

A STUDY OF PRIVATE PUBLIC DIVIDE IN ELLEN GLASGOW'S *THE WOMAN WITHIN*

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Abstract:

Writing an autobiography, for a woman, is sometimes risky, because a woman's autobiography has always been rejected by the male traditional autobiographical theorists as insignificant. She has to confront many issues to represent her life in the written medium. This article proposes to do a detailed study of Ellen Glasgow's autobiography. The inspiration behind her prodigious literary output can be traced to her fiercely guarded personal life. This article then is an attempt to pry opens the secrets behind her literary success.

Key Words: *Women, Autobiography, private-public, physical struggle, an literary success.*

Representing one's life is a difficult task for a writer because nobody can reveal every detail of one's life. The self may differ from one man to another in many respects. According to Edith Wharton, the 'self' is "a house full of great rooms". Representing the life is not always possible in the case of women writers. But being a woman writer, representing the self, sometimes being risky. As Susan Sidonie Smith points out in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, women who place themselves in public view by recording their lives may run particular risks of which they are on some level aware.

Attuned to the ways women have been dressed up for the public exposure, attuned also to the price women pay for the public self-disclosure, the autobiographer reveals in her speaking posture and narrative structure her understanding of the possible readings she will receive from a public that has the power of her reputation in its hands (49).

The Woman Within is an autobiography written by Ellen Glasgow between the years of 1934 and 1945. It was posthumously published in 1954, nine years after her death. It was sealed in Glasgow's safe-deposit box in Richmond, preceded by a note "To My Literary Executors" that read, in part: "This rough draft is the original and only copy of my autobiography. It was written in great suffering of mind and body, and the work is as true to actual experience as I have been able to make the written word... I was writing for my own release of mind and heart; and I have tried to make a completely honest portrayal of an interior world, and of that one world alone." (vii)

Ellen was born as the ninth child for a Calvinistic father and for an aristocratic Virginian lady. Being a ninth child, she was so weak and fragile from her birth. In "The Child and the World," she represents herself as a child who is afraid of anything and everything she sees. Throughout her childhood, she represented herself as a fragile girl who feels so threatened by the crowd. She often suffered from mental aches and nervous breakdowns. She recorded that she saw an illusion when she was one year old, a face without a body hanging on the top windowpanes. Throughout her life, she wondered what could have caused such illusion at her early age, when she cannot even recognize anything. She represented herself as a child who did not clearly know her birth date also. This confusion was arisen because her mother told that she was born on April 22nd 1874, but through some Bible record her father asserted that she was born not on 1874 but in 1873. Hence, Ellen concluded that she was born in 1873 and she said she has never used this date of birth except for important events. She always sought loneliness, though there were many members

in her family. She only loved the company of her Mammy Lizzie Jones, with whom she traveled to various places and enjoyed her childhood days. A sense of exile was entered into Ellen, when she was seven, when her Mammy left her home. "This was first sorrow of my life. It was the beginning of that sense of loss, of exile in solitude, which I was to bear with me to the end." (30) The secrecy in her life started when her first verses were read aloud to her sister's guests by her sister with a kind of ridicule and amusement. "My skin felt naked and scorched, as if a flame had blown over it." (37) This was a great shock for Ellen and after this bitter incident, she started living two lives- one for her external world and the other one was her internal writing world which nobody knew, except her mother, until her first book was published. This resembles Edith Wharton's *A Backward Glance* in which the autobiographer expresses the same view as Ellen Glasgow. Both the writers were ridiculed for their first attempt of writing and after this humiliation, both were writing in dim corners without other people's knowledge.

