

The Veneer of Values Validating the Verboten as Virtue

Priya Uthaiah

Assistant Professor of English, Government College (Autonomous), Mandya, India

Abstract

The article attempts to examine and analyse the functioning of values in societies that are predominantly patriarchal. The introduction posits the structuring of the system of values according to hierarchies in the gender echelon and brings to the fore the reality that lies underneath the veneer of values. The second part of the essay dwells on the universality of values as enunciated by Schwartz in his theory of basic values to show how individuals subscribe to and reject values in their endeavour to realise their goals in life. The third part of the article focuses on the concept of operability of contradistinction in the practise of values. This is illustrated through episodes of conflict, conformity and complicity in the pursuit of values as portrayed in the narrative of the novel *The Edible Woman*. The conclusion affirms that discernible gender bias penetrates values to delineate them as virtues and vices.

Introduction

Societal edifices across global cultures are deemed robust when their communities are guided by puissant value systems. Values connote moral and ethical rectitude. It is an indisputable fact that culture and values cannot be azygous. They are perceived as an organic whole and function in tandem. This intrinsic and inextricable connect between culture and values leads us to examine their operability in socialscapes where the preponderant culture is patriarchy. In an egalitarian stance on the position of the sexes, the appellation “woman” as a gender is regarded as a social construct. It is a logical inference then that values which exert influence on the social system are also gendered. The ascription of values as being feminine and masculine points to entrenched gender bias. This article shall examine gender hegemony in prescribed values for men and women in consonance with the sub-theme of the conference “Women Values in Literature”. Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman* shall constitute the frame of reference for the analysis. The theoretical framework for the study shall be Schwartz Theory of Basic Values and Deleuzian concepts of rhizome and haecceity. The inculcation of values by women and men is pre-ordained by their respective socio-cultural spheres. Values like freedom and obedience operate on an axis which is contradistinctual. Patriarchal prescription of freedom as predominantly masculine and obedience as a feminine value lends credence to the disparity inherent in the assigned scheme of values. Such conflict between bipolar values of self-direction and conformity to tradition pits women against acknowledged and sacrosanct social mores. Defiance of the value system will attract societal opprobrium for being vicious enough to yearn for freedom which is forbidden while acquiescence to obedience by relinquishing one’s right to make choices in life will earn approbation for adhering to virtues. This cult of submission to and confrontation with organisation of values, which is deemed as virtuous and vicious constitutes the crux of this study – of unravelling values as a veneer for validating the verboten, that is, the forbidden as virtue in a patriarchal society.

Universality of Values

The protagonist of the novel *The Edible Woman*, Marian McAlpin comes across as an individual who treasures her haecceity. The term haecceity has been defined as “the discrete qualities, properties or characteristics of a thing that make it a particular thing ...” (“Haecceity”, n.d.). French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari assert that “there is a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing or substance. We reserve the name haecceity for it.”(Deleuze & Guattari,1988,p.376). Employed as a surveyor at “Seymour Surveys, a market research company” (Atwood, 1969, p.19), Marian is a financially independent young lady who stays away from her family in a rented accommodation with her roommate Ainsley – a tester in an electric toothbrush manufacturing unit. This ensures that Marian occupies a “smooth space” (“Glossary”, n.d.) in the social set up. “Smooth space exists in contrast to striated space – a partitioned field of movement which prohibits free motion. Smooth space refers to an environment, a landscape (vast or microscopic) in which a subject operates” (“Glossary”, n.d.). Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p.479) explain that “smooth space is filled by events or haecceites...” Marian and Ainsley do not find themselves conforming to gender roles. Marian has a partner Peter who is interning to practise as a lawyer. She is happy in her relationship with Peter and is not in favour of pushing him to marry her. Ainsley wants to conceive out of wedlock and be a single mother. Peter too is phobic about getting married and so is Len – Marian’s friend from her college days. These youngsters’ choices in life are impelled by the values which they have imbibed. Schwartz (2012, p.4) states that “people’s values form an ordered system of priorities that characterise them as individuals.” With the awning differences that we encounter in terms of individual, socio-cultural and religious values within communities across societies, how do we arrive at common descriptors for values? The “theory of basic values” by Schwartz provides the tool for such an enquiry.

The values theory defines ten broad values according to motivation that underlies each one of them. These values are likely to be universal because they are grounded in one or more of three universal requirements of human existence with which they help to cope. These requirements are needs of individuals as biological organisms, requisites of coordinated social interaction, and survival. Individuals cannot cope successfully with these requirements of human existence on their own. Rather, people must articulate appropriate goals to cope with them, communicate with others about them and gain cooperation in their pursuit. Values are the socially desirable concepts used to represent these goals mentally and the vocabulary used to express them in social interaction (Schwartz,2012,p.4).

