

“Give Birth to Yourself”: Gender Roles and Marriage in the Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy

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Abstract

Carol Ann Duffy in *Standing Female Nude* acknowledges the facts of unhappy marriages, dissecting unequal power relationships within marriage, examining how some are held hostage by marriage with no way out. It examines how within marriage the needs and comforts of the husband are kept paramount at the expense of the wife toiling her life out and treated only as a sex object and birthing automaton; life clearly demarcated into before and after marriage, with voice broken or beyond recall. I argue that Duffy’s poems can be read via the lens of education, that Duffy provides women the possibilities that life may hold out for them and what holds them back, in indicating the shortcomings of men. Thus, if women need to be educated, to learn to be more than they have traditionally been then the men in Duffy’s poems often need to learn even more, to overcome conservative, traditionalist viewpoints, to be more generous, and to treat women, not as subservient but as equals.

Keywords: gender, marriage, sex object, birthing automaton, tradition, education, her self

Carol Ann Duffy, the first and only woman poet laureate of England is often associated with accessibility in the sense that “Her demotic, and conversational, poetics are key aspects of her populism” (Michelis and Rowland 1). Writing on Duffy’s style of writing Rees-Jones remarks,

Her attempts to strip bare the linguistic devices of poetic language, and to explore some of the patterns and rhythms of everyday, non-standard English, have made her accessible to a wide readership. The snappy sentences, and apparent simplicity of her work, however, do not prevent Duffy from addressing complex philosophical issues about the function of language and the construction of the self, or from dealing with a wide range of issues, from the effects of sexism, racism, immigration, domestic violence, and social disaffection, to the complexities of love. (1)

This paper explores the nuances of gender roles and marriage and chronicles the various issues that come into question especially within marriage as presented in the select poetry of Duffy. The issues of turning a woman into a sex object, a birthing automaton, of being muted leading to the loss of her voice and language, of being married into a foreign country, fettered and shackled by patriarchy. This study on Duffy’s poetry draws upon a primary idea: as stated by Adrienne Rich in “Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet” that poetry is a “revelation, information, a kind of teaching” (505), and read Duffy’s poetry as offering different ways of learning and teaching. Maud Bodkin in *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* makes clear the recurrent pattern of women who are represented by men in their literary tradition, “woman as mother, and woman as desirable maid” (176), and the clarion call that Duffy sends out is to break this pattern and tell the other side of the story. Helen Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa”, women are asked to write about themselves, about women and “don’t make of her what men have made of her” (882). Duffy’s poetry

does just that, as she tells stories of characters learning from lived experiences by breaking the centuries-old stereotypes and vesting them with a vital voice of their own, at once modern and relevant. I argue that in Duffy's poems, the education that we read about not only stays within the poems, for the characters therein, but it is also for us as readers: the poems turn the spotlight on exploitative, ruinous relationships and as we read them, they caution and educate us.

Even as Duffy celebrates togetherness, love and understanding in all familial relationships, she also acknowledges the facts of unhappy marriages, dissecting unequal power relationships within marriage, examining how some are held hostage by marriage with no way out. Rees-Jones states that in Duffy's poetry we see the "importance of women's experience, the difficulties of women's lives, and the difficulties that patriarchy presents to both men and women" (3). This is exactly what we see in "Alliance" from the volume *Standing Female Nude* that portrays the bitter reality of husband-wife relationship. Alliance is a word common to both French and English, only used and pronounced differently, which Duffy deploys to imply a marriage between two individuals of these nationalities, a Frenchwoman and an Englishman. The poem addresses the problems of marriage, of marrying into another culture, another nation which is at once personal and universal. The speaker puts forward the cost of marriage that a woman pays, "What she has retained of herself is a hidden grip / working her face like a glove-puppet. She smiles / at his bullying" (Duffy 26). The use of the phrase "like a glove-puppet" raises several issues and ideas; the protagonist's control over her face, even as it indicates her agency over her facial expression, it implicitly also suggests the speaker being treated like a puppet. The power play between the two is intense and huge: if the husband has his "hidden grip" over her, so does she over him. She knows the ways of her husband and has learned to retaliate the best way possible,

by smiling, “in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth” with laughter” (Cixous 888).

