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OUTLINING FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM: WOMAN AS READER / WRITER PERSPECTIVE

Sushila Singh

The feminist literary criticism has developed as a component of the women's movement and its impact has brought about a revolution in literary studies. Its wide range is evident from the fact that it flourishes in combination, and not in isolation, with every other critical approach from formalism to semiotics, and can be effectively applied to the literary study of every period and genre. This new approach has profoundly altered several critical assumptions. It offers a new perspective on literature and emphasizes the need for a search of new paradigms. Since antiquity, it has been taken for granted that the reader, writer, or critic of literature is male. Feminist criticism has shown that women readers and critics bring different perceptions and expectations to their literary experiences. It insists that women have also told important stories of culture. Elaine Showalter draws attention to this critical revolution in the following words:

While literary criticism and its philosophical branch, literary theory, have always been zealously guarded bastions of male intellectual endeavour, the success of feminist criticism has opened a space for the authority of the woman critic that extends beyond the study of woman's writing to the reappraisal of whole body of texts that make up our literary heritage. (Showalter 3)

Feminist criticism operates in three ways: (1) it unfolds the literary representations of sexual difference; (2) it brings out the ways that literary genres have been shaped by masculine or feminine values; (3) and it shows the exclusion of the female voice from the institutions of literature, criticism, and theory. Thus, feminist criticism establishes gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis.

To have a clear understanding of the crucial political and theoretical issues of contemporary feminist criticism, it is essential to distinguish between 'feminist' 'female' and 'feminine'. These three terms have been used in multitudinous ways. Toril Moi defines 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally determined characteristics. "The words 'feminist' and 'feminism', says Toril Moi, are political labels supporting the aims of women's

movement of the 1960s" (Moi 204). "Feminist criticism, then, is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature" (Moi 204). Therefore feminist criticism and theory become relevant to the study of the social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes. In her phenomenal study, *Sexual Politics* (1969), Kate Millett says that the essence of politics is power; and the task of feminist critics and theorists is to expose the ways of male dominance over females. This dominance which Millett defines as 'patriarchy' constitutes "perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power."

Following Millett's approach, feminists have politicised existing critical methods much in the ways the Marxists have done. Feminist critics are in the position of radical critics. Speaking from their marginalized position, feminists strive to make explicit the politics of the so-called 'neutral' or 'objective' works of their colleagues.

Feminists can be pluralistic in their choice of literary methods and theories with advantage. They appropriate any approach if it serves their political ends. As pointed out by Toril Moi, the term 'appropriation' in the sense of 'creative transformation' becomes a key word in this context. Since feminists insist that so far patriarchal power has been all pervasive and dominant, there is no choice but to be pluralistic. There is no pure feminist or female space from which they can operate. "All ideas, including feminist ones, are in this sense 'contaminated' by patriarchal ideology" (Moi 205).

Therefore, the fact must be accepted that Mary Wollstonecraft got her inspiration from the male dominated ideas of the French Revolution. Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* under the influence of Sartre's phallogocentric categories. Similarly, John Stuart Mill's efforts to analyse women's oppression cannot be ignored simply because he was a male liberal. In this specific context, it becomes important that whether with appropriation or specific use of available material, feminist impact can be produced. As an example of this task of cultural transformation, Toril Moi points to the work of many women who are turning Freudian psychoanalysis into a source of feminist analysis of sexual

difference and the construction of gender in patriarchal society. Similarly, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have put the philosophy of Jacques Derrida to brilliant feminist use, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have recreated the literary theory of Harold Bloom.

If feminist criticism is a political discourse, the mere fact of being a female does not guarantee a feminist approach. In many works by women we find the precisely same patriarchal stereotyping which feminists strive to combat. Rosalind Coward discusses the existing confusion of 'feminist' with 'female'. In her essay, 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?', she writes, "It is just not possible to say that woman-centred writings have any necessary relationship to feminism." She argues that *The Mills and Boon* romantic novels are written by, read by, marketed for, and are all about women. Yet nothing could be further from the aims of feminism than these fantasies based on sexual, racial, and class submission which so frequently characterise these novels" (Coward 230). Therefore, it is a misconception that the very act of describing experience typical of woman's life is a feminist act. While it is a fact that patriarchy has always tried to silence and repress women and women's experience and rendering women visible is an important anti-patriarchal strategy, it can also lead to women made visible in "alienating, deluded or degrading ways."

Several feminist critics have written on male writers revealing their fundamental sexism. Kate Millett in her revolutionary work exposes the sexist bias of writers like Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, and D.H. Lawrence; Mary Ellmann discusses the sexism of male literary critics; and Penny Boumelha analyses the sexual ideology in the novels of Thomas Hardy. Now the question arises, if feminists do not have to write exclusively on female writers, then men too can be feminists. To this Toril Moi says, "Yes, men can be feminist -- but they can't be women, just as whites can be anti-racist, but not black. Under patriarchy men will always speak from a different position than women" (208). Therefore, Toril Moi rejects K.K. Ruthven's so-called neutrality in his *Feminist Literary Studies* (1984) as totally unconvincing.

The confusion of 'feminine' with 'female' ultimately leads to essentialism which in the end proves to be anti-feminist. 'Feminine' and 'masculine' represent social constructs -- patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms.

In this usage 'feminine' represents nurture and 'female' nature. Femininity, thus, is a social construct. As Simone de Beauvoir says, one isn't born a woman, one becomes one. Patriarchal oppression imposes certain social standards of femininity on all biological women in order to prove that these standards for 'femininity' are natural. Consequently, a woman who does not conform to the chosen standards is considered unfeminine and therefore unnatural. To make women believe that there is such a thing as essence of femaleness, called femininity, serves the interests of patriarchy. Therefore, it is essential to clear the confusion of female with femininity. Women are female but this does not essentially mean that they will be feminine.