Marian and Peter, Ainsley and Len have inculcated and integrated the values of “self-direction, security, hedonism” (Schwartz, 2012, p.5) in their lives. “Self-direction derives from organismic needs for control and mastery and interactional requirements of autonomy and independence” (Schwartz, 2012,p.5). Accordingly the characters in the novel feel that they have shed their archetypal gender roles. This evasion and escape from the pre-ordained masculine and feminine roles also empowers them to embrace the value of “hedonism – values which derive from

organismic needs and pleasure associated with satisfying them” (Schwartz,2012,p.5). Leading their lives according to their own volition, ecstatic about the freedom it bestows on them to enjoy a hedonistic lifestyle, indulging in sex for pleasure outside wedlock without the least inhibition, they find themselves ensconced in a halo of security provided by the stability of their relationships. On the other end of the spectrum are Marian’s landlady and her colleagues – Millie, Lucy and Emmy who are called “the office virgins” (Atwood, 1969, p.21) by Ainsley. The landlady is the mother of a young girl and is cautious about the influences that might corrupt the impressionable young mind of the child. She expresses her strong reservations against Ainsley’s bold sartorial preferences with Marian. The landlady is forever vigilant about male visitors of her tenants ensuring that they do not spend the night in her rented apartment. “The office virgins” (Atwood ,1969,p.21) true to their epithet are squeamish about pre-marital sex. It is their inviolable moral scruple which they hold dear, while believing in marriage as a moral approbation of the union of the sexes. Marian’s colleagues and her landlady exemplify individuals who assiduously practise the values – “conformity and tradition.” “Conformity values emphasise self-restraint in everyday interaction and derive from the requirement that individuals inhibit inclinations that might disrupt codes of morality...Tradition as a value points to acceptance of the customs and ideas that one’s culture or religion provides”(Schwartz,2012,p.6).

Contradistinction of Conformity and Conflict

While Marian and her friends revel in the belief that they lead an emancipated life, little do they realise that their “positionality”(Grzanka,2014,p.99) in the social plane accords them a rhizomatic existence. The Deleuzian concept of a rhizome is an “image of thought, based on the botanical rhizome, that apprehends multiplicities” (“Rhizome Philosophy”, n.d.). As denizens of social environments where diverse factors like enculturation and socialisation result in genesis of “implicit gender stereotypes” – which “are the unconscious influence of attitudes a person may or may not be aware that they hold” (Kay, Lewis & Laurie, 1984, p.992) . Therefore Marian and her pals while conscious of their non-compliance to stereotypical social values, unconsciously gravitate towards the same which they presume as values shunned by them. The narrative evidence of “implicit gender stereotype” affecting the characters is seen during Marian and Ainsley’s visit to the former’s friend Clara’s home. Clara is pregnant with her third child and lives with her husband Joe and two kids in her home which is a picture of utter chaos. She is sapped of all energy and remains confined to a chair. Joe who teaches philosophy at the university manages the household and performs all the domestic chores of cooking, cleaning and taking care of his children and wife. Ainsley views the role reversal at Clara’s household with disapproving contempt. She remarks , “No, I’m not going to get married. That’s what’s wrong with most children, they have too many parents. You can’t say the sort of household Clara and Joe are running is an ideal situation for a child. Think of how confused their mother-image and father-image will be.”(Atwood, 1969, p.41). Ainsley’s point of view marks the conflict between values of benevolence and self-direction vis-à-vis Joe’s gender role in his family. She expects Clara to fulfill her benevolent role as the caregiver of the family and frowns upon Joe stepping into Clara’s shoes thereby indicating her complicity in imbibing patriarchal values which decree that benevolence is a feminine and self-direction, a masculine virtue through which Joe should have pursued his academic interests. Schwartz (2012, p.8) in his theory “explicates the structure of dynamic relations among the values. One basis of the

value structure is the fact that actions in pursuit of any value have consequences that conflict with some values but are congruent with others.”