Some fear and some dark identity had entered into Ellen. Her first day experience at school makes her health worse. She tells:

I remember this, and I have not forgotten that while I sat there I felt a chill crawling up my spine, like a beetle. Sickness, black and chill, attacked the pit of my stomach, and all the stamping feet and treble voices coming closer were stabbing down into my ears, into my throbbing head. It was the beginning of one of my nervous headaches, and a cold sweat broke out while I struggled not to disgrace myself by throwing up my natural enemies, strange children, on my first day at school. If the children had been cannibals, and I a missionary prepared for the feast, my doom could not have seemed more dreadful to me, or more inevitable. (47)

She was mocked by her elder students, which brought her nervous breakdowns and mental aches. The doctor Dr. Coleman advised her parents not to force her to go to school. Then she turned herself on various books such as European and British literary history from her Father's library. For Ellen "To teach one's self is to be forced to learn twice." (41) Even at her very early age, she was capable of reciting all the plots of the Waverley novels.

From her childhood, she found herself as the supporter of the weak and she wanted to be a voice for them which she could not fulfill in her childhood. But in her later life she became the voice of the weak through her literary works. She did not forget Uncle Henry, who was once beaten up by some people in the almshouse. She also remembered that she enjoyed while he was beaten up. For, she could not realize the pain behind it in that age. But later, when she realized, though she wanted to help him, she was helpless.

Ellen's Mother "was the center of her childhood's world, the sun in her universe." (13) She made all things bright and she was a mixture of both joy and sorrow. Her nature was interwoven with sympathy. From her childhood, she was born in a rich aristocratic family. Her health became deteriorated as she gave birth to ten children. On the contrary, her father was a man of Calvinistic faith and he gave everything to his children and wife except love which they needed most. However, he was a man of unselfishness. He, in his life, never spent money except for books. He worked as a Manager in Tredegar Iron Works. Ellen told that she had inherited nothing from him except the color of her eyes and share in a trust-fund. Her whole nature resembled her Mother's nature.

From her childhood, she sought an adventurous life which their parents always denied her due to her ill-health and this made her to seek the company of her Mammy Lizzie Jones, with whom she travelled to various places and encountered many adventures. "My little legs must have grown very tired on our rambles. But, like my Mammy, I was spurred on by an inborn love of adventure, a vital curiosity to know what was hidden round the next corner." (20) She created an imaginary little character named Lillie Willie and with him she encountered various deep jungles. Her Mammy, whom she loved most next to her Mother, was a woman of extraordinary skills. If she would have given a chance, she would have proved herself a better one. The association of Ellen Glasgow with her Mammy reminds of Edith Wharton's autobiography, in which the narrator was brought up by her surrogate mother nurse Dooley. Both the

authors felt relaxed while they were with their surrogate mothers.

Her mental aches and nervous breakdowns tortured her only when she was in midst of other people. But when she was in the farm, she was free from all the problems and she lived happily. At Jerdone Castle, she loved everything and there she developed a natural love for trees. Unlike her other sisters, she lived a happy life in the farm. She says “All the terrors of living were stripped away, like leaves from the trees.” (53) She could enjoy all these happiness only in summer, because during winter, she had to bury herself under the cold bed in the dark room.

With her mother's death, Ellen Glasgow felt that her life had come to an end, because she lived a detached life from her sisters. She described her pain as, “In those months of Mother's absence, I know that I broke forever with my childhood. For the first time I was standing alone, without the shelter and the comfort of her love and sympathy.” (71) When they had to leave the farm, her heart was broken, it was the place where she was healthy. Another significant reason was that it was only in the farm she had discovered her own interest in writing. She lived a natural life in that farm. “This was the only place where I found health, . . . where I had begun to write, and had discovered an object, if not a meaning, in the complicated pattern of my inner world.” (68) Thus, she presented herself as a fragile child who was afraid of hypocritical world, and felt threatened by strangers.

In the second part “Youth and the World”, she presented as a matured girl, who has evolved and free from the early fears. Between her ages of sixteen to twenty, she was so happy and she mentioned that those four years passed as if a single year. Several romances budded within her but she passed on. In those years, she turned herself completely to books and she was guided by her instructor Walter McCormack and she wanted to know the effect of poverty. Even at that early age, she wanted a revolution against humanity. She recorded that she liked human beings but did not love human nature. Her sensitiveness of her childhood vanished and she started to search her 'self'. Though she has not completely found her 'self', she developed a strong social consciousness.

