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Research Article:

“Trimming subliminal flickers”:

Mina Loy's Feminism and Motley Self

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“Trimming subliminal flickers”:  
Mina Loy’s Feminism and Motley Self

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*Our wills are formed  
by curious disciplines  
beyond your laws...*

—Mina Loy<sup>1</sup>

“Poetry is prose bewitched, a music made of visual thoughts, the sound of an idea,”<sup>2</sup> writes Mina Loy. Loy’s early poetry, with all its shocking newness and nonconformity, is a kaleidoscopic conglomeration of innumerable abstractions, her Futurist inclinations and an unmistakable attribute of the modern woman. Her explicit references like “infructuous impulses” and the “casual vulgarity of the merely observant” inscribe the first waves of a paradigmatic shift in women’s writing. Loy brings together and satirises gender constructions, economic hegemony and culturally created thresholds in her early poems. She identifies an essentially feministic self through reiterative self-contemplation attempted in these poems. This paper tries to trace the different dimensions of this feministic self as evolved in her poems—through ironic narrative subjugation, subversion and an attempt at “absolute demolition.”

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,” says Simone de Beauvoir (273). The idea that gender identities are culturally and historically determined is important to feminist critics. Mina Loy’s poem, “The Effectual Marriage or The Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni” questions the cultural, historical and performative constructions of femininity. Demonstrating gendered spaces through the spatial arrangement of the poem and employing a subversive narrative of subjugation, Loy suggests that *the feminine* is always constructed.

“The Effectual Marriage” locates the male and the female in two isolated and clearly demarcated spaces. Written after the end of her affair with Giovanni Papini<sup>3</sup>,

the poem satirically points out the constructedness of femininity as enforced by the seemingly impenetrable masculine space. These two non-intersecting spaces essentially introduce two distinctive perspectives into the poem:

In the evening they looked out of their two windows  
 Miovanni out of his library window  
 Gina from the kitchen window  
 From among his pots and pans  
 Where he so kindly kept her  
 Where she so wisely busied herself  
 Pots and Pans she cooked in them  
 All sorts of sialagogues (36)

The lines establish a clear distinction between the “library window” and the “kitchen window,” the intellectual space of man and the mundane, insignificant space of woman. “He” chooses to keep her “kindly” among “his” pots and pans and she “wisely” decides to indulge herself there. Her importance is reduced to cooking “sialagogues.” Loy continues to say that “some say that happy women are immaterial” (36).

The narrative continues with more descriptions of Gina. “Being an incipience a correlative/ an instigation of the reaction of man,” Gina is more than a female shifting/moving “from the palpable to the transcendent.” The commodification of woman becomes explicit in the lines:

Gina had her use Being useful  
 contentedly conscious  
 She flowered in Empyrean  
 From which no well-mated woman ever returns (36-7)

Loy sardonically talks about the *use* of the female, of which she is “contentedly conscious” and which transports her into “Empyrean,” the undeniable paradise which is the most desirable place for any “well-mated woman.” The essence of womanhood in this feminine square designated by and alienated from the masculine space is reduced to “being useful.”

Miovanni’s declaration that “I am/ Outside time and space” reinforces the masculine order in the poetic space. “Patience,” Gina learns that, “is an attribute,” a typical “feminine” quality imposed upon women irrespective of time and place. Gina, who is undoubtedly and entirely inside time and space, adjusts herself to offer “appropriately delectable” dishes at any time favourable for Miovanni. The phrase

lodges both gustatory and sexual sensations through which the overarching masculine subjective self completely appropriates and subjugates the female self. Hélène Cixous, in her famous essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," says:

I say woman overturns the "personal," for if, by means of laws, lies, blackmail, and marriage, her right to herself has been extorted at the same time as her name, she has been able, through the very moment of mortal alienation, to see more closely the inanity of "propriety," the reductive stinginess of the masculine-conjugal subjective economy, which she doubly resists. (888)

Loy exposes this "reductive stinginess" of the male subject in the poem. As the poem proceeds, the isolation and alienation become more intense. Loy's pungent tone constantly asserts the existence of the two identities and their mutually exclusive spaces. It is interesting to note that she never introduces a common space in the poem. The "wise ones" choose to remain shut in their private spaces, one chosen and the other given.

