

INHUMAN TRADITIONAL NORMS IN ELLEN GLASGOW'S *VIRGINIA*

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Virginia is a satire on the southern ideals. Glasgow interprets traditional Southern morals and manners, and replicates intensely the restricted lives of traditional women from the period of 1884 to 1910, and makes a sympathetic look on the women of that age and their earlier traditions. Frederick P.W. McDowell states that, “stylistically *Virginia* is one of Miss Glasgow’s best novels especially in the briskly satiric passages” (5). This novel is set in the town of Dinwiddie, where the protagonist Virginia lives. There most of the Southerner bitterly opposed the advanced ideas in the late 19th century. In Oliver’s words, “it was a quarter of a century since “The Origin of Species” had changed the course of the world’s thought, yet it had never reached them”(Virginia 6).

Virginia is an embodiment of past and its social ideals, and the exemplification of gentle, passive and self-effacing south women. She is a self-sacrificing mother who devotes entire life for family. She also represents, “the universal conflict between the ideal of what a southern lady was supposed to be and the reality of a woman’s life in the early twentieth century” (God bold .98-99). Glasgow introduces the young girl Virginia with, “an old world charm of personality”. She stands for the “the feminine ideal of the ages” (Virginia 5). On the contrary her thick friend Susan Treadwell, daughter of the wealthiest man Cyrus Treadwell, is “as intellectual as the early eighties and the twenty-one thousand inhabitants of Dinwiddie permitted a woman to be” (Virginia 5). Comparing to Virginia she is “the stronger of the two” and “she dominated the other, as she dominated every person or situation in life, not by charm, but by the force of an energetic and capable mind” (Virginia 5). By introducing these two characters Glasgow shows the difference between the traditional and the strong new woman in the society. Virginia stands for the social order, and epitomizes the ideal young lady of south and Susan stands for the more positive qualities of the future along with a new woman of having great independence. In Virginia one can see the challenges and the limitations of traditional woman.

Glasgow is very critical about the ideals of social institutions and the rigid code of conduct forced not only on her but also on others. The training Virginia gets from Miss Priscilla Batte's Academy for Young Ladies is an ironical representation of time:

Her education was founded upon the simple theory that the less a girl knew about life, the better prepared she would be to contend with it And this ignorance of anything that could possibly be useful to her was supposed in some mysterious way to add to her value as a woman and to make her a desirable companion to a man who, either by experience or by instinct, was expected "to know his world"
(Virginia 8)

Virginia thoroughly follows the traditional standard ideals and performs the role of a southern lady perfectly throughout her life and she is socially scripted by the gender ideology of the south. Pamela Matthews in *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions* notes that:

Originally intending to damn a woman's tradition that relegated Virginia to selfless inaction and to denounce the women who freely accepted this role, Glasgow, in creating her character, came to see the practical impossibility of Virginia's ever being otherwise than she had been defined by the patriarchal world, here that of the Reconstruction-era South Virginia's participation in her own loss of self-results from the subtle but strong internalizing of social standards. (74)

Virginia Pendleton sacrifices everything on earth that she has in service of her three children and husband, and her endless, untiring and compassionate love towards them eventually left her with indescribable lonesomeness and effacement of her own self. She realizes that her "too good" (Virginia 116) nature leaves a gulf between herself and her husband Oliver that she can never overcome.

Virginia believes the enthusiasm to get to know the universe is dangerous and women supposed to restrict inside of the nursery of the kitchen. According to her "Knowledge of any sort (except the rudiments of reading and writing, the geography of countries she would never visit, and the dates of battles she would never mention) was kept from her as rigorously as if it contained the germs of a contagious disease" (Virginia 8).

Glasgow ironically represents Virginia's instructor Priscilla Battle that she "stood firmly rooted in all that was static, in all that was obsolete and out grown in the Virginia of the eighties" (Virginia 6). Rita R. Golts gives us a clear assessment of Virginia's background:

Already in the springtime of her life, she has been irretrievably programmed and sacrificed by society's three main institution: first by family, her parents who teach her that love is all she will ever need in her roles as wife and mother; second by religion, the Episcopalian Church that indoctrinates her with the sacredness of being an object "to be given" to her husband; and third, by education, Miss Priscilla Batte's Academy for Young Ladies. (97)

However, by being a perfect Southern traditional woman of Victorian ideals, she loses her husband after the initial ecstasy of marriage. He leaves Virginia to marry a woman of his interest. Her children absorb all her energy, youth and beauty, eventually everybody leaves her in complete lonesomeness.

