

Mme de Rambouillet - The Aristocratic Woman Who Brought Civility to France

Sravan Kumar, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of French
EFL University Regional Centre
Umshing, Mawkynroh, Shillong-793022
sravankumark987@gmail.com

Abstract

Gender studies are an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the social, cultural and historical context of gender identity, expression, and relations. It analyses the ways in which gender intersects with other social categories such as race, class, sexuality and nationality to shape experiencers of power, privilege and oppression. Gender studies emerged as an academic discipline in the late 20th century growing out of feminist movements and activism and influences are seen in theories propounded by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and Bracha L. Ettinger. Seventeenth century France was a time of great social, political and cultural upheaval. This was also a period when the role of women in society began to shift, albeit slowly. The traditional role of women in seventeenth century France was that of a wife and mother with little opportunity for education or professional advancement. However, despite these limitations, women found ways to assert their identities and make their presence felt in a male-dominated society.

One of the most significant ways in which women asserted their identities in seventeenth century France was through literature and fashion. Women used fashion to assert their individuality and to stand out in a society where conformity was expected. Women writers such as Madame de Lafayette and Madame de Sévigné gained recognition for their work which often dealt with themes of love, marriage and personal relationships. Their writings provided a platform for women to express themselves and assert their intellectual capabilities which were often ignored by male contemporaries. This research paper looks in

detail one such exemplary noble woman called Mme de Rambouillet who was a pioneer in shaping women's identity.

Keywords: Gender studies, Salons, Aristocracy, La Fronde, Civility.

Introduction

The Regent Queen of France, Anne of Austria, and chief minister Mazarin had to stop the series of revolts waged by the noble class in order to restore their supremacy. Disappointed with the abolition of certain privileges like knighthood and exemption from taxes that they were enjoying till then, the nobility was left with no other choice but to rebel against royal power. It was in this background that the women belonging to the nobility or aristocracy started gathering in various houses usually called salons in Paris and provinces in order to discuss their ideas and exchange political views. These conversations gradually encouraged the nobility to revolt against royal impositions. One woman who stood apart from this world of political intrigues and plots and emphasised more on 'politesse' or civility was Mme de Rambouillet. This paper discusses in detail the life inside her salon and to what extent it has become famous in setting up an example to lead a civilised life. One such example is the salon 'Blue room' of Mme de Rambouillet which, besides being known for its grandiosity and magnificence, is a patronage of the civilised world.

Catherine de Vivonne was born to a noble family in Rome on 2 December 1588. She was married at the age of twelve to Charles d'Angennes, Vidame du Mans and in 1612 to Marquis de Rambouillet. The young, beautiful and witty marquise stayed away from French court from the beginning as she found it unattractive and coarse. In 1620, she began to gather around her in her townhouse, the circle that made her renowned.

Marquise de Rambouillet's townhouse or Blue Room was the wonder of wonders in that era. It had attracted several nobles for its exquisite décor and literary production without any authority to fear. Once, Marquise de Rambouillet received a surprise visit from Cardinal de Richelieu for her help in knowing the intrigues between Mme la Princesse de Condé and Monsieur le Cardinal de la Valette. She refused saying it would not be too well-suited to the business of spying. In fact, Richelieu's request was not outrageous as it was the era of plotting, volte-face, continuous bargaining between the high nobility and the monarchy. It was a time when Louis XIII's minister was busy recalling the rebellious nobility to order with threats of prison and the executioner's axe. The memoirs of Cardinal de Retz and the Duc de

La Rochefoucauld both offer ample testimony to the unscrupulous attitude towards the sovereign and how family interests generally prevailed over those of King and country. It's not that Rambouillet's were not loyal subjects but what she meant was their house was not a place of intrigue and sedition. She was only claiming the right to private freedom. She set a precedent of civil society proclaiming its independence from politics and denied the prevailing powers to interfere in private life. Richelieu, for his part, wanted to be informed of what was happening in the marquise's celebrated 'Blue Room'. Despite his keen political intuitive power, he could not have fathomed the hatching of plot, if there were so as it was of different kind for it did not have any need for ministers, armies or wealth. It depended purely on exchange of ideas or opinion. It was not until a century later that it would threaten the established order. Rambouillet's contemporaries were the first to claim her significance and to realize that a new civilization for a fashionable society of politesse was being born in her home. It constituted a certain courteous, honest, polite way of living, acting and speaking acquired through usage in society. It can only be learned through practise and initiation.

