Pretty Woman : A Rescue Story, Hollywood Style

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Few know that *Pretty Woman*, the1990 romantic comedy (written by J.F. Lawton and directed by Garry Marshall) was originally intended to be a dark narrative about prostitution in Los Angeles before it was reinvented as a romantic comedy. An immediate hit when it released, it saw the highest number of ticket sales in the US ever for a romantic comedy, was the fourth highest-grossing film of the year in the United States and the third highest-grossing worldwide, and continues its successful run with an estimated gross income of $463.4 million. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pretty_Woman). But while it remains popular to this day, and is often ranked one of the most successful instances of romantic comedies, it has attracted its fair share of criticism. The charges levelled against the film are many: it has been dismissed as a modern-day Cinderella story, as a makeover fantasy, as a sexist film (the reason why some of the actresses first approached for the role of Vivian Ward refused it), and a money-story that celebrates the power of American consumerism. Interestingly, Richard Gere, who plays Edward Lewis, himself recently called it a "a silly romantic comedy". This paper takes a closer look at the film to posit that there is more to it than meets the eye, and argues that the film operates at three levels, thereby making it more complex than it has been given credit for thus far: it works most obviously within the genre of romantic comedy, but while it also involves tropes from the genre of the fairy tale with its direct references to the knight-in-shining armor and the Cinderella, the film must be located within the dominant framework of Hollywood.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the great commercial success romantic comedies have acquired over the years, this genre is not taken very seriously, barely finding a mention in books on the theory and practice of film. Often dismissed pejoratively as a 'chickflick', a romantic comedy is even difficult to define, since its core ingredients – comedy and romance – are not specific to the genre, and are a staple of films of other genres as well. (Mortimer:3) Though romantic comedies lost much

of their appeal by the 1950s in Hollywood, they experienced a resurgence in the late 1980s. And while Shakespeare's comedies are generally credited to be the original inspiration for this genre, romantic comedies, or 'romcoms' as they are popularly known, are commonly considered derivatives of the screwball and sex comedies of Hollywood, particularly, the marital comedies of the early 20th century.

Keeping in mind some of the defining characteristics of screwball comedies, *Pretty Woman* appears to have been partially inspired by these early romcoms. Screwball comedies often had a completely mismatched couple in terms of social status, and presented an escapist fantasy that viewers expected from and loved about the genre. (Mortimer:10) However, *Pretty Woman* deviates from formulaic romcom plots in which "...the narrative shows the couple clashing, and then gradually working through the tumultuous progress of their relationship until equilibrium is found." (Mortimer: 7). Edward Lewis and Vivian Ward, the protagonists, are never at odds with each other, and compatibility is not an issue. Also, the film does not rely on popular subplots like that of disguise and deception out of which misunderstandings arise and which make for the central conflict in romantic comedies like *You've Got Mail*, *27 Dresses* and *The Runaway Bride*. There isn't even any competitor, male or female, to spice up the narrative and provide a valid excuse for some great moments of melodrama as in *My Best Friend's Wedding*. And while it does make use of the 'best-friend-as-confidante' ingredient, Vivian's best friend, Kit, also a hooker, plays a very minor role in the way things turn out. The film even gives the typical 'meet-cute' a miss (the 'meet-cute' refers to the first meeting between the couple usually characterised by moments of embarrassment) in favour of a no-fuss-no-thrills first meeting scene: Edward meets Vivian on the streets of Hollywood Boulevard when he stops to ask for directions because he's lost and she drives him to his hotel suite– as simple as that. Neither is struck by the proverbial 'love' nor 'hate-at-first-sight' emotion that is so common in romantic comedies. In fact, the relationship between Edward and Vivian maintains a neutral tenor for the most part, where they are neither madly attracted to nor greatly repelled by each other. For the

major duration of the film, an easy companionship, a warm and gentle camaraderie remains the hallmark of their relationship before and after they fall in love. The closest the film comes to being overtly dramatic is when Edward walks in to find his manager trying to rape Vivian and punches him before throwing him out of the hotel suite. What we have then is a rather tame plot – rich boy meets hooker, boy and girl fall in love during their seven- day contract when she accepts his offer to be his escort, girl wants marriage which boy is not ready for (billionaire man marry a hooker? Good God!), girl walks out, boy relents, they kiss - and needless to say, live happily ever after! What then makes this film worth watching several times over? What explains its enduring appeal? I believe that the primary appeal of the film lies in the characterisation of the lead pair and in the relationship they share far more than its appeal as a modern-day Cinderella story, a well-packaged makeover fantasy, or even a neo-Pygmalion narrative as it has often been called.

