

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## The Necklace by Guy de Maupassant: A Study of Women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France

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### Abstract:

*Henri Rene Guy de Maupassant is the French writer of the naturalistic school. The characters which he depicts in his novels and short stories are very interesting as his characters are natural rather than romantic and he depicts the inner-psyche of the characters and how it works.*

*The heroine of the short- story The Necklace is shown as simple girls with high ambition and we can compare the character of Matilda to that of every girl indiscriminate of time and place to which she belongs. But Maupassant highlights that Mrs. Loisel was very talented woman and if she was given a chance to prove her personal qualities she would be a successful woman.*

*But on the contrary in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France the hegemonic ideology of the society was their consciousness of class and the material achievements. And all the people of the 19<sup>th</sup> century France participates in the race of the false class achievements as they were groomed in such a way to achieve wealth, material prosperity, political power and individual's qualities was subordinated.*

*Hence, this paper highlights a critical study of the character of the heroine Matilda and how her character illustrates her the women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century France on the whole and also the actual woman in her which turned up when Matilda was caught up in the misery of her ambition i.e. the robust woman hidden in her. This simple story on the surface level illustrates the working of the complex psyche of an individual understanding and also highlights the tragedy created by human's over-ambition.*

**Keywords:** 19th century France, class consciousness, Character study, naturalistic school, Mrs. Loisel.

Henri Rene Albert Guy de Maupassant (Aug 5 1850- July 6 1893) is a French writer of the naturalist school. He generally, is regarded as one of the greatest modern short story writer. He wrote six novels, a volume of verse, three travel books and over 300 short stories and proved himself a versatile and genius. His genius rose from his childhood experience which was sad and traumatic because of his parent's unhealthy relationship. Finally, they separated when de Maupassant was 11 years old. This failure of relationship led a great scar on his memories, his personality, and his work. He also started fearing marriage and his stories ridiculed the persecuted husband, often center on the fate of a rejected woman and children, explores the problem of the individual's identity in such a rigid society. And his longing for true relationship is visible in almost all of his work. Guy De Maupassant believed that the only thing that is true in this world is 'Love' and human being let it go for all the secondary things. The story 'The necklace' highlights various issues in the relationship, the issue of class consciousness and many more debatable one. The paper focuses specifically on women, in 19th century France and women as a character portrayed by Maupassant.

Before discussing the women in specific it is necessary to have an idea of the kind of society in 19th century France. Any person is the product of the society in which he / she lives and acts accordingly. In the words, of Gramsci everybody is bound to a set mindset and this setting is succeeded by a social class who indirectly influence the subordinate class and they themselves participate in their own misery and oppression. In 19th century France there was class consciousness among the people. The men and women aims at association with the class whom they admired no matter what harm it can cause. The essentials being wealth, material prosperity, intellectual achievement, political power, aristocratic lineage, etc. People for the sake materialism were compromising with the other values. A man or a woman who belongs from the so-called 'elite' need no personal qualities to win the heart of a woman or vice-versa. The person who did not have these qualities was taken as the unfortunate and good for nothing kind of a person which results in a kind of competition among the people of that time.

Maupassant through the medium of the story 'The Necklace' brings out the follies of a woman who is beautiful and fashionable Madame Loisel and is fond of being the part of elite without any substance. A product of the society and also brings out the hidden personality of Madame Loisel. Maupassant in this story does not criticize the protagonist but the period in which she lives.

The story mainly focuses on Madame Loisel, and Maupassant took great delight in describing her. He introduces her as “one of the pretty and charming girls, born by a blunder of destiny in a family of employees” (The Necklace). She does not lack anything as far as her personality is concerned but for her, her misfortune was that she does not belong from the class she admires and dream to be the part of it. Except her beauty she does not have anything which can promise a proposal of a rich man and so married to a clerk in the Department of Education. Mr. Loisel though a good natured man was not admired for his personal qualities and the longing for wealth and fame persisted in Mrs. Loisel. She suffered intensely, “Feeling herself born for every delicacy and every luxury” (The Necklace). She dwell on all sorts of luxuries in her mind such as “quite vestibules, hung oriental tapestries, lighted by tall lamps of bronze, and on the two tall footmen in knee breeches who dozed in the large armchair...” etc and these things would go unnoticed for a woman of her class. But in her case she was fortunate to have modern education which result in her refinement and from there only she get an exposure to the way of the world of the elite class. The education that had nurtured her also seems responsible for her frustration. And this result, in her participation of the ideology (materialism) followed by others in that time. She seems comparing herself to the people of the high class society of that time and found that despite one’s beauty and intelligence, one need to be materially prosperous. And she was not the woman of substance to get the recognition she wanted.

The writer does not criticize Madame Loisel alone but through her example he shows the mental strata of people of that time. She herself was a victim of the society in which she was living and was trying to cope up with the age. This was the condition of almost all men and women of 19th century French society. They were facing the frustration by setting barriers in their effort to associate themselves to the class they admired. Guy de Maupassant presents this situation through the heroine who was beautiful but lack material prosperity. This ideological revolution was so dominant that the other things go unnoticed and people strive for wealth. Madame Loisel never gave a thought to other things; her emotional aspect is not at all described in the story, she never cares or reciprocates the love her husband showed to her. Again and again materialism is emphasized and it seems that there is a battle between have and have not and makes the life very complicated.