What had Miovanni made of his ego  
 In his library  
 What had Gina wondered among the pots and pans  
 One never asked the other (37)

Miovanni, "magnificently [a] man" and Gina "insignificantly a woman" in their alienated worlds live *peacefully*. The quotidian sexual union, the "passable" door (which was an "absurd thing") seems to be the only intersecting space in their life, the both sides of which are extremely strange and unknown to each other. "To man his work" and "to woman her love" are important and completely divided in space and time. Elaine Showalter in her essay "The Female Tradition" says that "[f]or women, however, work meant labour for *others*. Work, in the sense of self-development, was in direct conflict with the subordination and repression inherent in the female ideal" (22). Gina labours for Miovanni, who gives her only material existence. Later in the poem, the ruminating Miovanni in the dark room is bitterly commented upon by Loy. Gina's ambivalent thoughts linger as she might see a "round light" where his mind is and strain to think that she might even see "Nothing at all."

The poem turns its focal point to Gina's personality, suddenly stating that "Gina was a woman/ Who wanted everything/ To be everything in woman." But for Miovanni, her variegated appearances are encapsulated into a single persona, "she was Gina." He knew her as Gina, composed of those "fluctuant aspirations," holding

together the numerous selves in her, who would come to an end if he alters. So, "Miovanni remained/ Monumentally the same/ The same Miovanni" (39). The ironic stress on the word "same," achieved through repetition, points at his obstinacy. His refusal to change is contrasted against the conception of female as a variable. Loy again directs our attention to the constructedness of femininity, as how a woman is attributed certain characteristics by man. She sardonically reminds us that Miovanni, in fact, has nothing to do with Gina's existence in the world since he remains a mere presence to decree her identity.

Judith Butler writes in *The Psychic Life of Power*, "Subjection signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject" (Butler qtd. in Emerling 118). The fact that subjection is the basis of subjectivity creates the paradoxical situation where subversion becomes possible only through this subjection. Loy employs the narrative of subjection in order to subvert the politics of gendered spaces. The implicit irony in her lines attempts at the distortion of culturally determined identity and the construction of femininity. Loy's treatment of the gendered spaces foresees Butler's idea that gender identity is performative. The poem is a tacit subversion of the performative creation of gender identities through which femininity is constructed. "A feminist text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic," says Hélène Cixous (888).

The poem on the milk bill (she wrote it when she was lazy) is a reminder of the acquiescent artistic self that allays itself and reduces its spectrum of possibilities to the banal "strophes" of "good morning" and "good night." The "pet simplicities of her Universe,"

The scrubbed smell of the white-wood table  
 Greasy cleanliness of the chopper board  
 The coloured vegetables  
 Intuited quality of flour  
 Crickly sparks of straw-fanned charcoal, (39)

ranging themselves in her "audacious happiness" define a distinctly *feminine* world where she reductively engages in a prescribed process of *life*, where "circles were only round/ Having no vices."

The effete intellectualism of Miovanni and the fainéant subjugation of Gina, ironically form the "effectual marriage," which is essentially "insipid" and *peaceful*. "Corporeally transcendently consecutively/ conjunctively" they remained themselves, and were "quite complete." The irony that spills throughout the poem and the poet's tacit treatment of the narrative in a very ordinary manner

markedly delineates her position. The fundamental complicity of their lives, of Gina her multitudinous fluctuations and of Miovanni his subjugating masculine self, creates a domestic impasse, not because they struggle against each other but because they are accustomed to their own states of beings.

“Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought,” says Simone de Beauvoir in the introduction to *The Second Sex*. “[...] following Hegel,” she continues, “we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed—he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object” (17). The othering of woman creates this “fundamental hostility” in man to constantly oppose and subjugate her, rendering her the *object*. In Loy’s poem, this othering is evident. Gina is the other whom Miovanni distances constantly, thereby creating the gendered spaces in the poem. The spatial location of lines in the poem demonstrates the division of the domestic space.

“To write as men write is the aim and besetting sin of women; to write as women is the real task they have to perform,” said G. H. Lewes (qtd. in Showalter 3). Loy’s “logopoeia,” as Pound calls her language, “the dance of intellect among words” is distinct and potentially charged with an implicit mode of irony. “The Effectual Marriage” questions the gender identities determined by culture and history. Ironically through a narrative of subjugation, Loy subverts the constructions of femininity, the existence of gendered spaces and the performative iteration through which identities are conceived.

Another poem, “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots,” demonstrates the creation of a space in the title itself. The seemingly disparate components—virgins, curtains and dots—constitutes a space which in itself is a construct defined not merely by the constituents themselves but by exterior factors too. In fact, the labels are imposed by these exteriorities, which are to be encountered later in the poem. However, the title installs a perspective into the poem, which we will examine later in this paper.

In “Virgins,” the carefully demarcated spaces of the masculine and feminine are absent. Space here is an economic construct—created and governed by the masculine economy. The striking absence of an explicit gender reference such as ‘woman’ blurs the spatial boundaries. “Virgins” seems to be a gender-less category, only implicitly women. The masculine space is not defined but appears to extend limitlessly whereas virgins’ possibilities of any spatial detour end within the house.

