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Loy, Leading Lady with a Mystic Vision, Shattering Masculine Parameters of Sexual Identity

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Abstract

The following study intends to focus on Loy's feminist voice, continually surfacing in most of her works—in the "Feminist Manifesto" published posthumously, where she vehemently asserted women's right to selfhood rather than patriarchy subsuming their personalities and desires, in *Insel* as an autobiographical account of her own relationship with German surrealist artist Richard Oelze, where she voluntarily subverts the essential muse-patron dynamic, in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, where she makes use of vivid imagery, Biblical references, and allusions throughout "with the desire to ridicule, and surpass certain poetic laws." In her works, both poetry and prose, we find a constant effort towards achieving female aesthetic autonomy—we aim to discuss few selected poems of Loy: namely, The Effectual Marriage, Human Cylinders, The Black Virginity, At the door of the House, Lunar Baedeker, among others, that bring together: Futurism and Feminism. Loy's feminism was as uncompromising and resistant as her femininity, as she exemplified and lived the sexual, gender and maternal contradictions of the New Woman. Inspired by early debates of Futurism, she was attracted to two of its key men, Giovanni Papini and Filippo Marinetti, yet resisted misogyny and brilliantly satirized its sexual politics in her poetry and manifestos. In Loy, we find a need to politicize the feminine and the aesthetic.

Keywords

Loy, Futurism, Feminism, Sexuality, Subjection, Patriarchy, Agency, Autonomy, Hymen, Sexual Identity

1. Introduction

The following study aims to redefine "sexual identity" through Mina Loy's revo-

lutionary vision. Mina Loy came in the legacy of feminist writers like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Pauline Hopkins, and other modernist writers like Djuna Barnes, and Carson McCullers who attempted to represent gender through physical as well as mental disablements. Despite an abundance of unconventional, excessive, abnormal bodies in literature and art, it is only an idealised norm of aestheticised beauty and perfection of both body and mind that is repeatedly posited in the forefront—feminist theory recognizes and critiques such an incongruity. Loy believed, that being modern had to necessarily lead to opening the "proscribed psychic area," carefully avoided by her ancestors and contemporaries. She opposed Victorian methods of measuring womankind's worth according to their virtuousness and ignorance—a heritage that imprisoned their spiritual vitality while also suppressing their bodies. She detested the failure of literature in treating life with honesty. This study intends to focus on Loy's feminist voice, continually surfacing in her works—especially in the Feminist Manifesto published posthumously, where she vehemently asserted women's right to selfhood rather than patriarchy subsuming their personalities and desires, and in The Lost Lunar Baedeker, where she makes use of vivid imagery, Biblical references, and allusions throughout "with the desire to ridicule, and surpass certain poetic laws" (Potter, 2000).

In Loy's poetry, we find a constant effort towards achieving female aesthetic autonomy—in an attempt to urge womenkind to find an active agency, rather than passively accepting how they're perceived, she goes on to say, "Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not…you have the choice between Parasitism, and Prostitution—or Negation" (lines 27-31). "At the Door of the House" and "The Effectual Marriage," part of the Lunar Baedeker collection—meditations on women's disappointments in marriage—are loosely based on Loy's romance with Italian futurist Giovanni Papini. Despite Loy's pessimism about marriage and its ability to fulfil promises of romantic love, her poems do contain sensual and certainly, emotional depictions of femininity—"Human Cylinders" being the best example. Loy's deliberate distancing from her poem's subjects result in an unsympathetic, satirical tone, necessary for dividing art and personal life. Reviews of Lunar Baedeker paint her as both a cerebral and a mystic. Harriet Monroe, referring to this mystic tradition, implies that Loy's poetic revelations are experienced through the body which acts as a conduit to divine knowledge or love. Loy's vision of her own modernity is fundamentally linked with her ability to impersonate a "self" within her writing. Edwin Muir's review of Lunar Baedeker goes: "Loy was a mystic of a very peculiar kind, a negative mystic" and "her mysticism was complemented by her sense of the obscene." Unlike early Christian mystics using the body as a conduit for metaphysical knowledge or religious experience, she remains rooted to fleshly knowledge and refuses to transcend the body—writing about sexual satisfaction, procreation, sterility, disorder, disaster and death, i.e., the female experience and fluid sexuality, so much so that reading Loy produces bodily responses in the reader. Few selected poems of Loy: namely, The Effectual Marriage, Human Cylinders, at the