Her lack of religious fervor met with stern disapproval by her father. Her father was fearful regarding her love of knowledge. But she was not intimidated by religious persecutions and she always kept reading books, especially banned books like Lecky's *History of Rationalism in Europe* and other philosophical books.

When she desired to become a novelist, some natural instinct warned her “This is not right! That word will not do!” (94) Ellen, unable to decide anything, did not obey it. She later realized the instinct, when she first intends to publish her book *The Descendant*. She realized the reality of the world when she sent the manuscript of 'Sharp Realities' to an unknown literary adviser, she found that the man was interested only in her and not in her manuscript. She somehow escaped from him and she burnt the manuscript and resolved not to write again. But her character Michael Akersham did not vanish from her mind and she again started writing after few months. This brought the idea of her first novel where the hero was an illegitimate child who, later on, became a radical journalist. Thus she resolved to write of the “harsher realities beneath manners.” Her first book *The Descendant* was originally completed in 1895 but was delayed due to a series of deaths of her Mother and Walter.

Throughout her youth, she posed herself as a unique girl in her family and in her friends circle and a unique writer in the literary circle. She felt that everybody in American literary scene had gone soft and nobody wished to be different. But she was unable to accept this view and wanted to be different. She told that “Blood and Irony” would be the best tools for Southern people to express themselves because “Our innocence may have been as real as our gentility; but our sentimentality was so close to the skin that it would drip if it were touched.” (104) Her first book *The Descendant* was published after many hurdles. But when the manuscript was sent to a man named Mr. Patton, who was so fascinated and moved by the book and resolved to open a new publishing house to publish the book. She felt that the real credit has come to her. Throughout her childhood, she had to struggle for everything which was later remarked by a friend as

“Your whole life has been simply the overcoming of one obstacle after another.” (113)

In the third part “On Not Taking Advice”, she focused on her literary achievements. Her 'self' in the literary environment was quite different from other Southerners. And in these years, she encountered another difficulty of 'deafness' which she described as “wolfish terror.” Like her childhood, she suffered due to nervous problems when she was in amidst of strangers while sailing to London. She represented herself as an ignorant one without knowing that she possessed some knowledge on that. When one man asks her mockingly whether like all Americans she has also come to put a rose on the tomb of Chaucer, she replied him that she has come to put the rose not on the tomb of Chaucer but on the tomb on Darwin without knowing that the man was the eldest son of Darwin. She wondered that she has confessed her ignorance of his identity.

She came to know that her *The Descendant* was published anonymously but received a good welcome from the readers. While she walked alone in London streets, she felt that she has found the happiness at last. But with the increase of her deafness, she could not move freely with anybody. It gradually made her to be dependent on somebody. Being a writer, then she was receiving more visitors but she could not receive them unless Cary or Rebe, her sisters, were with her. But she clearly knew that there was no way of escape from that 'wolfish terror.'

When she returned to America, she went and met the publisher Harper. He found that the book was of one Southern woman's product. Though she was not rewarded directly for her work, she left the firm of Harper with a dancing heart. However, she knew that publishing one novel never makes a novelist. She wanted to write better. She asserted:

I wanted not an inspiration (was't my mind bubbling with inspiration?); I wanted an art. I wanted a firm foundation. I wanted a steady control over my ideas and my material. What I understood more and more was, that I needed a philosophy of fiction, I needed a technique of working. Above all, I felt the supreme necessity of a prose style so pure and flexible that it could bend without breaking (123).

She was to be distinguished from other American fictionists in this desire that she needed a new prose style. But she did not know whom to follow. She read Henry James for her model, but unlike others she did not want to imitate anyone. She wanted to be herself and to be perfect. For model, she read various authors such as Maupassant, O' Henry, Tolstoy, and Chekhov and she gathered different ideas from everyone. She considered Maupassant's *Madame Bovary* as the flawless one and *Une Vie* as the most beautiful novel in all literature. And Tolstoy's *War and Peace* proved that “a great novel can stand on its merits as fiction without style” (126).

