



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue 1.,2016 (Jan-Mar.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

ILLEGITIMACY AND SOCIAL OBSERVATION IN WILFRID WILSON GIBSON'S
"THE HOUSE OF CANDLES"

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ABSTRACT

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson (1878-1962) occupies a distinct place among Georgian poets. His name is associated with such poets as Rupert Brooke, Edward Marsh, Walter de la Mare and Siegfried Sassoon. He has written a large number of poems on diverse themes like nature, love, unemployment and the sufferings of common people, old age and childhood. Besides, the plight of women also gets expression in some of his poems like "Agatha Steel," "The Operation," "The Call," "The Wound" and many others. "The House of Candles" is such a poem that deals with the predicament of a woman in bearing an illegitimate child. Man and woman are equally responsible for the act of sexual intercourse out of wedlock. If this mating results in pregnancy of woman, it cannot be called an act of chance or accident. Unfortunately, society is of two minds towards female sexuality and in such circumstances women are blamed and all the punishment and criticism are meted upon them. No one cares for the man who is responsible for such condition of a woman. In fact, the society is real culprit for the predicament of women. In this article, an attempt has been made to discuss Gibson's "The House of Candles" from the perspective of illegitimacy and the role of society in such affairs.

Key Words: Illegitimacy, Social Observation, Poverty, Misery.

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Wilfrid Wilson Gibson (1878-1962), a Georgian poet, was born on 2nd October, 1878 at Hexham in Northumberland. In 1912, he left his birthplace for London where he came in contact with other Georgian poets like Rupert Brooke, Edward Marsh, Walter de la Mare and Siegfried Sassoon. The major themes in their poetry are nature, love, unemployment, old age, childhood, and the aviary world. These themes also figure in Gibson's poetry. Gibson was deeply affected to see the sufferings of common people due to poverty. His poems show "a real understanding of misery and a true poet's power of interpretation" (Dilla 47). Besides, the plight of women in one way or the other inform some of his poetry like "Agatha Steel," "The Operation," "The Call," "The Wound" and many others. "The House of Candles" is such a poem that deals with the predicament of a woman in bearing an illegitimate child.

"The House of Candles" was published in 1910 in the collection of poems entitled *Daily Bread*. The poem is an exploration of human suffering which seemed difficult to cope with. The poet presents the picture of a woman, Grizel Stark. She is a stranger as she has migrated to this locality recently. Grizel's neighbours Barbara Wilson and Rebecca Wood find her lying unconscious in her house. There is a complete darkness in the house. It seems something unfortunate happened in Grizel's house.

BARBARA. The house was dark, and so I knew at once
Something was wrong.

REBECCA. The house was dark? (1-3)

Grizel's house normally used to be lighted. However, the present night it was "pitch-dark" and there were "no candles in the window / And not a glimmer underneath the door" (9-10). She knocked the door but there was no answer. However, she was aware that Grizel is inside. Ultimately, she "lifted the latch" and entered into her room. As the room was completely dark, she was unable to see the things, nonetheless, she "felt her presence in the room, / And feared [her] hand might touch her in the dark" (26-27). Hence, she decided to come back her own home to bring the lamp. Coming back with light she looked inside the room very easily as she admits: "And in its friendly and familiar light / I looked about me with a braver heart, / And quickly found stretched before the fender" (29-31).

Apparently, she thought her to be lying dead, and this shrieked and frightened her no end. But gradually Barbara composes her own self. She constantly stared at the lying woman feeling that she might have strangled her own baby as she has heard from the public gossip. It seemed as if her fingers have clutched "a baby's throat," nevertheless, she gazed at her persistently in great dilemma and thinks this to be the figments of her mind:

'Twas only in my fancy they had twitched;
For still the lay limp. I shook myself,
And, coming to my wits again, took heart;
And pity drove out fear; and bending down
To raise her head, I found that still she breathed. (42-46)

Finding that her heart is still beating, she is happy. This induces in her the strength and confidence in lifting her up and laying her down on the bed. Barbara collects her boldness and then moves ahead in helping the miserable Grizel. It is evident from the words of Barbara:

I loosed her bodice; then I fetched my man.
We lifted her and laid her on the bed:
It took us all our time, for, though she's slight,
She was a dead-weight in our hands; we seemed
To lift much more than one weak woman's body,
As though some dreadful burden dragged her down. (47-52)

