



Research Article

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Received: 7 September 2022 / Accepted: 27 October 2022 / Published: 5 November 2022

Mirth as an Outlet of Repressed Feminine Yearnings in Carol Ann Duffy's Poetry

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/mjss-2022-0045>

Abstract

Subtlety is the only way wherein feminine rebellion can flourish and succeed in a male dominant society. This paper attempts to show that collaborative feminine effort leads to collective liberty and that Duffy (2002) pays homage to the feminist waves, especially the radical phase. The poet uses laughter as a metaphor to represent the feminist waves that were initially perceived as a joke but culminated in a force that ensured the emancipation of women. Although women's desires are often repressed by the patriarchal machinery that seeks to oppress them, united action leads to liberation. Critics of Duffy have focused on her radical feminist and revisionist themes but this paper will also read the *Laughter of Stafford Girls High* (2002) as a homage to the various feminist waves that have contributed to women's emancipation discourses globally. The paper draws from Wollstonecraft (1792) whose treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* exposed the triviality of women's education and advocated for equality in learning. Although contemporary society enjoys parity in learning, several feminist critics like Howe (1977) and Hooks (1994) insist that there are still hidden messages within curriculums that tactfully ensure the marginal role of women. The absence of women in the canons gives the pervasive feeling that women have contributed nothing to human progress. The paper, therefore, aligns with the idea of feminine writing posited by Cixous (1976) as the only way through which women can write their unique history. From a reading of Duffy (2002) with the aforementioned theoretical leanings, it was realized that spaces of patriarchal brainwashing still abound despite the perceived progressive worldview. Equally, united action is important for the restitution of the rights of all women globally.

Keywords: Mirth, Repression, feminism, patriarchy, education, laughter

1. Introduction

"You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (Cixous, 1976, p.885). Duffy (2002) extends Cixous' (1976) metaphor and elaborates how women's laughter deconstructs patriarchy. Women's desires and expectations are often negated in the grand scheme of things, especially because in the binaries that patriarchal societies uphold, the feminine components are represented as inferior and trivial. Laughter is associated with women as part of their unflattering and silly outlook and proves that they cannot be taken seriously. Cixous (1976) debunks Homer's narrative of the Gorgon Medusa as deadly by asserting that she is very beautiful if one dares to look into her eyes. In Duffy (2002) the all-girls school represents a bubble

wherein feminine potential is trapped with a school curriculum that represses their desires and makes them passive conforming and marginal subjects. Yun (2019) asserts that laughter frustrates the “masculinist discourse and enacts the feminist order” (p.291) suggesting that women’s unified action will always prevail over chauvinism.

Before the twentieth century, female education was not considered a right, making the education of women the concern of their families through private tutors, women’s seminaries, and finishing schools (Howe, 1977). The emergence of all-girl schools was due to the effort of education activists to educate young women. These schools were mostly finishing schools for young women of the upper class who were being prepared to be good wives. The curriculum focused on music, painting watercolors, needlework, and languages. Later these institutions would be elevated to veritable learning spaces in which young women could gain an education to compete for jobs that had been hitherto considered men’s jobs. One activist who regarded education for women as a tool of female emancipation was Wollstonecraft (1792), who in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* exposed the trivial education given to women. She posited that such an education was inadequate for women to compete with intelligent men and since all women were not destined to marry rich husbands and become trophy wives, the government needed to take an interest in girl education. Wollstonecraft (1792) advocated for coeducation wherein young women could learn business, law, and other career-oriented specialties like their male counterparts. Wollstonecraft (1792) maintained the view that the institution of marriage would be happier if both men and women receive equal tutoring.

Duffy’s (2002) *Laughter of Stafford Girls’ High* exposes the patriarchal intention of girls’ schools as a bubble for creating passive and conformist women. She echoes Wollstonecraft’s (1792) objection as she considered such separation harmful. The critic posited that “to improve both sexes they ought to be educated together, not only in private families but equally in public schools... if boys and girls were permitted to pursue the same studies together, they might early learn the decencies that produce modesty” (p. 96). Wollstonecraft’s (1792) remark arose from the fact that she witnessed how the patriarchal machinery of her time robbed women of equal opportunity by denying them equal education as men. Her solution to such an overlook was to:

Let an enlightened nation run an experiment to discover how far reason would bring women back to nature and their duty; let them share the advantages of education and government with man, and see whether they become better as they grow wiser and become free. They can’t be injured by the sentiment, because it’s not in the power of man to make them more insignificant than they are at present. (Wollstonecraft, p.96)