Her deafness really tortured her and she still had the problem of nervous depression while meeting strangers. Her sister Cary was always with her when Ellen received her visitors. She avoided strangers because she did not want others to know her disability. When one man found out and asked her what the real problem was, she avoided him for she did not want to expose her disability. When she got more income from her books, she consulted various aurists both in America and in Europe but in vain. As there was no treatment for that, she accepted stoically that she had to bear the pain. Later one of the aurists tells “You are only one of my patients who is not depressed by deafness.” (138)

Ellen wrote throughout her life only for the release of her mind. Writing became a part and parcel of her life. She came across various literary movements that blossomed in America but nothing lasted for long. She felt alienated because she could not associate herself with any of the literary movements and she wanted to write better.

In the years of great mental depression, her brother Arthur arranged a voyage to her sisters and for Ellen as he felt that a change of scene can be a cure for some burning memories. They moved from one place to another place such as Egypt, Cairo, and Yorkshire and to many places. After wandering many places, she finally realizes that a change of scene may be a diversion but not a complete cure for some

unforgettable memories. She felt that she was not acknowledged for her literary works as she was born in the southern part of America. She felt that if she had been born in New England and in Middle America, she would have been recognized. And in the South only classes were important and there literature was not considered much and there was a stereotype prevailing that the Southerners could not produce good literature. This was why even when the Southerners produced good literature, they were not recognized.

The author, then, described her first love. She fell in love with a man whom she called "Gerald B", who had already married and had two children, at first sight. This love proved to her, her charm and personality. Before she fell in love, she did not concentrate on her clothing, and wore only black dresses and this love changed her a lot and she preferred colourful apparels. "Love had proved to me that my personality, or my charm, could overcome, not only my deafness, but the morbid terror of that affliction, and, especially, of its effect upon others." (157) Thus, with her love, she found that she could overcome all the obstacles in her life. But her love was not successful, and was over with his death after seven years. She was shocked and described it as, "So that was finished, that was forever..." (167) She became emotionally alone and felt as if she had lost everything in her life. But she had will power to come out of it and she realized that one may select from realities, but one could not impose on realities. From the beginning, she dealt with a dubious nature that is, she was always in conflict. "Emotionally, I was a believer; intellectually, I was a skeptic" (168).

In part four "The Impenetrable Wall", Ellen represented herself as one who was in search of reality in her life. When her love was over, she turned herself to various philosophical books by authors such as Kant, Schopenhauer, and Spinoza. She looked for the reality of the soul. She felt that with her love, her best works were done. Though she enjoys companionship, it was momentary and did not last long. She needed a strong friendship. The author was twice engaged but had not married. Since from her childhood, she wished to be free from emotional ties. Meeting strangers was a great distress for her, which did not refer that she could not mingle with people. She can easily befriend with a person with a word. But her physical illness made her to avoid strangers except in the company of her sister.

As she asserted, she had a mask of joyous looks. "From my sad childhood, I had worn the protective coloring of gaiety, and this successful effort at dissimulation had consumed my small store of strength." (178) Her sister Cary's death had a great impact in the author's life. Ellen had an idea to protest for women's suffrage. Cary was suddenly caught up by a mysterious disease and the doctors tried in vain. All that they could do was to conceal the truth from Cary. Ellen was heart-broken but for Cary, she concealed the truth from Cary and she wanted to make her happy till she lives. Cary had an important role in Ellen's life because after Mother she was the only person who encouraged Ellen to write and to whom Ellen read her story chapter by chapter. But Cary died before the best work of Ellen was done. The irony is that Cary dies before Ellen's best work is done. "A tragic irony in life is that we so often achieve success or financial independence after the chief reason for which we sought it passed away. Mother died before my first book was published, and had had she lived but a longer, I might have made her future life so much easier." (188) Cary's illness created an emotional battle within the author and when Cary died, the author questioned why she alone had to bear all bitterness throughout her life. She settled in New York for some time to escape from some unforgettable moments.

