

Post-Feministic Study of Stephan Crane's Maggie: A Girl of Streets

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Abstract – *The present paper traces the development of feminism and post-feminism in the 20th century and shows how different theorists contributed to the development in their respective fields. It is in-depth analysis of the novel Maggie: A Girl of the Streets by the American novelist Stephan Crane, from the post-feministic point of view. In the novel the young girl Maggie, in feministic terms, enjoys liberty of doing work and having equal liberty to those all living around her. She works in a sewing factory and has the liberty to drink beer or whisky but in the post-feministic terms she is still jailed. She is constrained by the social customs. She realises that she is forbidden to take decisions of her life when she falls in love with a guy named Pete. She is jilted in love and scorns of society force her to kill herself.*

Keywords: *Feminism, Post-Feminism, Liberty, Social Customs, Forbidden, Scorns of Society*

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Feminism is a movement that strives to liberate women from social and patriarchal oppression. Though there are many who work for the liberation of women, yet they choose not to call themselves feminists. Madhu Kishwar, in the essay 'Why I do not Call Myself a Feminist' writes that her motive is "working to ensure the survival needs of all, especially of vulnerable groups...ensuring social and political space to minority groups for the evolution of their identities." Feminism as movement arose in the 19th century when women began to demand equal rights to those of men. The first and foremost text in this movement is considered to be Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* which was published in 1792. Feminism, since then, has been divided into many waves and other categories like First Wave Feminism, Second Wave Feminism and Third Wave Feminism and recently, in the 1980s, the term 'Post-feminism' has come to the fore. First Wave Feminism strove to advocate equal voting rights for women and, in Britain, they got it in 1928. The Second wave Feminism arose in 1960s and continues to be present even today. It advocates for gender equality and exists simultaneously with Third Wave Feminism which celebrates sexuality as a means of female empowerment.

Post-feminism arose from the images of strong and independent women in our culture. This movement holds the view that feminism has achieved its goals and it has now become irrelevant to our society. As Amber Kinser in her article 'Negotiating Spaces For/Through Third-Wave Feminism' writes "any needed gender equity has been attained and that

further feminist activity is contraindicated" (Kinser 132). The ideological assumptions of feminism have been rejected and the whole movement has been rendered out-dated. A movement of the 70s could not meet the demands of the younger generation and they demanded much more than what their mothers and grandmothers had tried to achieve and thus emerged a new movement called Post-feminism. The prefix 'post' has marked the change in the understanding of feminism and feminists of our time demand a movement with an ideology which is relevant to them. Earlier waves of feminism had a belief that women all over the world, no matter to which race or country they belong, face similar problems. But this idea has been rejected in Post-feminism and rather it believes in the recognition of individual identities. According to Ann Brooks, post-feminism is the conceptual shift within feminism from dualism to diversity and consensus to variety. She maintains that post-feminism, "facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of feminism, and addresses the demands of marginalized, diasporic and colonized culture for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminisms." Notable Proponents of Postfeminism are Ann Brooks, Sarah Gamble, Susan Faludi and Amber Kinser.

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets is a novella by the American author Stephan Crane. It was published in 1893. It is the story of a New York girl Maggie who is reduced to pitiable circumstances by the rigid social customs and poverty. Maggie lives in the Bowery Street with her family which includes her father and

mother who, both are alcoholics and her siblings Jimmie and Tommie. The family defies the traditional patriarchal system and here it is mother who dominates the family affairs. It is worthy of note that when most of the women associated with the movement 'Feminism' were demanding liberation from the tyrannical patriarchy, such a society existed where the mother ruled. The alcoholic environment of the family had adverse impact on the upbringing of the children. At the opening of the novel Jimmie fights for the honour of his group and pelts stones at the 'enemies'. Here what we are trying to point out is that Post-feminism deals not only with the welfare of women but also with that of those who are downtrodden. And the downtrodden here in this case are the children. Tommie, the youngest of the three could not survive in the vile environment and dies in infancy. The mother, the name that we often associate with affection and love, is indifferent to the needs of her children. The family lives in an apartment with basic amenities. The father passes away, thanks to his drunkenness.

The character of Pete is the embodiment of the dominant class which oppresses the lower section of the society. When the novel opens, it is Pete who saves Jimmie from the rain of stones and at first becomes his saviour. It is reminiscent of the 'ideology' or to be precise the 'ideological state apparatuses' of Louis Althusser where the dominant class rules not through violence but through ideology. Pete is a guy who works in a high class bar and he has made it his habit to 'invest' his money into the seduction of poor girls which ultimately leads to their ruination.

It is an irony that the father, who himself is alcoholic, directs the mother to let up drinking. He says, "'you've been drinkin', Mary," he said. "You'd better let up on the bot', ol woman, or you'll get done.'" (pg 5) The mother in the family does not call children to the dinner with affection, she rather cries at them to come to the dinner table. The litter girl Maggie is so frightened that she totters on her stick like "legs beneath the burden of dishes". Their neighbours do not get surprised when they hear any noise from the apartment of the family. The next door woman asks Jimmie, "'Eh, Gawd, child, what is it this time? Is yer fader beatin' yer mudder, or yer mudder beatin' yer fader?'" (pg 7) The mother does not bear the patriarchal oppression. She not only revolts against it but also responds to it by violently beating her husband.