The abovementioned excerpt conveys sentiments of dissatisfaction toward the national negation of women’s education in England. Wollstonecraft proposes mixed education as an experiment that would empower both sexes. She sees equal education as advantageous to the nation at large and for women in particular because it will make them wiser and free. The focus on freedom further illustrates Wollstonecraft’s belief that women’s education was intentionally basic to keep them ignorant. Education is a tool of empowerment that society has intentionally denied women. Stafford Girls’ High is a girls’ college that embodies an element of brainwashing as evident in the rebuke of the head girl. The school authority cannot tolerate the simpering behavior of the girls because they are expected “to grow to be the finest of England’s daughters and mothers and wives” (Duffy, p.42). Although Wollstonecraft published her treatise in 1792, her concerns about female education are still tenable in the twenty-first century.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

One focus of feminist critics is to explore the tropes of female writing considering their exclusion from canon which correlates with women’s educational rights in the western tradition.

Wollstonecraft (1792) underscored how education was utilized as a weapon of female subjugation which is still the concern of feminists like Heaton and Lawson (1996) who opine that contemporary education is filled with a hidden patriarchal curriculum. The fact that many subjects considered inferior to men were targeted at girls. This hidden curriculum perpetuates gender stereotypes and subversive gender binaries that become reinforced in real-life situations. In terms of positionality, the argument of black and difference feminists that young women of color and other ethnic minority groups are even more disenfranchised than western women equally come into focus. Hooks (1994) posits the concept of transgression in education making it the responsibility of teachers to help students question racial, sexual, and class boundaries since education to Hooks (1994) must be a practice of freedom. By emphasizing that education should be directed towards women's liberation themes like gender, culture, race, and class; stereotypes relating to social roles will be addressed. Duffy (2002) uses the mock epic as an act of subversion; the epic is a celebrated formal form used to celebrate heroic subjects as evident in Homer, Horace, Ovid, and other great bards who wrote about the heroic deeds of great men. By using the mock epic, Duffy underscores that women's actions are equally heroic though chauvinist societies might perceive them as trivial.

Wollstonecraft (1792) opened the conversation about the quality of women's education and called on mothers to help their daughters cultivate a taste for empowerment discourses rather than on romance and literature that depicted women as damsels in distress waiting to be rescued by knights in shining armor. Wollstonecraft (1792) opined that "the good effects of private education will always be very limited" (p.93). It is on this basis that feminists have interrogated how women are depicted (when they are mentioned) by literary history canon as an homage to Wollstonecraft (1792). Cixous (1976), Howe (1977), and Hooks (1994) provide different perceptions of the feminist lens that enhance the analysis of Duffy (2002). Duffy (2002) illustrates that in the twenty-first century, education still shows women that they are incapable of great feats and can only be cheerleaders for great men as evident in the school curriculum that is centered on the deeds of great men.

Howe (1977) advanced that curriculums were intrinsically biased towards women because of the male-centered outlook. The critic explored the three phases of feminine education which include "the seminary movement that established secondary education for women; the movement that established elite women's colleges; and the current women's studies movement" (p.11). Howe (1977) traces the evolution of the education of women from the exclusion of women to men's curriculum which Wollstonecraft (1792) decried; to the creation of seminary schools that taught women to be good housewives and mothers to the present wherein "male hegemony over the curriculum and over knowledge itself" (p.11) has been challenged. This correlates with Das (2017) who avers that in Duffy (2002) women use their mutual interest to destabilize the patriarchal infrastructure to pursue their individual goals.

Exploring the concept of feminine education from the perspective of difference, Hooks (1994) surveys the difference between "education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination" (p.4). Despite writing from a subaltern position as a black woman in America, this perception is tenable concerning Duffy (2002). The girls learn about the exploits of men, the great which Howe (1977) describes as male hegemony over knowledge. The school's mission is to groom the girls "to be the finest of England's daughters and mothers and wives" (p.42). Hooks (1994) interrogates "Who speaks? Who listens? And why?" (p.40) to establish how female voices and contributions are controlled in the educational system. The teachers are forced to conform to the curriculum resulting in the robotic rote memorization method favored by the school. Yet in their dreams, their true feelings are exposed "Miss Nadimbaba dreamed she knelt to kiss Miss Barrett" (p.40). This erotic desire is as homage to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, one of the greatest English poets ignored by canon before feminist attempts to revisit feminine writing.

