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The Essence of the Age of Enlightenment in Emma Donoghue's *Slammerkin*

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Abstract

This paper aims at analysing Emma Donoghue's Slammerkin, written in 2000. This novel, set in mid-eighteenth century England, projects a girl who in no time is pushed into the category of a 'fallen woman' for violating the prescribed patriarchal norms and roles for women. Here the girl, Mary, is represented as a universal subject who lives in wretched condition. The scope of reclamation is dealt to facilitate lost selfhood in general and of women victims in particular. Its objective is to asseverate the wholeness of one's identity. Reclamation is synonymous to the redefinition of womanhood and selfhood. The victory of assertion can be felicitously traced when Mary redefines the term prostitute by combating the patriarchal society of the Enlightenment that makes her a peripheral character.

Keywords: fallen woman; patriarchy; reclamation; selfhood

Emma Donoghue has set *Slammerkin* in the Enlightenment, a period in which she is deeply interested, a period when Europe and America emerged from centuries of ignorance into an age of science, reason and logic. Reason was used to challenge conventional thoughts, especially, in the sphere of religion, law, marriage and education. In the words of Edward Albert, the Enlightenment was “a revolt against the conventional literary technique,” which represented the subversion of the entrenched social customs (225). *Slammerkin* brings about a convergence of all these issues by bringing Mary in conflict with the religious, social, educational, and legal institutions of her age. Donoghue's narrative pace is relentless and imagery concise, at the same time, it provides space for extended musing around the silent space surrounding them. This links her to the representative novel of the age, *Tristram Shandy* (1765) by Lawrence Stern, in which blank pages and passages offered space to the readers to complete the story (Albert 225).

Slammerkin interrogates the role of the church through curate, Cadwaladyr who pimps and blackmails Mary while ironically exhorting his congregation to lead a virtuous life. His words, “Blessed are those who give ” (*Slammerkin* 373) appal Mary and when he glibly gives a sermon on patience asking people to trust in God if their “plans have gone awry” (368). She is violently



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sick. She is wrenched by the desperate desire to believe despite his insincerity but thwarted by her experience and knowledge of the world. Donoghue questions the power of the church to marginalize women and does so biting by building the repulsive montage of Cadwaladyr as an unscrupulous businessman, a hypocritical priest and a blackmailing degenerate pimp, “What gall the Reverend Cadwaladyr had, standing up there as pious as a monk, when the shillings in his pocket came from pimping for a murderess!” thinks Mrs. Ash (*Slammerkin* 391). The irony is diabolically compounded because the condemning nanny herself is lonesome and, therefore, conniving and hides behind a constructed web of illusion and treachery.

The enlightenment was perceived as an age of liberty and Edmund Burke, in his *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1757) eloquently describes the times: “The Fabrick Superstition has in this our Age and Nation received much ruder shocks than it had ever felt before; and through the Chinks and Breaches of our Prison, we see such Glimmerings of Light, and feel such refreshing Airs of Liberty, as daily raise our Ardor for more” (n. pag.). Liberty, however, was a lopsided concept, as was equality, and these were weighed towards the rich, male, and white citizens. Law was prejudicially framed on grounds of established hierarchy and a master killing a slave, a husband his wife, and a bishop his priest was accepted as the just order of things, but the opposite was punishable under law, because “if a priest kills his bishop, or a wife her husband, or a servant his master, then crime is accounted by natural law as a sort of treason, insofar as it reverses the natural order of authority” (404). *Slammerkin* exposes this inherent illogic of the age which claimed to seek freedom through logic. This is ironically highlighted by Abi, the African maid at the Joneses. Mrs. Jones says that she considers servants as family and treats them kindly, yet, as a black slave owned by a white family, Abi was free to go as long as she had nowhere to go, she was a servant but was not paid her wages, and she was expected to be grateful to her “kind” masters.

Enlightenment sets its agenda as prioritizing reason over imagination, science over religion, and logic over passion, but was uniformly marked by patriarchal dominance. Donoghue places Mary as an interrogator of the patriarchy in her society which was pro-masculine in nature. The prominent patriarchs of the age, Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau professed misogynist ideologies. Immanuel Kant supported the idea of subordinating women to men on account of their physical difference (Schott n. pag.). Marriage, as an institution, legalized the husband’s control on the wife like that of a master on the slave. This is well elucidated by Mrs. Jones belief that “ ‘a wife’s only a kind of upper servant . . . [who] can’t go against his word” (294). This is conflated with the episode in which Mr. Jones, troubled by his grief on not having a son and his wife’s



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coldness towards him, comes looking for the prostitute at the inn. He discovers Mary to be the whore but that does not stop him from having sex with her. The superficiality and duplicity of the marriage institution is thus exposed as wives are regulated to be monogamous, whereas husbands are free to seek pleasure and comfort elsewhere. The challenge to this prejudice was clearly enunciated in the feminist stance of Mary Astell given in *A Serious Proposal to Women* (1668), which seeks to subvert the patriarchal institution of marriage that entraps women and the struggles and triumphs of such a stance is manifestly represented Donoghue's characterisation of Mary.