Glasgow shows how the life of a woman utterly crumpled by the harsh and inhuman social etiquette. Not only Virginia, but Miss Priscilla Batte and Mrs. Peachy are a miniature form

of their social code or the social order prevailed in 1880. The specific traits of over self-righteousness, restricted and narrow vision, extreme exaltation, relentless devotion to the ideals of society are clearly shown in each individual and the race. If any deviates from these norms will suspect immediately. As society suspects clear vision and frank sophisticated behavior of Virginia's children; Abby Goode's mere pleasant and friendly approach to everyone make people to suspect her nature, and they frown their eyes.

Virginia wants to be a responsible wife and stands by Oliver through hard times as perfect traditional woman. In her letter to her mother Virginia indicates, "I never let him see if anything happens to worry me or if I am tired when he comes home. It takes every minute of my time, but, then, there is nothing else here that I care to do" (*Virginia* 52). She cannot even entertain herself being irresponsible neither wish to see someone like that. So she points to her mother about Mrs. Payson, the wife of Oliver's manager that "Mrs. Payson is a collage woman and it seems to me that she is always trying to appear as clever as a man" (*Virginia* 52). And often feels sorry for Mr. Payson for his wife's indifferent attitude toward house making but she confused with his response because, "he seems to have the greatest admiration for her" (*Virginia* 53). The culture of them is different and Virginia could have studied from them there is no need to be a sacrificed wife to get husband's admiration but to be a strong and intelligent one.

Silence and passiveness are Virginia's strength; to battle against the evil in her life is foreign to her nature. When Oliver starts to praise Abby Goode, the role conflict starts in Virginia's mind. Her energy of soul flames up when she first finds her husband's unnatural attraction towards Abby and Abby's ingenious amiability to her husband, to keep away her from husband she starts go for fox hunting with them, and make sure that her husband will not astray her but her jealousy towards Abby and her fight to get her husband's attention becomes meaningless when she realizes it pays her son's serious illness. She loses her courage to fight in her role as mother and she comes to know that the violence and fight has no place in her life. She submits herself, "Her submission was the submission of a flower that bends to a storm" (*Virginia* 116).

The standard of the code of conduct and ethics of the society in fact could ever modeled by any, yet Virginia spoils her entire life by trying to achieve it. She loses her husband's admiration only through the devotion of her role. The main character trait of southern traditional Victorian lady is to suffer in silence. They do not care to deny their own self in preference to others and will never lose temper. Their watch words are often self-control and self-effacement no matter of their own detriment.

Virginia leads a lifeless, monotonous and too weird life just for the sake of her children. She has been taught that accomplishing the duty as a mother is one way serving husband. When she looks back she knows, she is been ridiculously sacrificing. Avoiding to take care own health, beauty and charm she lives into her duty as a mother. That is the reason why Oliver goes behind the beauty as he is the admirer of it. By admitting her mistakes she never tries to bring him back because she lost already what he looks for or search for. The Book III "The Adjustment" shows Virginia's silent acceptance of her failure. At the first night of Oliver's play Virginia realizes the untold distance in Oliver's nearness of his physical body. "Even if she called him and he came to her, she could not reach him. Even if he stood at her side, the immeasurable distance between them would not lessen" (*Virginia* 113). She feels inferior to others and that can be the reason behind her silence consent for Oliver's withdrawal. When she overhears the talk of crowd at the first night of his play she realizes who she is in Oliver life. "That's Treadwell over there a good-looking man, isn't he? but have you seen the dowdy, middle-aged woman he is married to? It's a

pity that all great men marry young and now they say, you know, that he is madly in love with Margaret Oldcastle ” (*Virginia* 112). She is not able to fix herself either in reality or in illusion, her mind seems to be oscillating between these. Her unconditional love and responsibility to others puts her in dilemma, it seems she lacks acute sensibility.