Cixous (1976) encourages women to write their bodies and the explicit lesbian desire illustrated in Duffy (2002) affirms this intention which Mhana et al (2019) appreciate as part of the poet's emancipation of the feminine body. Cixous (1976) indicated that feminine writing can only:

Be conceived of only subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate... Bear in mind, to begin with (1) that sexual opposition, which has always worked for men's profit to the point of reducing writing, too, to his laws, is only an historico-cultural limit. (P.883)

Writing about lesbian desire is the portrait of feminine writing as it excludes any aspects of phallogentrism abhorred by Cixous (1976). Miss Nadimbaba is a poetry teacher forced by the school curriculum to teach a male-centered literary canon while her dreams allow her to consummate a sexual union with Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In the end, she becomes a poet to continue the feminine tradition.

3. Rote Memorization as a Channel of the Patriarchal Agenda

Rote memorization is a robotic form of learning that prohibits critical thinking though its proponents insist that it enables learners to recall information. Rote learning is the sole medium of instruction in the Stafford girl's school while the male-centric curriculum confirms the notion that the intention is to brainwash the girls to passively accept male superiority. Commenting on such male-centric curriculums, Howe (1977) states that "it never occurred to me that people wrote history, ordinary people. It never occurred to me that women were part of history and might write the story of their lives" (p.11). This scholar among others has commented on their personal academic experiences which involves the absence of women in the curriculum. To counter this bias Hooks (1994) insists that "to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (p.3) making rote learning problematic to this goal.

To critics like Das (2017) and Mhana et al (2019, Duffy is a lesbian feminist whose poetry captures trends of radical feminism but also incorporates third-wave feminist arguments which make her poetry elective and thought-provoking. Celebrating women's achievements and encouraging their aspirations is the preoccupation of feminine writing. Duffy (2002) captures women's unique experiences in ways that are intrinsically feminine adhering to Cixous (1976). The yearning for a feminine space wherein women's aspirations thrive becomes imperative yet the school in the poem is a patriarchal bubble that seeks to monitor and control young women. Hooks (1994) establishes that education has to entail freedom:

Attending school then was sheer joy. I loved being a student. I loved learning. School was the place of ecstasy – pleasure, and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone. Home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else's image of who and what I should be. School was the place where I could forget that self and, through ideas reinvent myself. (p.3)

School as a space of freedom underscores the importance of education. The excerpt describes the exultation of the author who could see the possibilities that life could provide outside a restricted society that defines a woman as a wife, maid, or teacher. The patriarchal home environment is juxtaposed to this liberated environment as it is a space in which one is forced to conform to expectations that subjugate them. The school in Duffy (2002) rather reflects the home space that brainwashes women to become contended to play second fiddle to men.

Cixous (1976) avers that women should not be conned into "accepting a domain which is in the margin or the harem" (p.881). The Stafford Girls' school is such a bubble in which women's desires are repressed in order to make them malleable to patriarchy. The attempt to break from these patriarchal constraints leads to the entire school dissolving into mirth. Tearing a page from the bible to write the note that causes the chaos is suggestive of the quest for liberation. This is seen in the following:

*It was a girl in the Third Form, Carolann Clare,
Who, bored with the lesson, the rivers of England –
Brathay, Coquet, Crake, Dee, Don, Goyt,
Rothay, Tyne, Swale, Tees, Wear, Wharfe...
Had passed a note, which has never been found,
To the classmate in front, Emily Jane, a girl
Who adored the teacher, Miss V. Dunn MA,
Steadily squeaking her chalk on the board –
Allen, Clough, Duddon, Feugh, Greta, Hindburn,
Irwell, Kent, Leven, Lowther, Lune, Sprint...
But who furtively opened the folded note,
Torn from the back of the King James Bible, read
What was scribbled there and laughed out loud. (p.35)*

The monotony of the lesson in the excerpt does not reflect the “sheer joy” that Hooks (1994) illustrates as her educational experience. Rote learning is forced memorization that takes away any pleasure in learning. Women are forced into a robotic state of parroting without questioning killing the ecstasy of education. Repeating the names of the rivers of England after Miss Dunn is dull and repetitive supporting the plausibility of a reprieve provided by the mysterious note that starts the laughter epidemic. The content of the note is a mystery but the fact that it elicits such a spontaneous response. It is interesting to note that the laughter comes from the teacher’s favorite student indicating the humorous content. Another intriguing aspect is that the note is written on a page torn from the *King James Bible*. *The King James Bible* is the official English bible; a book of conduct that generally lays out the norms that subjugate women. Tearing off a page from the bible is a blatant act of rebellion that underscores the beginning of the revolution. Tearing a page of this venerated book of conduct is a metaphor for the feminist insurgency which Duffy (2002) pays homage to.

