed. After all, what material has she out of which to spin twenty years of unceasing misery? She is somehow or other in easy circumstances; she has a model son to satisfy both her affections and her vanity; it does not even appear that she is subjected to any social slights or annoyances.
Undoubtedly Mr. Archer and other critics are very practical and like Lord Illingworth want Mrs. Arbuthnot to forget the past and move on. But hasn’t she moved on, bringing up her son single handedly without any complaints? She is ruffled only when the past in the form of Lord Illingworth threatens to take away her present and future, her son who has been her pride.

Mrs. Arbuthnot’s predicament can be effectively grasped in the light of Existentialist feminism. According to Simone de Beauvoir, women had an inferior position in society because they were categorized as the “Other” in contrast to men who categorized themselves as “Self”. This inequality exists in all binary possibilities: whites as “Self” and blacks as “Other”, aristocrats as “Self” and lower classes as “Other” and even within the same group as in conforming women as “Self” and challenging women as “Other” and the “Others” are always dominated by the “Self”.

Mrs. Arbuthnot in this case is the “Other” not only biologically but also socially, however as the play progresses she does try to come out of the watertight compartment she has always been in. She seems to share the views of Existential feminists who believed that a woman should move towards authentic selfhood not by negating herself but by shedding the burdens that hamper her progress. Mrs. Arbuthnot’s biggest burden is her shame of her past. Significantly no one in the play knows about it except Lord Illingworth and herself. She is terrified of losing her son; more importantly losing his respect if he knows the ‘secret’ and Lord Illingworth intensifies her fear.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: You have educated him to be your judge if he ever finds you out. And a bitter, an unjust judge he will be to you…..Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them. (47)
According to Kerry Powell, men subjugate women through the institution of motherhood. He quotes feminist novelist Mona Caird’s heroine to emphasise his point.

Throughout history, children had been the unfailing means of bringing women into line with tradition. Who could stand against them? They had been able to force the most rebellious to their knees. An appeal to the maternal instinct had quenched the hardiest spirit of revolt.

But Mrs. Arbuthnot is determined that her son should not go away with a father like Lord Illingworth. She gradually gathers her courage and begins by narrating her own harrowing experience in third person trying to show Gerald, Lord Illingworth’s unscrupulous nature. However Gerald, like Illingworth is “a man of the world”, practical and insensitive, having been brought up with typical Victorian notions of “good” and “bad”. He believes that Illingworth’s past is of no importance in the present condition and predictably assumes the woman to be in the wrong.

GERALD: My dear mother, it all sounds very tragic, of course. But I dare say the girl was just as much to blame as Lord Illingworth was.- After all, would a really nice girl, a girl with any nice feelings at all, go away from her home with a man to whom she was not married, and live with him as his wife? No nice girl would. (70)

However Gerald is soon to change his opinion. And it is a woman who brings about the change. Hester Worsley, the rich American heiress is the other important woman protagonist in this play. Though she is only eighteen, her self confidence and practical approach make her seem much older than her years. Hester’s upright morals and rigid value judgements make her unpopular amongst the motley group of shallow minded aristocratic women. Mrs. Allonby criticizes her as a Puritan, challenging Lord Illingworth to kiss her. In the climactic scene in Act III her role is as important as that of Mrs. Arbuthnot. Gerald is enraged that Illingworth has insulted “the purest thing on
God’s earth” by trying to kiss Hester. He no longer has the respect for Lord Illingworth that he had earlier and when the ‘secret’ is revealed by Mrs. Arbuthnot kneeling down in shame pleading to Gerald not to kill Lord Illingworth as he is his father, Gerald is in a way better prepared to accept the bitter truth. It is at this moment, when he puts his arm round her that Mrs. Arbuthnot is finally able to shed off the burden of the past and the hold that Lord Illingworth has on her. Maternal love triumphs over hollow social values and materialistic considerations. Wilde is careful in maintaining the dignity of a mother irrespective of her past. Mrs. Arbuthnot now emerges as a strong mother figure, “my mother and my father all in one” as Gerald says.