The glossy beginning and the fairy tale world of love fades away, to be replaced by clear revelations:

She is word-perfect. Over the years he has inflated
with best bitter till she has no room. *Je t’aime*
isn’t in it. One morning she awoke to a foreigner
lying beside her and her heart slammed shut. (Duffy 26)

The ambiguity and placement of the sentence, “She is word-perfect” soon after the acknowledgement that the husband bullies her, belittles her nation and its people, underlines her efforts: is she word-perfect in English, understanding the nuances of her husband’s denigrating words? Love goes away, “*Je t’aime*” becomes a thing of the past, yet, the very fact that the protagonist chooses to use the French term for “I love you” is indicative of language barriers, or the love and attachment one has for one’s mother tongue, or even to imply the changing times: courtship in French and marital life with all its negativity in English. The dimming and dying of love is translated into geographical and political boundaries that automatically come into play, for the speaker finds herself lying next to a foreigner in her husband, leading her to shut her heart. Even as Duffy teaches her readers about the realities of relationships that turn sour and bitter with the passage of time, she also makes abundantly clear the fact that women, though they put up with conventional and traditional abuse within marriage, learn ways to retaliate in appropriate ways, or at least to protect themselves from further hurt. Thus, the protagonist’s husband’s selfishness is responded to by the shutting of her heart. This approach reflects what has been defined by Cixous as,

On the one hand she has constituted herself necessarily as that “person” capable of losing a part of herself without losing her integrity. But secretly, silently, deep down inside, she grows and multiplies, for, on the other hand, she knows far more about living and about the relation between the economy of the drives and the management of the ego than any man. (888)

The speaker also addresses the one reason that makes the protagonist stay with her husband, in spite of love having been lost, “the youngest lives at home. She stays up late / to feed what keeps her with the father” (Duffy 26) clearly indicates the price the protagonist pays for having, and loving the children. The enormous sacrifices she makes in order to hold the family together because it involves children, even at the cost of being held as a “hostage in the garden” (Duffy 26). It is in this garden that the protagonist sits and reflects upon the thorns of her life, what her children have cost her and dreams about a holiday “in another language with a different name” (Duffy 26) which is, in all probability French and not English. She dreams and hopes for what is not, yet, while nothing stops her imagination, her dreams of going on a holiday are juxtaposed with “He staggers in half-pissed / and plonks his weight down on her life, hates her / for whatever reason she no longer lets him near” (Duffy 26). That’s the price she pays, and instead of understanding and affection, there is an incomprehensible invisible wall. Even as Duffy presents the situation from the wife’s point of view, she also shows us the befuddled confusion of the husband who is left puzzled by his wife’s rejection of him. The poem teaches us about the complexities of human relationships; of love found and love lost and the consequences of such love, of the price one pays after considering all the pros and cons of familial life with children as a priority. But it also allows the reader to think about the petty insults that can cause the ruin of a marriage, and how once distance sets in between a couple, there is no meeting ground possible.

If “Alliance” is about a marriage from a woman’s point of view then “You Jane” from the same volume, is presented from a man’s perspective. The plot is similar, marriage and children, and while the wife toils her life out, the husband can see only his own perspective. The wife is nothing more than a sex object, a birthing automaton and a housemaid according to the speaker. The wife is introduced as one “who snuggles up to me after I’ve given her one / after the Dog and Fox” (Duffy 34) whereas he “farts a guinness smell” (Duffy 34) against her, which is suggestive of a total disregard for the spouse and complete entitlement. The speaker is only interested in his own sexual satisfaction and cares very little for his wife. To enjoy life to the fullest he has kept himself fit, “It’s all muscle. You can punch / my gut and wait forever till I flinch. Try it. / Man of the house. Master in my own home. Solid” (Duffy 34). The physical prowess of the speaker which keeps him in command of himself and his wife, is extended into being the master of the house which speaks of how he keeps his wife under his complete control. This “charisma of Man” as Rich opines in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”, “come purely from his power over her and his control of the world by force, not from anything fertile or life-giving in him” (1983).