Slammerkin represents the peripheral status of women in the age of Enlightenment. Mr. Jones' regret over not having a son clearly highlights this: "a daughter, no matter how devoted to her parents, was only theirs for a time; she would marry into another family and bear children with another name . . . A son that would inherit the business, and support his parents when they were too old to work . . ." (313). Women were objectified, used for sexual pleasure and treated as sub human, even as they strove to maintain their human dignity. Within marriage, women of means like Mrs. Jones too had to struggle for their dignity and survival. This perspectivises Mrs. Jones' wrath at Mary, who could destroy her custom with Mrs. Morgan to her competitors in the business which would also have a deleterious effect on her already cold marriage. Similarly, Susan for the sake of her place in her marriage and the consequent fear of her husband had shown Mary the door earlier. Mary, on the other hand, combats the cruelty and adversity of her times with her indomitable and indefatigable spirit. Donoghue here links Mary to her namesake, the Queen of Scots, the story of whose execution is interpolated into the scene of Mary's hanging in the novel (331, 420). The resolution of Mary, her vitality, and her conviction that she was not in the wrong are woven together in the crimson robes of the Queen of Scots who earned loyalty and respect in the manner in which she faced her imprisonment and death. Therefore, through this intertwining, *Slammerkin* presents the subversion of patriarchy and reclamation of dignity and personhood by the two Marys.

Mary's sullen treatment by her stepfather, being deceived by the pedlar, her gang rape by the soldiers, and her being pimped by the curate, unites the relational, commercial, valorised and ecumenical aspects of patriarchy in her oppression. It is clear that in every walk of life Mary's being female is her major handicap. Mary, however, with wit and grit challenges these patriarchal assertions and destabilizes hierarchy at every level. Her basic education, her training at Magdalen and the life lessons given by Doll, coupled with her innate intelligence and courage link her to Mary Wollstonecraft's thesis in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Donoghue has thus



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composed an interesting montage of the three contemporaneous Marys, Saunders, Astell, and Wollstonecraft, which expresses subversion, reclamation and reparation in juxtaposition to the male montage of oppression, dispossession, and injustice.

The rebellion in the age against imposed femininity and class discrimination is given in the novel through focus on clothes and the entire process of making them, with special attention to embroidery. The symbols and metaphors in *Slammerkin*, where the propensity towards the red ribbon, the silver-edged slammerkin, and other embroidered clothes refer to Mary's desire to escape from the drudgery of life and to assert her individuality. The white velvet silver embroidered slammerkin that Mary claims as hers by way of the sweat and toil she has expended on it, is referential of her character, where the white colour represents her intrinsic innocence, and the silver embroidery on it represents her quest to seek freedom from the shackles of poverty and patriarchy. Doll's red ribbon that Mary is passionate about finds an echo in the red blood stains of Mrs. Jones on the slammerkin and the last gown worn by Mary, Queen of Scots. Together, they form a montage of desire, the cost it demands, and the brutalisation that ensues in a society inimical to a woman's individuality and aspirations. The age of Enlightenment, marked the fondness for gaudy embroidered clothes among affluent women as an expression of their budding liberty, this invariably throws into relief the absence of freedom and means in women belonging to the lower strata. Donoghue uses clothes as a metaphor to underline this point. Further, clothes play an important role in depicting the sisterhood between Doll and Mary, as well as the socially conditioned love of Mrs. Jones for Mary and Abi. Doll had died but kept Mary's slammerkins safe. Mrs. Jones, on the other hand, is furious at Mary for wearing the white slammerkin and wants Mary to immediately take it off, put down the other dresses she has taken and to leave her home. Her actions and words immediately other Mary who, in her hurt, is unable to see that the mistress is also made vulnerable by the prospect of the collapse of her business. Fashion is thus used to question the established hierarchies and to deconstruct the complex master-slave metanarratives of the age. The basic rules about clothes taught by Doll to Mary are thus subversively applicable to the beliefs and values of the age: "Clothes make the woman. . . . [and] Clothes are the greatest lie ever told" (76-77). Mary is a victim of the inherent elitist politics of fashion and the slammerkins she pines for are an expression of her aspirational self, which later became the noose placed around her neck by the entrenched hierarchies. Nevertheless, the desire to 'better herself' does not leave her even till the point of death, when she deprecates the dirty shift she is wearing and thinks, "it was a petty matter, but she would have given anything to be hanged in black satin" (418). This is followed by the final moment of realisation: "How vanity endured to the end! Clothes



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being no protection, she told herself, folks might as well cast them off and go naked across the world” (418).

Enlightenment is a contentious age for feminism as it prioritized the male and postulated a biased idea of advancement and reason that sought to establish the logic for sex and class based discrimination. Interestingly, the name Cadwaladyr can be anagrammatised as ‘Cad-lady-war,’ which embodies the anti-woman spirit of the age. Thus, *Slammerkin* describes and proscribes detrimental patriarchal ideas through the operation of subversion, the desire for reclamation and the denial of reparation in the character of Mary. Confined by her gendered experience in the poor grimy setting of eighteenth-century London that represents the underbelly of the urbanised locale and the social institutions of the age, Mary is placed both at the periphery and at double jeopardy. Located as she is, her movement towards the gallows is inevitable but not before successfully stripping bare the Enlightenment for its negating engagement with women.

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