

Scott's Eccentric Characters: Voices of Unrelenting Exploitation in *The Heart of Midlothian*

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Abstract

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), a Scottish novelist and Father of the Historical novel in English deserves the credit of pioneering the genre of Historical novel by presenting to the world, the fictionalized history capable of producing ineradicable impression on the minds of readers. Scott was meticulous in looking up old records and drawing upon his collection of legend, tradition, history and poetry that he had gathered for almost forty years while narrating his novels. His semi-mythical tales are in concurrence with the rapid industrialization and urbanization that transformed society and created unprecedented societal problems.

*Scott's most popular novel *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) incorporates a spectrum of characters ranging from common men and women to the uncommon, imbalanced eccentric beings. The minor characters like Madge Wildfire and Meg Murdockson portrayed by Scott impart a breadth and variety to the novel and create an impression of life burdened with heterogeneous problems encountered by human beings in all ages. The present paper focusses on the mindset of male folk who consider women simply a toy to be played with and to be thrown away when their lascivious desires are fulfilled. The attempt has been made to expose the evil mindset of the young especially in the postmodern era when men's faith in the institution of marriage has diminished; they simply lure young women giving them false promises of marriage and discard them after their corporeal urge is gratified.*

Key Words: karma, Tolbooth, illegitimate, despicable, fair sex, wild justice.

Sir Walter Scott though hailed in the nineteenth century Scotland, reflects in his novels, the agony of women prevalent in all ages round the globe. Women are simply considered the *fair sex*

and are exploited beyond measure by the dominating male folk of the society. The men in the society forget the unprecedented inner strength of women capable of scourging men the lesson which they will remember till the last breath of their lives. The most talked over incident of Delhi Gang Rape Case and the final verdict of capital punishment to all the accused justifies that the time has arrived when women will not sit silently, mourning the ill happenings in their lives but will boldly give an expression to their abysmal experience and proclaim their cry for justice. Through the novel *The Heart of Midlothian*, the concept of Nature's wild justice also surfaces when the fraudster George Staunton who exploits Madge Wildfire physically on the pretext of marrying her; discards her; marries Effie but is finally killed by his own lost son Whistler.

Madge Wildfire, one of the most unforgettable characters of Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian* is portrayed as a frantic and insane woman. But Madge is not insane by birth. She has a misfortune of being seduced by a young profligate George Staunton. As a result of which she gives birth to an illegitimate child. Madge's mother Meg Murdockson, wishing to conceal her shame and actuate Madge's marriage with an elderly but wealthy man destroys her off-spring. The consequence of this brutal action by Madge's mother results in the total derangement of Madge's mind, and it is in this state of madness that the reader meets her in the novel.

Even though Madge is demented, her subconscious mind alarmingly protests; she at times speaks coherently. She faintly remembers the disaster that befell her. When Jeanie, the heroine of the novel asks her the reason for her fits of weeping, Madge makes roundabout references of her past love-affair, her lover's vow to marry her, the birth of a child as a consequence, and the death of the child at her mother's hands. Madge comes close to revealing the details of her tragedy, but checks herself in time. This proves that she is not absolutely deranged; she even scolds Jeanie for being too inquisitive about her past and compares herself with Effie Deans in giving birth to a bastard child.

Effie is none other but Jeanie's sister who also falls into the trap of Staunton; becomes pregnant and gives birth to an illegitimate child. But the difference between Madge and Effie is that Staunton as against Madge, is serious about his relationship with Effie. He makes valiant efforts to liberate Effie Deans from the Tolbooth prison where she is awaiting the trial for child-murder. But his efforts go awry as Effie refuses to escape. Effie is put behind bars because she hides the secret of her pregnancy from everyone and is even unable to produce her child in the court. It is therefore

presumed that she has murdered her child to conceal her guilt. But the truth is that the baby has been stolen by Staunton's demented mistress Madge Wildfire while Effie was sick. Effie's sister Jeanie faces a moral dilemma in court when asked whether Effie told her of her pregnancy. Although a white lie would have saved Effie's life, Jeanie's religious and moral convictions forbid her to tell the untruth. Effie is therefore sentenced to death. Immediately after the pronouncement of punishment, Jeannie undertakes the journey to London on foot in order to ask forgiveness from the Queen Caroline for her sister Effie Deans. On her way to London, she comes across Madge Wildfire who narrates a story of her life to Jeanie in a fit of delirium.