This new way of life came to embody an ideal and it all began precisely in the hotel de Rambouillet. The enchanted place in which she received her intimate friends was the famous 'Chambre Bleu' or Blue room. The walls were hung with blue brocade interwoven with threads of silver and gold. The chairs were upholstered in blue, the curtains on the bed were blue. Breaking with convention, Mme de Rambouillet had transferred her actual bedroom to a little closet and transferred the big bedroom into an official reception room. This allowed Arthenice to receive her guests as she lay stretched in her daybed in the most protected corner of the room. This practice set an example and was to become a social ritual. The *ruelle*, the space between the bed and the wall was to become par excellence the part of the room where seventeenth century ladies received their guests.

Tallemant des Réaux recounts that the splendour of hôtel de Rambouillet was such that when queen mother had the Luxembourg built, she sent the architects to see this hotel. He says that the idea to create a sense of unity in a room by coordinating colours and materials was not new but what was striking was the overall effect of the house when the work was finished. The hôtel de Rambouillet became the perfect prototype for the décor that would form the backdrop to the rituals of French society for nearly three centuries. Brought into the social scene, the alcove became a place of prestige, devoid of all suggestion of intimacy. Although, the marquise's taste may have been dictated by a deep-seated desire for

beauty and harmony, it is impossible not to notice from the permanent animation in her house her continuous need for distraction and amusement. The first discipline that was practiced at the hotel de Rambouillet was the art of entertainment. The driving force behind all this effort was the child bride's refusal to grow up despite being a wonderful wife and mother of seven. It could also be the awareness that idleness was an essential element of aristocratic life and that to know how to cultivate it nobly was a mark of identity and belongingness. Perhaps it was the fear of the void and of solitude. Nevertheless, these explanations have an element of truth in it and the sum total of all these had imparted utopian quality is the hotel de Rambouillet.

Life in the marquise's house was easy, open, untroubled, and free of passion. There was no room for eros, although gallantry was allowed. Even if someone forgot and was carried away by the game, they were immediately kept in order. The regular visitors had to leave the hotel for real life to take up usual activities of lusting, loving, hating, conspiring, fighting, killing and even praying, preaching. The memory of utopian fiction remained and the temptation of playing at the hotel was so great that it had become a second nature. This dual life had become a phenomenon so much so that it had become an identity of French nobility until the Revolution. It was the only possible answer and the unlikely choice between court life and society life. Society and the court were two different worlds where the very people who frequented them no longer resembled themselves when they passed from one to other. At the hotel de Rambouillet, politics and intrigue were left at the door and at court, the manners of the hotel were disguised. Thus, for nearly two centuries, the nobility played two different parts, sometimes adopting the courtiers robe and other times donning the dress of a man of the world.

In the first decades of the seventeenth century, the aristocracy discovered unexplored territory that is halfway between the court and the church and whose boundaries were determined by its members. The nobility, on the other hand, established its own laws based on a code of behaviour marked by the strict veneration of form. They called it by the generic name *monde* or world. Mme de Rambouillet belonged to this sphere and she was hardly the only woman of her day to nourish the ambition of making her house into a cultural and world's centre. Mme de Loges, Vicomtesse d'Auchy were the other two who had held salons that were frequented by eminent writers like Francois de Malherbe, Guy de Balzac and they could reach to the rank of Rambouillet in their intent but what was novel about Mme de

Rambouillet was her personal idiosyncrasy of which dictated her decision. It was not that she did not like entertainment but she wanted it to take place in private. She had consciously distanced herself from court life. For a person who was considered a beauty and who took part in the crowning ceremonies of Henri IV and Marie de Medici, it is not unreasonable to assume that her detachment was partly due to her delicate health and successive pregnancies and most significantly the way of court life that deeply disgusted her.

Taillemant recounts that at the age of twenty-one, Mme de Rambouillet along with her close friends Mlle Montmorency an adolescent and the very young Mlle Paulet had taken part in the famous ballet de la Reine at Saint Germain enLaye on January 31, 1609 as nymphs in a cortege leading the imprisoned cupid. Neither the splendour nor the fact that Malherbe had honoured the festivities, could diminish the brutishness of the King's plot to sleep with Mlle Montmorency. He later turned his attention to Mlle Paulet who was singing skimpily dressed. In a world that was full of violent instincts and brutality, Mme de Rambouillet was keen to establish a code of behaviour that might act as an invisible shield between one person and another in order to protect ever one's dignity. It was not one noble woman's aspiration but an entire caste demanded it- a warring caste that had laid down arms after the long and bloody struggle of the wars of religion but could not succeed to eradicate violence from everyday life.