The problem still remains to define femininity. Under patriarchy, a whole series of feminine characteristics such as sweetness, modesty, subservience, humility etc. have been developed. If feminists try to develop another set of feminine virtues, it would just become a part of the metaphysical binary oppositions Helene Cixous has rightly criticized. The French-Bulgarian linguist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's consideration of femininity as marginality offers a position and not a definition. She refuses to define 'femininity'. In Kristevan terms, it is simply that 'which is marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order.' This consideration of femininity in relational perspective is as shifting as the various forms of patriarchy itself. Therefore, she is able to argue further that men can also be constructed as marginalised to the symbolic order.

Cixous's deconstruction shows femininity as lack, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos, and darkness. Thus, woman becomes a non-Being. Kristeva's emphasis on marginality allows the repression of the feminine as a *position* and not the *essence*. This shift from essence to position, Toril Moi illustrates:

If patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position, within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the *limit* or border-line of that order. From a phallogocentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos, but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside. Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other words share in the deconstructing properties of *all* frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position which has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher and purer nature,

to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God. (*Sexual/Textual Politics*, 167)

This positional perspective on the meaning of femininity can be used to avoid the dangers of biologism; but, then, in deconstructing female out of experience, the very foundations of feminist struggle will disappear. Kristeva, in her article "Women's Time", advocates a deconstructive approach to sexual difference and argues for feminist struggle to be seen historically and politically as a three-tiered phenomenon: (1) women demand equal access to the symbolic order, considered Liberal feminism -- equality; (2) women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference, termed Radical feminism -- femininity extolled; (3) women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical.

The third position, as it challenges the very notion of identity in deconstructing the opposition between masculinity and femininity, is advocated by Kristeva: "In the third attitude, which I strongly advocate -- which I imagine? -- the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*. What can 'identity', even 'sexual identity', mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?" (33-4).

Toril Moi does not accept this third position in its entirety because with this one loses touch with the political reality of feminism. There is still need to claim women's place in human society as equals, not as subordinates, and to emphasise the difference between male and female experience of the world. But to remain faithful to the difference created by patriarchal structures is again playing the patriarchal game. Politically it is essential to defend women as women in order to counteract the patriarchal order that despises women as women. But, again, the risk of an inverted form of sexism remains, and therefore an adoption of Kristevan form radically transforms the awareness of the nature of the feminist struggle.

Feminist literary criticism can be considered, then, against this background. Toril Moi has divided the field of feminist criticism into two main categories: (1) female criticism, and (2) feminine theory. Female criticism *per se* means criticism which is some way focuses on women, and as such, it is not of much importance. One must analyse it in order to judge whether it is

feminist or not. Any apolitical study of women authors is not in itself feminist study. "It could very well just be an approach which reduces women to the status of interesting scientific objects on a par with insects or nuclear particles." (Moi 215). Nevertheless, in male dominated society an interest in women writers is significant as it aims to make women visible.

Feminine theory in its ultimate analysis would mean the construction of femininity. This theory is prone to the attacks of biologism and very often turns into theories of female essence. As such, it may not be feminist. Toril Moi finds the works of Sigmund Freud the best illustration of theory formation. Freudian theory, while in no way overtly feminist, offers a non-essentialist analysis of sexual difference. Creative transformation of psychoanalysis can effectively be used for formulating "a non essentialist theory of human sexuality and desire in order to understand the power relations between the sexes."

Elaine Showalter outlines a brief taxonomy, if not exactly a feminist poetics, of feminist criticism with the hope that it will serve as an introduction to a body of work which needs to be taken into account as a major contribution to English studies and also as a part of an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary effort to reconstruct the social, political, and cultural experience. She divides feminist criticism into two distinct varieties (Showalter 128). The first is *feminist critique* concerned with woman as reader -- woman as the consumer of male produced literature. It shows how the hypothesis of a female reader changes the meaning of a given text creating an awareness of its sexual codes. Feminist critique probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Its main concerns are the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions of and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male constructed literary history. Its subjects also include the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience, particularly in popular culture and film, and the analysis of woman-as-sign in semiotic systems. For the second type, Elaine Showalter adapts the French term *la gynocritique* and calls it *gynocritics*. This specialised discourse is concerned with woman as writer -- with woman as the producer of textual meaning, and with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women. The subjects also include: the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem

of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and studies of particular writers and works. Analysing the two types, Elaine Showalter finds that the feminist critique is essentially political and polemical, with theoretical affiliations to Marxist sociology and aesthetics. Gynocritics is more self-contained and experimental, with connections to other modes of new feminist research (Showalter 129). Commenting upon the two positions, Carolyn Heilburn and Catharine Stimpson compare the feminist critique to the Old Testament, "looking for the sins, and errors of the past," and gynocritics to the New Testament, seeking "the grace of imagination" (64). Both kinds are necessary for feminist vision.

Anglo-American and French feminist critics establish two schools of feminist literary criticism -- one empirical, pragmatic, and progressive; the other skeptical, idealistic, and radical. Both the schools today address themselves to the alternate perspective, as is evident from the works of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and their French aligned counterparts Mary Jacobus and Alice Jardine (Draine 148). In *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century: The War of the Words* (1988), the first book in their projected three volume opus, Gilbert and Gubar offer a history and also a theory of modernism. They also provide a theory of women's relation to language specifically refuting those of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Nancy Chodorow. Joanne S. Frye's *Living Stories: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience* (1986) assimilates the French concerns basing her feminist poetics in "dual recognition that experience cannot be absolutely separated from language but that language and experience are not fully coextensive either" (Frye 38). Similarly, Margaret Homans, in her *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth Century Women's Writing* (1986) summarises the French feminist position in the following words: "Language is not a neutral medium but rather ... its very construction is based on presuppositions about gender that devalue women: the speaking or writing subject is constitutively masculine while the silent object is feminine" (Homans xxii). Homans documents a history of collision in women's writing between, on the one hand, their urge of the purely literal which she equates with attachment to the mother, and, on the other hand, the limits that language and literary convention place on the literal which the male-oriented symbolic always tends to push toward the figura-

tive dimension.

