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## Asphyxiating Patriarchy and Polemical Misogyny in Guy De Maupassant's *Useless Beauty*

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“Useless Beauty” is a short story by one of the most admired nineteenth century French novelist and short story writer Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893). He is deemed one of the modern masters of the art of the short story and has influenced practitioners of that genre from his time to the present. This story was featured in *Original Short Stories Volume 6 of 13* published by Alfred A. Knopf in New York in 1926. Known for its realism, simplicity, and directness, Maupassant's fiction addresses the theme of human cruelty and incorporates his observations on French society. In addition to his more than two hundred short stories, Maupassant also wrote travel sketches and six novels.

“Useless Beauty” is the story of Countess de Mascaret and her husband, Count de Mascaret. During their eleven-year marriage, they have seven children and the Countess has fallen deaf to otiose adulation from her husband. The Countess feels as though her husband loves her only because he asserts claim over her youth and life, over her ability to have children. He loves their children not as a father but again as a victory over her youth and life. One day the Countess tells her husband a dark secret that one of the seven children does not belong to him. She admits that she gave herself to another man without love and affection just to take revenge upon his abominable masculine tyrannies. She confesses her indiscretion at the altar of a church and leaves the Count in the church while she returns home. Throughout the story, the Count wants to know which child is not his, but the Countess refuses to tell. In the end, the Countess reverses her confession and discloses that she said it to prevent from becoming a baby factory.

It is a narrative story, written in third person point of view, in the form of showing rather than telling. All characters are flat. Maupassant has succeeded in maintaining the suspense until last. Fabula is simple and syuzhet is straight. The story is written in present tense with two occasions of time lapse. There is a single plot, which follows the Aristotelian pattern of beginning, middle, and end. The story ends on positive note. Atmosphere is light with a little flashes of humour.

Though in the twenty-first century, this story seems implausible and irrational; which may be of little interest for modern computer-age readers. One cannot think it wise to lie about such dishonourable act just to avoid pregnancy. In modern times when women are equipped with innumerable medical aids to prevent unwanted pregnancy, why should one keep her husband away—physically as well as emotionally just to avoid pregnancy? Even Count de Mascaret's patience waiting for six years, just to know which of his child does not belong to him seems irrational. In the age of DNA test one can easily find out his child's parental status without any delay. Nevertheless, to enjoy this story one must follow Coleridge's “willing suspension of disbelief”, and postpone her/his judgment regarding the credibility of this story. We must take historical approach and relate our self to that era when there were no such things available to people. Because the real theme of the story is not the

need of contraception or DNA facility, but the suppression of woman's identity and her free will in the patriarchal society. It also points out the need for the space in marriage, at the same time mutual understanding and respect between married couple. Above all, it also gave us message for the small family and need of preventing woman from becoming a reproductive chattel, mere machine for bringing children in the world. This Story is quite entertaining, full of drama, tension and suspense.

It is a piece of phallogocentric literature. Obviously, the story is phallogocentric, and text is androtext. The term phallogocentric stands for that narration in literature which presents women from male's point of view. Similarly, androtext also represents male written text in literature. In this story, it is the writer, who is acting as Comtesse de Mascaret, not the Countess herself.

The title, "useless beauty" itself carries strong phallogocentric connotations. The word 'useless' means that which is not able to be used or unsuccessful or unlikely to be worthwhile. It also means "serving no practical purpose, or not at all proficient" (Chambers 1565). Now coming to 'beauty', it stands for "the quality pleasing to senses, especially to the eye or ear, or giving aesthetic pleasure generally" (115). Since language is masculine and generally all norms were decided and defined by male, these two terms also expressed male's concepts and ideas. "Through language, the world is defined and structured, and without language, the social structure of the world cannot exist" (Waugh 336). Thus, the language here also served as a means to continue and perpetuate the patriarchal system of society. It articulates male's idea of beauty and utility. That is the reason why feminist ask for *écriture féminine* (feminine writing), which can defy masculine linguistic code.

In the story, Maupassant used the word beauty for Comtesse de Mascaret, symbolically for all women. So here useless beauty means, woman who is not serving any practical purpose or is not able to be used. Now the question comes: what is this purpose and who is defining this purpose. Of course, man. According to the story line, a woman who shies away from her solemn duty, i.e. to please male senses, is useless. Like Comtesse de Mascaret, who lied even at the altar of God just to drive away her husband who is sensually obsessed about her. From the ancient time, all husbands consider their birthright on their wives' body and soul, under patriarchal social system. The Count felt "furious jealousy" for his wife, despite the fact that he completely controls her life. The reason behind his jealousy lies in the patriarchal system, which desires a willing absolute submission from woman without any objection and questioning. The Count felt jealous because the Countess had submitted her body to him not her soul. Though she married him under pressure, yet within her heart she always bore the grudge for this forced marriage:

I have always felt an antipathy to you, and I have always let you see it, for I have never lied, monsieur. You married me in spite of myself; you forced my parents, who were in embarrassed circumstances, to give me to you, because you were rich, and they made me marry you in spite of my tears. (WWW.Google.Co.in, <<http://www.classicreader.com/book/601/1/>>).

