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A Behoof through Hypnotism in George Du Maurier's 'Trilby'

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Abstract:

This paper aims to focus on the state of Art, and the Artist, in the typical Bohemian Paris of the 1850s with reference to the use of hypnotism. Hypnotism has been presented as one of the central themes of the paper, showing how it was used in multiple ways, positive and negative, and how it's explained in the terms of modern psychology, and how it influenced the late 19th century society. The paper is unique in a sense where it would look at the role of “hypnotism” and its imitations, when being used against an innocent artist by his evil mentor; coined as “Svengali”, for the quest of fame, influence and power. It represents how gender, social hierarchy, and interpersonal relationships result in a dark trio of behoof and treachery. The novel “*Trilby*”, penned by George Du Maurier, is a horror gothic novel published in 1859, the central character Trilby O' Ferall, is a tone deaf, appealing woman, of lesser worldly aspirations and many spiritual and individual pursuits, who falls prey in the hands of Svengali, a clearly dominating figure. The paper would focus on how he made her work for his own desires, altering her personal and professional choices by casting a spell on her. It also talks of mental, and sexual exploitation central to Victorian women of the 1850s, and their fate as fallen women, whenever they tried to occupy the centre stage in the city space, apart from their pre-defined territory.

Keywords: Hypnotism, art, bohemianism, behoof, women.

Human aspiration opens endless avenues of possibilities in all major spheres of life, including treachery, and desperation. The desire of material recognition is known to victimize an individual immensely, opening doors for his psychological and ideological damage. George

Du Maurier 's Trilby is set in Paris going through social practices like Bohemianism¹. The novel talks about the beautiful Trilby, a bohemian girl, finding art as both refuge and a way of living, she spreads unmatched charm within her social circle, and walks with exceptionally charming feet. Trilby is spellbound by Svengali, her evil mentor, but the spell keeps her from realizing the dangers of his ulterior motives towards her. She is hypnotised, inside and out, mimicking the actions of Svengali like a puppet. Hypnosis, as a deciding component of this novel, if understood carefully, comes up as a state of trance, where the imagination feels real, a condition where there is a deliberate disconnect from one's environment, resulting in the subject's complete absorption by imageries and feelings. The science of hypnotism redefines awareness, hypnosis is also referred as “a condition of deep sleep” at several places.² The novel discusses how a mentor can use his student/ disciple for his own behoof, treating him like an opportunity. Svengali is clearly evil; he is a visibly negative character having Jewish roots with relatives in Austria who adore him. He is a huge nosed, ugly man with filthy nails, he spews hate from his speech, always laughing at the wrong moment and things. His character seems to be in complete contrast with the character of Trilby; as in the novel, it goes like:

“Svengali walking up and down the earth seeking whom he might
cheat, betray, exploit, borrow money from, make brutal fun of,
bully if he dare, cringe to if he must – man, woman, child or dog.”³

These lines can appropriately signify how sinister he is in his pursuits. He is street smart and attacked straight on the weaknesses of Trilby.

Trilby's tragic fate happens to be a terrible result of her social positioning, suggestive of her having a tragic past and dark childhood, although, the suffering only adds to the radiance of Trilby. The lack of happiness in her past seems fading away with her life into Art. Being a naturally adventurous woman, Trilby unknowingly sets herself up for an extensive treachery. George du Maurier shows how “Art, and the glamour beholds darkness and moral dilemma,

¹ Jerrold, Siegel. *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life*, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

² Forel, August. *Hypnotism or Suggestion and Psychotherapy; A Study of the Psychological, Psycho-Physiological and Therapeutic Aspects of Hypnotism*, Publisher: Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1891.

³ Du Maurier, George. *Trilby*. Osgood, McIlvaine & Company, (1895)

knitting her social identity as an artist.”⁴ The novel, puts under focus the power play going on between the characters, hugely flawed in their respective lives. At the same time, it also highlights the vulnerability of a woman out in the social sphere trying to make ends meet, and at the same time, seeking a creative high, that too, while being surrounded by many suitors. Being so, Trilby continuously goes through exhausting trauma, affecting her delicate body and mind- a mind which doesn't function according to her will.