In her readings of novels, journals, and letters by the nineteenth century women writers, Homans looks for instances of "bearing the word," her figure for a woman writer's invention, in language, of a sign for women's preference of the literal (maternal) over the figurative (paternal), Homans categorises these instances in this manner: (1) there are moments in a woman's text in which a figure is literalized, an evidence of the feminine pull away from the symbolic; (2) there are figures of the Virgin Mary, whose birth of a son who is the Word paradoxically recapitulates women's participation in the literal creation of flesh and shows their complicity in the passing on of symbolic language; (3) women characters as translators or message bearers express a woman writer's perception that women typically transmit the writings and speech of men rather than develop their own; (4) women's texts can stand in deference to male texts: the text may literalise an abstraction in a male-authored text, or translate it into new terms, or pass it on to the new generation. Betsy Draine comments that Homans does not find in these texts the evidence of the sign of woman's language in a sustained way. This is because, as for Irigaray, so for Homans, woman or feminine consciousness conceptualised by *l'écriture féminine* "does not exist yet" (165). In her review of recent feminist literary theory, Betsy Draine finds Jane Miller's *Women Writing about Men* (1986) a starting point "for an inscription of women's suppressed perceptions and desires" (169). Thus, various trends of feminist critical theory seem to be integrating, leading to clarity of thought with regard to woman's discourse.

In articulating feminist literary theory, clarity of thought regarding 'female', 'feminist', and 'feminine' as three categories is essential. The strength of feminist theory is its very openendedness, which has very often been mistaken for its weakness. It can use the existing critical theories and ideologies with advantage. Thus, it is pluralistic, and the term 'appropriation' is of special significance in the context. Anglo-American and French thinkers, initially conflicting groups, are now entering into open dialogue, accepting the alternative perspective to 'define' and articulate feminist literary theory, leading to a meaningful reading of the sign - reading of the text. This will lead to the deconstruction of the opposition between traditionally

'masculine' and traditionally 'feminine' values confronting the full political force and reality of such categories. As Toril Moi says, "we must aim for a society in which we have ceased to categorise logic, conceptualisation and rationality as 'masculine', not for one from which these virtues have been expelled altogether as 'unfeminine' " ("Feminist Literary Criticism", 220). Till then this decoding of the meaning of text must go on.

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HAMLET: A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION

Rangrao Bhongle

Hamlet is a favourite piece of Shakespearean writing among the English speaking people all over the world. It offers an interesting text to read for students, a large scope of scholarly pursuits for scholars and an enormous range of histrionic possibilities for actors. The Shakespearean tragedy stands upto every critical approach including the sociological one. To say that Shakespeare had no interest in sociological issues like the racial problems and the treatment of women in society is to deny him yet another equally important feather in his cap. *Othello* has been effectively interpreted as a tragedy of racial prejudices by critics like Edmund Wilson. Here is an attempt to interpret Hamlet's tragedy as powerful exercise of male chauvinism.

Shakespeare's treatment of women characters is an independent topic of discussion. While he has produced intelligent and quick-witted women characters like Beatrice and Viola, there are others like Ophelia, the obedient daughter of Polonius, and that indomitable Lady Macbeth-- ambitious, cruel and over-conscientious of her own acts. Gertude, the Queen in *Hamlet*, is another interesting character from various points of view. She is portrayed as a confused and helpless observer of the happenings around. She is charged of adultery by her own son, though the ghost of her husband bids her son to "leave her to heaven and to those thornes that in her bosom lodge." She is the cause of Hamlet's cry against the entire womankind--'frailty thy name is woman!' Is she really so obnoxious and abominable as her son describes her?; or is she a mere victim of Hamlet's perverted mentality?; what does Shakespeare intend her to be?; how did the Elizabethan audience look upon her?; and finally how did the following generations respond to the Queen in *Hamlet*? -- these are some of the questions considered in this essay.

Shakespeare certainly was a person who believed in the intellectual capacity of both sexes. He may not be a feminist as Shaw seems to be, but the range of female characters he produced presents women who are equal, even better in intellectual power than their male counterparts. But he lived in an age which, though enlightened in many aspects of the universe, was yet in an infant stage of civilization. The Elizabethan men might have high

regards for their queen, but they certainly did not treat their wives as equal. The ancient belief that girls should be guarded against the ill-influence of the world because they are more susceptible and vulnerable to evils than their brothers prevailed in the sixteenth century England. This is very much present in *Hamlet*. Polonius takes utmost care to keep his daughter away from Hamlet because she is young and immature, and is likely to be affected by Hamlet's vows, which, he thinks, are "mere implorators of unholy suits." Even Laertes thinks it proper to advise his young sister before he leaves for France. This is enough evidence to prove that women in the Elizabethan England did not have the privilege of being equal to men and that they were looked upon as frail and fickle-minded. The question whether Shakespeare had this social thought in mind or not when he wrote *Hamlet* is not important because he was working upon his theme within the existing social set-up. Though the story is said to have occurred in Denmark, it is set against the English background. Dover Wilson points out this in the course of his discussion on the state of Denmark:

Christian IV, the reigning king of Denmark in Shakespeare's days, no doubt held council meetings, but are we to suppose that an English dramatist and his audience under Queen Elizabeth troubled their heads about Danish usage? Is it not far more natural to assume that they translated the business into English terms and looked upon it as a meeting of Privy Council such as Queen Elizabeth constantly attended.

(*What Happens in 'Hamlet'*, Cambridge University Press, 1960, p.29).

There is no need, therefore, to regard the social customs observed in *Hamlet* necessarily as Danish; they are basically English. The English customs regarding women were no better than what prevailed elsewhere in the world-- man's unquestioned intrinsic superiority. Shakespeare himself admitted this in *The Taming of the Shrew* where he makes Katherina advise her daughter:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper
Thy head, thy sovereign.