In addition, to this in French Society of that time a celebration use to serve as a platform for women to show their wealth, beauty, and elegance. Any woman fulfilling the criteria was appreciated and recognized and was taken as the centre of the ball. Hence, Madame Loisel on seeing the invitation of the ball instead of getting excited became sad because she doesn’t have the suitable dress and jewelry for the party and she rightly decides to go to the ball properly dressed or not to go at all. As a product of social milieu, it is natural of her to compare herself to other women and to prove herself far better among them. Thus, Madame Loisel was a proper portrayal of women prevalent in that society as a product of it, rather than an ambitious woman.

Guy De Maupassant describes her psyche at the ball and at the same time shows the tragic flaw in the society through her psychology. She manages to attend the Minister’s party after purchasing a new dress from her husband’s saving which he made for gun powder and borrowing the diamond necklace from her friend Madame Forestier. In the party she was able to prove herself as she thought “the prettiest woman present, elegant, graceful, smiling, and quite above herself with happiness”. She made what her heart desire “all the men stared at her, inquired her name, and asked to be introduced to her”. The mental status of Madame Loisel is clearly visible from the line “She danced madly, ecstatically, drunk with pleasure, with no thought for anything for anything, the triumph of her beauty, in pride of her success, in the cloud of happiness made of this universal homage of admiration, of the desired she had aroused of the completeness of a victory so dear to her feminine heart”. She even forgets her husband who is right now “dosing in a deserted little room”.

If we analyze the works of Maupassant we will realize that his works are full of major and minor female characters. We cannot say bluntly that he had optimistic or pessimistic view about women rather we can say he had a mixed view about women. His stories depict all the shades of women’s personality. Maupassant defines women as:

Do women feel anything more keenly than curiosity? No, they will go to any length to find out to know, to feel, what they have already dreamed of! Once their excited curiosity has been aroused women will stop to anything, commit any folly, take any risk. They stop at nothing. I am speaking of women, who operate on three different level superficially cool and rational, they have three secret compartment : the first is constantly full of womanly fret and anxiety; the second is a sort of innocent guile , like the fearsome sophistry of the self-righteous and the last is filled with an engaging dishonesty , a charming deviousness, a consummate duplicity with all those perverse qualities in fact that can drive a fool , unwary love to suicide but which by other may be judged quite delightful.

From the above line it is clear that Maupassant had an insight of women and seemed fascinated by the personality of them. For him the real women are those who have the guts to pay anything for the fulfillment of the curiosity which arises in them. For some people the same women seem fascinating and for other she drives fool.

The story 'The Necklace' is dominated by the theme of the materialism and its adverse effect on the personality of men and women. The writer does not condemn the women of France of 19th Century but he says; that they were the product of the society in which they were living .He calls Madame Loisel as the victim of the society and show the tragic flaw of the society. As the story proceeds, the loss of necklace causes a drastic change in the personality of Madame Loisel. The dullness of her personality as a frustrated woman yearning for some impractical things lost and she emerged as new woman who struggle for existence. This personality of women to having guts to meet any challenge in the crisis is celebrated by Maupassant through the character of Madame Loisel.

The loss of the necklace does not cause a moral downfall in the lives of the Loisels. They do not informed Mme Forester about the incidence and beg for the forgiveness; nor do they abscond from returning the object they borrowed; they did not tell about their poverty and lose their class identity; but instead took the responsibility of the loss and challenge to replace it with a new one.

They found an identical diamond necklace in a shop and purchased it for thirty- six thousand francs, by raising such a huge amount; half from Mr. Loisel's inheritance from his father and the other half is raised from mortgaging. Madame Loisel also played her part 'heroically'. She discontinued the servant, and changed her house and started living in an attic under the roof. She took various jobs to procure money by doing the washing, cleaning, laundry, marketing etc .She gave up fashionable lifestyle and started wearing simple clothes and maintained domestic practices. She fights "for every wretched half penny of her money."The writer called her that she transformed into 'robust woman'. And these qualities were already in Madame Loisel from very beginning, but it came out through the impetus given by the loss of then necklace. The other changed worth noticing was Madame Loisel was proud in her bearing when she meet Mme Forester at the end and told all the suffering she faced after losing the necklace 'she smiled with proud and naïve joy'. This shows that she was a changed person who use to feel inferior was proud and confident. The romanticism was replaced by realism and she accepted the situation and condition in which she was born, the only tragedy was that she understood when she was no longer beautiful. And the story ends on this note.

If we refer to the view of many modern critics, they have found that his short stories as a rich material for the study of women characters. Maupassant went to both ends in describing women; he has portrayed some female characters which are meant to be admired and many female characters depict his pessimistic view about women. Unlike, Shakespeare his female heroines are good as well as victims of evils and follies. Critic like Mary Donaldson Evan (1986) concentrated the connection between the role of women in the tales and the author's clear 'contempt for the concept of God'. Other critic like Mary L. Poteau-Traile(1995) traced Maupassant increasingly pessimistic portrayal of mother, in particular, which was idealistic in his early works, but later focuses on the horrific version of motherhood, involving infanticide, sexuality, and madness. According to Poteau this increasingly negative characterization was directly related to his deteriorating mental and physical health and his pessimistic view of the world in general.

But if we take into account the story 'The Necklace' in specific the character of the protagonist is not ridiculed rather she is shown as the representation of women of her time and the innate goodness is revealed by author after she lost the necklace she borrowed. The author tries to say that the influence of the class consciousness was such that the other good thing in the personality goes unnoticed. The characters may not have significant virtues, but they must appear in rich outfits, so that they are considered to be respectable in the society. The whole system under whose spell of materialism is exposed in the end. The universality in the story in, the fact is that it can be applied to any society where people are behind clothes and commodities in order to gain respect. In this story Maupassant shows his genius not only as a story writer, but also as a social critic. He does not preach people, but simply narrate the story and we the reader get what the writer indirectly tries to say.

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