In the novel, hypnosis and behoof seem to be the central theme. These unembodied characters play their role in the background, and George Du Maurier, through his understanding of the human psyche, tries striking a chord with the supernatural phenomenon, fitting into the horror gothic genre.⁵ Du Maurier uses psychology and psychic realms in the novelties, as it was in trend during the late 19th century. Her portrayal of Trilby, however, is different from the conventional Victorian women, giving the readers ample room for interpretation of the woman. Trilby is a bohemian girl, having few permanent ties, believing in freedom of mind and body, highly spiritual yet discarding the regressive notions of Christianity about love and physical encounters. Trilby has had her share of adventurous encounters with men who approached her for anything but permanent ties, yet believing in the boho lifestyle, she never turns bitter personally. While Christianity condemned physical relationships outside marriage, Trilby is rebellious enough to discard these rigid rules and enjoyed her individuality, way before encountering Svengali.

Thus, the frank nature of Trilby puts her in the close vicinity of various men, and precisely, her admirers. The spell suggested in the novel is thus, not just a literal occurring, but also metaphorical in a sense where the naivety of the central character makes her vulnerable to the advances of the forces working behind her, good or bad. George's interest towards modern psychology made him blend it with the novel, his writing comes up as not only a novel, but the manifestation of his own unfulfilled desires as a child. Thus, his writing suggests an autobiographical narrative, not to forget that he himself to be like a virtuoso and wanted to acquire great mastery over singing.⁵

Also, it is seen that the human tendency of behoof is backed up with a strong desire of territorial control. Trilby falls into the spell of Svengali given that her belief system in her

⁴ Berleant, Arnold. "Artists and Morality: Towards an ethic of Art", *Leonardo* 10, (1977), pp. 195-202.

⁵ Golden, Catherine. *Turning Life into Literature: The Romantic Fiction of George Du Maurier*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

mentor was intact, despite the various cautions she ignored while being in his company, submitting to his will.

“It is a wondrous thing, the human foot—like the human hand; even more so, perhaps; but, unlike the hand, with which we are so familiar, it is seldom a thing of beauty in civilized adults who go about in leather boots or shoes. So that it is hidden away in disgrace, a thing to be thrust out of sight and forgotten.”³

These lines represent the enchanting features of Trilby- and her overly beautiful feet, something which makes her highly ravishing, with her raw sense of art. Trilby, who only sang to take the commands of Svengali, unknowingly falls prey to demonic energies and crude intentions. The spell designs her just appropriately to carry forward the influence of Svengali, with nothing else remaining behind for Trilby's own interest. By the end of the novel, her act of admitting about her disinterest to sing signals of how she never knew, in her childlike-ness, of what perils she was subjected to. She transforms into a mere pawn amidst patriarchal power structures. Trilby is largely influenced by the grandeur of Svengali, and admires his musical expertise to a point where she loses all track of her reason, described in the earlier part of the novel as how Trilby would react at his singing expertise- with just the right amount of stress, skill, and insistence, as shown in the lines below:

“Then Svengali came and made some of his grandest music, which was as completely thrown away on Trilby as fireworks on a blind beggar, for all she held her tongue so piously.”³

The novel is a Parisian romance where there is a constant sentimental quest of a bunch of artists, all puppets in the hands of Svengali, for their love interest. Trilby, the young but promising woman with a spark, captures the attention of Svengali, an appropriate example of a Victorian villain, ruthless, egocentric, barbaric, and wicked to the core. He is immoral and signifies gracelessness, ungrateful to his acquaintances, and highly arrogant. Being misogynistic and dishonourable, he is shallow and lacks basic principles and sensitivity. The practices of Svengali are hugely influenced with Franz Anton Mesmer's theory of '*animal magnetism*', as a strong explanation to powerful forces of the nature influencing human mind, society, as well as politics. Mesmer, from an early age, had a calling, and a deep fascination for marvellous, but later abandoned it for magnetism, as he found out that “all marvellous

phenomena cannot be addressed with electricity, but mesmerism.”⁶ Thus, Trilby as a horror gothic novel finds its base in animal magnetism, where the victim acts upon the wishes of his victimizer.