Madge vaguely remembers the injustice inflicted on her by her mother Meg Murdockson. But she is afraid of Meg because she has taken strong hold over her mind. She even bullies Madge when the latter is obstinate in some manner. While wandering with Jeanie, away from her mother's hut, Madge suddenly remembers that she must go back without delay and take Jeanie along with her otherwise her mother would be furious. When Jeanie refuses to go back, Madge tells her that her mother will thrash her if she goes back without taking Jeanie with her.

Madge keeps wandering aimlessly through the wood and talks incoherently and disconnectedly with Jeanie by her side. Jeanie also follows Madge. Finally Madge emerges from the wood and takes a path that leads them to a small village. Having arrived at the village church, Madge shows Jeanie the grave of her dead father, Donald Murdockson who as per the inscription on the tombstone said, had been a faithful servant of George Staunton. The inscription runs as follows,

THIS MONUMENT WAS ERECTED TO THE MEMORY OF DONALD MURDOCKSON OF THE KING XXVI, OR CAMERONIAN REGIMENT, A SINCERE CHRISTIAN, A BRAVE SOLDIER, AND A FAITHFUL SERVANT, BY HIS GRATEFUL AND SORROWING MASTER, GEORGE STAUNTON. (312)

Madge's agitated mind finds relief when Jeanie begins "to arrange her hair, place her bonnet in order, rub the dust from her shoes and clothes, adjust her neck-handkerchief... made her appearance ten times more fantastic and apish than it had been before. (319) Madge feels elated for she has been wearing a dazzling dress and considers herself the most beautiful woman of the world. Her personal vanity elevates her much above the lofty mountains and she thinks that she is flying unconstrained away from all earthly sufferings. "She minced, she ambled, she smiled, she simpered,

and waved Jeanie Deans forward with the condescension of a noble *chaperone*, who has undertaken the charge of a country miss on her first journey to the capital” (320).

As Madge and Jeanie reach the church of the village, Madge drags Jeanie into it where, it being a Sunday, a large congregation is attending the service. People who are sitting in their seats observe the two newcomers with some surprise as they both seemed to them like crazy women. Madge is dressed in fantastic garments and behaves in the most ridiculous fashion whereas Jeanie helplessly walks by her side. Jeanie inwardly decides to seek help from the clergyman as soon as the service is over as he seems to her a benevolent and dignified man. At the end of the church service, Jeanie somehow gets rid of Madge, though Madge creates an ugly scene and attracts a large crowd giving rise to an impression that Jeanie too is mad like Madge whom everyone knows in the village as a demented creature fit only to be jeered at and ridiculed. Jeanie with a great difficulty eliminates herself from the crowd but Madge falls into the hands of a rabble which thinking her to be insane, teases and torments her without any qualm as it normally happens in such cases.

Jeanie flees from the place but after the lapse of a month, while she is passing through the village with her companions Mr. Archibald and Mrs. Dutton, she notices that a crowd has assembled there and is eagerly awaiting the hanging of a woman reported to be a witch, a thief and a murderess. Inquiries reveal that the person to be executed is no other but Meg Murdockson who has shown hostility to Jeanie when Jeanie is on her way to London. A little later Jeanie encounters Madge Wildfire who being harassed and tormented by the crowd of people appeals to Jeanie for help. At Jeanie's intervention, Mr. Archibald reports the matter to a local magistrate. Madge is rescued from the crowd and taken to hospital.

Madge is a very sensitive woman and is fond of reciting poetry. Therefore even in the hospital, she begins to sing her favourite song that her lover George Staunton had composed for her. She admits “I like that the best o' a' my sangs, because *he* made it. I am often singing it, and that's maybe the reason folks ca' me Madge Wildfire” (316).

The song runs as follows -

I'm Madge of the country, I'm Madge of the town,
And I'm Madge of the lad I am blithest to own-
The Lady of Beever in diamonds may shine,
But has not a heart half so lightsome as mine.

I am Queen of the Wake, and I'm Lady of May,
 And I lead the blithe ring round the May-pole to-day:
 The wild-fire that flashes so fair and so free
 Was never so bright, or so bonnie as me. (316)

As Madge nears her death, she sings another song:

Proud Maisie is in the wood,
 Walking so early;
 Sweet Robin sits on the bush,
 Singing so rarely. (316)

As Madge sings, her voice gradually dies away with the last notes and she falls into a slumber from which she never wakes up at all. The scenes describing the tormenting of Madge by a bunch of village rowdies and her death in a hospital are some of the pathetic spectacles of the novel. Madge is modelled on a weak-minded vagrant of the 18th century who roams about the country. It is her song that warns George Staunton against the police. It is she who unknowingly becomes the instrument of Jeanie's release from the grip of Madge's mother Meg Murdockson.