Here it becomes a universal truth across the world, race and culture. In patriarchal society, men had been using their power, money, and position to possess those women whom they found tantalizing to their libido. They use this institution of marriage as a camouflage to hide their lowly lust. In such relationships woman becomes a living corpse. Without any say in their own matters, they became the legal sex-slave. That is why feminist considers

marriage as an oppressive and exploitative economic arrangement. It confines woman to domesticity and maternity, which Comtesse de Mascaret resisted by hook or by crook: “I wish to take my place in society as I have the right to do, as all women have the right to do” (*Ibid*).

The term “beauty” is also used for pretty girls and women. This association of the word “beauty” with female is completely rejected by feminist theorists, who deny the binary opposition of western world, which represents female as meek, beautiful, sensitive, gentle, emotional, shy, weak, unstable, and anxious. Woman is continuously presented as such, that they naturally obtained secondary position to man in the society. Here also the Countess is presented in the dark light. She is fickle; unable to resist Count’s wishes despite her objection, thus weak; a liar, who can lie even at the altar of God; mindlessly ambitious for worthless social life. The Countess gave us a stereotyped image of woman, eternalized by male community from centuries under their concealed misogyny.

Comtesse de Mascaret is presented primarily as a young beautiful flesh, nothing else in particular. She was mentioned as such: “The Countess was very beautiful, graceful and distinguished looking, with her long oval face; her complexion like yellow ivory, her large grey eyes and black hair” (*Ibid*). For Count also, she is first a beautiful woman than anything else. Which is clear by many of his remarks to his wife, like, “I think you are looking adorable” or “You never looked so pretty as you do today” (*Ibid*). Despite the fact that Countess is angry with Count, the Count is more interested in her beauty. Throughout the story, their conversation never had any impressions which suggest that Count is interested in his wife in any other way except sensually. Even in the end, his realization finally and indirectly suggested his newly found physical attraction for Countess: “He looked her full in face, observing how beautiful she was, with her eyes grey as a frosty sky. In her night-black hair the diamond coronet scintillated like a milky way” (*Ibid*). Thus, it suggests that for a man whether Guy de Maupassant or the Count, the value of female lies in her ability to please male’s senses with her physical charm. This kind of description of woman can only come from male writer. Because modern women have denied their male defined role, which represent them as an attractive commodity ready to be consumed before it wither. In contrast, they realized their worth as an independent entity from their male partners. The concept of sisterhood is its proof.

It is quite humiliating and insulting to show that woman can lie even at such a pious place like church just to grind her own axe. It presents woman as a most unreligious and ignoble creature. Again, it is phallogocentric interpretation of female frailty; here done by another male writer, Mr. Maupassant, proving his misogynist bent of mind. Which reminds us Shakespeare’s famous line from *Hamlet*—“Frailty thy name is woman.” Woman is portrayed as a weak-minded and weak-willed, who lacks strength of character. Such kind of portrayal is very common in literature. In contrast, man is portrayed as a strong, determinate, resolute and unyielding. For example, T S Eliot in *Murder in Cathedral* establishes man as a highly noble creature who can sacrifice even his life for the sake of religion. See the contrast, here Archbishop Thomas Becket—a man, turn down all the lures and lucrative proposals of four tempters and sacrificed his life in the service of God, religion and His people. On the other hand, Comtesse de Mascaret—a woman, did not think even for a second to lie before God just for her comfort. It is just one of many examples, which reveals the dire misogyny and gendering in literature. It indirectly suggests that the higher responsibilities cannot be trusted to women, because they are liar, weak, vacillating, and manipulating creature. Nonetheless, we know this is not true. Thus, the text represents the woman from male’s point

of view. As already mentioned by Simone de Beauvoir in her revolutionary book *The Second Sex* (1949) that woman were presented as inferior and lack by male throughout history and across cultures.