Shakespeare, of course, did not form theories about his view of women, or their place in society. He tacitly accepted the conservative idea of hierarchy in nature with man at the top and woman second. In doing so he has been harsh and unfair to certain women

characters, particularly so to the Queen in *Hamlet*. It is assumed that the entire tragedy of Hamlet is an outcome of the sin of adultery she commits, and of her hasty marriage with her dead husband's brother. We are not told about the nature of relationship between the Queen and her former husband except through the ghost's mouth. And there are, of course, Hamlet's remarks in the first soliloquy:

She would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on.

This is not enough because that does not offer a necessary defence against the charges levelled against the Queen. She is described as 'an adulteress,' 'a whore,' 'a frail, fickle-minded woman' and as cruel as Lady Macbeth who is ready to 'pluck' her 'nipple' from the boneless gums of an infant that feeds on her breasts and dash the brain out because the Queen in *Hamlet* has deprived her son of his rightful throne. But if we see her carefully and listen to her dialogues, she looks quite innocent and ignorant of everything that takes place. She fails to understand why Hamlet should make such a hue and cry over the death of his father and her own marriage with Claudius. She is ignorant of the murder of the King and thinks of it as natural death. When Claudius is alarmed by sudden transformation of Hamlet, she relates it innocently to "His father's death and our overhasty marriage." It is possible that she might have been purposely kept in darkness about the plan of murder. This is the reason why she is not affected at all by the Gonzago-play, whereas Claudius is terrified at the sight of murder in it. Her question -- 'how fares my lord' speaks, again, of her innocence than of anything else. According to English custom, brothers do not succeed brothers' throne; it comes to the son, if there is one. But Shakespeare took care to follow the Danish custom so that the State of Denmark should appear Danish. Denmark was an elective monarchy in Shakespeare's time. Hamlet's own words reveal the fact when he utters his last words before his death:

But I do prophesy the election lights
On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice.

So, Hamlet cannot have legal grievances against his uncle. This is what, at least, the Queen thinks, though Hamlet thinks otherwise.

Had Gertrude committed adultery while Hamlet's father was alive? Bradley, in his famous discourse on Shakespearean tragedy, finds in the words of the ghost (I,V,41) a clear suggestion of the Queen's dishonesty with Hamlet's father and also finds her totally ignorant of the murder. Her passionate exclamation at the mention of the King's murder

What have I done that thou wag thy tongue
In noise so rude against me?

in the bedroom scene cannot simply be an expression of a woman's ignorance about her husband's murder. It can very well be a manifestation of her moral spirit. No woman, guilty of debauchery, can put such a pertinent question --- "what have I done?" Bradley's interpretation of the ghost's words, therefore, is mistaken. The ghost utters such words as 'lewdness', 'lust', 'incest', etc. They refer not to the past liason between Gertrude and Claudius but to the present state of affairs when the couple is satiating itself 'in a celestial bed'. The King's spirit, naturally, is bitter because he was murdered and the throne of Denmark was illegally snatched away from him.

Why, then, Hamlet is so deeply disturbed as if heavens have collapsed? Yes, heavens have, indeed, collapsed for him. Besides losing his dear father, he has also lost the throne. Claudius is shrewd enough to know Hamlet's popularity and the mass-psychology to elect the one who is a natural heir to the throne. So, he does not wait till Hamlet returns to attend his father's funeral, and grabs the throne. Hamlet's ambition is foiled. Hamlet's thwarted ambition becomes quite obvious in his talk with his schoolmates-- Guildenstern and Rosencrantz who are now deputed by the King to spy on him. On being asked what is the cause of his distemper, Hamlet replies: "I lack advancement." He certainly does not mean 'advancement' in love because Ophelia has defied his approaches and returned his letters. Polonius may think it so ; but Claudius, the spectators and the readers of the play do not. Hamlet's deep melancholy is the result of his thwarted ambition, and not only of his father's death. The scholar who tells Horatio that "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in philosophy" should also know that fathers do not live for ever and should have been able to overcome his grief. The grief, on the contrary, has insinuated itself into pangs of insult and finally into madness. Though Hamlet feigns madness at times, he certainly

gets attack of insanity, particularly when he is alone with women characters in the play. He is not less uncivilized with Ophelia than he is with his mother. He lies down at Ophelia's feet before the Gonzago-play begins and his conversation with her is almost lewd:

Hamlet Do you think I meant country matters?

Ophelia I think nothing, my lord.

Hamlet That's a fair thought to lie between a maid's legs.

Ophelia What is, my lord.

Hamlet Nothing.

In the nunnery scene (Act III), he asks the poor girl to join nunnery which, during the Elizabethan period, was an euphemism for a whore-house. Hamlet's behaviour with his mother is not only uncivilized but also disrespectful. Respect for the tragic hero is an important ingredient of tragedy and *Hamlet* is universally acknowledged as one of the great tragedies of the world. But the critics, I fear, have never looked upon the hero's behaviour with women as a quintessence of the assertion of male chauvinism. They have all taken for granted Gertrude's sin as the origin of her son's tragedy. In fact, Gertrude is as innocent as Ophelia is. She is a victim first of Claudius's crafty manoeuvrings, then of the sinister ghost of the former King's restless spirit, and finally of Hamlet's perverted mentality-- all together forming the male-presumption of the unquestioned submission of the opposite sex. Why should Gertrude be dishonest with Hamlet's father? In the context of the play, I find no reason except a far-fetched one-- the dead King's sexual perversion which his son has inherited. If that is true, Gertrude is not to be blamed at all. The blame goes to Hamlet's father, whose ghost, out of penitential feelings, warns Hamlet to leave his mother out of his scheme of revenge. Gertrude's only fault is her agreement with Claudius's proposal of hasty marriage. But here she becomes a helpless victim of the conspiracy worked out by Claudius and Polonius. Our sympathy should flow out towards the Queen as it does in the case of Ophelia.