Contrary to the pursuit of freedom and independence (values of self-direction) Peter decides to get married to Marian when all his friends take their wedding vows. Marian too willingly agrees – decision which gets immense approval from her family and friends. Her willingness to take on the role of Peter’s wife and leaving the task of decision making to him signals her acceptance of values of conformity (honouring social expectations as a woman and being obedient). When Peter consults her on the date of their wedding she replies, “I’d rather have you decide that. I’d rather leave big decisions to you.” (Atwood, 1969, p.98). This bouleversement in their scheme of values inspite of it being an informed choice begins stifling Marian. After they get engaged she abruptly leaves and starts running away from Peter, from a get together where Len and Ainsley are also in attendance. Peter pursues her in his car, catches up with her, blocks her way and drags her inside. They encounter a storm midway and Peter wilfully accelerates while driving down a slope. The car skids off the road and mows into a garden uprooting the hedge plants. Marian is alarmed at finding herself so powerless as the car hurtles away from the road throwing her off the seat. Peter is unapologetic and maliciously muses the destruction he had wreaked on somebody’s landscaped garden. Peter’s action is symbolic of the masculine value he embodies – power, his control and dominance over Marian. Earlier in the narrative when both Peter and Marian pursued the value of self-determination, she states that it was her “aura of independence and common sense” (Atwood, 1969, p.66) which Peter had liked. But later Peter’s imbibition of the value of power conflicts with her pursuit of the value of self-determination. In quest of her autonomy as an individual Marian embodies the value of “stimulation – the organismic need for variety and stimulation in order to maintain an optimal, positive level of activation” (Schwartz, 2012, p.5). She indulges in physical relationship with Duncan whom she meets during one of her door-to-door surveys for a beer brand as part of her job. On the threshold of getting married Peter and Marian host a party for their friends to which Duncan is also invited. Marian dresses herself according to Peter’s instructions and plays the perfect hostess at the party. When Peter is busy assembling the guests for a group picture, Marian’s revulsion at her own submissiveness to Peter peaks and she stealthily leaves the place, deciding that her departure from Peter’s home and life would be for good. She seeks out Duncan and they head to a hotel for a night of hedonism. She returns home the next morning and answers Peter’s call who excoriates her yelling, “... why the hell can’t you think of other people once in a while?” (Atwood, 1969, p.295). Peter’s reprimand clearly indicates that Marian had erred on keeping up the feminine value of benevolence and had transgressed into the realm of the forbidden. Hence she had acted with vicious alacrity which was unacceptable.

To expunge the impuissant situation she found herself in Marian bakes a cake and carves a woman out of it, marking a floral dress and facial features with bright pink and chocolate icing and silver decorations. Her edible woman is a metaphor imbued with dual motives directed at her own self and Peter. To her the cake in the form of a woman is an image of her acquiescence which Peter demands. By devouring the cake she would extricate herself from the seemingly inextricable situation. Offering the cake to Peter she wants to hit out at his toxic masculinity which she had found oppressive. Placing the edible woman before him she says, “You’ve been trying to destroy me, haven’t you,... You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you really wanted all

along, isn't it?" (Atwood, 1969, p.301). Peter leaves the edible woman untouched. With Peter gone out of her life Marian begins to eat the cake and in the process devours and calms the tornado of values which had assailed her life with the conflict between self-direction and conformity to tradition.

Conclusion

Universally in dominions of patriarchy it is a ubiquity that the principles governing the accessibility and violability of values are tinged with gender imperialism. This spawns a perpetual conflict between values of self-determination, stimulation, hedonism and values of conformity and tradition. Conciliation demands women's complicit conformity to traditional social values avowed as virtues, whereas confrontation in pursuit of preserving one's haecceity would be regarded as a vice. The protagonist Marian McAlpin in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* discerningly oscillates from seeking her autonomy to submitting herself to toe the line and remonstrating to defend her freedom which she treasures above all else. In doing so life for her seems to have turned full circle, scraping the flawless veneer of values and revealing that their moral predilection of vice and virtue is ordained by gender hierarchy.

References

- Atwood, Margaret. (1969). *The edible woman*. Canada: The Canadian Publishers.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. London. Athlone Press.
- Deau, Kay., Lewis., & Laurie, L. (1984). Structure of gender stereotypes: Interrelationships among components and gender label. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46(5), 991-1004. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.46-5.99/
- Glossary. (n.d.). Retrieved from www.rhizomes.net/issue5/poke/glossary.html.
- Grzanka, Patrick A. (2014). *Intersectionality : a foundations and frontiers reader*. (1st ed.) Colorado: Westview P.
- Schwartz, S.H. (2012). *An overview of the schwartz theory of basic values*. Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116>
- Wikipedia Contributors. (n.d.). Haecceity. In *Wikipedia.the Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved On 05:18, May 2, 2019, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/haecceity>
- Wikipedia Contributors. (n.d.). Rhizome philosophy. In *Wikipedia.the Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved on 7:30, May 4, 2019, from <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>