It is not only the third form that undergoes the tediousness of rote learning. The entire school curriculum is taught in this manner as Duffy (2002) gives a kaleidoscopic view of the school allowing the reader to observe the various teachers at work and their initial reaction to the laughing epidemic that consumes the entire school. After the third form, the first form comes into view with Mrs. Mackay teaching Shakespeare. The emphasis on rote learning continues:

*... Don't look
At your books, look at me. After three. Friends,
Romans, Countrymen... What's so amusing? Rapped out
Mrs. Mackay as the First Years chirruped
And thrilled like baby birds in a nest at a worm. (p.38)*

The use of italics differentiates the interjection of the various teachers that come into view systematically throughout the poem. The lesson on Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* follows the same pattern as the geography lesson. Mrs. Mackay orders the students to refrain from reading but rather repeat by rote. Diction is also important as it suggests the teacher’s frame of mind and the classroom environment. The teacher is authoritatively seen when she says “don’t look” which is an order. She “rapped out” the lecture which indicates impatient detachment which is antithetical to the creative ambiance of a drama class. It is obvious that the students abhor rote memorization because immediately Mrs. Mackay steps out to investigate the commotion in the third form:

*... the moment
she'd gone, the room blossomed with paper planes,
ink bombs, whistles, snatches of song, and the class clown-
Caroline Joan- stood on her desk and took up
The speech where Mrs Mackay had left off- Lend
Me your ears. (p.38)*

Descriptive words like blossomed, whistles and song indicate the sense of liberation the students experience when the boring lesson is interrupted. This is expected considering the stifling environment the class has been subjected to. Caroline Joan is considered the class clown and that she continues Mark Antony's speech where the teacher had left off. It is unsurprising that "belted out Antony's speech in an Elvis style/ for Brutus, uh huh, is an honorable man" (p.38). Elvis Presley was an American singer and cultural icon known for his escapades with young women. Such a character would be disapproved of in this school where decorum is taught. By rendering Shakespeare in a controversial pop culture version, the poem foreshadows the breakdown of the bubble. The poet's kaleidoscopic lens moves throughout the school and just like in the previous classes, rote learning prevails which emphasizes the underlining concern that the girls are being brainwashed to conform to a submissive role in society.

4. Women's Exclusion in the Canon

McLeod (2017) articulates that "critical attention to memory and the movement of received and revised historical narratives is vital for analyzing the legacies of feminist reforms and how they might be (re)animated in the present (p.283). Critics like Das (2017) and Mhana et al (2019) appreciate Duffy's ability to open up historical narratives and interrogate the nature of female representation within the canon. Hooks (1994), Howe (1977), Gilbert and Gubar (1979) all give anecdotal references on how male professors have denigrated the attempt to include female voices within the curriculum and enhance diversity. Yet these scholars and Duffy (2002) persist in the urging of Cixous (1976) because:

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 silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain that is the margin or the harem. (p.88t)

The school described by Duffy (2002) is one where girls are taught to remain at the margins. Being governed by the phallus means any environment wherein women are conditioned to submit and see men as their superiors. The curriculum of the school openly highlights this chauvinist ideology. The curriculum is male-centric which gives the impression that only men have accomplished great feats. The geography lesson on the rivers of England is a case in point; most of them are named after men. The men are the explorers who supposedly "discovered" these rivers instilling the message that only men have a right to go on adventure. The history lesson is no better as the kings of England are listed "Egbert, Ethelwulf, Ethelbald, Ethelbert, Ethelred, Alfred, Edward, Ethelstan, Edmund, Eadred, Eadwig, Edgar" (P.43). The monarchy gives men the right of succession which is why only three women; Elizabeth I, Victoria and Elizabeth II have been crowned as queens of England.