The novel defies the notions Victorian sensibility. Women in that age were restricted within the threshold of their homes. But here is a different scenario. The female of the house could not bear to see herself jailed into her house. The mother goes outside, she has the liberty to work if she wants to, she drinks, and she attends parties. The mother could often be seen drunk in the street staggering towards her home. When she reaches home she needs not tell about where she has been. Mary, the mother, has got rights equal those to her husband. Thus the demands that Feminism made

had no relevance to this society. It was something more that was needed. The boy Jimmie becomes a lorry driver. He becomes the patriarchal head of the family. The girl Maggie has also been asked by Jimmie to go and work. Jimmie says to Maggie, "Mag, I'll tell yeh dis! See? Yeh've edder got teh go to hell or go teh work!" (13) Maggie gets a job in a factory where collars and cuffs are made. She would sit on the table and treadle at her machine all day.

Though the girl Maggie has the liberty to go to work, yet she has no liberty for her own life. She has to hurry home right after her work. She would meet a furious mother if she gets late at her work. Pete, the guy who saved Jimmie in the first section of the novel, becomes his (Jimmie's) friend and comes to his home often. Pete attracts Maggie with his appearance and his talks. His extravagance lures Maggie into his love. He would often come to their home and would talk about his valour which quite often seems fake. He would boast about his firm dealing with the customers who tried to make mess at the bar. He says, "Hully gee...those mugs can't phase me. Dey knows I kin wipe up deh street wid any t'ree of dem." He could often be heard saying the phrase "ah, what the hell". This phrase shows that his voice is burdened with anger for the inevitable and contempt for anything that might force him to endure. Maggie takes him to be a genuine guy who is rich and knows how to deal with his fellow beings. She imagines herself accompanied by Pete in remote valleys. She has completely fallen for him.

Liberally jailed Maggie, without knowing it, has led herself to trouble. She works at home in the morning and then goes to work in the "collar and cuff" factory. Societal pressure compels her to hide her emotions for Pete. She lives in such a society that would look down upon a girl if she confesses of being in relationship with any guy. Boys enjoy liberty of everything. Her own brother Jimmie carries relationship with girls but he would not allow his sister to fall in love with anybody. He can ruin the lives of any number of girls but cannot bear to see his sister "go to the devil".

Pete asks Maggie to "put on yer bes' duds Friday night an' I'll take yehs the deh show" (16). Maggie, the innocent soul, starts having goose and bumps and keeps thinking about Pete all day. She spends her much of time preparing "bes' duds". She saves some money from her salary and makes a lambrequin for the decorative purposes of her house. But when, one day, she gets late from her work, her alcoholic mother turns everything upside down in the house ruining the lambrequin as well. She scorns Maggie: "Hah...where deh hell yeh been? Why deh hell don' yeh come home earlier? Been loafin' 'round deh streets. Yer getting' the be a reg'lar devil" (17).

Individual independence could have given Maggie a chance to continue her life with Pete which is also the main trait of post-feminism. She decides to leave

her family and stays with Pete without marrying him. Physical pleasure is what Pete demands from Maggie. He takes her to a bar with him and meets a woman with whom Pete was in relationship earlier. She forces Pete to accompany her leaving Maggie alone in the bar. Maggie has been jilted in love. Society looks down upon her as she has disgraced herself as well as her family. She goes to her home and the author writes:

The girl stood in the middle of the room. She edged about as if unable to find a place on the floor to put her feet.

"Ha, ha, ha," bellowed the mother. "Dere she stands! Ain' she purty? Lookut her! Ain' she sweet, deh beast? Lookut her! Ha, ha, lookut her!"

She lurched forward and put her red and seamed hands upon her daughter's face. She bent down and peered keenly up into the eyes of the girl.

This is how she is being treated by her mother. Her brother, while turning her out, says: "'Well, now, yer a hell of a t'ing, ain' yeh?" (43) She turns back and moves out of the house "before open doors framing more eyes strangely microscopic, and sending broad beams of inquisitive light into the darkness of her path." (43) The next day news comes that Maggie has committed suicide. The scornful society and its pressure on its denizens have claimed another life.

Thus, even when it fulfils every demand of the Feminist Movement, yet some of the individuals suffer in our society because of Feminism's notion of "collective suffering". This notion, though capable of redressing the common problems of individuals taken as a group, has no power to give voice to the individual voices. The novel written way back at the turning of 19th century tries to give voice to the individual cries that feministic demands ignored or overlooked due to its overemphasis on "whites" or its notion of common suffering. *Maggie*, studied from a post-feministic point of view, reveals the very tenets of Post-Feminism that arose about a century later.

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