CHAPTER – III

The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith

Religion and Patriarchy

Sir Arthur Wing Pinero unarguably comes first in the list of dramatists in this dissertation not only because of the chronology of his plays or of being born before the other playwrights, but more importantly because of his pioneering work in the field of what is today called “Modern British Drama”.

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, dramatic activity in England, after its meteoric success in the Elizabethan and Restoration Ages, had declined considerably in the nineteenth century. Theatres that once proudly played only the great Elizabethan dramatists had to counter with the more popular pantomime, farces, melodrama and even animal acts that catered to the rowdier and lower class audiences. Henry Salerno referring to a particularly violent scene in the dramatic version of _Oliver Twist_ reflects, that the taste of the audiences had undergone a great change from the previous era.

All the emotional and visceral effects of the most popular theatre—the violence, the macabre, the absolute focusing of strong feeling on the monstrous villain, the complete involvement, the mixture of horror and theatrical thrill- are suggested by this performance and its response. It portrays the popular theatre and its audience and is a graphic illustration of what was commercial and thus successful in the nineteenth century.  

The period from 1880 however saw a resurgence of “serious” drama with the introduction of the “well made play” technique. Playwrights like Henry Jones, Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw were to gradually
occupy centrestage in British theatre with their unique dramatic presentation of day to
day real life on stage. Another very significant playwright who changed the course of
modern drama in England was Tom Robertson. Though none of his plays are a part of
this dissertation, he needs to be mentioned here for the strong influence that he had on
the young Pinero. His “tea cup and saucer” dramas brought verisimilitude on the
British stage even before Ibsen became popular. Drama now became “serious”
business with the introduction of social and domestic problems within the play
structure. The plays with their easily identifiable problems, realistic characters and
settings, made the audience more conscious of their social milieu. Henry Arthur Jones
termed this period as the “Renascence of English Drama” with reference to both the
quality and the quantity of dramatic work produced. Carl Selle calls the plays of the
period as “New Drama” written by the “New Dramatists” “who believed in the unity
of purpose and brave new world achievements of the time”.  

Amongst the above playwrights, Henry Jones and Sir Arthur Wing Pinero
were the first to portray “problem plays” with a social message. By the 1880’s Pinero
was already highly popular in London with his comedies, farces and melodramatic
plays. By 1889 however, Pinero felt the audience may require a change and set about
to write tragedies. Moreover Ibsen’s plays were getting translated, and in 1889 the
first production of  A Doll’s House was already making waves on the London stage.

The Second Mrs. Tanqueray (1891) was Pinero’s finest attempt at a play that
questioned the double standards of a prudish society. The play portrays the
unfortunate circumstances of “a woman with a past”, who is trying hard to reinstate
herself in society with the help of a “liberal” man who is going to marry her. The play
was quite bold for its time in having a sympathetic perspective for the “fallen”
woman; however towards the end, Pinero shows the woman as getting defeated by a
morally prudish and unforgiving society. When Paula Tanqueray, the protagonist is condemned not only by society, but also by her step daughter Ellean, she realizes that she can never get into the ‘good’ society by leaving her past behind, and commits suicide. The play emphasises the double standards of the Victorian society, especially when it shows Ellean forgiving her fiancé for his moral lapse, but condemning her step mother for the same. With its fine plot, melodrama and qualitative depth, the play did strike a chord with the audience, especially in its attempt at a humanistic portrayal of a ‘fallen’ woman. Its success cemented the already strong reputation that Pinero had on the London stage.

Pinero had now found his touch in tragedies and decided to focus on plays with social and domestic problems with strong women protagonists. With boosted confidence, in his next play, *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* (1895), Pinero continued the groundbreaking depiction of a “woman trapped in an inappropriate marriage”. However, here the protagonist Agnes Ebbsmith is the rational New Woman. After finding marriage a failure, she experiments on her advanced notions of love and marriage and attempts a “free union” with a man whom she looks upon as her companion. She is a liberal woman, ahead of her times, whose thoughts as well as actions would be considered feminist in any age. Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the noted actress who played Agnes, thought of her character as more refined, more brave than that of Paula Tanqueray.

In those days, not so long ago, she was a new and daring type, the woman agitator, the pessimist with original independent ideas- in revolt against sham morals.  