The speaker is so entitled and full of himself that even when he talks about his wife, it is only from his own point of view and with his needs and comforts kept paramount:

Look at that bicep. Dinner on the table
and a clean shirt, but I respect her point of view.
She’s borne me two in eight years, knows
when to button it. Although she’s run a bit to fat
She still bends over of a weekend in suspenders. (Duffy 34)

That the husband and wife do not always see eye to eye is made clear by the speaker’s statement that he respects her point of view, but it also comes down to the speaker’s priorities and needs once again: sex, clean clothes, food on the table and he should be fit, sexually

satisfied and able to live his own life, a drink “with the lads, a laugh, then home to her” (Duffy 34). The title of the poem gives a clue as to what Duffy is getting at: “You Jane” refers to the line from early Tarzan comics and movies where the ape-man would say, “Me Tarzan, you Jane”, and here while the couple is located within a civilisation far removed from the jungles of Tarzan’s world, the ape-man continues to exist, within the trappings of civilization and civility. For him, women have very limited roles to play and he has a fixed, unchanging idea about the roles and spheres that men and women occupy in life. Duffy does not mince words in this educational project and while she does show women what they could have, the possibilities that life may hold out for them and what holds them back, she is as, if not clearer, in indicating the shortcomings of men. If women need to be educated, to learn to be more than they have traditionally been then the men in Duffy’s poems often need to learn even more, to overcome conservative, traditionalist viewpoints, to be more generous, and to treat women, not as subservient but as equals.

That the speaker is a fitness-freak, strong as an ox, has no problem with drinking, are all suggestive of the speaker’s life not having changed in spite of marriage and children. He drinks and has fun outdoors while his wife labours at home, looks after the children and cooks and cleans for him. For all the muscles on his body the speaker does not seem to have much of a mind or even a heart,

She says, Did you dream love? I never
dream. Sleep is as black as a good jar.
I wake half-conscious with a hard-on, shove it in.
She don’t complain. When I feel, I feel here
Where the purple vein in my neck throbs. (Duffy 34)

The complete oblivion of the speaker in sleep is reflective also of his oblivious blinkered life, wherein he lives physically but has little or no emotional or mental life. Cixous clearly puts it

out, “Though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same regionalization which serves the couple head/genitals and which is inscribed only within boundaries” (889). Thus, when the speaker answers that he never dreams, it is indicative of his living a fulfilled life, the only feeling he has is in his jugular vein which throbs. The speaker’s complete physicality is close to the animal nature of his life, which in turn connects to the title: he is Tarzan-like, almost an ape. If the speaker’s wife has dreams of her own, what could those be? It is these dreams of women that will be explored in the next poem.

“A Clear Note” explores three generations of women, Agatha, Moll, and Bernadette, and their dreams about their life as a woman. Agatha, the mother of Moll and grandmother to Bernadette, feels the burn of having married the wrong man, moved out of Ireland to Glasgow (to her the wrong country), and experiences the negligence and uncaring ways of her husband. Her life is clearly demarcated into before and after marriage; one that is free, fashionable and attractive in “long auburn hair”, “glorious with a new frock and high hopes” (Duffy 27), famous for her hats and with a voice of her own, all evocative of living a vibrant life, to the full. In contrast, life as a wife and mother for Agatha is gloomy and bleak.

Agatha, like Jane (the protagonist in “You Jane”), is again a sex vessel and birthing automaton, but unlike Jane who doesn’t complain, Agatha dies several deaths in each act of sex:

Kiss me goodnight – me weeping in our bed.
The scunner would turn away cold, back rigid,
But come home from work and take me on the floor
With his boots on and his blue eyes shut. (Duffy 27)

Their conjugal relationship is not only completely voided of emotions, but marital rape is suggested. The use of “boots” indicates the character of the man, and at the same time, the boots, the floor and the shut eyes, all indicate the proprietorial mode of functioning of the man: his needs alone matter even if what he is subjecting his wife to is sexual abuse. As a consequence, Agatha’s pregnancy is unplanned, unwanted and it becomes an inescapable tragedy. The very act of bringing forth a new life becomes a symbol of death. According to Cixous,

Pregnancy cannot be traced back, except within the historical limits of the ancients, to some form of fate, to those mechanical substitutions brought about by the unconscious of some eternal “jealous woman”; not to penis envies; and not to narcissism or to some sort of homosexuality linked to the ever-present mother! Begetting a child doesn’t mean that the woman or the man must fall ineluctably into patterns or must recharge the circuit of reproduction. (890)

Agatha’s life is regulated by birthing child after child, and her agony is portrayed in the statement, “Again and again throwing life from my loins / like a spider with enough rope / spinning and wringing at its own neck” (Duffy 27). She had borne eight children, “worked as a nurse / tending the dying. Four kids to each breast” (Duffy 27); an image of children eating away at the mother almost literally.