It was also proved by this text that woman is first of all a flesh for man than an emotional being. Count treated his wife as a beautiful woman throughout the story. He was least concerned about her feelings and emotional requirements. It was clear on many occasions. First, in the beginning when Countess was very angry with her husband even at that situation Count found her very beautiful. He did not try to find out why his wife is upset. Even in the end when Countess revealed that she has never been unfaithful to him, he immediately starts feeling the same without the least concern about the fact that what made his religious wife to lie even at the altar of Christ. Thus proving that for a man, it is lust that is of utmost importance in their relationship with woman. Noble emotions are used as facades to dignify their ignoble passion.

The story establishes the age old notion of man's authority/superiority over woman. When Comtesse de Mascarot blamed her husband for being highly selfish by saying that he never loved her as a true lover but as sensuous man, and loved their children not as a true father but treats them as a proof of his masculinity—"You loved your children as victories, and not because they were of your own blood. They were victories over me, over my beauty, over my charms, over the compliments which were paid to me and over those that were whispered around me without being paid to me personally" (*Ibid*)—he retorted fiercely physically as well verbally:

He had seized her wrist with savage brutality, and he squeezed it so violently that she was quiet and nearly cried out with the pain and he said to her in a whisper:

'I love my children, do you hear? What you have just told me is disgraceful in a mother. But you belong to me: I am master—your master—I can exact from you what I like and when I like - and I have the law on my side.'

He was trying to crush her fingers in the strong grip of his large, muscular hand, and she, livid with pain, tried in vain to free them from that vice which was crushing them. The agony made her breath hard, and the tears came into her eyes. 'You see that I am the master and the stronger', he said. (*Ibid*)

Consider this line—"I am master—your master—I can exact from you what I like and when I like - and I have the law on my side"—this single line is well enough to confirm man's attitude towards woman. For a man, woman never exists as an independent entity but always as an auxiliary to his being, secondary in nature, as a servant in the service of Man God. This biased notion of woman even does not spare great intellectuals like Aristotle, who declared that "the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities." Who can forget his famous derogatory statement regarding woman—"The woman does not exist." This master-slave relationship is behind woman's subjugation. In this story, Comtesse de Mascarot also has no will of her own. She does not want many children but is helpless, forced to obey her husband's wish. She takes the refuge of lie so that her husband/master stays away from her. Because, she cannot stop him unless he stops himself on his own. Thus, it is proved again that women do not have their own will they chiefly depend on man's will.

There is another thing that is quite noticeable in the story—that the woman itself recognized her value in relation to man. Comtesse de Mascaret outpoured her anger in these words:

And as you could not prevent me from being beautiful and from pleasing people, from being called in drawing-rooms and also in the newspapers one of the most beautiful women in Paris, you tried everything you could think of to keep admirer from me, and you hit upon the abominable idea of making me spend my life in a constant state of motherhood, until the time should come when I should disgust every man. (*Ibid*)

Consider the line “until the time should come when I should disgust every man”; it is quite clear from this line that Countess herself recognized her value in being beautiful, in being pleasing to men. Now consider another line “And it is not the desire of possessing me for I should never have refused you, but it is the wish to make me unsightly” (*Ibid*). The Countess is portrayed by man, that is why physical beauty is of utmost priority for her. In this story, she is not a woman but a mouthpiece of man, a male writer. It is male who value beauty in woman above all things. “The thing of beauty is a joy for ever”, the most referred line of literature by John Keats again proves this same mentality of men. That is why Maupassant’s Countess concerns too much about her appearance and beauty. For her, her admirers are very important, because they make her feel physically worthwhile in man’s world. “Men all over the world looked at women from their point of view. And not only that they have also taught and even forced women to look at themselves from male point of view” (Das 93).

Now contrast it with Elizabeth of *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel by Jane Austen. Elizabeth the protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice* never tries to mould her character according to man’s criteria. She never tries to be delicate or beautiful, never aspired to tempt Mr. Darcy by being so-called cultured woman according to British high society’s norms. Reason behind this contrast is that while the Comtesse de Mascaret presents male’s image of woman, Elizabeth presents female’s impression of woman. First is phallogocentric image of woman, whereas second is gynocritical image of woman. This is the reason why the need of *écriture féminine* is felt.

We can also apply John Berger’s gaze theory on this story. According to gaze theory, looking is not just a physical activity but always saturated with social, cultural, political, racial existence. Here woman is projected as passive object while male is active subject.

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly of vision: a sight. (Berger 47)

Countess viewed herself from male’s point of view. That is why looks and beauty are so important for her. She wanted to be recognized as a most beautiful woman in society. That is her only ambition, the only success that she desire. She turned herself as an object to look at. The Count is the source of authority. He cast his ‘male gaze’ on Countess. She is his property. He is the owner.