Pinero here outlined the persona of the brave “New Woman” who was unafraid to speak her mind and get things done her way. Slowly but surely the personality of a
woman protagonist was undergoing a change on the British stage and Pinero contributed to this to a large extent.

Born in 1855 in London, Pinero had a fairly well to do and liberal upbringing. His parents, while they had the money, always allowed him to go to the theatre and watch plays. His frequent visits to ‘Sandler’s Wells’, a small theatre near his house instilled in him the urge to be an actor and a playwright. He saw the dramatic world from close quarters as also the boldness and independence of the actresses. A strong and confident woman for him was thus not an imagination but a reality.

Pinero’s experience in the theatre as actor gave him a point of view on the rise of the new woman, for the middle class girls were merely adopting the freedom long enjoyed by actresses.4

They probably were his inspirations when he started drawing women characters of strength beginning from Leslie Brudnell in The Profligate to Paula Tanqueray in The Second Mrs. Tanqueray to Iris in Iris and Agnes Ebbsmith in The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith. Moreover society too was undergoing a change. The issue of female emancipation viz. the right to education, earning, retaining one’s own income and the right to vote was getting a lot of importance. With the rapid spread of Industrialism a new prosperous class was already established. The women of this class being well off did not need to go in for low paying jobs. They sought education and careers in professions heretofore considered strictly male. According to Dunkel, Pinero’s women were a realistic representation of a section of the developing new women in England who were trying to get freedom from old stifling conventions, but could not handle the responsibilities that the new freedom brought.

Unprepared by training and experience to realize that the new freedom brought responsibilities they merely became notorious.5
In our play Agnes Ebbsmith is labeled as “notorious”. She does not belong to the prosperous class though, but to the poorer section of society that is thoroughly embittered with the upper classes. She does not conform to the conventional notions of a woman and her first appearance in the play shows her distaste towards anything feminine. She dislikes “femininity” preferring to be plainly dressed to the point of being unattractive.

Agnes enters. *She moves firmly but noiselessly- a placid woman with a sweet low voice. Her dress is plain to the verge of coarseness; her face which has little colour is at the first glance almost wholly unattractive.*

Her companion Lucas questions her reasons for purposely trying to make herself “a plain looking woman when nature intended you for a pretty one” (142) but Agnes argues that being pretty does no good to anybody. She is a practical woman with higher interests than mere beauty and attractiveness. Her argument with Lucas brings into focus the conventional beauty standards that Lucas here in particular and society in general expects from women.

AGNES: Why? We are just as we have always been, since we’ve been together. I don’t tell you that your appearance is beginning to offend.
LUCAS: Offend! Agnes, you-you pain me. I simply fail to understand why you should allow our mode of life to condemn you to perpetual slovenliness.
AGNES: Slovenliness!
LUCAS: No, no, shabbiness. (142-143)

A patriarchal society determines what constitutes a beautiful woman, and women go to all extents to conform to these standards. Unfortunately, many a times these beauty standards are for male pleasures and are harmful to women not only physically, but also to their self esteem as they degrade themselves to being “objects” of pleasure. In China the concept of “small, beautiful feet” was an ideal of beauty and mothers bound the feet of their infant daughters to prevent them from growing, often
maiming them in the process. In the West, as also increasingly in our country, women go in for beauty treatments and surgeries that are often detrimental to the body, in an attempt to project themselves as the epitomes of beauty. Some cultures prefer anorexic women while some prefer voluptuousness. Most cultures prefer a fair skin over a dark one and women blindly follow the demands of their respective societies, giving undue importance to their appearance. According to Naomi Wolf, women are hindered in their growth in other fields due to the mythical standards of beauty that a patriarchal society demands for its own voyeuristic pleasures.

Pressures to conform to impossible aesthetic ideals, pressures perpetuated by advertising and the media, are inhibiting modern women in their search for social and political advancement. Agnes who wants to be an instrument of change in society with her ideas of “free union” and “companionship” is unfortunately judged wholly on her physical attributes by all the male characters in the play. The stinging comments of the Duke of St. Olpherts on her appearance makes Agnes feel insecure about herself. She starts judging herself from the perspective of the “male gaze” and realizes she falls short of their standards. Agnes, from the beginning had paid the least attention to her clothes, tending to focus on intellectual pursuits and to maintain a Platonic relationship with Lucas, symbolizing to the world the “free union” between a man and woman.