Let's begin with Vivian Ward, effortlessly essayed by the then not so reputed actress, Julia Roberts. Many critics have lambasted Vivian's characterisation as a bimbo, a woman with no self-esteem, and who therefore desperately needs to attain a sense of self-worth through her rich and generous client, specifically, his credit card. It is his credit card that empowers her by enabling her transformation into a radiant beauty, a la Cinderella. Yes, Vivian does display characteristics of low self-esteem, but only because she's been catapulted into an unfamiliar world. We see her unsure of herself only with respect to issues of lifestyle – all she needs is a fairy godmother to help her out with respect to things like fine dining etiquette, things that symbolise the external trappings of elite society. In every other matter, Vivian is very sure of herself, comfortable with who she is, and the choices she has made in life. She makes no apologies for being a hooker, displaying a cool professionalism about it, as is apparent in her confession to Edward: "When I'm with a man, I'm like a robot. I just do it." She bargains for what she thinks is a good price for spending a week with him, makes her terms very clear, (no kissing on the mouth), and never hesitates to cock-a-snook at those that patronise her, even if they happen to be Edward's fancy, rich friends. In spite of

being slightly overwhelmed by Edward's world, she holds her own. She does her best to please, but only because she's being paid handsomely to be his "beck-and-call girl", as she puts it. Let's not forget that her efforts are directed at Edward the client, not Edward the man. And when she gets bitten by the love bug, she remains clear about what she wants – she wants "more", in fact, she wants the whole fairytale, as she candidly confesses to her friend Kit, because she believes she deserves it, hooker or not. When Edward tells her that he's never treated her like a hooker, she mutters to herself 'You just did' in view of his obvious reluctance to continue their relationship on *her* terms. When Edward asks her outright what she wants, she answers "I want more." Her walking out after this episode may be seen as a clever attempt at emotional blackmail instead of a sign of a self-respecting woman, but like Eliza Dolittle, the heroine of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Vivian is a street-smart survivor who plays her cards well - and what's wrong with that?

We now come to the film's hero, Edward Lewis, the most eligible bachelor in town who goes on to become Vivian's knight in shining armour, her fairy godfather, if you will. A billionaire who has worked hard to attain his wealth, he is a workaholic rather than a playboy. The ruthless streak he displays in business is not a personality trait. If anything, he is the quintessential gentleman, sensitive, caring and impeccably polite to everyone without exception. Calm and composed at all times, he never raises his voice even when angry. The only time he flies off the handle is when he walks in on his manager trying to force himself on Vivian.

Edward is clearly an object of desire, as heroes of romantic comedies must be. His suave persona, his quiet and restrained demeanour with just the right touch of brooding vulnerability becomes the perfect complement to Vivian's vivacious nature. The appeal of Edward's character was thanks, in no small measure, to the manner in which Gere essayed him on screen with his trademark style of understated panache. Incidentally, Gere was much more active in his role as Edward until the director told him: "No, no, no. Richard. In this movie, one of you moves and one of you does not. Guess which one you are?" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pretty_Woman)

Like Edward, Vivian too becomes an object of desire, but primarily when seen through his eyes: the 'male gaze' is here characterised by tender, bemused, indulgent glances more like a loving parent looking over a precocious but adorable child than a besotted lover leering at a sex object. Every time Vivian makes one of her famous gaffes, his only reaction is a barely suppressed smile - when Vivian perches herself on top of a chair, stuffing huge morsels into her mouth; when she tells the old woman that she liked the opera so much she almost peed in her pants; or at the restaurant when the piece of chicken flies out of her plate only to be deftly caught by the waiter standing nearby - whatever Vivian does, Edward never objects to or criticises, and in his smiles and affectionate glances is a validation of who she is, of her personhood. It is to his credit that he never tells her to behave any different, and few men in Edward's position would have taken the risk, if only for seven days. Which is why, defining Edward as "a callous oligarch" (Chocano) who purchases Vivian's personhood doesn't seem fair, considering that he is never threatened by her personhood and never patronises her. When he asks her to stay back for a night, he asks her to stay because *she* wants to and not because he's paying her to. In sum, he is not only her knight-in-shining-armor, but also a quasi-parent-cum- fairy godfather- cum-mentor- cum-personal grooming agent all rolled into one!

Edward makes no apologies for his ruthless way of acquiring wealth, and Vivian has no sob story to tell about being a prostitute. They may be separated by social and economic inequality, but they are kindred souls, and it this, apart from the (rather understated) chemistry they share, that draws them together. Both feel let down by their families – Edward was not on speaking terms to his father until his death, and Vivian's mother used to lock her up in the attic as a routine punishment. Edward has no friends, and Vivian only one.