“Houses hold virgins,” they do not inhabit them. The primacy of the space indicates the virgins are governed by their spaces.

The windows and doors act as frames which construct the perception. Windows limit the perception and doors are thresholds which they never cross as opposed to the door in “The Effectual Marriage,” which they passed daily. The imposed limitation of perception recalls their “stare” which haunts the entire poem. The “stare” that prolongs is an inner frame that assists the windows.

Virgins        without dots  
Stare         beyond probability (21)

The sadly fragmented and delimited visions of the virgins enclose themselves within the “stare” “beyond probability.” This places the visions outside “probability” and windows become a mere apparatus to look through. This looking out through the windows is a motif that hints at the way perceptions are shaped and constructed based on culture, gender and “performative iteration<sup>4</sup>.”

The other dimension of perception in the poem is represented by the mirror. The introspection and the confessional constitute a certain ‘looking in,’ greatly contrasted and belittled by the helpless desire to look out. This diminution of self importance is again intensified by the commodification of the virgins:

Nobody shouts  
Virgins for sale  
Yet where are our coins  
For buying a purchaser (22)

Virgins remain intact within their “house,” the door always locked against them. The “curtains” bring a further obstruction to the view, perhaps filtering the perception. Loy’s proposed “unconditional surgical destruction of virginity throughout the female population at puberty” can be read as a reaction to overrated virginity which enforces the confinement of women (153).

In “One O’Clock at Night,” Loy presents, in an autobiographical note, the submissive woman who is indifferent to the “cerebral gymnastics” of men, desiring the “imparted physical heat.” She writes:

Beautiful half-hour of being a mere woman  
The animal woman  
Understanding nothing of man (15)

Waking her up from this sleepy complacency, the Marinetti-figure<sup>5</sup> of the poem creates a different space (read masculine), which she wishes to regard as the “self-indulgent play of children” or the “thunder of alien gods—separating herself from it. The need to assume a “personal mental attitude,” ceasing to be a woman, suggests the apparent inability of a *woman*—a mere woman—to be a part of the “dynamic” intellectual argument. In “[ceasing] to be a woman,” Loy ironically hints at the concept of woman’s need to be loved. She exhorts, in her incomplete Feminist Manifesto, “women must destroy in themselves, the desire to be loved” (155)

“Giovanni Franchi” formulates the scornful attitude towards Futurists, especially Giovanni Papini whom she refers as Giovanni Bapini in the poem. The “threewomen” of the poem seems to be an ironic self-representation, who is driven by three equally strong and contradictory instincts:

The first instinct            first again            may  
 renascent gods save us from the enigmatic  
 penetralia of Firstness  
 Was to be faithful to a man            first  
 The second            to be loyal to herself first  
 She would have to find which self first  
 The third which might as well have been first  
 Was to find out            how many toes            the  
 philosopher Giovanni Bapini had            first (28)

These three dissimilar desires seem to create a split in the identity—of the woman persona of the poem who becomes a “threewomen”—and a self-conflict. Bapini often claims, “[e]verybody in Firenze knows me.” But “[s]he never knew what he was/ Or how he was himself.” More than evoking gender imbalances in general terms, the disequilibrium here is forged by more or less a personal narrative, redolent of the unresolved gender disparities.

In “At the Door of the House,” the card-teller traces “the Man of the Heart” in the “maps of destiny.” The lady, still in “tears about matrimony” sees him “at the door of [her] house.” The man never crosses the threshold and the woman remains, “[l]ooking for the little love-tale/ That never came true/ At the door of the house.” As in “Virgins,” the door acts as a threshold which is never crossed.

“Love Songs” is rather a coalescence of distinct and yet connected images which flash one after another. Carnality pervades the poetic field, though actively confronted by a lingering tension brought by the “humid carnage” and “red a warm colour on the battle-field.” These implicit references to war create a disquieted fusion of sexual love and violence. This tension is intensified by the latent struggle between illusion and reality scattered throughout the poem. In the third song, the past tense references and the uncertainty signal the conjectural nature of the anecdote, though the dichotomy between illusion and reality strikes the speaker and the reader at the same time. The butterfly with “daily news/ Printed in blood on its wings” brings down the feeble fantasy of an imagined sexual union to an acrid acceptance of reality. Here, the feminine and the masculine unite (or do they?) in a state of disequilibrium brought into being not by the sexes themselves but by the contextual framework that binds them together. The distinctly female voice conveys an infinite longing which seems to deflate with the awareness of impossibility (of everything she lings for). This comes as the doubt whether the beloved is only the “other half/ Of an ego’s necessity” which then becomes the need to be separated:

Or we might tumble together

Depersonalized

Identical

Into the terrific Nirvana (58)

This tragedy of togetherness erases all the sexual differences that she talks about in her other poems.