How is, then, Hamlet's tragedy to be considered? Are his tragic potentialities to be denied? Hamlet is a prince, a scholar

and a skilful fencer who easily outdoes Laertes in the bout, He is an amiable person before the attacks of insanity. Ophelia tells us that he has a noble mind of courtier, soldier and scholar 'which is now overthrown.' So, he possesses one of the classical norms of the tragic hero. But Hamlet has a natural inclination towards tragedy. He takes delight not in the pleasures of the universe, but in its tragic aspects. On being asked about the sort of players that are in the city, Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that they are the tragedians in whom the latter took delight when they were together in school. This tendency develops into a melancholic state of mind, and then turns into morbidity which is close to madness. Hamlet is not very strong physically. His constitution is rather weak. While comparing uncle Claudius with his father, he speaks of himself:

My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules.

Hamlet's morbid mentality becomes worse in his physically weak constitution. It develops into hysteria. It is in this hysterical state of mind that he abuses his mother and speaks ill of the entire female race -- 'frailty thy name is woman,' or the play being 'as brief as woman's love.' Ernest Jones's interpretation of Hamlet's tragedy as Oedipus complex is wrong because Hamlet lacks manly approach toward women. Therefore, it is unlikely that he has developed phallic disturbances after his mother's marriage with his uncle. Hamlet's tragedy remains, thus, a merely personal anguish resulting out of the innate morbid melancholy which he seems to have inherited from his father. The Queen in *Hamlet*, thus, receives unfair treatment as a character in the play. Shakespeare does not seem to be very certain about her role in the course of action. This uncertainty on the part of the playwright continues to be with the Shakespearean critics as well.

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SHELLEY'S BEATRICE CENCI: FEMINITY AND FEMINISM

O.P. Mathur

Robin Morgan wrote in words glowing with resentment, pity and humanism:

There's something every woman bears around her neck on a thin chain of fear -- an amulet of madness. For each of us, there exists somewhere a moment of insult so intense that she will reach up and rip the amulet off even if the chain tears at the flesh of her neck....

We are rising: powerful in our unclean bodies; bright glowing mad in our inferior brains: wild hair flying, wild eyes staring, wild voices keening:... stuffing fingers into our mouths to stop the screams of fear and hate and pity for men we have loved and love still....¹

These words, fierce both in hatred and in love, express the depth, complexity and multiplicity of feminism. Perhaps it can be said that there is no feminism: there are only feminisms, ranging from the purely rebellious stance of the shrieking, bra-burning type to the more balanced multivalent "womanist" and 'humanist', even "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female,"² embodying what Elizabeth Young-Bruehl calls "conversation,"³ "bringing to consciousness facets of our [i.e. women's] experience as women that have hitherto escaped attention...."⁴ It would appear that the increasing range of our reading about Feminism is a sort of journey from a layman's simplistic understanding to a philosopher-critic's theoretical configurations, pluralistic and not isolated, in their everwidening horizons of rationality. The norms of Feminist criticism are still more elusive and its estrocentrism may have to yield to a compromise with androcentrism, thereby tending to revert to the humanistic hermaphroditism of literary creative writing and criticism at its best. Male writers have empathised fully with their female creations and vice versa. There has never been a purely androcentric criticism. The codes of Feminism and Feminist criticism are therefore not easy to finalize: they appear to be only a small sub-division of the larger social and political Feminist movement. Unlike politics, literature has at its core tolerance, understanding and sympathy deepening into empathy.

No woman, or man either, can walk save upon her or his own shadow, and any brand of feminism which denies the woman's

essential femininity, thereby making her an Amazonian oddity is as much of an aberration as an effeminate "male." Yet feminism provides a new approach to the understanding and interpretation of the great literary works of the past and the present. Many of the most memorable women characters like the Wife of Bath, Rosalind and Tess, to mention just a few, have been the creations of masculine imagination. One of such characters is Shelley's Beatrice Cenci.

Shelley himself had tasted parental tyranny,⁵ which must have given a sharper edge to the depiction of Beatrice's rebellious stance. In fact, Shelley's love of liberty and equality for all and his refusal to bow before any authority, including religious, not supported by reason, permeates the whole of his poetry. In his poetry he places all mankind, men and women alike, on an equal pedestal and the whole of his poetry is suffused with his enthusiastic acceptance of woman as comrade, friend and lover, and even as mother (as of Mother Earth of *Prometheus Unbound*), position which do not recognise any superiority of men or inferiority of women. What perhaps is of greater significance is that his women, in his lyrical, narrative or dramatic poetry, victims or redeemers, are almost all paragons of beauty, virtue and courage. Even objects of nature, when they assume a female symbolic form, seem to fall into this pattern. It may be the nightingale, "love's gentle Dryad," expelled from the haunts of life, or the west wind, not the victim but the redeemer of mankind through her instruments of fierce destruction, or the blithe skylark submerging the universe with a "clear, keen joyance," or the lady of *The Sensitive Plant* whose death results in the fading away of the garden. Shelley not only idealizes his women characters, real, imagined or symbolic, but he also wishes to inculcate from them certain qualities and become one with them-- "Be thou me" The Feminine Principle, often embodied in Liberty, Equality, Creativity and Joy, seems to have been at the root of his inspiration in many of his lyrical and narrative poems and major dramatic pieces.