That Agatha had been muted by her husband is made clear, resoundingly, when she states that “I had a voice once, but it’s broken” (Duffy 27), and she is no longer heard but only made to listen. The “broken” voice and “unspoken words” (Duffy 27) become her own state of being that along with her abused body, her dreams to reach for the “moon”, her language, all break and disappear beyond “recall” (Duffy 27). For,

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away – that’s how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak ... A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine. (Cixous 880-81)

Marriage becomes a place where her sense of self is ruined or lost, and the loss of the voice and the language she once used is a symbol for the loss of self. When language is extinguished, her self is extinguished.

Agatha lost her voice, and as a result she kept a dairy; that she could only speak of her sense of self, her feelings, anger, etc., in the pages of a diary, never having the possibility of sharing her emotional truths with anyone. Cixous points out that “It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence” (881). Cixous also states that “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions” (880). As a consequence, Bernadette noticed that the day her grandmother died: “Someone burnt the diary she wrote” (Duffy 30). The diary if read, by anyone else would indicate the sham that her marriage had been, that the husband’s neglect and cruelty would be exposed and thus it is burnt, killing off Agatha’s truth, not allowing it to be known and thus enabling the preservation of the façade of a marriage. But fragments are known, extracts “whispered at the wake” and then it slips into the past.

Moll thinks she “saw him bend over the coffin to kiss her / and half-thought the corpse has flinched” (Duffy 30). It is rather ironical that all her life Agatha longed for a kiss and she only gets it after her death. The flinch Moll thinks she sees, clearly focuses the reader’s gaze on the fact that even though the husband tries to camouflage the truth about their marriage it is a truth known to her daughter and she recognizes Agatha’s revulsion and fear, even in death.

Agatha knows it will continue and there will be no change until death do them part. Therefore, her last wish is “Don’t bury him on top of me. Please” (Duffy 27), the hope encapsulating all her anger and agony and the hope that at least in death she could be free of him. But the tragedy is that “they buried him on top” for “What does it matter, they said, now she’s dead?” (Duffy 31). The web of sexual violence in which she is trapped stretches to the grave and complicates the sequence: home, which was to unite the man and woman, rendered them separate because he treated her as just a body, available for his use; the grave which was to separate the two in death, brings them together again. In both cases there is an absence of feeling; he did not express an emotional connection with her when they were alive and making love or delivering children, and now even in death, there is still no getting away for her.

Agatha, not having managed to live her dreams leaves a clear dream map for her daughter and grand-daughter, but for her, “the starved body began eating itself” (Duffy 28); maybe a reference to reproductive cancer, the image of the children eating her, and the cancer eating her body, all of it clearly exploitative and destructive. Her daughter Moll learns from Agatha and in turn educates her daughter Bernadette to “*Never have kids. Give birth to yourself*” (29) which is exactly what Bernadette does.

For Moll, the memories of her mother's troubled marriage and life "turn up / like old photos and catch at the throat / somehow" (Duffy 28). Though in a better position, when compared to her mother, she too feels stifled in her marriage and is hemmed in by various forms of imprisonment, physical and mental, which haunt her. She is not permitted to work even though "The job pays well" and there's "freedom" (Duffy 29), because her husband is against it. Moll becomes what Cixous describes as, "reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow" (880).

Moll is handled like "gold leaf" by her husband and sons, yet, she thinks of leaving, "Sometimes I think I'll walk out the door / and keep right on walking" (29), her desire to be free and her knowledge of her own wasted life constantly nagging away at her. Moll's statement that she is treated like "gold leaf" indicates much: her men folk thinking of her as delicate and fragile, but also as a rare and precious object, and it also implies lifelessness and being someone else's possession. If Agatha's dreams were to be kissed, to be called darling and to be told to look at the moon by her husband, Moll's dreams are to be allowed to work, to ride a bike by the seaside, to be able to travel to her daughter alone, all of which are made impossible because of a jealous and suspicious husband for if she were to do the last, "there'd be fights for a month. He broods on what I'd get up to / given half the chance" (Duffy 29).