On another occasion, on the dining table, after the Comtesse de Mascaret revealed her dark secret to Count; the Count cast his gaze as a supreme authority while the Countess faced him as a subject race: “The Countess . . . remained with her eyes cast down, while the Count

scrutinized now the three boys and now the three girls with an uncertain, unhappy expression, which travelled from one to the other” (WWW.Google.Co.in, <<http://www.classicreader.com/book/601/1/>>). But if the Countess had lied to take her revenge upon Count’s abominable masculine tyrannies, then why she behaved like a sinner, why her eyes are cast down. On the contrary, she should be happy and content to see Count in this frustrated and helpless position. But why she is so afraid. She only able to feel her ‘first victory’ when Count left the room. Reason, she is presented here as a typical stereotyped woman, the secondary, the slave who cannot stand her master’s gaze. “They continued to exchange looks, rapid as pistol shot”, it is the master (Count) who is firing those shots and it is the slave (Countess) who is bearing those shots. The whole story is immersed in gendering, which define male as active subject-authority while the female as passive object-playground. It is the Count, who bears the responsibility of Countess and her children. When Count left his house, he still arranged for Countess’ expenditures. Here woman is presented entirely as male’s responsibility. Even Countess’ desire to take her place in society is not meant for becoming financial independent but to be recognized as beautiful charming woman. She never tried to become independent from her husband. She only tried to avoid pregnancy so that she should not become ugly, unsightly. Her aspiration is not of higher kind. Her purpose is not gaining “transcendence” or avoiding “lack” or “immanence” in so called Simone de Beauvoir’s phrase. This is a typical image of a woman in the gendered world:

It was at Opera . . . In the stalls the men were standing up . . . They were looking at boxes full of ladies in low dresses covered with diamonds and pearls, who were expanding like flowers in that illuminated hothouse, where the beauty of their faces and the whiteness of their shoulders seemed to bloom in order to be gazed at, amid the sound of music and human voices. (*Ibid*)

“In order to be gazed”, here women are presented as an object to be gazed at, and men are presented as consumers of these objects. It solidifies the Western binary roles of men and women. Which presents men as active, bold, strong, assertive, independent, aspiring, rational, logical, consumer, and as a source of energy and authority; while the women as a timid, yielding, gentle, dependent, self-sacrificing, emotional, intuitive, receptor, commodity, and the playground on which male exercised their power.

Personality traits are distinguished in terms of polar opposites of masculine and feminine. . . . Though all cultures claim to praise and value the ‘womanly’ quality, one can cite an equal number of passages denigrating woman while the verbal praise masks the actual relegation to the secondary position. Literature amply reflects these stereotypes. (Kudchedkar 33)

In the present story the beauty of Countess is also used as a mask, behind which her irrationality and mindlessness has been covered. This kind of projection naturally reduce woman to inferior class. Women became ‘the second sex’.

Milton’s line, “He for God only, she for God in him” could well be cited as an example of the almost universally held assumption that man’s purpose in life is to serve God, the state, society, not least his own self-advancement, while woman’s purpose is to serve man. Man is seen as the norm, woman as the ‘other’, not merely different, but inferior, lacking. (33)

From centuries, male has been using literature to portray woman as his subordinate, which is reflected from time to time. It reminds me of Tennyson’s famous lines from *The Princess*:

As are the roots of earth and base of all:  
 Man for the field and woman for the hearth;  
 Man for the sword and for the needle she;  
 Man with the head and woman with the heart;  
 Man to command and woman to obey;  
 All else confusion. (www.google.co.in, <[http://archive.org/stream/tennysonsprinces02tenn/tennysonsprinces02tenn\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/tennysonsprinces02tenn/tennysonsprinces02tenn_djvu.txt)>)

Literature that initially belongs to male members of society has always been biased to man. They maintained their superiority by maintaining the division of labour. They projected man as a breadwinner, the owner, the protector of woman and her children; while woman as housewife, servitor, dependent on man for her living and security. The present story also maintained the same status.

Though on the surface it seems that Maupassant was taking up feminist cause, but under the surface, he is actually perpetuating the male's impression of woman's utility. In this story, the misogyny of male writer is clearly exposed. Sexism is also there. The representation of Countess as a selfish, fickle, mindlessly ambitious and cruel woman is its proof. Though to understand these facts, one needs to take gynocritical approach. For male reader it is a simple story, which entertains you in every possible way. But for the female readers it is an another attempt by male authority to perpetuate their secondariness. Against which they must defend themselves with their innate wisdom and courage.

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