Madge serves as a kind of contrast to Effie who too is a victim of Robertson's lust. She is an embodiment of man's ruthlessness and mercilessness to woman. She is depicted by Scott as an infinitely richer character in the sense that her derangement is the result of callous behaviour of Staunton and the vicious nature of her mother. She is portrayed in a sharp contrast to her mother who is ruthless, vindictive, and bloodthirsty. Her mother is responsible to a great extent for the ruin of her daughter. Madge has to live continuously under the horrifying fright of her mother Meg Murdockson.

According to Arnold Kettle, "She [Madge Wildfire] is a conventional figure - the crazy jilted girl turned harlot- but not merely in a literal sense. These mad, semi prophetic women who are constantly appearing in Scott's novels... these half-crazy women reach strange heights of eloquence - colloquial eloquence springing out of the language of the people (Kettle 108-109)

The characters of Madge and her wretched mother Meg Murdockson are depicted by Scott as frightening yet they enthrall the mind of the reader and suffuse his imagination.

As the novel progresses, Jeanie is able to seek pardon for her sister from the Queen, with the result that Effie is freed from the charge of child murder and is released from the prison. Staunton marries Effie and takes her far away from London and imparts her dignity of Lady Staunton of Willingham. Effie is able to seek all the material pleasures of life but is unable to have the joy of bearing her own child after her marriage with Staunton. A search for their lost child therefore gains acceleration. Finding a little clue of their son, Effie and Staunton rush to Jeanie's house. But while rummaging for their lost child, Staunton gets killed by an outlaw who later turns out to be his own son called Whistler. Since Whistler was sold by Meg to an outlaw, he had become a criminal under the guardianship of an outlaw. After killing Staunton, Whistler flees to America and continues his felonious activities there until he is captured and killed by Indian. After ten years, Effie retires to a convent on the continent where she spends her remaining years grieving for her husband and the son she has never known.

It is remarkable that each minor character devised by Scott is alive and full of vitality as any of the principal characters. These characters bear the mark of absolute fidelity to human nature and besides imparting the idea of infinite manifestations of human nature; they have a tangible role to play in the novel. They are not just so many 'extras', but they are woven artistically into the texture of the novel. Some of the minor characters directly aid the action of the story; some lend to the novel a comic or a pathetic interest; whereas some serve as a chorus on the happenings. They all bring into a close relationship with the plot by one means or other. They do not constitute surplus material; but are woven into the narrative of the novel.

The novel ends at an unhappy note when father George Staunton is killed by his own son for whose quest and safety, he has spent long period of his life. It is evident that Staunton pays the price of his crimes in the form of his death by his son's hands. It is the *karma* of a person that ascertains his final destination over which no human has any control. Though many believe that money can buy everything, but it is not true since many such incidents happen in life which has no logical reasoning.

The fate of Madge Wildfire's mother Meg Murdockson who kills Madge's illegitimate son leaving Madge in a pool of despair, meets a despicable fate when she is hanged by a group of people considering her to be an insane woman. Also Staunton responsible for making the life of Madge miserable, meets a dismal end when he is shot by his own illegitimate son. The irony of Staunton's life is that in spite of making both Meg and Effie pregnant before his marriage, he is unable to

produce any child after his marriage with Effie. His death at the hands of his criminal son who was sold by Madge's mother Meg Murdockson to an outlaw proves that a person is ruled by all powerful almighty that puts everything in place at the right time.

Viewing the novel from postmodern point of view, an analogy can be drawn between the characters of the novel and the male folk of the 21st century society in which the rape cases have become rampant and the security of women folk is at stake. The male folk have shown decadence in their moral values that their parents have nurtured in them throughout their lives. They mistakenly assume that their wrongdoings will slip away unnoticed. But the times have changed when women are liberated; they have become bold; have realized their potentials and have prepared themselves to fight out every situation. The maxim "Character is Destiny" seems justifiable here. It is certain that persons like George Staunton will meet a disgraceful and appalling end if they turn awry and challenge the legal system which seems to have woken up at the behest of far reaching cries of women. Every person is destined to pay the price for his wrong doing at a sooner or later stage of his life.

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