The literature lectures in the first and second forms are male-centered emphasizing the absence of women in the canon. Shakespeare is considered the greatest playwright but his works are focused on masculine issues. The play under focus is *Julius Caesar*, considered to be one of the greatest Roman emperors. The recitation of the poet laureates equally illuminates the exclusion of women by literary canon:

*... John Dryden, Thomas Shadwell,
Nahum Tate, Nicholas Rowe, Laurence Eusden, Colley Cibber,
William Whitehead... but scattering titters and giggles
Like noisy confetti on reaching Henry Pye. (p.38)*

The poet laureates are all men like all the great explorers and inventors projecting the subliminal message that women are incapable of artistic creativity and great discoveries. Some of

these poet laureates were terrible writers; it is not surprising that “scattering titters and giggles/ like noisy confetti on reaching Henry Pye” since he goes down in literary history as the worst poet laureate. Ironically, Duffy is the first female English poet laureate after the appointment of John Dryden in 1668 (though Chaucer, John Skelton, and Ben Jonson had hitherto been acknowledged as poet laureates, it only became an unbroken tradition from 1668). British literary historian Blake (1966) dubbed Pye as the worst English poet laureate in history except for Alfred Austin. Most literary historians like Laurie (1999) include Laurence Eusden, Colley Cibber, and William Whitehead along with Henry among the worst English poet laureates.

Hooks (1994) explores how women are denigrated and/or omitted from the canon even when they partake in literary production. Through personal experience with faculty members (male) like Hooks (1994) recounts an encounter at a faculty Halloween party where:

A white male colleague, with whom I was chatting at the time, went on a tirade at the mere mention of my Toni Morrison seminar, emphasizing that Song of Solomon was a weak rewrite of Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls. Passionately full of disgust for Morrison he, being a Hemingway scholar, seemed to be sharing the often-heard concern that black women writers/thinkers are just poor imitations of "great" white men... these trivial incidents reveal how deep-seated the fear that any de-centering of Western civilizations, of the white male canon, is an act of cultural genocide. (p.32)

This anecdote is central to the peripheral status delegated to women within the canon (especially women of color). Dismissing a female author based on the perception that her work is a poor imitation of a great male white author is a constant denominator within the attempt to introduce female contribution to the western canon. It is not surprising that the curriculum taught in the school emphasizes the insignificant role of women in society through the male-dominated curriculum. Duffy (1999) ironically states that “but the Gods are like publishers/ usually male” (p.59) The poem also focuses on the lives of the teachers after school and it is mundane and unexciting. They either live alone or with female relatives while the only married person among them is Mrs. Mackey. She is not excited about her marriage because her husband is boring and they have nothing in common. Mr. Mackey is the only man referenced in the poem and he is just a boring afterthought in Mrs. Mackey consciousness. The isolation of these women is juxtaposed against the backdrop of their demanding careers. Mrs. Mackey and Miss. Nadimbaba are neighbors but have never visited each other. Dreams according to Freudian psychoanalysis represent the place where all desires are attained. This is seen in the following:

*The women teachers of England slept in their beds,
Their shrewd or wise or sensible heads safe vessels
For Othello's jealousy, the Wife of Bath's warm laugh,
The phases of the moon, the country code;
For Roman numerals, Greek alphabets, French verbs;
For foreign currencies and Latin roots, for logarithms, tables
Quotes; the meanings of currente calamo and fiat lux and stet.
Miss Dunn dreamed of a freezing white terrain
Where slowly moving elephants were made of ice.
Miss Nadimbaba dreamed she knelt to kiss Miss Barrett
On her couch and she, Miss Nadimbaba, was Browning
Saying Beloved, be my wife... and then a dog began to bark
And she woke up. Miss Batt dreamed of Miss Fife. (p.40)*

Conventional education has made these women mild-mannered and robotic but, in their dreams, their true desires unfold. The erotic dreams Miss Nadimbaba has for Elizabeth Barrett Browning is antithetical to the image of propriety presented during school hours. In her dreams, she takes the place of the poet's husband and fulfills her innate sexual desire.

The snowball formed by the sixth-form girls is symbolic of the attempt to break patriarchal norms. Its sheer size indicates the potential success of the deconstruction of the status quo. The reaction of the teachers and students alike upon seeing the huge snowball is suggestive of the positive outcomes. Miss Batt moans aloud, oblivious of her surroundings. A moan is symbolic of an emotional release and hers indicates the cracking of that barrier of decorum that is traditionally dictated to women in society. The fact that Miss Batt finally consummates her relationship with Miss Fife that has been simmering over time as evident in the fact that they constantly have dinner dates together.