I did not want people; I did not want sympathy. I wanted only to lose myself in a strange place, where nothing would remind me of grief or of joy or of life I had known. The past has become my present enemy, and my flight, I felt without thinking must be toward the unseen future. (194)

In part five "The Years of the Locust", she discussed about her matured life. She mentioned about a man named "Harold S" with whom the author had a passionate affair. But when he left for the World War, he was going away from her life consciously or unconsciously. She tells "If falling in love could be a bliss, I discovered, presently, that falling out of love could be blissful tranquility." (244) She spent her final life in her old house in Richmond. In that big house, she lived alone with the ghosts of her Mother, Frank, Cary,

and Father.

In part six named "What Endures," Ellen described her visit to England and the final hours of her life. In England she stayed with her brother Arthur and her wife Caroline. She said that though she loves the Cathedrals most, she could not write of them. She could only write of almshouses. The final years of her life marked her maturity over the things and the philosophy. When her beautiful dog Jeremy died, she had dreams such as both were in search of another in a vast hollowness. Then she was admitted in a hospital in Hurrogate. She was one of those persons who met both the World Wars and the impact of them on people. She ironically commented that American fiction had become so worthless. She felt that everybody possesses philosophy without knowing the meaning of it. The age, the period of 1920s has become modern. Sensation alone matters, not the reason. Everybody wrote fiction without any great effort. These works were considered to be great. She feels that the value of the fiction has degraded. When she nears sixty, she felt that her imagination was more vital than her early age. Between 1920s and 1930s she has produced five novels in her career, and these five she considered her best of all her works, and in American fiction.

In the final years, she was so much involved in philosophy. She clearly knew that one cannot remember with the mind alone. "One remembers with the nerves, and the arteries, and the bloodstream long after the mind has defeated and banished visible images." (213) At sixty, she felt that she is young than when she was in twenty. Her only companion was her secretary Anne Virginia Bennet. She ironically says that everybody in Richmond focuses on of trivial things. She felt as if trapped as a small animal in life. The trap is not the literal prison. She is caged by memories.

Only at the age of sixty, she learnt the secret of living. According to her, youth is the season of tragedy. She thought that her sense of laughter and making new friends were her two gifts that God had given for her. She felt pity for the literary situation that prevailed there. She was not sure about future. Though she suffered from heart ache in the in the final years of her life, She had the passion for writing. Her final book *In This Our Life* was started and the doctor advised her not to write. But she wanted to finish it before she died

She feared pain; not death. Throughout her life, she wore a protective color of gaiety around her. One friend asks her "The people here think you are so gay and attractive that they wonder why you write such sad books." (296) This clearly explained her 'self'. Through her literary career, she wrote books that were to be the voice of the people. As a writer, she wanted to break the conventionalities of a Southern Woman. She created literary characters like that. She ironically commented on the prevailing situation of American literary scene. In the midst of others, she wanted to create a new prose style without breaking.

Throughout her autobiography, she used various kinds of narrative technique to emphasize her feelings. This was written in the "I" person narrative. Usually, the narrative and autobiography are inseparable because autobiography is merely recalling the past of one's life, it is appropriate to use the narrative techniques as possible. If it had been written on the basis of the psychology of the author, it would have been better to use argumentative technique to justify the author's psychology.

This autobiography, written by a literary personality, followed the traditional conventions of autobiography, and so it can be considered a literary product. It is a clear manifesto of the time period between 1890s and 1940s. It clearly presents the World Wars. It is in this sense historical as well as political for it draws a picture of the literary scene in America during that time.

Ellen Glasgow, after weathering the storms of life, stoically falls in love with life when she touches sixty. The external gaiety has been a camouflage for the various painful stages that has been going on in her soul. Her writings reflect the loneliness, the loss, the alienation and also the subsequent acceptance towards the end of her life. Though Ellen during her time may have been discouraged by the marginalization of Southern literary artists, today she occupies a coveted position in the enviable galaxy of Southern Fiction writings of America like Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Conner and the like.

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