Pretty Woman has been called a money-story amongst other things, and so it is in good measure, but it doesn't endorse the power of money as an all-important value system, only as a useful means of "cleaning up" for those who have less of it. If we consider Edward's attitude towards his wealth and status, we see that not only does he not take it too seriously;

he actually displays a curious detachment towards the fringe benefits of having money, as if he finds something distasteful about the human tendency to give so much importance to those who have it. In a particularly telling line, Edward tells Vivian: "Stores are never nice to people, they are nice to credit cards." At the shopping store, Edward is particularly amused at the salesman's efforts at sucking-up to him on learning that he plans to spend an "obscene" amount of money at the store. In fact, Edward actively encourages the man to suck-up to him, not to show off to Vivian what he can do with money as much as to illustrate how people are willing to debase themselves for it. Edward's saving grace is his awareness of the irony of this situation: he knows only too well that he, and Vivian for that matter, are not very different from the salesman. As he later tells her, "You and I are such similar creatures. We both screw people for money." Instances like these demonstrate that even as both Edward and Vivian desire money, neither are fooled by the glamour of the world he inhabits and that she aspires to be a part of. Completely unapologetic about their love for money and the good things money can buy, they are able to detach themselves from it rather than mindlessly subscribe to it. As for those who have painted Vivian a desperate bimbo, her subtly sarcastic question addressed to Edward: "Do people always do what you tell them to do?" shows that she too is not impressed by those who fawn over Edward because of his wealth and status. Edward's cryptic, one-word response to that, "Always", conveyed in an extremely ironic tone, endorses Vivian's questioning of a value system that attributes such significance to wealth. In this sense, both Edward and Vivian have a certain self-respect that allows them to enjoy the experience of being pandered to without stooping to pander to others, to function within the world of luxury but also to stand outside it from time to time so that they never lose sight of things more important than money. This could explain why Edward endorses Vivian's several gaffes, almost silently cheering her on – he seems to derive a vicarious pleasure from watching Vivian telling people off, especially the rich, stuffy one's from his social circle, people he himself doesn't care much for but cannot always displease, for professional reasons.

The central conflict of the film depends on this crucial question– will a man like Edward risk his image and status in society by actually marrying Vivian, a hooker? It is here that the genre of romantic comedy comes to the rescue of such a preposterous proposition. Unlike Shaw's *Pygmalion* whose heroine refuses to live with the much older, more learned and sophisticated Professor Higgins unless he offers her nothing less than marriage, *Pretty Woman* endorses the fairy tale ending with Edward following Vivian to her house to propose marriage. But then, Shaw's play was meant to be an anti-romantic comedy, while *Pretty Woman* works squarely within the genre, in which case viewers can't be denied the expected happy ending, however predictable or unrealistic it may seem.

True to the form of romantic comedies, the hero and heroine are mutually enriched by their relationship. If Edward rescues Vivian from prostitution by giving her a second chance at a better life, she rescues him from himself, teaching him to relax and enjoy the simple pleasures of life, and make more humane business decisions. But aside from the immediate paradigm of romantic comedies, the film is situated in the larger context of fairy tale narratives like that of the knight-in-shining-armor. Vivian recounts her childhood experience of being locked up in the attic for being 'bad', and her coping mechanism of dreaming that she would be rescued by a knight who would rush in, brandishing his sword and rescue her. Edward, himself unwilling to believe in this fairy tale given his history of "impossible relationships", later makes this dream come true to become the knight of her dreams who comes to her rescue, albeit in a chauffeur-driven car, dressed in a three-piece luxury suit, and brandishing an umbrella if not a sword! The Cinderella story with its rags-to-riches theme is directly invoked in the film. Vivian herself questions the possibility of a fairy tale ending when she has a good laugh over it with her best friend Kit, who names "Cinderfuckingrella" as the only person they know who managed the impossible. But the larger framework that subsumes the contexts of the romantic comedy and the fairy tale is that of Hollywood. Viewers may remember that the film opens with a shot panning the larger-than-life Hollywood sign in Los Angeles, and ends with a voice-over reminding viewers that any dream can come true in Hollywood. I would here like to quote David Thomson, who referred to

Pretty Woman as "one of Hollywood's fondest love-letters to itself", and who summarised what the 'mythology' of the Hollywood sign (which he calls "an affront to nature") signifies in these words :

> Hollywood thinking still wants us to trust that good-looking people are good; that you will fall in love and get a happy ending; that women are seen, while men watch; that desire and dreaming are necessary pursuits that take precedence over evidence and reasoning; that justice will be done, very likely with a gun; that stories are resolved and heroes are sound; that you can understand experience just by looking (so keep everything cinematic).

Looked at in the light of this critical comment, we can see how it is Hollywood that is the real hero of the film. It is Hollywood that rescues the film's heroine Vivian from prostitution, and it was Hollywood that also rescued Julia Roberts, the actress who played her, from near anonymity. Was it a wonderful stroke of luck or destiny that the then- 21 year old, not so well-known Roberts, finally got the part of Vivian Ward after it was rejected by such established stars as Winona Ryder, Meg Ryan and Michelle Pfieffer, the role that catapulted her into the 20 million dollar bracket? Who would have thought that this ordinary girl born to a vacuum-cleaner salesman and secretary cum real estate agent would become one of the highest paid and best loved actresses of Hollywood, ironically because of the success of this very film! Roberts, the first Hollywood actress to achieve this feat, had this to say about her amazing success story: "I'm just a girl from a little town in Georgia who had this giant, absurd dream", thus echoing the comment at the end of the film to reinforce the transformative power of Hollywood in fiction and in reality. Need I repeat, anything can happen in Hollywood!

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