Miss Batt's repressed lesbian desire for Miss Fife which is repressed by the conventional academic environment is revealed. All of these released repressed desires are awakened by the laughter that seems to have infected the students, the teachers are unaware of the infection since it only happens in their unconscious. Their social conditioning makes them perform their duties like robots without acknowledging their own needs. Repressing women's innate desires ensures their passivity which Cixous (1976) insists must be overhauled. This overhauling is attained in the descriptive sexual imagery; "Miss Batt slid down/nuzzled her breastbone, her stomach, kissed down/kissed down, down to the triangle" (p.51). This blatant female ecstasy is in celebration of the pleasure that only a woman can give another, therefore, affirming the maxim of Cixous (1976) that "women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, rhetorics, regulations and codes" (p.886). Duffy (2002) is writing the feminine body into canon as opposed to Das (2017) who reads lesbian sexuality in *the Laughter of Stafford Girls' High* as forced attraction.

5. Laughter as a Metaphor of Feminine Liberation

Female rebellion is subtle and goes without notice until it becomes an unstoppable avalanche as apparent in Duffy (2002). As already reiterated, laughter is a metaphor as it leads to the dismantling of the patriarchal school intended to contain feminine aspirations. It is a trivial weapon that slowly erodes the system and goes unchecked because it comes from the subaltern. This metaphor is sustained because the note is written on paper "torn from the back of the King James Bible" (p.35). This mysterious note is the catalyst that breaks the patriarchal institution, including biblical restrictions that portray women in subversive ways. Malinowska (2020) states that "early media coverage of first-wave feminists were unfavorable and biased. Media coverage was overtaken by the stereotypical trope of a bad looking, unfeminine advocate of women's liberation and hated by all men" (p.3). The perception of the media suggests the triviality of the subject to the public.

Since Duffy (2002) is paying homage to the feminist waves that enabled the codification of universal women's rights, mirth is appropriate since the struggle for women's rights was initially regarded as inconsequential. Duffy's ability to paint scenarios with words enhances the intrigue as the persona provides descriptive details of the environment. It is a "miserable, lowering winter's day" (p.35) while the windows are "sad with rain like a long list of watery names" (p.35). This dreary image indicates the state of mind of the students and the need to break the dullness.

The outburst of laughter is so uncanny and shocking creating such confusion that could not be controlled by the school authorities. Breaking ennui with mirth is a central motif in "the Laughter of Stafford Girls' High" which underscores the power of women. Although the incident occurs in the Third Form, it does not end there; it spreads slowly through the entire school in a dramatic fashion. The choice of words is also commendable since the lesson on the rivers of England is linked to the sound of Emily Jane's laughter. The laughter invokes a liquid image "a gurgle, a ripple, a dribble,/ a babble, a gargle, a splash, a splash" (p.35). The emphasis on the words that the sound of the laughter goes to show its infectious nature as it will soon spread across the entire school like a pandemic which Yun (2019) reads as "how women's laughter arises and spreads and what it reveals" (p.291). Here it reveals the involuntary nature of the outburst emphasized as "Emily Jane/ clamped her turquoise hand/ but the laugh was out" (p.35). The use of asyndeton and the semantics of water emphasize the artistry that the young women in the school are deprived of.

Although Emily Jane is patient zero, the laughter soon spread as Rosemary Beth cannot resist a giggle in response. She, unlike Emily, does not even read the joke like the rest of the class that is infected by the fit of mirth. The girls kick the note around to prevent the teacher from noticing it though the action only increases the height of hilarity. This is evident below:

*By now, every girl in the form
Had started to snigger or snicker or titter or chuckle
Or chortle till the classroom came to the boil
With brothy mirth. Girls! Miss Dunn's shrill voice
Scraped Top G and only made matters worse. (p.36)*

The feeling of glee is contagious and every student is partaking as evident in the variety of words the persona utilizes to indicate the state of chaos in the class. Miss Dunn, who is supposed to be the symbol of authority is unable to bring order to the class and only adds to the entertainment. Her voice is shrill, which does not enhance the attempted authoritative tone. It is this inability to keep order that allows the amusement to spread to the other classes. The continuous repetition of synonyms of laughter enhances the metaphor of mirth that breaks the barriers of patriarchy. The multiple synonyms equally show the difference in the young women which the patriarchal society tries to erase. Individuality is discouraged in a system with the intent to brainwash and make women insipid. Laughter is an emotional reaction that should have a limited lifespan but after five minutes, there is the realization that this particular bout will not end soon. The racket is described as a "cauldron of noise" (p.36) while Miss Dunn's screeching efforts to control the class only intensify the jollity. Miss Fife, the math teacher comes in to assist but it is futile as well as an error since she leaves her class unattended.