Towards the end of the play she has not one but two children. Hester Worsley, the young American refuses to love Gerald if he does not love his mother. For her Mrs. Arbuthnot is someone in whom “all womanhood is martyred”. She in fact plays a crucial role in the play. It is she who prevents Gerald from forcing his mother to marry Lord Illingworth. We may say she facilitates the reconciliation between a “tainted” mother and a “moral” son with her feminist perspective of Gerald’s suggestion that Mrs. Arbuthnot should get married to Lord Illingworth.

HESTER: (Running forward and embracing Mrs. Arbuthnot). No, no: you shall not. That would be real dishonour, the first you have ever known. That would be real disgrace: the first to touch you. (85)

In the 1890’s The “New Woman” Movement was gaining momentum in the West. This was more of a social and literary phenomenon and considered the predecessor of the suffrage movement. The New Woman was literally very attractive with her emancipation- often symbolized as smoking, riding bicycles and using bold language. Wilde who was exposed to feminists early on, first through his mother and later with his association to women’s magazines and his own empathetic nature had
insight into the New Woman types. In our play Hester Worsley symbolically represents the “New Woman”. Outwardly in matters of dress and mannerisms she shows no traces of her but her thoughts and actions convey a steely interior in the young girl of eighteen. She is displayed as bold and brash without any “feminine” virtues. She has none of the artifices and hollow sentiments that the other English ladies have making her stand out as “painfully natural”. Proud of her own country, she is Wilde’s means of exposing the hollowness of upper class British society vis-à-vis American society.

HESTER: We are trying to build up life, Lady Hunstanton, on a better, truer, purer basis than life rests on here. Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season. With all your pomp and wealth and art you don’t know how to live—you don’t even know that. (35)

Hester readily takes a liking to Mrs. Arbuthnot as soon as she sees her; however Mrs. Arbuthnot is more cautious. Hester the “young Puritan” as she is critically called initially has some very stern views on the idea of sin and punishment. She strongly believes that it is God’s law that “the sins of the parents should be visited on the children” and Mrs. Arbuthnot fears this view. However Hester is soon to change her opinion. When she comes to know the truth about Mrs. Arbuthnot and Gerald, she does not shun them but embraces them. “God’s law is only love”, she triumphantly declares to mother and son. Her outlook is not confined to the narrow patriarchal rules of the period but goes beyond. Maybe her love for Gerald is partly responsible for this view, as also her prosperity but it is also true that belonging to the “New Country” she has a more modern perspective about cultural values. She has no inhibitions in living with the “nameless” and the “outcasts” even if it means going to distant shores.
HESTERTO MRS. ARBU Thornton: Leave him and come with me. There are other countries than England...Oh! other countries over sea, better, wiser and less unjust lands. The world is very wide and very big. ...(85)

However according to some critics Hester Worsley falls a little short in translating her thoughts into actions. She accepts the past of Mrs. Arbuthnot but is not too sure if society would welcome the move and is prepared for tragedy.

HESTERTO MRS. ARBU Thornton: We shall somewhere find green valleys and fresh waters, and if we weep, well we shall weep together. (85)

Wilde here once again brings into focus the narrow outlook of British society that makes people abandon the country- the Irishman reviled by the ill treatment of the ruling country. Could this also be a premonition of Wilde’s own self exile after his prison term ended in 1897, and his subsequent death in another country?

Nevertheless it is true that the change that comes about in Rachel Arbuthnot is partly due to the young girl Hester Worsley who proves to be an ideal companion in the fight against a discriminating society and helps her to be better prepared to face its challenges. Both women abhor the shallow aristocratic life and have no regard for the shams of high society. They have a few things in common; most significant of them being love for Gerald and hatred for Lord Illingworth and as Mrs. Arbuthnot says “they feed each other”. Hester embodies the bold woman of the decade who is unafraid to speak her mind. But Rachel has also been bold in her own right. We do see flashes of her fiery nature early on. There is a streak of stubbornness, a shade of pride even in the young Rachel as it is she who leaves Illingworth after he has refused to marry her and give the child his name. Moreover though she is poor, her ego refuses to accept the six hundred a year that Illingworth’s mother offers out of charity. She is ready to bring up the child as a single parent in suffering and hardship.

98
but is unwilling to accept anybody’s sympathies. The fact that she has not forgiven Illingworth even after twenty years shows the bitterness still seething in her.