Violence becomes explicit and inseparable from performed corporeality:

No love or the other thing

Only the impact of lighted bodies

Knocking sparks off each other

In chaos (59)

The coloured glass of experience gradually transforms into the “illimitable monotone” of whiteness explained as “I am burnt quite white/In the climacteric/Withdrawal of your sun.” The invasion of white signals this absence that distils all the colours. The “wanton duality” dismembers to smelting of “coloured conclusions” into “synthetic whiteness” and the white smoke that hovers above his house.

The actors—he or she—lose importance and numerous abstractions flood the page splattered with dashes in between. Neither gender nor identities prevail, crumpled by the perturbing dissonance of selves and the consequent distortions. The taut ambivalence of dissimilar identities and thoughts condenses, if not continues, into the densely epigrammatic last line: “Love— — — the preeminent litterateur.” The tone of incompleteness prevailing in the poem, genders, identities and the participants revert to a “subliminal flicker.”

“To become really free woman has to throw off the heavy chains of the current forms of the family, which are outmoded and oppressive,” says Alexandra Kollontai (9). Loy, in her *Feminist Manifesto*, puts forward a similar, if not stronger and extremist, argument that “NO scratching on the surface of the rubbish heap of tradition, will bring about Reform, the only method is Absolute Demolition” (153). As Kollontai argues, “Only when women are relieved of all those material burdens which at the present time create a dual dependence, on capital and on the husband, can the principle of “free love” be implemented” effectively (13). Loy boldly announces that there is “nothing impure in sex” and advocates “free love.” Her poems evidence the brave attempt at overtly structuring sexual references and instincts. The “infructuous impulses” stemming from the “erotic garbage” confound the conservative and typically masculine reading public and leave them struck by the limpid “wanton duality.” Michele Barrett writes:

Delphy argues that women’s class position should be understood in terms of the institution of marriage, which she conceptualizes as a labour contract in which the husband’s appropriation of unpaid labour from his wife constitutes a domestic mode of production and a patriarchal mode of exploitation. (14)

The masculine political economy and the patriarchal domination create and sustain a power imbalance between man and woman which leaves woman in a state of constant dependence. Loy extends this imbalance to constitute specific gendered spaces as in “The Effectual Marriage” and “Virgins.” Economic and gender constructions create isolated spaces which she demonstrates in her poems with the spatial allocation of lines.

House comes as a constant motif in Loy’s poems. Signifying a space, her *house* broadens over psychological, cultural, economic, and gender structures. In “Virgins” the spatiality of the house becomes synonymous with the bodily space of the virgins through a metaphoric *looking out*. Eyes look out through the windows, creating a double frame that forms perception. Domestic space in “The Effectual Marriage” is divided, thus house containing and enacting the *dichotomy* between the two genders.

In “Love Songs,” house lodges the desires and a sense of incompleteness. “FORGET that you live in houses that you may live in yourself,” says Loy (149).

Mina Loy leaves an enigmatic and potentially agitated self—ostensibly feministic—in her *perniciously* powerful logopoeia. Her poems employ diverse new methods to deconstruct the *feminine* identity constructed through iterative cultural and historical narratives of inflictions. Astonishingly powerful and ironic in one poem and mysteriously feminine in another, Loy’s coalesced poetic self—driven by mutable and conflicting instincts as in her “threewomen”—announces, “leave off looking to men to find out what you are not—seek within yourselves to find out what you are” (154). Her beautifully cryptic poems subvert and satirise the masculine constructions of female identity and isolated feminine spaces. As Carolyn Burke quotes Kreymborg, Mina Loy wrote with “all the earnestness and irony of a woman possessed and obsessed with the sum of human experience” (Burke n. p.), converging her imaginative swerves to a potent subjective terrain.

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> “Apology of Genius” (Loy 77).

<sup>2</sup> Mina Loy’s “Modern Poetry” (Loy 157).

<sup>3</sup> An Italian writer with whom Mina Loy developed an affair. Burke writes about him: “the Florentine writer Giovanni Papini, known as a stroncatore—a polemicist who pulled other people’s opinions to pieces” (Burke n. p.).

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler’s idea that gender is constructed through performative iteration.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Burke writes that Mina Loy chose her Futurist poet-friends F. T. Marinetti and Giovanni Papini as models for her word portraits. She observes that the male figure in “One O’Clock at Night” is modelled on Marinetti.

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