Influence, art and power take up the centre stage in the novel while being ingrained the typical Parisian society, a society which seems to degenerate in the sense of moral values. Svengali tricked her into believing that she could sing exceptionally, but his power made him realise the vulnerability of Trilby getting attracted to attention and partnership, these were the times when Art was transforming into a sensational phenomenon, and Svengali wanted to make full use of the same, as he exclaims:

‘Barpleu! he was right, Litolff," said Svengali. "I assure you, mademoiselle, that I have never heard a voice that can equal yours; you have a talent quite exceptional.”³

Svengali, as sly as he can be, is aware of the unlimited budge the presence of a lady like Trilby on the stage could create- an idea which is highly objectifying yet sexual at the same time, implying that the role of Trilby on the stage was not only to sing, but to present her body in a provocative manner, putting herself up for public display, under the mesmeric condition, not to forget that these stage performances catered to men who were there not only for the fascination towards art, but also, sexual appetite.

The novel is an attack on the Victorian society and the social system attributed to it, and it is also a critique of the Victorian popular culture. George puts forward the absence of woman agency in terms of Trilby, continuously surrendering to the smart tactics of people who try to extract as much as they can, from her beauty, and grandeur, as the consequence of not having control over her senses. The fact that Trilby was spellbound made her mentally paralysed and added to her misery as much as it added to the courage of destructive forces around her. On a personal level, she never wanted to fall in love with Svengali, she says that she

‘could never be fond of [Svengali] in the way he wished ... I used to try and do all I could – be a daughter to him, as I couldn’t be anything else’.³

⁶ Townshend, Chauncey H. *Animal Magnetism, or Mesmerism; Its History, Phenomena and Present Condition*. James Mowatt and Co., (1844).

She was subjected to Svengali's racial discrimination, physical angst and insatiable lust by force. Trilby, is, in a way, subjected to various risk factors, produced by her status as a Victorian woman, who has lived most of her life in the poor quarters of Paris, making her a part of the urban poor. Trilby is a fairly vibrant woman. The noticeable changes in Trilby after quitting modelling are highly captivating, her speech improves with the right degree of refinement,⁷ her skin grows paler and it compliments her long hair- the qualities which play alongside, making her the perfect example of woman beauty and divinity- and someone who would be desired by many men for sexual encounters and reproduction.⁷ Her motherly tendency also attracts male attention, having the ability to cook, sew and her expertise in putting together a domestic sphere, and speaking English makes her a perfect match for romantic selection, and Svengali attempts to make ample use of this opportunity of turning her into her consort as well as earning partner. Svengali not only exploits her physically and mentally but also financially, given that he himself wasn't successful enough to earn a name and fame in the artistic circuit of Paris. He deliberately makes sure that she is trained a certain way, a way in which people would like her to be on stage, which could be resulting in the success of his professional goals with her.

However, despite Trilby's roaring fame and success as a singer, she is still a fallen woman according to the English standards of morality, however, in her childlike manner and simplicity, she is unaware of the negative labels she is subjected to- she is able, tastefully grown, healthy and blooming individual unlike her parents and brothers, keeping her in a high league already. While it is suggested that she also signifies savagery- backed up by her act of posing nude- something which irked her admirers, but she is like Eve in the Garden of Eden, enjoying her raw self and 'virginal heart'. Trilby is a woman, and as a woman, she gives in to the love of her suitors, Romance is also an important concern in the novel, however, the love and romance is toxic, and did not prove productive for the welfare of the people involved in love confessions, it is just Svengali and his short-lived romance with Trilby that remains, proving the suitability of Svengali as the fittest, and the most influential of all men chasing Trilby. Trilby is fairly open, and probably this prevented other men to walk by her side. The purity of her heart makes negligible all her acts of nudity; and that she is open to art and architecture, also making her the appropriate candidate for being an artist. As the novel