door of the House, Lunar Baedeker, among others, bring together: Futurism and Feminism. Loy's feminism was as uncompromising and resistant as her femininity, as she exemplified and lived the sexual and maternal contradictions of the New Woman. Inspired by early debates of Futurism, she was attracted to two of its key men, Giovanni Papini and Filippo Marinetti, yet resisted misogyny and brilliantly satirized its sexual politics in her poetry and manifestos. She criticized romance and sexuality, but then again, was roused willingly by desire. In Loy, we find a need to politicize the feminine and the aesthetic. To solve issues of freedom, chaperonage, overvaluing of virtue, marital choicelessness, and sexual manipulation, Loy proposed the annihilation of "the principal instrument of female subjection. The hymen."

2. An Insight into Her Psyche

Loy proves to be relevant for current academic trends of connecting gender and language, emergence of the New Woman, and the shift from a Victorian to a modernist aesthetic. *Becoming Modern: the life of Mina Loy* is an example of a feminist biography on Loy, that reiterates what it's like, not just for Loy, but for women trying to make themselves into a modern literary force in the 20th century. Loy's mother supposedly remained her psychological adversary and Loy was criticized often, for her artwork and behaviour, for it was too modern, sexual, even dangerous, fuelled by a certain hypersensitivity to Victorian social and religious mores. It was possibly her mother's violent responses, at times leading to destruction of her works, that made her equate "a good artist" with "being a bad girl"—as Carolyn Burke puts it, added to which was the difficulty of being a female artist because Britain didn't necessarily care to see flourishing women. Between 1910-1916, Loy's poetry took a dig at futurist male egotism from an explicitly feminist position, so much so that Pound considered one of them, "The Effectual Marriage," one of the most memorable poems from the century's first three decades. Poems from this period demonstrate the general energy of revolt and criticism that futurism inspired in her—they expressed an analytical mind juxtaposed with sexual feelings, with no conventional end-rhymes or traditional meters, with new ideas, creating quite a stir among free verse writers and in the country at large. Her sense of ostracism as an artist, coupled with her draconian childhood, led Loy to identifying with society's outcasts—marginalized, homeless, abused, self-abusing, those struggling merely to live—an identification that pushed her into a vital engagement with social reality. As much as Pound admired her poems, he hardly could locate emotion in them, taken by their irony and intellect. However, Loy is a more personal, intimate poet than either Pound, Eliot, or Marianne Moore. Pound even coined the term "logopoiea"—"the dance of the intellect among words," to describe her poetry.

By initiating her essay, "Getting Impersonal: Mina Loy's Body Politics from Feminist Manifesto to *Insel*" with a curious quote from Loy's letter, defining human consciousness as something that transcends "the personal" while "intensifying" it, Walter (2009) immediately grasps our attention. Walter's prime in-

tent is the investigation of Loy's "fraught relationship" with female personality and impersonality: her diagnosis of Loy's impersonality, characterised by "women's subjection to a cultural model of universality that privileges men," segues into her focus on the "Feminist Manifesto" that initiated Loy's quest for "a specifically female selfhood." Loy's "body politics" is a revealing insight into the psyche as well as creative credo of an undervalued literary artist while being an enlightening retrospection on one of literature's longest-running trend: modernism. Positing the impersonal subject as "the centre of the modernist project" in the final paragraph, while establishing Loy's impersonal aesthetic as one of "the most pressing cultural questions that underwrite modernism's visual and stylistic experiments"—the essay rediscovers, within its brevity, the synergetic relationship between Loy and Modernism, each incomplete without the other. Pozorski's (2005) "Eugenicist Mistress & Ethnic Mother" too is an interesting endeavour at understanding the convoluted chemistry between the life and poetics of the obscure Mina Loy. Pozorski centres her focus on the problematics of Loy's subscription to Futurism and her simultaneous opposition to the same, drawing our attention to the "dark side" of Futurism, its misogyny, (Italian) race superiority, glorification of war, and denigration of women as means of birthing "pure" babies. Futurism's underpinning of "courage, audacity, and revolt" as the essentials of poetry perfectly matched Loy's poetic creed, but its murky moorings were at odds with her credo. Loy's appropriation of Futurism yet her failure to reconcile its inherent contradictions thus resulted in her "perpetually fragmented identity" already complicated by her status as "the conflicted daughter of contentious parents: one Christian, the other Jewish" and fragmented further by a marriage in which she felt perpetually "trapped and misled." This feeling of disintegration was perhaps at the root of the incompleteness that haunted her lifelong, engendering her poetics of "profound ambivalence."