Glasgow portrays how one’s life spoiled in the clusters of tradition. In Virginia Pendleton one can see the negative influence of tradition, the excessive obsession with idealism of her society acts as a villain in her life. She takes ideals as it is, irrespective of reasonable thinking. She fails to keep equilibrium between ideals and the reality. She is preoccupied with her duties to her children and forgets herself. Oliver’s needs and his expectations become secondary in her “pangs of motherhood” (*Virginia* 84). She comes to reality the first time after eight years of marriage life but by that time Oliver has changed or she makes him to change by her nature. She is too late to correct herself and Oliver.

Virginia Pendleton can be put into the category of woman as a victim, but she is not a victim of a drunkard’s wife, neither is she a slave nor a fallen woman but she is a victim of social ideals, race or class prospects and lives to fulfill what society anticipated of a woman. What brings misfortune to the life of dutiful wife Virginia is, she misunderstood that self-sacrifice bring happiness and it is inevitable to attain perfection in her duties. She has done everything a woman can possibly do in her life to satisfy the role of mother as society expects, in turn she gets nothing but an empty life. Her marriage life would not have ruined if she could be a bit more realistic in persuading things.

Glasgow throws light on the importance of being a strong woman in life and focus how to change them for a better life. The society expects women to limit themselves as wives or mothers. Southern ladies irrespective of their position try to uphold the social institutions. To go against all these ideals or break all these seem foreign to southern ladies. Virginia says to her mother once that she is not interested to go outside because she has seen her mother, “stay in the house all the time and so did grandmother” (*Virginia* 55). She does not want any change in the system. At the Academy for Young Ladies in Dinwiddie, Virginia, under Miss Priscilla Batte, Virginia has done her formal education, who is “capable of dying for an idea but not of conceiving one” (*Virginia* 10). Her academy does not help someone to develop intellectually:

it was earnestly believed that no girl, after leaving . . . with a diploma for good conduct, could possibly go wrong or become eccentric in her later years. To be sure, she might remain a trifle weak in her spelling (Miss Priscilla having, as she confessed, a poor head for that branch of study), but, after all, as the rector had once remarked, good spelling was by no means a necessary accomplishment for a lady; and, for the rest, it was certain that the moral education of a pupil of the Academy would be firmly rooted in such fundamental verities as the superiority of man and the aristocratic supremacy of the Episcopal Church. (*Virginia* 6)

When Virginia reiterates firmly an opinion on her lover Oliver, Miss Batte worries that the girl might be “getting know things” (*Virginia* 9). The formal education Virginia receives from Miss Batte is very difficult to materialize in real life. Virginia never tries to free from etiquette and she acts according to her emotions and instincts but not according to intellect or mental abilities. Literally the formal education she gets paralyzes her intellectual abilities.

Oliver needs nothing but a beautiful wife to love and serve him, instead he finds a tired and worn out mother of his children not a wife for him. Her problems lies in the contradictory roles of wife and mother, the conflict between these two roles do not allow her to perform

simultaneously well up to the social expectations. A wife can be a friend, lover, companion, housekeeper and social secretary thus she is capable of performing many more positions, likewise a mother is able to perform the roles of a nurse, teacher, counselor, friend, mentor and role model. Elizabeth Jane way in *Man's world, Woman's place: "A Study in Social Mythology* notes, "sometimes different roles demand different responses at the same moment" (80) but no one taught her the overlooked pluralistic dimension of these two roles.

The tragic failure of Virginia's marriage is that Oliver is not a true southerner and he is not exposed to the custom and traditions of a typical southern gentleman to appreciate Virginia's type. After receiving education from Australia he comes to Dinwiddie when Virginia is at the age of twenty-two, so the ideals of southerner, what John Henry or Gabriel Pendleton possess missed in Oliver. The perfect example of southern gentlemen is Reverend Pendleton; he has never noticed the faded beauty of his wife while caring his needs, doing household works and brings up their one and only daughter. When Reverend Pendleton sees wife, still he has the feeling of the day they first met, "It is doubtful if he had seen any change in her since he had first looked upon her face, and thought it almost unearthly in its angelic fairness . . . he saw her always as she had appeared to him on that first morning, as if the pool of sunlight in which she had stood had never darkened around her" (*Virginia* 37).