A look at some of his poems can make this suggestion more explicit. Even an early poem like *Queen Mab* has clear hints about Shelley's dislike of male tyranny and his Utopian view of a life of harmonious domestic equality. In his note on the line "Even love is sold" (V. 189), Shelley asserts, "Not even the intercourse

of the sexes is exempt from the despotism of positive institution.... Love withers under constraint: its very essence is liberty, it is compatible neither with obedience, jealousy, nor fear: it is there most pure, perfect and unlimited, where its votaries live in confidence, equality and unreserve."⁶ He renders the same idea poetically in the poem:

Woman and man, in confidence and love,
Equal and free and pure together trod
The mountain paths of virtue, which no more
Were stained with blood from many a pilgrim's feet. (IX. 89-92)

The basic teaching of *The Revolt of Islam* too seem to be "the sole law which," as Shelley says at the end of his Preface to the poem, "governs the moral word." But this love implies the equality of sexes. The poet condemns man's tyranny over woman: "Woman! she is his slave, she has become/ A thing I weep to speak--the child of scorn/ The outcast of a desolate home." (Canto VIII, St. XV, 3325-27).

As Carlos Baker points out,⁷ Cýthna's main prototype is the mother of his second wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and might have been an inspiration behind lines like the following, spoken by Cythna:

Can man be free if woman be a slave?
Chain one who lives, and breaths this boundless air,
To the corruption of a closed grave! (II, XLIII 1045-47)

She is greeted by some in the golden city as "the child of God, sent down to save/Women from bonds of death" (lines 3538-39).

Cythna is an abstract being, but Shelley has portrayed a realistic victim of male tyranny in *Rosalind and Helen* which presents the contrasted situations of two women. Prohibited from marrying her true lover, who is revealed to be her step-brother, Rosalind is forced to marry another man who turns out to be a sort of ogre, "a man/Hard, selfish, loving only gold/Yet full of guile" (lines 248-50), an object of so much hatred of Rosalind as well as of their children that on his death they are all happy, the children laughing aloud in "frantic glee," clapping their hands and leaping about (l. 234), and Rosalind sitting tearlessly with a heart which could not quell her secret joy (lines 242-43). The man was so much bent upon making a hell of Rosalind's life that in his will he called her an adulteress and an anti-Christian, and hence unfit to be

the guardian of his children, thereby making her leave them and to become a homeless wanderer. Rosalind as a guiltless sufferer at the hands of a man is fertile ground for a modern feminist rebel, but *Rosalind and Helen* is an early work of Shelley and he was to make his heroine graduate towards positive action only in *The Cenci*.

Shelley wrote a number of such poems suggesting or directly depicting the conditions of contemporary England. Baker rightly points out "Malicious intrigue, abuse of power, cruelty, betrayal, false witness, corruption, madness, lust, avarice, and murder: these were the letters upon the calendar of history as Shelley viewed it, and he was to discover further corroboration of his views in the state of England during the years 1819-1820, even to the extent of implying an ominous parallel between nineteenth-century England and sixteenth-century Italy."⁸ Individual liberty trampled upon by ecclesiastical and secular powers of the Pope, combined with extreme paternal tyranny found for him a multiple objective correlative in Guido's picture of Beatrice as a beautiful and innocent girl, whose portrait he saw in Casa Cenci and which inspired him to depict her suffering through the powerful visual medium of drama. In his 'Dedication' of the play to Leigh Hunt, Shelley refers to Hunt's "patient and irreconcilable enmity with domestic and political tyranny and imposture." Beatrice undergoes the unspeakable torment of incest perpetrated by her father. Christine Froula in her essay "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History" has approvingly referred to Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman's model of the family situations of incest victims: "a dominating authoritarian father, an absent, ill or complicationous mother, and a daughter who, prohibited by her father from speaking about the abuse, is unable to sort out her contradictory feelings of love for her father and terror for him, of desire to end the abuse and fear that if she speaks she will destroy the family structure that is her only security."⁹

Such a pattern might be applicable to the classical works, discussed by Christine Froula, but Shelley's *The Cenci* does not quite fit into it. In it the idea of the destruction of "the family structure" is emphasised and supplemented by the physical and spiritual torments undergone by the victim. Beatrice herself does not fit into any of the traditional moulds like that of the classical Procne (confused by later writers with her sister Philomela) and

her tongueless vigil. She is a heroine *sui generis*, "one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without destroying one another,"¹⁰ as Shelley said in his Preface to the play.

The unenviable situation in which she is placed is almost an archetypal one for an oppressed woman--a beautiful young girl, motherless (though having a loving step-mother, herself standing in awe of her husband), weak brothers, no sister to confide her sorrows in, and a powerful old, greedy, murderous, evil-minded and unscrupulous father Count Cenci who is like a cruel and heartless jailer of that huge castle of which he is the master. He brooks no opposition and goes to any extent, even murder, to silence all those who happen to cross his path and then wins his pardon by bribing the Pope. The situation reminds us of the imprisoned princesses of the fairy tales of the past and of Sita of the *Ramayana* imprisoned in Ashok Vatika by the demon Ravana. Beatrice, a young girl with a "milky meek face" (The Cenci II. i. 122) a "weak and deserted creature" (I.ii.45) can only regret her fate: "Ah, wretched that I am!/Where shall I turn?" (I. ii. 29-30), and when her own father decides to punish and subdue her by assaulting her chastity, she is on the verge of losing her sanity:

My God !

The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!
The sunshine on the floor is black ! The air
Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe
In charnel pits....

My God ! I never knew what the mad felt
Before; for I am mad beyond all doubt.

(III.i. 12-25)

After passing through various states of traumatic experience, Beatrice begins to doubt her own identity: "O God ! what thing am I" (III.i. 37). Her brother Giacomo is able to delineate Beatrice's feminine sensibility more objectively:

Beatrice,
Who in the gentleness of thy sweet youth
Hast never trodden on a worm, or bruised
A living flower, but thou hast pitied it
With needless tears! Fair sister, thou in whom
Men wondered how such loveliness and wisdom
Did not destroy each other ! Is there made
Ravage of thee?