The poem takes a new turn at this stage as Rebecca disapproves of the initiative taken by Barbara helping the helpless Grizel thinking that she may have committed sins in her life. Rebecca thinks touching such a sinner is an act of sheer madness. On the other hand, Barbara has a different opinion. She thinks whatever she is doing to help Grizel is a sort of social accountability on the part of an individual. Grizel may be "innocent" as there is no evidence that she is a sinner and that because of her sin she is in such a wretched condition. To validate her argument, she states: "Bairns die in spite of all that we can do, / And why, God only knows. My first-born died. (57-58)" In contrast, Rebecca retorts: "The innocent are not afraid of darkness, / And they don't need to squander a heifer's price / On candles in a twelvemonth" (59-61).

Barbara is anxious to see the deteriorating condition of Grizel. Noticing Grizel's numbness, she sends her husband to call a doctor lest she should die. Barbara's growing anxiety triggers ire in Rebecca who thinks that a "slut like her" can never meet a peaceful death. This observation of Rebecca infuriates Barbara. Still harsh, Rebecca calls Grizel a "murderess" bringing to the fore the contrasting nature of the two ladies. Barbara does not agree with Rebecca though Barbara has earlier the same opinion about Grizel as Rebecca has now:

BARBARA. Nay – you shall not – in this house!
Nothing was known.

REBECCA. Why, you yourself have said
These many times – I heard it from your lips . . .

BARBARA. Happen we all have wronged her: she may be
As innocent of her poor baby's death
As it . . .

REBECCA. But who can tell even it. . . .

BARBARA. The bairn? (78-85)

Obviously, the misery and hardship meted on Grizel is the product of society. She was carrying the child of illicit union and because of this she has to face the social taunt that forced her to leave her native place and settle down in a strange land. She came in this strange land to make a living without depending upon anyone. Here, she delivers the child giving a chance to question the identity of the child: "If she's no strumpet, where is her good man?" (87). Barbara tries to defend her that it might be her husband would have "died." Ironically Rebecca exclaims:

And taken the ring with him?
There is little use for wedding-rings in heaven,
By all accounts, and less in hell, I'd fancy.
Woman's not worth much who comes alone
To a strange village, and sets up a house
Where she within a month is brought to bed,
And cannot name the father of her brat. (89-95)

It is natural that the state in which Grizel has delivered the child makes other doubt. She does even defend herself when everyone was criticizing her for leading a life of corrupt behaviour. Rebecca goes on stating based on assumption and observations, regarding Grizel's act of possible living an immoral life, which is not accepted by society. Man and woman are equally responsible for the act of sexual intercourse out of wedlock. If this mating results in pregnancy of woman, it cannot be called an act of chance or accident. Despite being aware of the consequent result and despite the fact that legally, socially, officially and ethically speaking illicit intercourse is disapproved, why we condone it in practice. David Kingsley suggests:

Though illicit intercourse in our culture is disapproved officially, it is usually winked at or ignored in practice – by persons, indeed, who heartily disapprove of illegitimate children – partly because it is difficult to detect and control. The illegitimate comes as a tangible and inescapable consequence of a clandestine act; it comes as a climax, a point at which public indignation can self-confidently boil over. (223)

Unfortunately, society is of two minds towards female sexuality and in such circumstances women are blamed and all the punishment and criticism are meted upon them. Sometimes even women also begin to hurl criticism and condemnation on such women. Rebecca is such a woman who blames Grizel for her plight. She has come to know from public hearsay about Grizel's dissipated behaviour. She further questions how a woman without her man can have a pretty standard life. She herself is not engaged in a well-paid job. It is quite impossible to "earn enough by picking stones / Or singling swedes at seven pence a day / To keep blazing like a bar-room" (111-13). Perhaps she has got some help from her lover and is thus leading a pretty much better life in comparison to her job. Further, Rebecca question if she is not a fallen woman then why she is silent. Remaining silent testifies her guilt: "Had she been all she should, what need for secrets? / Her very silence proves her guilt: her brat – / Her bastard brat . . ." (111-16). Rebecca's sense of blame for Grizel further strengthens when she candidly admits:

. . . I thank the Lord
That I'm not such as she whom you befriend:
Though I've not brought my man a bairn, at least

I've never borne a nameless brat. (138-41)

To remain a childless woman is far better than to become a mother giving birth to a bastard child. She further states the difficulties that a childless mother faces in the life:

Must the barren wife
Lose her night's rest to tend two shiftless mothers?
For she, the helpless wanton on the bed,
And you who stand there dithering at her side
Are mothers both, the pair of you, while I –
I'm but a barren woman, hard of heart. (163-68)

In this way arguments and counter-arguments between Rebecca and Barbara continues till the latter fails to convince the former. Finally Barbara states:

Go: I don't need you: take your rest and spare
Your strength to wash your linen. I can manage:
I, who have brought to birth, can look on death
Alone if need be: I am not frightened now.
Go: shut the door behind you. (181-85)

At this moment, the situation takes yet another new turn, as the poet deals with an entirely different sort of mood. Gibson manages to create this mood in a very artistic manner. Grizel gathers her consciousness and begins to move her limbs. Perhaps she is trying to rise and speak and when Rebecca notices this, she changed her mind and remains standing in a corner. Opening her eyes, "raising herself in bed and gazing about her," Grizel sees Barbara standing next to her. She finds "the great light" in her house and fails to understand from where it came. Barbara tries to remove the light from that place but she is stopped by Grizel.

No, do not shift it:
It's not the lamp. . . . The light is in my heart,
Golden and glowing. The candles have gone out:
Yet I fear nothing now. (198-201)

Grizel experiences a sense of pity and love in her mind and begins to express these feelings in a very convincing manner. She expresses that she has been sick of her life since long. But now she has gathered all the courage to face the challenges of life. It may be that her house appeared dark to others. But to her "it was filled with light – / The light that quenched the candles and [her] fears" (214-15). She has been deprived of the light of life on the day her child died. Since then her

heart has dwelt in darkness, and though fear
Lit candle after candle in the night,
'Twas useless; for not even the sun at noon
Could dry away that darkness from [her] heart –
[Her] heart so blind and choked with bitterness
Since [her] bairn died. . . . (219-24)

The past life of Grizel is shocking. Barbara cannot stand listening to her. She shrinks but Grizel appeals her:

Nay, neighbour, don't shrink back!
These hands have never done a baby hurt.
I know your thought: I heard those dreadful whispers
In years gone by, though then I answered nothing:
I scorned to answer – but oh, if you have felt
A newborn baby cold against the breast,
You'll know I speak the truth. (224-30)

Further Grizel admits that she killed her newborn baby as she has "nursed" a feeling of hatred for the child in her heart before the child was born. She did so perhaps because of the fact that the child of illicit union suffers scorn and contempt in the society. This negative attitude of society goes to such an extent as if the child

himself or herself is to blame for the circumstances that led their birth. She was fully aware of the social stigma she will have to face if she delivers the child in her native place. The question of her illegitimate motherhood had created a serious problem for her. David Kingsley aptly remarks:

The bastard, like the prostitute, thief, and beggar, belongs to that motley crowd of disreputable social types which society has generally resented, always endured. He is a living symbol of social irregularity, an undeniable evidence of contramoral forces; in short, a problem – a problem as old and unsolved as human existence itself. (215)

This may be the reason of her sense of hatred for child. On the other hand, she admits the acrimony developed for the child basically due to her lover who had deserted her in such abject condition. Fearlessly, she states:

Although my hands are clean, I killed the bairn –
I killed it, in my heart, before 'twas born:
Before it breathed I poisoned it with hate –
My hate of him who had forsaken me. (234-37)

At this stage, her attention is captured by the “shadow” of Rebecca who is hidden there. But it hardly matters as she wants to confess her misdeed before “the whole world.” She recalls her past when she enjoyed the company of her lover. He was “all in all” to her. She admits as why she came in a strange land to face hardship and misery. She recalls her past days:

When first I left my home,
To hide my shame from friendly eyes, and came
Into this countryside, thinking to bear
The pang and burden of my misery
More easily among strangers, my heart was black
Against - but even now why should I utter
The name that once was all in all to me?
And, that black month before the boy was born
I brooded on my bitter wrong, and nursed
Hate in my bosom till there was no room
For any other feeling in my heart. (244-54)