Virginia's husband notices the loss of charm and beauty in her and he is not a forgiving type, above all he does not dare enough to make any ungallantly remarks on her mercilessly. He does not expect Virginia to spoil her beauty for the sake of caring him or the children. According to him she is not expected to do hard work to blemish her beauty. He asks, "What have you done to your hands? They used to be so pretty" (*Virginia* 73). Household works, child rearing and laundry have taken the beauty of her hands. She finds difficulty to explain the reason, her heart cried but quietly she says, "What do my hands matter when it is for your sake that I have spoiled them?" (*Virginia* 73). A perfect traditional a woman's priority goes to her duty not to beauty so she never cares it. Oliver fails to the see beauty of her mind. It is clear that he attracted to her physical beauty and he needs her to maintain it enough to attract him. Eventually Oliver goes behind to Margaret Oldcastle, the actress in his plays, because Virginia is not ambitious, stylish, beautiful and intelligent.

Oliver is not exposed uniquely to southern perspective of the actual role of mother or a wife, he insists Virginia to accompany him always especially during weekend trips and rides. He wants her attention directly not indirectly as a mother of his children. According to tradition a woman's life is totally different from man. Her vision, life, emotions everything is under the clusters of patriarchal society. Through Virginia's thought Glasgow portrays the tragic situation of woman:

Suspense! Was that a woman's life after all? Never to be able to go out and fight for what one wanted! Always to sit at home and wait, without moving afoot or lifting a hand towards happiness! Never to dare gallantly! Never even to suffer openly! Always to will in secret, always to hope in secret, always to triumph or to fail in secret. Never to be one's self never to let one's soul or body relax from the attitude of expectancy into the attitude of achievement. (*Virginia* 38)

Glasgow rages against the injustice of the society which never allows a woman to be self-assured and take control of a situation. Society does not even want a girl to be educated; being a member of a wealthy family Susan does not get education. Cyrus refuses to send her for further studies because he believes that it is actually a waste to educate a girl, as her role is supposed to be acted

inside the four walls of the house. It shows progressive nature of woman is unacceptable in the patriarchal society. Lucy Pendleton's advice, the very moment before their wedding is very important to note down because which shows the real pathetic situation of women in a family circle, "Your first duty now, of course, is to your husband. Remember, we have always taught you that woman's strength lies in her gentleness. His will must be yours now, and wherever your ideas cross, it is your duty to give up, darling. It is the woman's part to sacrifice herself" (Virginia 48).

Though Susan also hails from the same place, her life is not as failure as Virginia's, she succeeds to build up a great family of her own along with her loving, caring husband John Henry. She also gets many children yet she finds time for reading books, gets involved with many civic activities and charitable organizations. Outside the nursery of the kitchen, the society has provided a few chances for women and they are expected to be loyal, faithful and completely depend on family, society and community in which they belong. Virginia's close friend Susan overcomes the barriers of social code. She has her own precise view on everything, and establishes her own view and opinion. When she informs father that she is going to marry the man she loves. Though he is not expressing, her decision making character is really impresses her father. Once Oliver says, "Now, I can understand a man not wanting to marry Susan, because she is so full ideas, and has a mind of her own about things" (Virginia 35). It is a clear cut denial of woman to be proactive in society.

In *Virginia*, Glasgow successfully reveals the pathetic condition of a southern woman, who grew up bound with all its tradition. Glasgow wants her novel be an eye opener to the women who blindly follow these ideals. "Ellen herself was one day an old fashioned Southern girl and the next day a modern intellectual in total rebellion against the traditions of the past. In all her life she was not able to reconcile them" (God bold. 99). Glasgow reveals the worst effect of tradition, religion and social pressure on women. Portraying Susan along with Virginia she proclaims the need of women to be stronger, assertive and thoughtful. Even after following southern tradition as it is, Virginia fails to impress her husband or to make a life of her own. In fact, traditional norms ruined her life. By depicting *Virginia*, Glasgow reiterates such tradition only helps to make useless and selfless creatures in the society. They face unfortunate consequences when they give up themselves blindly in the hands of tradition, such people can never develop their own potential and interest. Hence, when greater freedom of independence is given to women their life and relations will be meaningful, fruitful and happier.

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