She acknowledges that her husband loves her but one cannot survive on love alone, and it is in the name of love that Moll is reduced to being a housemaid, utterly divorced from what she aspires to be. Stripped of the freedom that she needs, she creates an inner space within herself, "I've been drained since twenty, but not empty / yet. I roam inside myself" (Duffy 29). The mother and daughter both suffer within the institution of marriage, in very different ways: the former in a loveless marriage, wishing to be cared for, loved, while the latter is loved and cherished, but desires freedom, the very love that the mother hankered for, now suffocating the daughter, as even love can stifle and prove a constraint.

Bernadette, as her mother describes her, was different from conception, a “wild wain, with an answer for everything” (Duffy 29) and unlike her four sons Moll could read Bernadette like a book, like the back of her hand; Bernadette who made her sing “*The stars at night are big and bright*” (Duffy 30). Moll carries within herself the dreams of her mother Agatha, and her own dreams, “The dreams / of women that will hurt no one” (Duffy 31) and with those unfulfilled dreams she teaches Bernadette to reach for the stars; which is what Bernadette does.

The advice that mothers leave daughters is to live and travel, “The hopes of your thousand mothers / sing with a clear note inside you. *Away while you can, and travel the world*” (Duffy 31); the musical note of physical and mental freedom. It is Bernadette who gets to live this “clear note” which is the title of the poem, holding the dreams of thousands of women, “Bleak decades of silence / and lovelessness placing her years away / from the things that seem natural to us” (Duffy 31).

This poem chronicles the lives of three generations of women, the struggles they have endured, fettered and shackled by patriarchy, and how with careful comprehension and understanding, they make way for a change in the next generation and next. The learning that comes from the experiences of the previous generation in conjunction with the changes that have been brought about with time is clearly noted from Agatha to Moll to Bernadette. Thus, Bernadette is free, her own person, and puts into practice the lessons learned from her mother and grandmother and it is through them, and for them, that she travels and as the flight takes off “For Moll / the life goes streaming back in tune. / For Agatha, from Bernadette, the moon” (Duffy 31), giving their dreams wings. According to Cixous, “Flying is woman’s gesture – flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we’ve been able to possess anything only by flying;

we've lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers" (887).

Duffy informs and educates women through Agatha, Moll and Bernadette on what marriage can do to destroy a woman's life where many suffer, either caught in abusive, repressive marriages or the only-a-housewife syndrome, and she contrasts it with the freedom and joys of being one's own person in Bernadette. Cixous states, "It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her – by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than her self" (878). Bernadette becomes the liberated new woman.

Duffy's poetry echoes what Adriene Rich addresses in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", that "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (1982), and "we need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (1982). The poems also inform why some women are victims of bullying, physical and/or sexual abuse by their spouse(s) but continue to stay in the relationship, trying to make sure the same does not happen to their daughters, in line with what Cixous clearly opined as "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (875) and that "The future must no longer be determined by the past" (875).

Duffy's poetry truly mirrors the words of Rich stated in "Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet", that what it "constantly and tellingly manifested was a belief in

art, not as commodity, not as luxury, not as suspect activity, but as a precious resource to be made available to all, one necessity for the rebuilding” (512) of her self. Ian Gregson in “Carol Ann Duffy: Monologue as Dialogue” in *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* argues that Duffy gives a voice to the voiceless, and notes that “Duffy’s feminism is most accurately seen as part of a wider political protest against how representation “programs and precedes us”” (104). A similar opinion is reflected by Rees-Jones when she says that Duffy’s body of work dramatizes

... the anxiety of her position as a woman poet at a turning point in the history of women’s poetry this century, her work also illustrates the anxieties of the age in which she lives: anxieties about the relationship of the self to the world, about the validity of communication, and the disturbance of gender roles.

Duffy’s is a remarkable achievement; hers a ground-breaking and original voice. (4)

Thus, Duffy with careful comprehension and understanding, makes way for a change and breaks this hold of the centuries-old stereotypes of the woman, and as the characters present and navigate their lives, they also caution and educate the readers; changing the future.

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