3. The Feminist Quest of Her Verse

Loy's "The Effectual Marriage or The Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni" is a satirical denunciation of the constructed-ness of woman's position, of cultural, historical and performative spheres, as determined and imposed on her by patriarchal agencies. It exposes us to two distinctive, unconverging domains devised for man and woman that provide us with two disparate perceptions. The world inhabited by Gina and Miovanni is a markedly bifurcated limbo, symbolised by "library window" and "kitchen window"—representing the intellectual masculine space and the mundane feminine. He condescendingly grants her space among his pots and pans and she "contentedly" limits herself within that periphery, thereby conforming to commodification. The world the woman so happily inhabits, although unimaginative, dull, and of soulless chores, is her personal paradise. While the man occupies an indefinitely expansive turf—"Outside time and space"—woman is circumscribed by pots and pans, with "patience" as her typical feminine attribute. Gina labours for Miovanni, who gives

her only material existence. Gina finds her worth in dishing out "appropriately delectable" feed for Miovanni, symbolising "subordination inherent in the female ideal": a subjugated surrender to male physical needs. The deeper we delve, the more acute the isolation and alienation become. Loy points at man's lack of sentience towards woman. Miovanni sees Gina as a single persona: this is a denial, a diminution of woman's entity, which the latter can overcome only through what Loy calls in "Feminist Manifesto"—"Absolute Demolition." Loy thus satirises and subverts such masculine constructions, ironically, through subjugation narratives.

"Lunar Baedeker" is a meta-terrestrial travelogue from a woman's point of view that guides the lustful deceased to an imaginary point on the moon to gratify their carnal cravings. "A flock of dreams browse on Necropolis" (lines 34-35) defines the moon as a land of dead dreams representing greed and lust, a corrupt culture thriving on sex, drugs, and other bohemian excesses. Loy's "Baedeker" disorients, landing us amidst vaguely familiar landmarks. In Loy's lunar world, urbanism is pronounced by its "Delirious Avenues" (line 12), "eye-white skylight/white-light district/of lunar lusts" (lines 21-23) and even "Stellectric signs" (line 24). With reference to Lethe, either a nymph or the mythical river of forgetfulness, mentions to cocaine, and "hallucinatory citadels": Loy's poem is a tour of the ways, places, and times in which we are made strange to ourselves. Though lunar, this is also another hell, made evident by the Lucifer-Lethe allusions. Lucifer is a Biblical reference to a figure representing immorality, such as, rebellion and explicit sexuality. As Lucifer is seen only by the dead and specifically by those ending up in hell—Lucifer serving cocaine to the incumbents suggests that moon is apparently a wicked place, that people go to, in order to attain their erotic desires. Julie Lein argues that Loy's allusions to modern lighting express "ambivalence over whether they make fitting or desirable analogies for troubled interpersonal dynamics." Loy's term "white-light district" supposedly comes from red-light district, dedicated to prostitution. Moon depicted as white-light district shows that it is purposely meant to satisfy sexual fantasies. Loy's chilly landscape seems to reflect her lived experience as an expatriate. Being in a strange, uncanny place is the universality of the feminine experience or, for that matter, the human experience. Loy's poem, alongside showing us how foreign we remain to each other, reflects the alienness so excruciatingly sensed by women in a world dominated by men.