Mrs. ARBUTHNOT: Do you think I would allow my son-
LORD ILLINGWORTH: Our son.
Mrs. ARBUTHNOT: My son- to go away with the man who spoiled my youth, who ruined my life, who has tainted every moment of my days? You don’t realize what my past has been in suffering and in shame. (46)

And in Act IV her feminist fervour is on full display. For the first time in the play the setting moves from the artificial aristocratic households to the simple world of Mrs. Arbuthnot, her home, “quite the happy English home”, as Mrs. Allonby says and for the first time we see Mrs. Arbuthnot’s poise and extreme self confidence. When her son Gerald, who has imbibed all the Victorian (male) prudish values, proposes that he would make Illingworth marry her, Mrs. Arbuthnot refuses to abide. Gerald, brought up “in the right way” with his “belief in religion” is shocked as to how any woman could refuse to get married to her son’s father. Wilde does get bold here when he shows Mrs. Arbuthnot as being unwilling to accept marriage as “the happy ending”. She shows rare courage in not taking the trodden path and becomes a forerunner of the feminist who refuses to believe that her destiny and happiness lie in marriage.

GERALD: I implore you to do what I ask you.
Mrs. ARBUTHNOT: What son has ever asked of his mother so hideous a sacrifice? None.
GERALD: What mother has ever refused to marry the father of her own child? None.
Mrs. ARBUTHNOT: Let me be the first then. I will not do it. (82)

Mrs. Arbuthnot no longer wallows in self pity as she is wont to. To the delight of any feminist she endorses her independence by refusing Illingworth’s marriage proposal.
even when he proposes himself. In a way she symbolically becomes equal to the man who had snubbed her in her youth by refusing marriage to her.

Mrs. ARBUTHNOT: ….How could I swear to love the man I loathe, to honour him who wrought you dishonour, to obey him who, in his mastery, made me to sin? No: marriage is a sacrament for those who love each other. It is not for such as him, or such as me. (82)

According to Kerry Powell, in her rebellion against customary ideal, “Rachel Arbuthnot behaves more as a character in Ibsen than an English drama of the pink lampshade variety”.¹⁷

Towards the end of the play we see a transformed Rachel- a bold and independent woman, facing with pride and dignity, the man who has ruined her life. She shows no hesitation in rejecting Illingworth’s marriage proposal and this trait makes her an “Ibsenite” character.

Mrs. Arbuthnot revolts against the ideal of womanhood which the nineteenth century enforced, one which demanded she marry the man whose son she gave birth to.¹⁸

She is now more aware of her existence; she has created a space for her ‘self’ by overthrowing the ‘other’ and will surely no longer have the sleepless nights that she has fretted about earlier. Illingworth himself is not prepared for the change in this woman when he comes to meet her at her home. He takes it for granted that she would gratefully accept his marriage proposal and forget the past. But Mrs. Arbuthnot is made of stronger stuff. She warns him to go away lest Gerald attack him again and this time is not so sure of saving him. Significantly in this Act both the major characters undergo physical changes. Rachel looks younger making Illingworth wonder.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: How curious! Ah! This moment you look exactly as you looked the night you left me twenty years ago. You have just the same expression in your mouth. (93).
But Lord Illingworth, the permanent dandy, on being insulted by a woman seems to age. By striking Illingworth with her glove, Rachel takes revenge of the twenty years of her shame and ultimately by calling him “a man of no importance” she shows that she is no longer held by the conventions of a society that had always trapped her and taught her to regard herself as insignificant.

Though the feminist in her is slow to emerge, she nevertheless upsets typical Victorian notions of the ideal woman who had no individuality of her own. Both Gerald and Hester love her but more importantly they respect her even after knowing her past and this is the final triumph of Mrs. Arbuthnot as against the aristocratic Lord Illingworth who inspite of his riches and influence is despised by his own son, and condemned as “a man of no importance” by the woman whose life he ruined.
NOTES


3. Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* (Berkshire: Penguin Popular Classics, 1996) 46. [This edition has been used throughout the chapter and page numbers have been mentioned in parentheses.]


15. William Archer on *A Woman of No Importance* reprinted in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed Karl Beckson

16. Quoted from Mona Caird’s novel ‘The Daughters of Danaus’ in Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* 68.


18. Ibid. 66.