⁷ Vorachek, Laura. *Mesmerists and Other Meddlers: Social Darwinism, Degeneration, and Eugenics in Trilby*. Cambridge University Press (2009).

progresses, she transforms from a savage to an enchanting diva, as a result of a mesmeric influence of her mentor, something which also resulted in her loss of autonomy, where she only started taking direction from Svengali in her life.

Trilby as a novel is a relevant example of how complex the coexistence of humans and the occult can be- there is always a bittersweet relationship between both of them, which turns out to be problematic even after infinite attempts of striking a fair balance. Be it Trilby, or Svengali- it is not the human, but the supernatural which takes over. The succession of unexplained energies over advanced human reason is an endless debate, which puts forth that no matter how desperate the effort of coexisting happily with the supernatural gets, there is always a tragedy chasing the one who tries to harness it for self-interest.

However, despite Trilby's roaring fame and success as a singer, she is still a fallen woman according to the English standards of morality.⁷ However, in her childlike manner and simplicity, she is unaware of the negative labels she is already subjected to- She is aware that she has done unacceptable things in her past, which are sensational and unconventional, not fitting in the mould of a typical Victorian woman, as she writes to Sandy:

“And I have done dreadful things besides, as you must know, as all the Quartier knows. Baratier and Besson, but not Durian, though people think so. Nobody else I swear – except old Monsieur Penque at the beginning, who was mamma's friend. It makes me almost die of shame and misery to think of it: for that's not like sitting I knew how wrong it was all along – and there's no excuse for me, none.”⁸

George Du Maurier through his pen shows how able she is, tastefully grown, healthy and blooming individual unlike her parents and brothers, keeping her in a high league. While it is suggested that she also signifies savagery- backed up by her act of posing nude- she worked as an artiste model for living-something which irked her admirers, for a woman choosing to do so at point in the social setting was considered to be a taboo. Trilby is hugely spiritual, liking pleasure and leisure, discarding wealth and worldly ties, spiritual, and essentially, rebellious against the rigid rule- but it is in clear contrast with the way she becomes after coming under the hypnotic spell created by Svengali. Her feminine aspect and her insistence on romance and wholesome human relationships is a major trait of her character, however, a quote from the novel suggests that:

“Indeed, she might almost be said to possess a virginal heart, so little did she know of love's heartaches and raptures and torments and clingings and jealousies.”⁸

She is like Eve in the Garden of Eden, enjoying her raw self and ‘virginal heart’. Trilby is a woman, and as a woman, she gives in to the love of her suitors, Romance is also an important concern in the novel, however, the love and romance is toxic, and did not prove productive for the welfare of the people involved in love confessions, it is just Svengali and his short lived romance with Trilby that remains, proving the suitability of Svengali as the fittest, and the most influential of all men chasing Trilby. After Trilby returned to Paris again, Svengali casted the hypnotic spell on her and even compromised her physically, while she is in her deep hypnotic sleep. She makes her his virtual wife despite having a wife already. Trilby, herself mentions to Sandy that:

‘I always had the best of everything. He insisted on that ... as soon as I felt uneasy about things ... he would say “Dors, ma mignonne” and I would sleep at once – for hours, I think – and wake up, oh, so tired! and find him kneeling by me’.⁹