"Human Cylinders" is an acknowledgement of the perpetual contradiction between masculine intellectual merit and feminine emotionality. The male and female protagonists are human cylinders who meet, rather mate, to solemnise their relationship in a dreary, dismal urban milieu that devours their vitality and leaves them dazed. Unromantic and unemotional, these apparently human lovers are actually oversexed automatons, hungry for mechanical connect. Loy, in the Futurist mode, refers to men as machines and applies a mechanical formality to sexuality, reducing sex to an unfeeling intellectual contract. The "absence of

corresponding" connotes a lack of harmony and understanding of each other's emotional needs. "Reciprocity" adds a business-like formality, reaffirming the detachment. The female is the "whining beast": the unsentimental sexuality too painful and fruitless, she needs the sanctuary of a homely, womb-ish "burrow." It may not be ladylike to insist that all bodies are subject to lust, birth, disease, and age, but it is undeniably human. He's seemingly unharmed, "elastic" and vital, and his invincibility is simply skin-deep, allowing his fear to show far away from human judgment. Both machines express a vulnerability and both end up alone in their "miseries."

Another of her early poems, "At the Door of the House" appears to posit an occult or subverted feminism as Loy uses uncommon vocabulary, radical structuring of lines, unusual punctuations, to attack woman's cowardly capitulation to the demands of patriarchal society, and to register her revolt against the same. We are allowed a glimpse of the woman's self-same surroundings of "an inconducive bed-room"—the mundaneness of the milieu enhanced by the minimalist presence of "a bed and a table" together contributing to the quotidian blandness of life within four walls. It is a life that reeks of an unsatisfactory conjugality, one major cause of which probably is unconsummated matrimony. "Sad" is her matrimonial fate that is anchored to the unfaithful, loveless "Man of the Heart." It could be that the "letter" delivered to her door informed her of her husband's illicit tryst with another woman, thereby awakening her to the "sad" hollowness of her conjugal existence. Loy builds upon the lachrymosity of the woman's life by referring to her entity, "covered with tears." Using "matrimony" instead of marriage lends a mock respectfulness to the ritual, while providing sharper fangs to Loy's satirical bite at the revered institution. But we cannot say anything with finality when it's Loy. It could be her having a covert "affair": which is why she's overwhelmed with remorse at the brittleness of her matrimony. The poem draws to its rather saddening conclusion, riding on allusions to an array of typically feminine names, from Petronilla to Eufemia. The chaste bearing of all the names probably insinuates the intensity of the woman's regret at not being faithful, while indicating her surrender to the promptings of feminine ethicality. Then again, the colourless sanctity of the women named connotes femininity's servile yielding to the fetters imposed by masculine masters. She strangles her love for loyalty, miserably lacking the boldness to facilitate a happy closure to her "little love-tale."

Loy's Love Songs echo and anticipate canonical modernist love poems and literary strategies. The American press considered Loy a New Woman who might as well be the "cause of modernism." Loy saw sexual honesty as a prerequisite for liberation. She closes the "Feminist Manifesto"—writing, "In defiance of superstition I assert that there is nothing impure in sex except the mental attitude toward it" (*Mina Loy*; Shreiber & Tuma, 1998). For Loy, "sex was not merely a sign of love but its origin, underpinning and essential ingredient" (Seidman, 2015). When she talks of demolishing traditional heterosexual relations, she asks for a

