

## Strachey's Nightingale: A Perspective

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The paper is an attempt to study the life of Florence Nightingale amidst the rigid Victorian society. In this endeavour, we shall take into account the representation of professional women in the Victorian society with special focus to the *Lady with the Lamp* through the words of Lytton Strachey. The paper will discuss and throw light on how the people of her age conceived a derogatory picture of this self-sacrificing woman and depict how she stood against the prevailing customs. This paper will also try to bring forth the drawbacks of the Victorian society through the life of Florence Nightingale.

*Florence Nightingale* is a part of the famous book *Eminent Victorians* (1918) written by Lytton Strachey. Strachey was one of the influential members of Bloomsbury Group, a loosely associated group of English writers, intellectuals, philosophers and artists who shared and propagated a common view of life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century England. They stood apart from the conventional norms, bourgeois values and Victorian morality and adopted a more liberal way of life with a focus on personal relationships and individual pleasure. As a member of this society, Lytton Strachey, a biographer and literary critic, took an unconventional attitude to writing biography. He revolutionized and even deconstructed the concept as well as technique of writing biography in *Eminent Victorians*. In November 1912 he wrote to Virginia Woolf that their Victorian predecessors "seem to me a set of mouth bungled hypocrites." He demystified several Victorian icons like Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold and General Gordon who were standing on the ivory tower of glory. He stripped them of their aura associated with them to present a realistic picture of their life with psychological realism. In the present essay on Florence Nightingale, founder of modern nursing system, he shatters the romantic and ideal concept of her life. He deflates the aura of this soft, delicate, angelic lady known as the "lady with the lamp" with divine mercy and grace as he says, "But the truth was different," suggesting that the real woman behind the popular imagination was quite different in real life. Strachey begins his essay with a shocking remark upon Miss. Nightingale: "She moved under the stress of an impetus which finds no place in popular imagination. A demon possessed her" (P.119). Later in the course of his writing Strachey clarifies its meaning.

The essay is divided in five parts each of which deals with different aspects of her life from different perspectives. The first passage focuses more upon Florence Nightingale's inward life, her character and mind. This passage also depicts the earlier stages of her life when she was preparing herself to choose the profession of a nurse. Born of a well-to-do family, Florence Nightingale was brought up with all the advantages of aristocratic life. While her sisters and cousins were busy in dinner-parties, dances and finding suitable partner for marriage, her craving was quite different. Strachey writes, "She would think of nothing but how to satisfy that singular craving of hers to be doing something" (p.121). Her lovers had been to her "an added burden and a mockery" (P.123). She was able brush aside all the allurements and temptations of life with disdain and loathing. Thus she suppressed, according to Strachey, "the most powerful and the profoundest of all the instincts of humanity" (p.123). But the suppression of this powerful instinct transformed her into a megalomaniac, autocratic, dominating lady with a strong and persisting desire of "doing something." This also gave her energy to face and overcome numerous difficulties in her profession as nursing was regarded as "a peculiarly disreputable" (p.121) profession at that time.

Upon arriving at Scutari she found the hospital in a deplorable condition without the basic facilities needed for the patients (p.120). She used her own resources and connections to provide them with the basic facilities. Her sympathy and affection touched the hearts of the patients and infused new hopes into those who had lost their hopes in life. Sometimes her efforts rescued those who had been considered as beyond curable by the doctor. Soon she became an idol among the patients. Strachey writes: "A passionate idolatry among the men: they kissed her shadow as it passed"(p.137). But there was other side of this delicate angelic lady which was known to the surgeons and other staff working under her instruction in the Scutari Hospital. Strachey writes: "Beneath her cool and calm demeanour lurked fierce and passionate fires...the high deliberation in the scope of the capacious brow, the sign of power in the dominating curve of the thin nose, and the traces of a harsh and dangerous temper – something peevish, something mocking, and yet something precise – the small and delicate mouth" (p.137). This is with her fierce dominating nature she brought order out of chaos with strict method and stern discipline. After all days' restraints and reserve, she poured out all her pent up energies in writing letters and which she filled with recommendations, suggestion and criticism at night. She also used her suppressed energies to find the faults of her officials and criticise them with fierce sarcasm and ridicule. Strachey writes: "...her pen, in the virulence of its volubility, would rush on to the discussion of individuals, to the denunciation of an

incompetent surgeon or the ridicule of self-sufficient nurse. Her sarcasm searched the ranks of the officials with the deadly and unsparing precision of a machine gun” (p.139). Strachey also mentioned that she respected none. Even her vituperation descended upon her most well-wisher friend Sidney Herbert with whom she was once engaged in temporary quarrel. After gaining much popularity Miss Nightingale returned to England.

Strachey sardonically portrays her adventure in the philosophic and spiritual realm after her flawless victory in the physical world of action. Strachey writes: “She sighed for more worlds to conquer –more, and yet more. She looked about her – what was there left? Of course! Philosophy! After the world of action, the world of thought” (p.169). She found many defects in the workings and teachings of the church and tended to correct it with her suggestions. Her *Suggestions for Thought to the Searchers after Truth among the Artisans of England* (1860) unravels the difficulties ...connected with such matters as Belief in God, the plan of Creation, the origin of Evil etc. Strachey sardonically comments on her conception of God: “...her conception of God was certainly not orthodox. She felt towards Him as she might have felt towards a glorified sanitary engineer...she seems hardly to distinguish between the Deity and the Drains”(p.171). His biting satire on Miss. Nightingale does not end with this. He continues that if one reads few pages of her book he will get the impression that “Miss Nightingale has got the Almighty too into her clutches, and that, if He is not careful, she will kill Him with overwork.” (p.171) But she was more comfortable in analysing and dissecting facts than in constructing abstract coherent system of thought. She was an empiricist who believed in what she saw. For her there was no such thing as “infection” as she had not seen it. But she noticed the good effect of fresh air upon her patients. That’s why she always insisted that the patients’ bedrooms should be well-ventilated. But according to Strachey it was “purely empirical doctrine and thus it led to some unfortunate results” (p.172). Though she was unaware of the hot weather in India, she recommended that “windows must be kept open all the year round” in the hospitals. This almost shocked the authorities in India who opposed this decision. But she stood firm in her position.

Florence Nightingale had the strength to stamp the notions of Victorian society underfoot. She opted for seizing the chance of forming herself “a true and rich life”. One-sided? May be so, but she made her choice knowing full well that by that very decision she was abnegating other possibilities. And so did her biographer. Florence Nightingale’s story on Strachey’s interpretation drives home the brutal truth that feminist critics were so slow to arrive at; namely, all women must destroy in order to create: in her case the all-powerful

sexual instinct had to be buried or at least channelled into other outlets. The latter provides a convenient and plausible explanation for her feeling “ravenous and more work”.

References:

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