Trilby is exceptional and exposed, and probably this prevented other men to walk by her side. The purity of her act and her determination to work as an artiste model for her living, visibly disturbed her suitors to approach her. Trilby did not fall under the set criterion for Victorian woman, but she is indulging in something savage, unacceptable, and unconventional. Despite her occasional moral dilemma and mental ambiguity, she emerges as a woman of substance, for she “followed love for love's sake only, now and then, as she would have followed art if she had been a man.” She is appreciated to art and architecture, also making her an appropriate candidate for being an artist, although it’s not her inner calling. However, as the novel progresses, she transforms from a savage bohemian to an enchanting diva, as she was mesmerising, much to the delight of Svengali, her Jewish mentor, something which also

⁸ Du Maurier, George. *Trilby*. Osgood, McIlvaine & Company, (1895), pp. 243.

resulted in her loss of autonomy, where she only started taking directions from Svengali regarding her actions and mannerisms.

Hence, she awakens, she is quite aware, yet very dormant - she is aware and active in her imaginary world, she wakes up and sleeps instantly, upon orders of her master, thus, there lies a sense of activity and awareness, but in a wrong sense. For her, the imageries of the unreal, world around her summed up as the ultimate reality. The spell brought her a life of recognition and luxury, but at the end of the day, it was nothing, but only the spell which turned out to be the supreme, even more than Svengali, because it was merely the ability of Svengali casting spells over fresh artists, that won him his living. Trilby has lesser individual liberty as the novel progresses- she cannot take her decisions with confidence. Her free will is absent throughout, as if she is walking in a sleep- she transforms more as a sacrificial goat rather than a healthy, living individual. Her suffocation through her luxurious life is evident with the kind of dark ethos she is offered with- isolated, and alienated, with a famous background. By the end of the novel, when Svengali dies in the cubicle and the mesmeric spell breaks, Trilby is humiliated by "laughter, hoots, hisses, cat-calls, cock-crows",³ as she is not able to sing in tune, which made her cry in anticipation:

“I didn't want to sing at all...I only sang because I was asked to sing.”³

Trilby wanted to escape from the darkness of her uneasy past, and the association with Svengali and Art came up as an opportunity for her to divert from the same. The company was like intoxication to her being, she lived through false images and symbols, whereas her physical body collapsed due to rigorous rehearsals with Svengali, something which disturbed Little Billee, a man with a tender heart, wondering at the sheer fragility with which his love interest was turning into a living corpse gradually, After Svengali's death, Trilby passed away shortly, bed-ridden, looking at his picture.

“It is complex as to how Du Maurier has designed the character of Svengali- grey, debatable, controversial yet captivating. One cannot completely love him or hate him, but there always lies a moral dilemma around the character of Svengali. He is foul, surviving on corruption, and

his capability to keep Trilby glued to him represents his sheer power of seduction.”¹⁰

Trilby as a novel is a relevant example of how complex the coexistence of humans and the occult can be- there is always a bitter-sweet relationship between the both, which turns out to be problematic even after infinite attempts of striking a fair balance. Be it Trilby, or Svengali- it is not the human, but the supernatural, and the act of hypnosis which takes over. When understood with the point of view of the modern psychology, it can be figured out that every human interaction, and every human activity can be a part of hypnosis, including religious entities and political framework, which produce the effect of mass hysteria. The succession of unexplained energies over advanced human reason is an endless debate, which puts forth that no matter how desperate the effort of coexisting happily with the supernatural gets, there is always a tragedy chasing the one who tries to harness it for self –interest. Although, the reference of hypnotism in the novel also makes clear that hypnotism, is not the cure to medical concerns but the actual problem, where the main issue with people was that they were under hypnotic influence, losing track of their will and sanity.

The novel also shows how despite being a progressive age, the 19th century society was still wanting to be moved- the herd mentality kept them away from the quest of the Truth, they just wanted some pleasant stimulus to make them feel good about their lives. It can be an effective interpretation that Art, and Art forms were also nothing but merely the modes of hypnotism, facilitating escapism. Hence, hypnotism, which was deemed as a treatment for psychic diseases was crazy, but as crazy as it sounded, it still remained a forte of curiosity amongst the cosmopolitan crowd.

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