This pitiable state of Grizel astounds Barbara. But she continues to speak:

His child within my womb,
Because it was his child – ay, even it
My hatred would not spare; and so I prayed
It mightn't see the light of day or draw
A mortal breath, though I myself should perish
To keep the life from it at any cost. (258-63)

Evidently, she is not a hypocrite. She admits her sin and is prepared to accept her fortune whatever it may be. She admits herself a “murderer” but it was, in fact, circumstance which made her so. Killing the innocent child was a painful moment of her life like any sensible person. All this was done because of malicious conditions prevailing in the society. She was cognizant of the fact that society will have an animosity for her as well as the child.

My time came, and I went through all alone.
Nay, spare your pity, neighbour: 'twas my wish:
I kept you all at bay to serve my ends;
And little I remember of those days,
Save as a nightmare anguish, till I woke
To feel a lifeless baby at my breast
Whose eyes has never opened to the light,
Whose lips had never drawn a mortal breath,

And knew my prayer was answered, though I lived,
 Knowing myself a murderer in my heart,
 Although my hands were clean. (264-74)

The day she felt a "lifeless baby" at her "breast" always haunts her and since then her life became dark. She is unable to forget it. Since that incident she did not dare to go all alone in darkness. She tried to forget it but it was in vain because her "heart" was still "black." A sense of hatred is still prevalent in her mind.

In the subsequent part, Grizel expresses her tale with strong feeling and energy. She is a woman who suffered throughout her life. She was at her day's work in the scorching sun; she was extremely tired and felt sleepy. This highlights the fact that Grizel is a poor lady. Coming back to her cottage, she lit a candle and then dropped herself in a chair by the hearth and fallen asleep. She could not even eat her supper. Later when suddenly she woke up, she failed to recall how long she slept. She found herself in utter darkness and was frightened. It was too dark to see all around her, and she felt as if someone has touched her. But when she sees Barbara who was taking care of her and standing beside her bed, suddenly, a sense of regeneration germinates within her heart. Her sense of disgust for others begins to turn into love and adoration. This sense of rebirth has brought the new Grizel to the readers. The transformation that took place in her is clearly reflected in these lines when she says:

Since I had been forsaken, the thought of him
 Came into my heart without a breath of hate:
 The icy clutch was loosened from my bosom,
 And pity stole like light into my breast;
 And, as I wondered whence the glory sprang,
 My little baby stood before me laughing
 With outstretched arms and happy kindling eyes,
 His little body filled with living light:
 And as I stooped to clasped him to my breast. (301-09)

The line quoted above "The icy clutch was loosened from my bosom" refers to two kinds of meanings: first, Grizel is perhaps uttering these words because of the fact that she has got rid of the blazing fire of hatred for the people all around her; second, her soul is about to depart her earthly mortal body. The second meaning can be substantiated by the last conversation between Barbara and Rebecca:

BARBARA. She cannot last long now: the end is near.
 I doubt the doctor will be here in time.
 REBECCA. In time? What could he do if he were her?
 She's far enough beyond the need of doctors. (318-21)

The fainting of Grizel cast a sense of fear at Barbara. It might be she will die shortly. But Rebecca is still inflexible in her mind-set and thinks she is far away from the need of doctor. Thus, in the poem Gibson has delineated the psychology of three women – Grizel, Barbara and Rebecca. All these three are different from one another. It is obvious that although Grizel has committed a sin according to social or religious doctrine, she is not hesitant in admitting before others of her relationship with a man revealing that she is pure by heart. Her heart is clean as she does not hide the reality. Barbara did whatever is expected from someone to help his or her neighbours at the hour of crisis. She just performed her social responsibility. On the other hand, we meet Rebecca who condemns Grizel of her past deeds. Even she dislikes that Barbara has befriended with such a lady of immodest nature. Gibson has simply portrayed the "wrongs of society without proposing remedies" (Dilla 56). His "greatness" lies "in his artistic detachment from his characters" (Dilla 56). The poet has written this poem in common and simple language. He has presented before us the situation of a dying woman Grizel. She has been plagued by the woes resulted because of her illegitimate child and poverty-stricken life. However, the power of love is suddenly seen to transform misery and woe and to uplift the woman and remove hate from her heart.

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