AGNES: …It is not too late for us, in our own lives, to put the highest interpretation upon that word- Love. Think of the inner sustaining power it would give us. (More forcibly.) We agree to go through the world together, preaching the lessons taught us by our experiences. We cry out to all people, “Look at us! Man and woman who are in the bondage of neither law nor ritual! Linked simply by mutual trust! Man and wife, but something better than man and wife! Friends, but even something better than friends!” I say there is that which is noble, finely defiant, in the future we have mapped for ourselves, if only….it could be free from passion. (139).
However conventional society reduces the theories of this woman of lofty ideals to mere cant. Her ideal relationship is to soon change from the intellectual to the physical. When faced with the prospect of losing Lucas, she goes against her own principles. She is now relying on the sensual rather than the ideological aspect of this “union” and stoops to wearing a “feminine” gown that reveals her body; thus playing in the hands of a patriarchal society that gives more importance to women’s physical appearances rather than their intellectual capabilities.

As seen earlier, a patriarchal society demarcates the roles men and women should play in society. It expects women to be economically dependent on men: to stay at home while men go out for work. Not only that, it also wants them to be emotionally dependent: weaklings who have to turn to men for support in each step of their life. However Agnes Ebbsmith does not conform to these role demarcations. In the beginning of the play she is portrayed as an intellectual woman, immersed deep in supposedly manly tasks like writing and proof reading. She is also bold enough in wanting to be a forerunner in the experiment of a ‘free union’ relationship in the prudish Victorian society. Her composed self confidence is in total contrast to the weak and dependent stereotypical Victorian woman portrayed in literature and in real life.

In this play we have a role reversal of the main characters wherein Agnes, the woman controls things while Lucas, her “companion” and co worker in “the cause” of the “free union” relationship is emotionally dependent on her. Agnes has made herself so strong, that she does not get disturbed with minor problems and has the capacity to control her emotions. Even when she faces the prospect of losing her close friend Gertrude, because of her reputation, she remains calm. Lucas finds this trait in her
character as strange, and even thinks of her as androgynous because of her stoic attitude.

LUCAS: These were decent people. You and she had formed quite an attachment.
AGNES: Yes.
LUCAS: There’s something of the man in your nature, Agnes.
AGNES: I’ve anathematized my womanhood often enough.
LUCAS: Not that every man possesses the power you have acquired- the power of going through life with compressed lips. (136)

Virginia Woolf in her work *A Room of One’s Own* in 1929 emphasized the importance of androgyny for a woman writer; the combination of both male and female characteristics in an individual for effective artistic expression. Modern feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Carolyn Heilbrun in *Towards Androgyny* echo Woolf in commending the benefits of androgyny. For them androgyny is a liberating concept necessary for the deconstruction of a dualistic concept of gender, which would ultimately lead to equality. For Kate Millett, an androgynous society was significant so that neither gender would dominate over the other. However for feminists like Elaine Showalter and Mary Daly, androgyny is detrimental to a woman’s personality. They believe that androgyny will only add to the woman’s woes of self identification synonymous with self respect. They strongly commend that women should have their own distinct female identity and be proud of it.

Attempts to combine masculinity and femininity, which are patriarchal constructs, will result only in pseudointegrity. 8

It is of course difficult to come to a definite conclusion about Agnes’s personality, of whether she is a “womanly” woman or a “manly” one. On the one
hand she says she has ‘anathematized’ her womanhood—does she mean the eight
loveless years of marriage spent with a brutal husband or is she focusing on her union
with Lucas that is to be devoid of passion? Nevertheless on the other hand, when the
Duke of St. Olpherts reveals Lucas’s true nature of a typical man—a womanizer who
would soon tire of experimental ideas, she decides to seduce Lucas and readily slips
into the revealing gown that she had earlier despised and held in aversion.

St. OLPHERTS: I knew your hold on him was
weakening. (She looks at him.) You knew it too. (She
looks away.) He was beginning to find out that a dowdy
demagogue is not the cheeriest person to live with. I
repeat, you're a dooced clever woman, my dear...(168)

Agnes is here fighting a battle between her two selves, the independent,
rebellious woman wanting to live life on her own terms and the conforming womanly
woman who cannot sever her emotional ties with her lover. Jean Chothia in her
introduction to The New Woman Plays believes that Pinero’s characterization of
Agnes is confused as she is playing too many roles—New Woman, fallen woman and
penitent woman that come in quick succession.9 We may say though, that in spite of
the conforming woman being more prevalent in the play, ultimately it is the
independent self confident woman who triumphs by taking a decision to go away
from Lucas for her own regeneration.

