**Themes of ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’**

(For B.A. 2nd Semester, Honours)

Geoffrey Chaucer’s ‘The Canterbury Tales’ is an immortal creation. It is a most astonishing work which brings the middle ages to life. The idea of the pilgrimage to Canterbury in which men and women drawn from all walks of life lighten the tedium of the travel by telling stories which reflect their character as well as their profession. Chaucer through his Canterbury tales not only throws light on the character of the teller but also provides contrasted viewpoints on the same theme, in such a way that the collection becomes a panorama not only of life in fourteenth century England, but of life anywhere and at anytime. This immortal work was written in the late 1300s and published in the 1400 after the death of Geoffrey Chaucer.

‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’ caters mainly the following themes: sex, marriage, domination and politeness. In the middle age, sex is regarded as a sin and the one who is involved in it illegally is looked down with scorn. The churches of those times did not approve of the sex. The people of those times believed that sex is only for the married couples and it is done just to give birth to the children. Women were considered as a commodity of sex. Moreover the medieval regarded women as having cold bodies which continually desired contact with the heat of the male. Therefore, it was seen as a woman’s nature to desire for sex voraciously. The Wife of Bath is, however, does not feel upset with this view of churches and scientists. She glorifies sex in her own way. She talks about sex with a certain level of dignity as she regards sex a natural and biological need of human being. The whole section of The Wife of Bath is full of instances of sex. She proudly announces that in all her life she has never withheld ‘chambre’ of Venus from a good ‘felawe’ and this together with her ‘bele chose’ and her less politely name ‘queynte’ is the part of her anatomy we become best acquainted with in the course of the text. Here, the female sexuality is not presented as sinful as the medievalists thought of. The only sexual sin in the text is the rape committed by the knight in the tale.

Marriage is another crucial theme in the tale of Wife of Bath in the Canterbury tales. The churches at that time allowed sex only to the married people. If possible they would not allow people to marry. A religious and social hierarchy was created by the church: virgins at the top, then the widows, and then the married people at the bottom. It was made to believe that God loves those who are virgins, and married people are least loved by God. The Wife of Bath vehemently criticizes the hierarchy and defends the condition and benefits of marriage.

Through the character of Wife of Bath, Chaucer tries to puncture the prejudices of his time and consolidates his disgust for the same by making a female figure question the norm. The wife of bath is everything that is deemed as morally corrupt. The navigation between the conservative and liberal ideology is an interesting reading in Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale. The contempt for misogyny is appropriated by the Wife of Bath through her brave acceptance of ‘deceite’, ‘wepying’, spynnyng’, the attributes commonly ascribed to women. The audacious nature of the Wife of Bath in her monologue further portrays her confidence in going against the stereotypes of marriage and questioning its monogamous nature by talking about ‘bigamy’ and her five husbands. She proudly describes all her husbands and her romantic or sexual relation with them.

The next unavoidable theme in ‘The wife of Bath’s Tale’ is dominance. The Sex in the tale of Wife of Bath and in the tale of the Knight has nothing to do more with the desire, however, but with the power of dominance. The rape in the case of the Knight displays the Knight exercising power over the woman. The act of rape is shown as an effort to regain the lost power. In the case of Wife’s prologue, it is also the exercise of the power of domination. She dominated her husbands merely with the weapon of sex. Chaucer’s theme of dominance does not come only from these tales, but from the then fourteenth century society. At that time, there were very few examples of women who could have dominated men. The strict rules and regulations of the medieval society put them in a place where they had no more options, but just to obey. The wife of Bath challenged all those suppressive authorities. She dictates and dominates her five husbands and also tries to control male texts, possessing them and making twists and turns according to her own interest. She also justifies her multiple marriages stating that Jesus himself proposed the idea of going forth and multiplying. King Solomon and St. Paul’s reference further validates her idea of multiple partners.

Politeness can be studied in contrast to the theme of domination depicted by the Wife of Bath. She mentions noble ancestors for their ‘vertuous lyvyng’ and this comes in opposition to her way of living. The theme of politeness comes only in the speech old woman when she rebukes the Knight for not possessing this quality in spite of being a Knight and a man. The old woman talks about politeness and poverty in her speech. In contrast to the Wife of Bath’s colloquial arguments, the old wife tries to make informed and intelligent comments in a conventional narrative. The moralistic and virtuous undertone of her arguments is different from the morally ambiguous statements of the Wife of Bath. The reference of inherited nobility highlights Chaucer’s concern of questioning the rigid structures of society. The old woman appropriates the meaning of nobility or gentry by associating the quality to the character of a human being and not to the social status. This deflation of the medieval perspective with the introduction of a modern ideology is Chaucer’s strong suit. He juxtaposes medieval along with the modern which gives the possibility for fresher thoughts. The quality of being noble can be now associated with the actions of an individual and this gives any human being the power of rising above mediocrity. The Wife of Bath’s domination can, therefore, be viewed as a modern definition of the medieval politeness.

Thus through the tale of the Wife of Bath Chaucer puts forward his opinions of marriage, sex, politeness and dominance etc in his ‘The Canterbury Tales’.

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