Hilarity is transformative as evident in the effects it has on the students. The first change is witnessed in Geraldine Ruth who is described as "a sketch/ for a girl, the first draft to be crumpled and crunched/ and tossed away like a note" (p.36) is transformed in front of the entire class. The persona illustrates as follows:

*The girls who were there that day never forgot
How invisible crayons seemed to color in
Geraldine Ruth, white face to puce, mousey hair
Suddenly gifted with health and youth, and how –
Her lips split from the closed bud of a kiss
To the daisy chain of a grin that how then she yodeled
A laugh with the full, open, blooming rose of her throat,
A flower of merriment. (37)*

The blossoming of Geraldine Ruth is astounding as she transforms from an insipid mousy girl into "a flower of merriment".

The therapeutic power of laughter is seen in the metamorphosis of the girl and it brings to mind the ecstasy of St Teresa painted by Bernini in the 16th century which documents in explicitly sexual terms her dream of being pierced by the sword of an angel that causes her to moan and experience a sensation of sweetness. The laughter of Geraldine Ruth is the first experience of real pleasure that is akin to a sexual orgasm causing the stunning transformation. The diction is equally suggestive of the captivating transformation of the student. Words like flower and merriment show a combination of beauty and happiness.

Extending the metaphor of laughter to sexual liberation is not farfetched as Duffy (2002) illustrates the effect on some of the teachers. Repression forces individuals to behave in superficial ways and laughter as an outlet shows their true nature "the sound came again, louder...Miss Batt had her head in her lap and was keening and rocking/backward and forwards... Miss Batt/flung her head back and laughed, laughed like a bride" (p.45). Miss Batt breaks decorum and laughs during an assembly where the Head is trying to establish an order which foreshadows the demise of the school.

The diction like keening, and rocking shows her attempt to hold back the hilarity bubbling in her. The feeling is too strong as she lets go of herself and laughs. The metaphor of the bride suggests the depth of satisfaction and joy in the sound of her laughter. It is important to note that this happens after she has finally consummated her relationship with Miss Fife before ignoring the sexual tension between them till the outbreak of the laughter epidemic. The intensity of the passionate encounter suggests the deep emotions they have been resisting “Miss Batt pulled Miss Fife by the hair, turning her face around, hearing/her gasp, bending down, kissing her, kissing her” (p.43). The passion among them is brittle and the repetition shows the pleasure they find in each other. Drawing similarity to St Teresa’s dream encounter with the angel:

In his hands, I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease. (<https://aras.org>)

The passion and sexual bliss evident in the use of words like plunged, penetrated, consumed, moans and sweetness suggest that dreams are the only outlet for the nun who has taken a vow of celibacy. The fact that she sees these visions repeatedly indicates that it is only in dreams that her sexual desire can be fulfilled. Miss Batt and Miss Fife also try to ignore the sexual attraction but their defense crack with the epidemic of laughter that suffuses the school. Das (2020) observes that the relationship between the two teachers only occurs because “laughter overrides the existing academic disciplines and consequently, women are found queerly attracted to themselves” (p.107). Duffy’s poetry adheres to the expectations of feminine writing posited by feminists like Cixous (1976) who insist that writing “de-censored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (p. 88o). The illustration of the pleasure Miss Batt and Miss Fife derive from one another de-censors feminine sexual pleasure that excludes procreation which patriarchal society shuns. It is not surprising that St Teresa’s sexual yearning must be associated with God to validate it which seems ridiculous.

As an epidemic, the laughter spreads across the school as a class after a class becomes contagious; mimicking the various feminist waves. The lower forms get caught in the infection and the narrative persona makes a play of words in finding synonyms for laughter. The momentum builds in the lower forms but the school authority fails to address the issue before letting the girls go home. Incidentally, this move becomes counterproductive as the entire school gets infected during the Monday assembly. The head in an attempt to restore order strips the head girl from her title forcing a transition into a rebellious phase. This is akin to the radical feminist wave that focused on the roots of women’s problems especially their lived experiences (Duriesmith and Meger 2020). The infection moves from the lower forms to the entire school during the assembly. The Head Doctor Bream thinks that sternly reprimanding the students will frighten the students into complacency but the effect is antithetical. The assembly brings the entire school together and the infectious laughter moves from the lower forms and spread throughout the entire school. Attempting to restore order through stern measures backfires as seen below:

*But Josephine June was stripped of the Head Girl's badge
And sash and sent to the Sixth Form Common Room
To demand of the prefects how they could hope to grow to be
The finest of England's daughters and mothers and wives
After this morning's Assembly's abysmal affair?
But the crowd of girls gave a massive cheer, stamping
The floor with their feet in a rebel beat and Diana Kim,
Captain of Sports, jumped on a chair and declared
That if J.J. was no longer Head Girl then no one*

*Would take her place. All for one! Someone yelled. And one
For all! (p.42)*

The upper-form girls are held in high regard and the expectation of decorum and discipline are expected. Stepping out of bounds requires punishment evident in the stripping of the title of Head Girl from Josephine June. She is expected to lead by example and “killing herself” with mirth does not present the expected image. The decision to strip the Head Girl position from June rather intensifies the rebellion as the girls all pledge to stand together. Referencing Alexander Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers*, they band together and continue to break stipulated norms. United action was not envisaged at this stage but forced by the necessity to stand together to fight injustice, to Grady (2018) is why the radical feminist wave is continuous and not static.

After vowing to stand together, the students take their rebellion outside, breaking school rules and indicating that the rebellion is in motion. Diana Kim, the captain of sports is regarded as the leader and she “opened the window and jumped down/ into the snow. With a shriek, Emmeline Belle jumped after her” (p.42). Malinowska (2020) and Grady (2018) among other feminist scholars have commented on the metaphor of the wave of the feminist movements. They posit that since a wave conjures continuity it seeks to underscore the need for prompt action when women’s rights are being undermined. Grady (2018) points to the #metoo movements and the women’s march on Washington as proof of such prompt action. Jumping out of the window into the snow is the collective action that brings down the school. They mold “a snowball, the size of a netball... creaking, rolling/growing under their hands” (42). The snowball is symbolic because it can easily melt but when it is compacted as the girls have done, it becomes a weapon of destruction. There is the use of hyperbole in describing the size of the snowball “some claimed that the Head, as it groaned/past her study, thought that there might have been an eclipse” (p.43). Despite the hyperbole, the impact is huge since it contributes to the breakdown of decorum and the closure of the patriarchal institution.

The metaphorical snowball crushes the final barriers of the patriarchal bubble enabling the faculty to chase their dreams instead of being confined to the teacher role that Hooks (1994) avers is the only possibility given to a woman in the patriarchal society. Carpe Diem is experienced in the ways the teachers seize the moment to attain their dreams; they all resign to, climb Everest as the case of Miss Dunn and Diana Kim the captain of sports, Miss Nadimbaba to write poetry, Miss Batt and Miss Fife to be with each other. The two women left behind are Mrs. Mackay and Doctor Bream, the Head, they represent the “Old Woman” (Cixous 1976, p.878) who hangs onto the dictates of the phallus and refuses liberation. Mrs. Mackay is the only married woman but there is no marital bliss—“Mrs. Mackay with her husband of twenty-five grinding/childless years” (p.40) is incompatible with her husband. She becomes a noctambulist to assuage her boredom while her husband believes she is “a satisfied hen” (p.46). Her final action is to write “her maiden name with a stick in the sand then walked into the sea” (p.54). Dr. Bream who is the custodian of patriarchy is confined to a psychiatric hospital because of a nervous breakdown; “a nurse brought warm milk and a pill to the Head/who stared through the bars at the blackened hulk of the school” (p.54). Her unwillingness to adapt to the liberation movement suggests the irreversible depths of patriarchal brainwashing. Mrs. Mackay writes her maiden name before drowning herself in an attempt to remember herself.

6. Conclusion

The foregone analyses have explored Duffy (2002) on the premise of the subtlety of female rebellion utilizing intrinsically feminine weapons like mirth which led to the devastation of the patriarchal school. Although contemporary society celebrates equality in education and other domains, evidence showed that ‘hidden curriculum’ exist that still brainwashes the woman to accept a passive marginal societal role. Duffy (2002) pays homage to the radical feminist movement and its contributions to feminine liberation. Education as a weapon of marginalization was explored especially the absence of women in the curriculum which feminists like Howe (1977) and Hooks (1994) perceive as strategies of

marginalization. Duffy (2002) celebrates female sexual liberation by adhering to Cixous's clarion call for women to write themselves as a rejection of the phallus. The metaphor of laughter and the mock epics are innovative ways through which women subvert masculine dictates.

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