Agnes’s personal history has been full of struggles. She has come from a
revolutionary socialist background. Her father was a street side public speaker, and
Agnes followed in his footsteps, becoming a public figure, lashing out at the injustices
done to the poor. However her means of protesting by public speaking does not turn
out to be a smart career choice. Agnes often finds herself starving and in ill health and
so she goes into a “womanly” profession like nursing. According to Jean Chothia,
Pinero is talking about the unconventional behavior of Agnes, but on stage he makes
her conform to conventional Victorian norms. He is here falling back upon Victorian morality and expectations in delineating a not too bold woman, portraying her as the “angel in the house” and an epitome of Victorian womanhood who saves a man’s life with her nursing skills.

The audience hears of her writing and public speaking but sees her arranging flowers, threading her needle, worrying about Lucas’ medicine.\textsuperscript{10}

Though this demarcation by Pinero was in conformation to Victorian notions of a woman’s position in society, he also ensures a sympathetic perspective towards this unconventional woman. Considering the Age, it was a bold step to portray this kind of a woman character of significance- a woman who had strong feelings and emotions and was capable enough to take her own decisions.

With the success of \textit{The Second Mrs. Tanqueray}, Pinero shifted his focus to the more personal issues of domestic problems brought about by crises within a marriage. In \textit{The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith} Pinero talks about four marriage relationships and all of them are failures and the individuals according to Agnes are doomed with ‘the curse of unhappy marriage’ that has destroyed their lives.

Agnes’s friend Gertrude, the clergyman’s sister, the “virtuous” and “reputable” woman surprisingly confesses to having a bitter relationship with her husband who has treated her cruelly making her life “intolerable” till his death. She mentions being in love with another man, who according to her would have been more gentle and loving but Gertrude never pursued that relationship. Gertrude is the conventional woman who would never do anything that society disapproves of.

The marriage between Lucas and Sybil Cleeve is merely an arrangement. They have nothing in common and are virtually repelled by each other. Their hypocritical
relationship is in sharp contrast to the sincere belief in “free union” that Agnes and Lucas share in the beginning of the play.

Agnes’s parents themselves had a very bitter relationship making her home a wretched one, with her father’s violent preachings outside the home and her “mother’s storming and sulking inside”; finally ending with her father’s death. As a young girl Agnes was deeply touched with the harrowing plight of her parents brought about by their disastrous marriage and she resolved to never get married. But at the tender age of nineteen she fell in love and got married to a barrister. However the marriage was an unhappy one, with Agnes subjected to mental and physical torture for eight years till Mr. Ebbsmith’s death. Now a widow, Mrs. Ebbsmith with her bitter experience is resolved to never get married again and the woman in her wants to reach out and help other women.

AGNES: Oh, and I was fond too, of warning women.
GERTRUDE: Against what?
AGNES: Falling into the pit.
GERTRUDE: Marriage?
AGNES: The choked-up seething pit- until I found my bones almost through my skin, and my voice too weak to travel across a room. (134)

Pinero is here highlighting the plight of unfortunate marriages and their victims that spread across the spectrum of society- from rich aristocrats to religious believers to the poor working class.

While Lucas suffered his “hell” for three years before finally “breaking the gate”, Agnes suffered for eight years till her husband’s death. Her bitter marriage has left her disheartened and disillusioned with the institution of marriage.

AGNES: That is what marriage gives- the right to destroy years and years of life. And the right once given, it attracts, attracts! We have both suffered from it. So many rich years of my life have been squandered by it. (135)
Many feminists believe that marriage is the cornerstone of patriarchy. According to Marxist feminist Christine Delphy, women are oppressed by marriage as “marriage is the means by which men gain control of female reproductive functions and women’s domestic labour”.\(^\text{11}\) For Agnes, the advanced feminist, marriage is an unnecessary obstacle. However her bitter experience has not robbed her of her will to enjoy life and neither has she turned against men as a class. For her the institution and not the individual is the problem. After having met Lucas Cleeve, she progresses towards her aim of a free union with him. She here underlines the viewpoint of some Socialist feminists who believe that women should include men in their sphere rather than oppose them, for a better society.