demolition of the desire to be loved, she asks for an essential separation of the paradigm of honour, sentimentality, grief and jealousy from sexual acts or "futurist mating." The very first poem of the thirty-four Love Songs could be saying, how "once upon a time," we spoke of fairy tale romances with no mentions of sex whatsoever. Pig Cupid's rosy snout could signify a comical phallus, bringing in the element of lust. The speaker here is not entirely a free-spirited New Woman enjoying the fruits of her sexual fantasies: fruits that have only given birth to hideous "spawns" and transformed her into a "weed"—"white and star topped"—amongst "wild oats" planted in "mucous-membrane." Loy had little or no sympathies for a diluted love, where the body stays unspoken. Her poetry deals with sex, womanhood, lust, acts of love and organs. For a woman rebel like Loy, "free verse led to free love" (Burke, 1996). But the speaker in this poem, rather than experiencing a sense of liberation, chokes on her sexual frankness. In an attempt to articulate, she stops at "I would"—and fails to follow up with a verb. Her momentary ecstatic dreams give way soon to the grovelling imagery of "an ocean/Whose rivers run no fresher/Than a trickle of saliva" (lines 10-12). She shifts from "suspect places" of sexuality, towards a vigilant "virginal" seclusion, leaving behind realised sexual fantasies and experiences, dismissing it all as "coloured glass." Loy refuses to adhere to "man-made" diction and decorum, as her Feminist Manifesto also demands. Loy referring to "coloured glass" resonates with the "coloured and distorting lenses which we are"—as said by Emerson in his essay "Experience." His essay talks of the distance between subject and object, the object being the beloved. Loy's speaker rejects this Emersonian distance and repetitively steps ahead to attach meaning to passionate love. But she finds, the promise of "eternity in a skyrocket" fading into merely "a trickle of saliva." The failure of love is marked by a failure of language, a characteristic feature of modernist poetry describing unhappy love. Pig Cupid might stand for mankind's arrogance and irresponsibility, especially that of Don Juan, or Joannes but might also symbolise female disillusionment and guilt. He has destroyed all dreams of her youth and all of her "star-topped" aspirations. Loy's speaker fails to seek refuge solely in the intensity of her imaginative desire, in the "need" for Joannes to be hers alone or in the "dream" in which she's declared as his. Such an idealization might have helped Dickinson deal with her Emersonian isolation, but for Loy, a New Woman modernist—to place her speaker in such a position of "romantic thralldom" where she completely idealizes Joannes, makes him a God, seems bizarre, unlikely even.

4. A Look at Luce Irigaray's Erotic Vision

Identical to Loy's explicit, satirical style, Irigaray writes in "This Sex which is not one," female sexuality is marked by masculine parameters. Irigaray brings in the concept of penis envy, calling the "penis" the only sexual organ of considerable worth, an organ that the woman attempts to appropriate for herself. She talks of feminine autoeroticism, that is disrupted by a vicious break-in of the penis,

therefore leading to a distraction from self-pleasure. She writes a rather derogatory account of rivalry concerning male sexuality: "the strongest being the one who has the best hard on, the longest, the biggest, the stiffest penis, or even the one who pees the farthest (as in little boys' contests)" (Irigaray, 1985). Womankind, collectively, is treated as an enslaved prop in men's sexual gratification, her desires are not her own, and she chooses to be in a state of dependency upon the man who perceives her as an object owned, kept away for moments when his need for pleasure surfaces. Freud comments on how the commencement of sexuality for a female child is so extremely "obscure" that one would have to dig deep into histories of civilisation for finding clues to women's sexuality. Irigaray goes on to explicitly sketch sexual imageries—drawing phallic pictures of a woman's two "lips" in contact with each other, lips here being a metaphor for sexual organs, and it is this contact that keeps a woman in touch with herself. A woman entrusted with the responsibility of reviving a man's desire tends to forget the value of her own. As her own appetite for touch is alienated by social taboos, her frustrations find compensations in her motherhood. Her lack of pleasure or repressed sexuality is overshadowed by maternal roles. Men and women who forget the art of caressing are linked together by the child, preferably male. The essence of "maternal fondling" is restored when a man identifies with his son during such a caress. Masculine and feminine desires are strangers, and therefore, a couple's interactions have more to do with their social roles as "mother" and "father" rather than being remotely related to "making love." A woman's sexuality, however, is diverse, complex yet subtle: pleasure does not need to choose between "vaginal passivity" and "clitoral activity" since both have equal contributions to the same. A woman has an "other" in herself, and thus understandably, she's incomprehensible and whimsical, she leaves men confused with apparently contradictory indiscernible words; she cannot be trapped in exact definitions and meanings, because she desires everything and nothing simultaneously—reason why such a desire is always taken for a ravenous hunger, one that men are apprehensive of. Such rejections of female sexuality result in a fragmentation of womankind's experience—it is merely "waste" or "excess." To rediscover herself, a woman should sacrifice none of her pleasures, or identify with any one of them in particular—she should never self-impose limits. A woman's "other" self is auto-erotically similar, and not because it is owned by her as some form of property. As Irigaray says, "Ownership and property are… foreign to the feminine" (Irigaray, 1985). But then again, to achieve pleasure, a woman needs to actively dismiss systems of oppression bearing down on her, she needs to stop being a commodity for exchange branded by her father, husband, and procurer. Their development alone, no matter how radical, cannot help liberate their desires. The fact that women constitute several classes and hierarchies of society makes their political struggles all the more layered, complex, contradictory even. Entire classes of women are underdeveloped due to their wilful submission to an oppressive phallocentric culture that derives masochistic pleasure from the female "domestic" and "reproductive" labor force.

