

## Sketch the character of the Wife of Bath.

The Wife of Bath's *Prologue* throws, in a confessional mode, a flood of light on the character of the narrator. The *Prologue* is self-revelatory in nature. By her vibrancy and ebullience, sovereignty and strong feminist zeal, she appears as one the most charming characters among the twenty-nine pilgrims. In the *General Prologue*, Chaucer describes her physical charms, and through *Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale* we get an idea about her undaunted personality.

Alison or the Wife of Bath does not fit in the traditional group of medieval women typified by meekness. As a woman, she is very outspoken and intrepid. She cares a straw for conventional morality preached and endorsed by the Church. Through her *Prologue*, we come to know about her daring personality that refuses to play a second fiddle. Nicholas Marsh opines, 'The use of a distinctive 'voice' and colloquial language to create her unique personality, and the complexity of her character as digressions and inconsistencies reveal an inner self, all show that Chaucer was breaking new literary ground with his creation.' Chaucer heaps together many stereotypical ideas related to women and gives to them an ironical twist while creating the character of the Wife of Bath. It goes without saying that Alison does a number of things which are not morally sanctioned. She does run into trouble occasionally. She is a nightmare embodied for her husbands. Moreover, she is lascivious—a trait that was highly condemnable at that time. However, the fun resides in the fact that she is well-aware about the stereotypical images of women in the medieval period. She prefers experience to authority. This is a significant move. Medieval period upheld the Scriptures as complete authority. According to the preachers, everything written on the Scriptures is infallible and sacrosanct. Against these inviolable commands, Alison posits 'experience'. The term does not only indicate marital experience. It is used in a wider sense. 'Experience' connotes the lesson learnt from the book of life and not learnt from any Scriptures. She holds a commonsensical attitude to life, which refuses to lie limited to any circumscribed code of morality. She wants to enjoy life to the fullest. She does not let anyone pontificate to her.

Alison has an argumentative disposition. She reads the Scriptures against the grain. In an impressive way she arguments in favour of marriages by pointing out the aporias inherent in the Scriptures. She lays bare the paradoxes of the Scriptures and carefully uses them to her advantage. She starts out by challenging those who question her right to marry five husbands, adducing biblical examples, including the Woman of Samaria, Solomon, Abraham, and Jacob—all of whom had married more than once. She supported her multiple marriages by saying 'Bet is to wedded than to brynne' (better to be married than to burn with sexual desire). She challenges the romanticization of virginity with clever argument. According to her, the organs of reproduction are created by God for both purgation and pleasure. They are not made for nothing but meant to be enjoyed. She quotes from *Corinthians 1*, chapter 7 to load the dice in her favour. To the claims that Jesus graced only one wedding in Galilee (an indication that Jesus did not approve of multiple marriages), Alison replies by pointing to the Woman of Samaria. Jesus, according to Alison, met a Samaritan woman beside a well and He told her that she had five husbands and the one she had then was not her husband.

Alison is a crusader against orthodox morality. She is against the suppression of sexual desires. Medieval persons regarded women as wildly sexual creatures burning with the desire for sex. Sexual desire is not an anathema to the Wife of Bath. She craves for sexual consummation which is manifest through her long prologue. Her repeated references to her



sexual organs speak volumes for her desire for sexual enjoyment. The uninhibited manner in which she makes references to her private parts illustrates her bold personality. She approximates the Lawrentian model of 'natural man' by highlighting her primordial instincts.

The Wife of Bath is dictatorial in temperament. She always likes to take the upper hand in conjugal life. She refuses to be dictated to by anyone. She tries to impose her authoritarian attitude on her husbands through various means. Her dominance over the first three husbands was absolute though she had a tough time in exerting authority over the last two husbands. J.A. Tasioulas remarks, 'In the real world of the fourteenth century, very few women would have dominated men. The rules of society placed them in a position where they had to obey. The Wife challenges all such authority.'

Alison is cunning too. For her, attack is the best form of defence. In order to gain authority over her husbands, she fabricated a tissue of lies to accuse them of having said this or that. She spoke in favour of marital bliss by comparing the virgins to pure bread and married people to brown barley bread. According to her, the first one is more desirable but a hungry man will equally relish a barley bread. Deception, falsehood and wrong accusations are the tricks she used to control her husbands. She also has firm belief in astrology. In Chaucer's time, people thought that a person's personality was the result of the planetary influences. The Wife of Bath is no exception. She tells that her ascendant is Taurus where Mars is positioned. She ascribes the cause of her passionate nature to the influences of the stars. As a Taurean her personality is dominated by Venus, the goddess of love. That is why she has a vehement temperament and falls in love every now and then. She says that Mars was also positioned in Taurus at the time of her birth. Resultantly, she has got a domineering nature as Mars is the goddess of war. Her passionate and valiant nature, according to her, comes from the astronomical influences. She says that as a result of such astronomical effects she can hardly restrain herself in matters of love.

To sum up, we can see that the Wife of Bath is a very complex character. She is no simpleton but astute enough to turn the patriarchal dictates of a society on its head. Caught up in the medieval patriarchal citadel, she tries to eke out for her a path to salvation by inverting the traditional narratives and prioritizing her 'experience' over 'authority'.