AGNES: We remain together only to help, to heal, to console. Why should men and women be so eager to grant to each other the power of wasting life? (135)

Agnes is here a symbol of feminism holding the beacon of hope for other unfortunate women. She is the “New Woman” who does not proclaim herself by wearing pants and smoking cigarettes. However she does conform to the type of ‘New Woman’ that Selle defined.

The New Woman can, like Ibsen’s Nora, achieve her selfhood out of desperate resolve and the severing of ties no longer believed in.\(^\text{12}\)

Dunkel compares her strength to that of Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler and the source of her strength is “her protest against the false standards of society”.\(^\text{13}\) She also depicts traces of the Liberal feminist who believes in equality between men and women.

In the introductory chapter to this dissertation, I have mentioned the important role that religion in general and Christianity in particular, has played in Western culture in the whole patriarchal set up. *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* no doubt became popular in its first season itself but it also attained notoriety for its portrayal
of religious heresies. Pinero here seems to be torn between the conventional Victorian notion of depicting a pious heroine and the modern notion of a liberal woman who does not care for religion. The protagonist Agnes Ebbsmith is portrayed as a non believer, however she is not so from the beginning. She was a pious girl full of hope who even marries in church.

AGNES:...In spite of father’s unbelief and mother’s indifference, at the time I married I was as simple-ay, in my heart as devout- as any girl in a parsonage. The other thing hadn’t soaked into me. Whenever I could escape from our stifling rooms at home, and slam the front door behind me, the air blew away uncertainty and skepticism; I seemed only to take a long, deep breath to be full of hope and faith and it was like this till that man married me. (134)

Pinero with his known penchant for logicality and extreme detailing gives us the reasons for Agnes turning from a believer to a non believer. Agnes had an atheistic background. Her father was an outright demagogue who “believed in nothing that people who go to church are credited with believing in”. He was deep into the evils of capitalism with trade, labor questions and the division of wealth but her faith is actually destroyed only after her disastrous marriage.

AGNES: For about twelve months he treated me like a woman in a harem, for the rest of the time like a beast of burden…
GERTRUDE: It changed you?
AGNES: Oh, yes, it changed me.
GERTRUDE:...He’s dead?
AGNES: He died on our wedding day…
GERTRUDE: You were free then- free to begin again.
AGNES: Eh? Yes, but you don’t begin to believe all over again. (134)

Agnes’s friend Gertrude and her brother Amos are the two religious people in the play whose views contrast with the modern, almost atheistic views held by Agnes and Lucas. Their “upright” moral upbringing makes them shirk away from Agnes initially when they discover the relationship she has with Lucas. Their reaction does
not come as a surprise to Agnes because she is prepared for “this sort of thing”; however Gertrude proves to be a truer friend than expected. Believing that the life Agnes plans to lead with Lucas is sinful, she wants to pull Agnes “out of the mud” and take her to their parsonage at Ketherick. Both Amos and Gertrude try to persuade Agnes to start ‘believing’ and ‘praying’ and it is for this reason that the Rev. Amos leaves a copy of the Bible on her table under the pretext of writing his address. This seems to be the final straw for the notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith. Her calm and composed manner throughout the play is eventually destroyed vis-à-vis religion. When confronted with the Bible, she spews venom against it, as it has never helped her in life.

AGNES: I’d trusted in it, clung to it, and it failed me. Never once did it stop my ears to the sound of a curse; when I was beaten it didn’t make the blows a whit lighter; it never healed my bruised flesh, my bruised spirit! (176)

Act III ends on a melodramatic note, with Agnes hurling the Bible into the fire. This was an act of sacrilege hitherto unseen on stage and Pinero was highly criticized for it. Though she eventually retrieves it, her blatant action displays the violent streak of her nature that is surely not feminine from a patriarchal standard. In one striking gesture, “Mad Agnes” as she was called defies one of the most patriarchal of institutions viz. religion and reconfirms her iconic status as a liberated woman on the Victorian stage. However this is the last time that we see the rebellious side of her nature. No sooner does she hurl the book into the fire, than she puts her bare hand in again to retrieve it, (and also burns her hand as a sign of penitence) acting out the “miracle” that the Rev. Amos has talked about just moments ago. Perhaps the Bible also symbolizes her ideals that are put to the test, but like the Bible
they manage to come out shaken but not destroyed, ultimately leading Agnes towards the right path from the Victorian perspective.