(III,i. 365-72)

Beatrice's essentially feminine consciousness is the warp and woof of the poetry of these scenes of the play. But she is not made

to forget the wrong done to her or to continue suffering it silently or to die at her own hands, as many women would have done. She seeks revenge and that too after carefully planning it. It is here that she transcends mere feminity into feminism and reveals her hidden potentialities. Combining courage with intelligence, she plans a terrible revenge. From now onwards she is in full command of the situation. Even earlier when Count Cenci had given a feast to celebrate the death of his two sons, Beatrice displays her courage, and asking for shelter from the celebrities present there, "Fair and yet terrible," as Count Cenci calls her (I.iii. 166), she gives a spirited reply to his father asking him to leave the hall:

Retire thou, impious man ! Aye hide thyself
Where never eye can look upon thee more !
Wouldst thou have honour and obedience
Who art a torturer

(I.iii. 146-49)

Now, after the assault on her honour, she carefully assesses the situation, assumes the role of a judge and with her subtle mind, "her awe-inspiring gaze" (I.ii. 84), she penetrates into men's minds and motives, discovering the "sly, equivocating vein" (I. ii. 28) even in Orsino. She moulds every one-- her lover Orsino, her step-mother Lucretia, her brother Giacomo, the hired murderers Olimpio and Marzio-- to her will and sees that her father pays with his life for his unnatural assault on her.

But Beatrice becomes a victim of destiny also, and she and all others are arrested for the murder of Count Cenci. Beatrice emphatically asserts what has been called her "paradoxical innocence."¹¹ Beatrice and her lie can be both condemned and sympathetically understood. But perhaps she could have as well spoken the truth, defended her action and bravely bore the punishment. This would have been more like a modern feminist. Her lie, however, does not arise from cowardice: its springs are much deeper. At the outset, it must be realized that she was fighting not only for her own life but also for the lives of many others, including her loving step-mother and brother, and she sacrifices her truthfulness for the sake of others. This reminds us of our own scriptures in which even Yudhishter, the lord of truth, had to utter a suggestive lie and many other Pandava warriors and even Lord Krishna Himself had, at one time or the other, to stoop to dubious means to win the war for truth and justice. Beatrice's lie can thus be interpreted as an attempt by Truth to triumph over

Evil, even if it has to deviate from the straight path, and it is an evidence of the strength of the highest sacrifice-- the sacrifice of one's soul to save the lives of others, a sacrifice which perhaps really saves the soul.

The problem of Beatrice's lie can be approached in other ways too. It has been argued that she was indeed innocent of parricide. No father would do what Count Cenci did, and so the man whose murder she planned was not her father: she is practically fatherless and hence is guiltless of parricide:

Guilty ! who dares talk of guilt ? My lord,
I am more innocent of parricide
Than is a child born fatherless. (IV.iv. 111-13)

There is a higher law than the human which would pronounce her innocent, and she thinks that she is governed by that law. In fact, she is the agent of divine justice:

God is there
As here, and with His shadow ever clothes
The innocent, the injured and the weak;
As such are we (IV.iv. 160-63)

Camillo pledges his soul "that she is guiltless" (V. ii. 61-62). As Giacomo remarks, she is only "avenging such a nameless wrong/As turns black parricide to piety." (v.i. 44-45) The assassin Marzio too cannot face her and realizing the higher truth declares, "She is most innocent." (v.ii. 165). Beatrice's delicate sensibility too leaves hardly any choice for her. If she confesses her guilt, she will have to defend herself by naming the wrong done to her, and she finds herself unable to do so, "which never shall be done." (III.i. 69). The utmost she can say is:

Or wilt thou rather tax high-judging God
That He permitted such an act as that
Which I have suffered, and which He beheld;
Made it unutterable, and took from it
All refuge, all revenge, all consequence,
But that which thou hast called my father's death?
Which is not what men call a crime.
Which either I have done, or have not done,
Say what ye will. (V.iii. 78-86)

Her "pangs are of the mind, and of the heart,/ and of the soul" (V, iii. 65-66), and her nature refuses to translate them into gross human speech. Like her Creator Himself, she inhabits a world of higher morality and finer sensitivity which cannot be plumbed by

the world's coarse thumb, least of all by the cruel and corrupt ecclesiastical courts and the Pope who cavalierly rejects the petition made on her behalf. Beatrice's lie, therefore, crystallises both her spiritual strength and womanly weakness, her feminism and femininity:

My god! Can it be possible I have
To die so suddenly ? So young to go
Under the obscure, cold, rotting, wormy ground !
To be nailed down into a narrow place,
To see no more sweet sunshine, hear no more
Blithe voice of living thing...or to be...
What ? Oh, where am I?

(V.iv. 48-58)

Like Hamlet, she is also afraid of what may befall her hereafter whether her afterlife will be pervaded by the spirit of her father:

Even the form which tortured me on earth
Mastered in gray hairs and wrinkles, he should come
And wind me in his hellish arms, and fix
His eyes on mine, and drag me down, down, down !

(V. iv. 64-67)

But soon she begins to rationalise her situation and view it more objectively:

How tedious, false and cold seem all things, I
Have met with much injustice in this world,
No difference has been made by God or man...
I am cut off from the only world I know,
From light, and life, and love, in youth's sweet prime,

(V.iv. 80-84)

She soon regains her faith in God and in

that I,
Though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and shame,
Lived ever holy and unstained,

(V.iv, 147-49)

Her fear and pain "Being subdued" (V.iv. 155-56), she fully becomes normal and strong again. As a true feminist humanist, her love for all mankind, friend or foe, living or dead, blossoms forth once again and she tells her step-mother:

never think a thought unkind
Of those who perhaps love thee in their graves
So mayest thou die as I do

(V, iv. 153-55)

The moment of her death becomes just like any other moment of her life and her last words to Lucretia clinch her femininity,

strength, love and acceptance of both life and death in a way that produces pathos, affirmation and exaltation at the fate of this brave and yet tender rebel against masculine tyranny:

Here, Mother, tie
My girdle for me, and bind up this hair
In any simple knot; ay, that does well.
And yours I see is coming down. How often
Have we done this for one another: now
We shall not do it any more. My Lord,
We are quite ready. Well, 't is very well.