The civilizing impetus that began to make itself felt in the second decade of seventeenth century was not motivated by practical necessity alone but belonged to broader and more complex notion concerning the identity of the nobility, its social image and the different role allotted to it within the framework of the modern monarchy. Deprived of its old certainties, the residual culture of French nobility was obliged to rethink itself and redefine itself by means of a spectacular metamorphosis. The nobles were obliged to question their identity as they had been deprived of the very role which constituted their essence – the permanent exercise of arms. Royal power had forced them to pull down the walls of their own fortresses and forbidden them to draw their swords to defend their honour; war had become a profession and the nobility had been reduced to the rank of king's officers. It had almost become intolerable for them to identify themselves with the monarch. He had ceased to be first among equals and jealous of his own authority, had excluded the nobility from the world of politics.

Davis Burton, the American historian, has pointed out that the French nobles like the landed aristocrats in other countries had faced problems of adjustment before but the period between 1560 to about 1640 was extraordinarily difficult: the transition that the nobility underwent during these years which was a kind of identity crisis with economic and social and psychological dimensions coinciding with religious wars, commercial revolution and scientific revolution. The constantly rising prices that characterized the whole of the sixteenth century had had a disastrous effect on the nobility's revenues. Ever poorer and in ever greater debt, it is in fact attempted to recoup its losses at the expense of the peasantry, this had further refuelled widespread resentment and did nothing to strengthen the position of the nobles within the kingdom. Indeed, the peasants were not the only Frenchmen to question such privileges. For centuries, in return for the loan of militiamen, the nobility was exempted from the tax, the tax that formed the basis of the French fiscal system from the Middle Ages until the Revolution.

Now in various quarters, the questions were being asked as to whether they still played such an important part in the nation's defence. During the Hundred year's war, when large armies were permanently being mobilized over vast areas, many commoners had had the chance to prove that they could fight courageously, whereas the noble institution of the ban and arrière-ban, the mobilization of the vassals on the king's order to go to the war was fast falling into disuse. The nobility gradually seemed increasingly unwilling to mobilize at the king's command and many of its members hired substitutes to replace them on the battlefield. Even the very way of going to war had changed. The classes were no longer segregated within military units. The role of cavalry, where noblemen traditionally distinguished themselves, had been redefined by the newly attained importance of the infantry, which the nobility despised. In the area of public administration and employment the affairs were no better for the nobles. In the courts of justice and local and provincial administration, endemic corruption favoured the new rich commoners who were buying their way into office. The 1604 edict known as 'La Paulette' regularizing the sale of offices and designating heirs to these offices constituted a real blow to the nobility's claims. Nevertheless, its defensive strategy remained uncertain. If on the one hand, class furnished an argument against corruption, then it also had to be taken into account that money was at the root of the growing number of plebians infiltrating the nobility.

The practice of raising commoners of the third Estate to the rank of noblemen had always existed but under Henri IV the phenomenon had grown to unknown proportions. If on the other hand, merit was to be considered, it had to be admitted that many of the positions occupied by the bourgeoisie in the courts required a degree of learning and technical training that the nobility utterly lacked. Deprived of a defined and recognizable social function and the difficulty of providing a rational justification for their privileges which further combined with the vulnerability of their class to outsiders persuaded them not to contest the 'loi de dérogeance' which forbade them to participate in business or commerce. This has further weakened their position though most of the nobility welcomed it as a sign of superiority and distinction.

In reply to these uncertainties and in reaction to these difficulties, the nobility redefined its ideology by taking the stress off valour and placing it on the incontestable purity of lineage, thus emphasizing superiority of breeding. Nevertheless, in order to express itself even superior lineage required a new code to reinforce the declining authority of the existing one. The outward signs of nobility like titles, positions, lands, palaces, clothing and jewels could no longer irrefutably indicate membership by right of a certain class since they were stuck in the traffic between the crown and the new men. The nobility's prerogatives had lost their exclusivity and the occasions on which to boast themselves were limited to carrousels and tournaments. Thus, seeing themselves in an entirely new context, the nobility of the sword chose to define itself through the treacherous domain of style. Henceforth it would be by their way of living, of speaking, of acting, of amusing themselves, of enjoying each other's company that they persuade themselves with unshakeable certainty their own superiority. In place of arms, their touchstone would be provided with refined manners or bienséance which proved to be more powerful than any other written law.