Women have to reject men and their needs in order to defend and prioritise desires of their own, they have to discover feminine solidarity instead of aggressive jealousy as rival commodities in order to let go of the prostitute position and strive to achieve a certain social recognition—they cannot simply ask for a reversal of the "natural" order of things.

5. Reclaiming Erotic Agency—A "Modern" Movement

It is in the late 19th century, that the erotic desire was finally "definitively medicalised" and thought of with respect to pre-Freudian theories of the unconscious. However, literary decadence aestheticized sexuality—writers separated sexuality from reproduction and made it into an aesthetic zone of pleasure without purpose. According to Lawrence Birken, women acknowledging their status as "desiring subjects" conferred upon them a "citizenship"—undermining previous conceptions of natural sexual difference. Felski sides with Birken's account of the realm of desire constituting the modern sense of feminine subjectivity. It is exactly this modern vision of revolutionary spirits, with erotic and aesthetic agency, that can be called "feminist"—standing in the 21st century. Rita Felski observes, "to be modern is to be on the side of progress, reason, and democracy… to be modern is often paradoxically to be antimodern, to define oneself in explicit opposition to the prevailing norms and values of one's own time" (Felski, 2009). She says, 19th century's key symbols, i.e., the public sphere, the stranger, the dandy, were gendered and meant for the male, because no one at the time could imagine a woman loitering metropolis streets, for she would inevitably be perceived as a prostitute. As the modern came to be associated with the public, women were easily relegated outside processes of history and social change. Caught in a web of familial relations and reproductive capacities, they were kept away from the fragmentation of modern life. Thus, her argument portrays how modern cityscapes, consumerism, technology and other related facets of modernity were essentially masculine: the "modern" was an erasure of female forces of expression. Modernization was not a progress narrative, improving women's lives—in fact, it was interrelated with gender politics. Alienated from the demands of capitalist economies, women were almost becoming "non-modern" entities who could only be "modernised" by assuming traditionally masculine traits. The prostitute was the ultimate symbol of dangerous female sexuality, breaking down all social hierarchies in modern cities. It is around this time, that women reformulated dominant representations of gender and modernity to position themselves in social history. Gender is an on-going process, and it evolved over time within societal constraints. Women's lives were radically transformed by modernist phenomena but we must accept that women experienced these changes in gender-specific ways, and such changes have been affected further by social hierarchies and identities. Undoubtedly, although feminism had multiple minor victories throughout Victorian era; only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did it become a "modern" political movement—making a mark on public consciousness.

6. Conclusion

In the poems analysed, Loy wasn't sticking to any one form of feminism, but was combining various perspectives in a number of ways. She was redefining the female "self"—reconstructing the very identity, the very core of what it is to be a woman. In Loy, we notice a mysticism that provoked her deep enquiry into the female self vis-à-vis the body: spirit, soul, and body seem to be consistently impressing upon our minds. She's perhaps a better "modern" than others of her age, as she attempted to breakdown tradition and convention while also not entirely abandoning them. Loy stood apart in her unabashed pattern of thought—it is her manner and method that makes her so very modern.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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