It was the realization of the truth that freed Agnes- that through the agony of human passion spiritualized lies the path of freedom- not through denial or indulgence.\textsuperscript{15}

The last act of the play turns into an anticlimax especially with regard to the characterization of Agnes. The fiery woman has turned into a passive religious person engrossed in the reading of the Bible- a far cry from the intellectual woman of Act I engrossed in writing articles for women. According to Mrs. Campbell who first played the role of Agnes, this act “broke my heart”.

I knew that such an Agnes in life could not have drifted into the Bible reading inertia of the woman she became in the last act: for her earlier vitality, with its mental and emotional activity gave the lie to it- I felt she would have arisen a phoenix from the ashes.\textsuperscript{16}

But looking at the play from another perspective, I believe this act would be a feminist’s delight with its emphasis on the “sisterhood” as it brings about the much anticipated meeting between Agnes and Sybil Cleeve. The two women are the present and past of Lucas and are aware of his weaknesses, but ironically have come together to “save” his reputation and his career. Role reversal is again at play here, as the women are deciding what to do for the man, for his best interests. In the process they sacrifice their own principles- Sybil who considers it beneath her to come and meet Agnes, and Agnes who prefers doing things her way is almost compelled to do something that her nature does not agree with.

Both women still harbor some interest in Lucas. While Agnes has slowly grown to love the companion she nursed back to health, Sybil too shows her concern in being “forced to undertake this journey” to meet Agnes.
SYBIL: Only- I did love him once….I don’t want to see him utterly thrown away-wasted….I don’t quite want to see that….(186)

As arranged by Cleeve’s family, Sybil comes to Agnes to persuade her to exert her influence over Lucas and continue being his lover so that he would return to London, resume his career and have a pretentiously happy married life with his lawful wife. Though initially both women are pitted as rivals, as the Act progresses there grows an understanding between them wherein they are aided by another woman, the ‘virtuous’ Gertrude. Sybil, from the beginning shows her reluctance to force Agnes to lure Lucas back to her and with a little remonstrance from Gertrude who wants to “save” Agnes, she prevents her from doing something that she would later regret. This fills Agnes with remorse at having tried to wrong another woman.

GERTRUDE: Mrs. Cleeve-! (Looking down upon Agnes.) Mrs. Cleeve, we-my brother and I – hoped to save this woman. She was worth saving. You have utterly destroyed her. …………
SYBIL: (with a gasp) Oh-! No- I will not accept the service of this wretched woman. I loathe myself for doing what I have done. …. I decline your help- I decline it….I unsay all that I’ve said to her. Its too degrading, I will not have such an act upon my conscience. If you rejoin this man I shall consider it a fresh outrage upon me. I hope you will keep with your friends.
AGNES: (clutching at Sybil’s skirts): Forgive me! Forgive-! (187).

According to Gertrude and the Victorian mindset Agnes is “redeemed” and “saved by Heaven” from falling into further sin just like her. However from the viewpoint of the liberated feminist, Agnes only remains a shadow of her former fiery self: of the woman who wanted to be an “example” for other women. It is true that Agnes has faltered and faced defeat. She emerges as a regular woman who is torn between conflicting impulses. However this dissertation is about the common women
who do falter but manage to restore their dignity. Both Agnes and Sybil emerge as victors from this perspective as they manage to control the conditions they find themselves in towards the end of the play. Agnes, broken hearted, tries to find her solace in religion, and Sybil, in leading a life apart from her husband.

The play reiterates that a woman’s strength lies within herself and if she is able to will it, she can overcome all kinds of obstacles as Agnes proves. Her severing of her emotional ties with Lucas was not easy but she does it for a bigger cause and like Gertrude is “saved by the blessed mercy of God.” Agnes, though is aware of her own weaknesses, and her transformation from an idealist to a commoner is heartbreaking. As she confesses to Lucas she lacked the “strength” and her tirade against herself is also a scathing critique of Lucas’s character who could never be the man in the true sense of the word.