After the death of Henri IV and the turbulent uncertain years of Marie de Médici's regency that followed, the monarchy could hardly remain indifferent to the insubordination, arrogance and violence that continued to mark the nobility's behaviour throughout the country. As soon as he appeared on the political scene, Cardinal de Richelieu proposed to re-establish order in the state and to revive the forms of courtesy due to the king and his officers. The courtesy he was talking was already fully formulated by tradition. His mission to educate was motivated by something quite distinct from the self-exaltation sought by the aristocracy. Going back to the Middle Ages which was absolutely concerned with the

relationship between the monarch and the knighthood and between the king and the state, Richelieu saw to it that the present situation readopted the old codes of courtesy and made it an instrument of coercion and control in the service of absolutism. The cardinal minister was too aware to not to know that a great monarchy must be reflected in the elegance of its language, the excellence of its culture and art, the prestige of its literature and obviously the splendour of its court. Richelieu had no wish of whatsoever to deprive the nobility of its standing provide that they celebrate the monarchy's prestige. His sole condition was that the nobility learn to be courtiers. Given these restrictions, the nobility was bound to feel the need to regain an area of freedom away from the dominion of the court in which to celebrate only themselves. They resorted to this new area of social world in which the regeneration of usages and customs of modern French society began under the banner of salons rather than authority.

Jean Starobinsky, eminent Swiss scholar has stressed that in their efforts to palliate the violence of everyday life, the nobility discovered that by repudiating the potential for aggression, they could not only make life less dangerous but could also produce pleasure. He further said that a protected space is thus created, an enclosed field where by common accord the partners to a relationship refrain from attacking or injuring one another in ordinary commerce as well as in matters having to do with love. The crucial idea is to maximize pleasure and it is somewhat like that of loss that the amorous instinct incurs owing to repression and sublimation is counterbalanced by the eroticization of everyday intercourse, conversation and epistolary exchange. According to Starobinsky, the doctrine of *honnêteté* aestheticizes instinctual renunciations. Well before it culminated in theoretical formulations or found expression in novels, the nobility's uncertain quest to fulfil itself in a new way of life discovered a protected space of amusement under the guidance of women in an exclusive game of worldliness.

Conclusion

If we rewind a little bit, we can see that the renaissance in the sixteenth century France, was at least fifty years behind Italy, noble women were more liberally treated. They did not live-in traditional isolation from men nor were they excluded from social life. Although their role in public was essentially a decorative one, they were not living in exile. Several women had already contributed to the true centres of humanist culture and the feminine presence had

made a real contribution to the splendour of the Valois monarchy. In the reign of François I^{er}, the court had begun to expand beyond the king's narrow family circle and was increasingly open to women. Their beauty, elegance and grace destined them to preside over courtly splendour and the weakening moral order that characterised Catherine de Médici's long period of influence. They were mothers, wives, sisters and lovers who within the closed world of court enjoyed a certain freedom by persuasion and seduction.

During the first decades of the seventeenth century, however, the significance of women in French society changed. They were no longer obliged to fight for an influence beyond the confines of domesticity but took upon themselves the leadership of society. Henceforth, women would decide matters of manners, language, taste and loisirs like reading, conversation, theatre and the arts. They would define the outstanding characteristics of aristocratic style. Many contemporaries welcomed its purifying and civilizing process but certain observers like François de Grenaille, Jean Jacques Rousseau immediately perceived its dangers and sounded alarm. Their values and virtues were at the service of a class culture and complemented the heroic, warrior qualities of the male world. With traditional male values in a period of crisis, however, women found themselves unexpectedly in the limelight.

There were two reasons for this – one being their loyalty to the old feudal system which was against contemporary attitudes and the other being traditional feminine values like 'politesse' which became of critical importance for men as well. Women were therefore allowed to take control of the new social environment that had come into being halfway between the official life of the court and the domestic world of the private house. This new found territory had to be guarded from the unwarranted pressures of the outside world as well as from the intimate disorders of the heart. In the new cultural climate, their frailty could be turned to strength and their initial disadvantages to unexpected opportunities for recognition like the correct use of bienséance. It acted primarily as a weapon of defence and secondarily as a mark of social distinction. They had become the most faithful custodians of the rules of behaviour since only those rules could better their inferior position. Noble women had the talent to maintain a delicate balance between custom and the law and were used to entrust their prestige and reputation to their ability to interpret collective class and caste sensibility. They acquired the consummate art of nuance which naturally allowed them to excel in the game of society.

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Bio-Note

Dr.Sravan Kumar teaches French at the English and Foreign Languages University, Regional Campus Shillong since more than twenty years in the capacity of Assistant Professor. He was the recipient of Erasmus Mundus Scholarship in 1997 by the University of Delhi and Academy of Rennes, France. He did his postgraduate studies from the University of Delhi and was awarded Ph.D. in Foreign Languages from the Gauhati University. He presented several papers in national and international seminars and published various research papers. His research interests are French literature and comparative literature. He has two authored

books namely “Innervoice” (a book of poems) and “Interprétation des Maximes de Vémāna” (a critique of maxims) to his credit.