AGNES: For what am I? Untrue to myself as you are untrue to yourself; false to others, as you are false to others; passionate, unstable, like yourself; like yourself a coward. A coward. I—I was to lead women! I was to show them, in your company how laws- laws made and laws that are natural- may be set aside or slighted; how men and women may live independent and noble lives without rule, or guidance, or sacrament. I was to be the example- the figure set up for others to observe and imitate. But the figure was made of wax- it fell away at the first hot breath that touched it.(188)

Agnes at least has the courage of her convictions to admit her flaws while Lucas remains throughout what William Archer aptly called him as “nebulous”.

Pinero has often been criticized for turning Agnes into a regressive penitent from a firebrand revolutionary. According to A.B. Walkley, her modern ideas are a misfit in that Age.

The experiment upon which Mrs. Ebbsmith embarks is one foredoomed to disaster. So much is evident almost from the opening scene, so that by the advocates of the “new morality” which Mr. Pinero condemns it may not
unfairly be retorted that he does not give their system a chance. She is gradually subjugated into becoming conventional by the rigid norms of society. Patriarchal conventions manage to emasculate this modern woman in the trappings of love, emotions and religious conventions. The rational, principled woman starts acting like a conventional woman when faced with pressures from a conventional society. According to theatre critic Clement Scott, the character of Agnes, first played by Mrs. Campbell was full of beautiful, human and womanly touches.

The defeat of Agnosticism and Materialism and Free-Love jargon, at the mere danger of her lover’s departure; the gradual rebirth of an almost buried affection;… the scornful rejection of the Bible, followed by the reaction of penitence;……and in the end the very martyrdom of ruined hopes and aspirations.

From the viewpoint of the Victorian chauvinist, at the end of the play, Agnes is defeated in her ideals and retreats as a penitent to a country vicarage. However from a feminist perspective, things are different. Agnes is not defeated, but is burdened with difficulties heaped by a patriarchal society. Her anger towards social conventions that have attempted to subdue her is manifested in the momentary act of “madness” that descends on her. Her Bible burning is symbolic of the (dis)regard she has for the patriarchal institutions that have always treated women as inferior creatures. Moreover her ‘retreat’ to the vicarage signifies her triumph over the shallow bond that she had with the petty minded Lucas Cleeve. She deliberately breaks the “emotional bond” between her and Lucas portraying her strength of character that refuses to give in to the patriarchal notion that sets women apart as “emotional weaklings”. Even Lucas admits that she has a unique strength of character. As I see it, in the end, it is Lucas, the man, who breaks down at the thought of Agnes going away, leaving him rudderless.
LUCAS: ...Why have you left me? Why didn’t you tell me outright that I was putting you to too severe a test. ... I know now how much I depend on you....Agnes, this is the great cause of the unhappiness I’ve experienced of late years- I’m not fit for the fight and press of life. I wear no armour. I’m too horribly sensitive. My skin bleeds at a touch; even flatter wounds me. Oh, the wretchedness of it! But you can be strong- at your weakest, there is a certain strength in you. With you, in time, I feel I shall grow stronger.

(188)

Agnes’s strong will has determined the direction her life would take. It is significant that she at least knows where she is heading while Lucas is diffident, caught in the middle of nowhere as the women have destined the course of his life. In the end, he is left alone with nowhere to turn to; with both wife and lover having deserted him.

ST. OLPHERTS: Now, I wonder whether, if he hurried to his wife at this moment, repentant and begged her to relent- I wonder whether- whether she would- whether…(189)

The play remains a thumping reminder of strong women who many a times give in to patriarchal pressures in the interest of their loved ones. Agnes, Sybil and Gertrude are all strong and confident women, but at different points of time have given in to the demands of a misogynistic society. Nonetheless towards the end, all three women carve a separate niche for themselves. Agnes in her decision to retreat to Ketherick wants to do a bit of soul searching while Sybil refuses to put up with the sham marriage in this hypocritical society. The gentle Gertrude with her powers of persuasion helps both Sybil and Agnes to look at each other more sympathetically and ensures the victory of “women power” against a hypocritical society.
NOTES


5. Ibid. 109.

6. Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, “The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith”, *The New Drama*, intro. Carl Selle (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1963) 128. [This edition has been used throughout the chapter and page numbers have been mentioned in parentheses.]


10. Ibid. xvii.


14. In the published play, stage directions mentioned a black leather bound book, and not the Bible, to avoid controversy.


16. Ibid.128.


18. Clement Scott as quoted by Carl Selle,” Introduction”, *The New Drama* 54.