(V.iv. 159-65).

Though Beatrice may not have expressed her rebellious stance as strongly in words as is done by modern feminists like Robin Morgan quoted in the beginning of this paper, her actions are no less bold and emphatic, though they run parallel to her quivering feminine sensibility. Heroic rebellion and loving tenderness co-exist in her and make her a remarkable predecessor of the feminist protagonists of the twentieth century, perhaps an anticipatory illustration of "the feminist postmodernists' plea for tolerance of multiple perspectives ... altogether at odds with feminists' desire to develop a successive science that can refute once and for all the distortions of androcentrism."¹² By the end Beatrice acquires the grace and dignity of universal love, acceptance and affirmation, almost becoming, in Goethe's words in the concluding lines of his *Faust*, the eternal feminine that draws us upwards.

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A FEMINIST VOICE: JUDITH WRIGHT

A.N. Dwivedi

In the contemporary Australian literary scenario, Judith Wright occupies a prominent position as a poet of talent and artistry who can be compared only with the best of the poets of her country, such as Christopher Brennan, David Campbell, R.D. Fitzgerald, A.D. Hope, James Mckenzie, and Douglas Stewart. It would be no exaggeration to state that in points of popularity and feminist sensitivity she is not second to anyone of her compatriots. In the international context, she may be suitably placed beside the two famous American poetesses, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, and the two well-known Indian poetesses, Kamala Das and Gauri Deshpande. Combinedly, they forcefully articulate certain besetting problems and difficulties facing the feminine world in a male-dominated society. They come out boldly with their ideas and attitudes against the established norms and tortuous conventions in a society upholding the male cause and values. Of these poetesses; Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are much more vociferous in voicing their fears and concerns about the fate of womankind in an uncongenial surrounding; Sylvia Plath seems to have suffered a good deal from the Electra complex and from the resultant estranged relationship with her poet-husband, Ted Hughes; and Judith Wright and Gauri Deshpande (in a lesser degree) look to be contented with their marital status and are therefore less wild and challenging in their tone and temper.

As regards Judith Wright, she has been considered as a sober woman well-trained in poetics and conscious of her own purpose and requirements and of her responsibility towards womankind and society. Some scholars have admired her for her well-pronounced Australian consciousness, while others for her treatment of a wide variety of themes, including those of love, sex and marriage, and for her astute craftsmanship. Syed Amanuddin, for one, noticed the following distinctive attributes in her poetic personality: "Her wide humanity, her exploration of the feminine sensibility, and her superb control of diction, form and image, make her stand apart from many poets of the English language."² But barring the 'exploration of the feminist sensibility' with which I am concerned here

in this paper, other attributes of her artistic personality will not be considered. Mrs. Wright is well-known for her forceful feminist voice in the golden realm of letters, and we shall consider her here as such.

For one thing, Judith Wright attached considerable importance to her being "a woman writer" out to find her own way and to "shake off male and overseas influences."³ But though she has been a feminist in her writings, and an independent one in holding aloft the banner of women's cause, she has not thought it necessary to rise in rebellion against the males in general and her husband in particular, as Kamala Das does in her poetry and prose. Nor does she visualise to establish a women's Academy (solely governed and attended by women) with a rebellious intellectual princess at the head of it, as Lord Tennyson depicts in *The Princess* (1847), where a clear-cut line of demarcation is drawn between Man and Woman:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
 Man for the sword and for the needle she:
 Man to command and woman to obey:
 All else confusion.⁴

This might have suited the Victorian age of compromise and priggishness-- the age which did not think it proper to grant franchise and equality to womankind--, but the modern times will hardly approve of it. To such an attitude the pert reply comes from the Indian poetess, Kamala Das, who rebelliously proclaims thus:

I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon
 You built around me with morning tea,
 Love-words flung from doorways and of course
 Your tired lust. I shall someday take
 Wings, fly around....⁵

Judith's attitude towards man-woman relationship cannot be so mutinous and dashing. In her calm, quiet way, she can say at the most this:

· Sunk in his brittle prison-cell of mud
 the god who once chose to become a man
 is now a man who must become a god.⁶

Judith also protests against what man has become, against what man has made of man and especially of woman, in the present-day materialistic world, but her protest is lodged in a nobler and soberer way. Women's 'lib' movement is alright so far as it

raises its forceful voice against the rotten age-old customs and conventions binding their feet for no valid reasons, or it demands certain facilities and civil liberties and certain welfare schemes for them, but it *must* know where it has to halt and its propaganda against the males (who may be cruel and unsympathetic towards them) must terminate at a certain valid point. The fear is: such a propaganda may lead them to a hatred of mankind-- not a happy outcome of all their movement-- and ultimately to self-centredness and masochism. In the above-quoted excerpt, Judith is definitely against the bestiality, earthliness and selfishness of the males, but she expresses her feelings and thoughts on this issue in a dignified and disciplined manner. She clarifies her position in an unambiguous fashion in one of her replies to the Questionnaire of Syed Amanuddin:

I suppose my personal experience has a lot to do with the fact that I have seldom felt 'dominated' by a male-oriented society. I have been lucky in my relationships with men, especially with my husband with whom I worked in a kind of intellectual symbiosis. So, there has been no real need for me to rebel against male values but I certainly do sympathise with much of the 'women's movement' and see plenty of need for it. It just hasn't touched me as a personal issue, that's all.⁷

This self-explanatory statement evidently points to the place where Judith stands as a woman and as a writer. She clearly treads the middle-path, full of decorum and decency. The reader needs to be reminded of what happened to the plans of the Princess in Lord Tennyson's famous poem. They ended in a fiasco, and the Academy run by the Princess was abandoned, and she eventually married the hero whom she had despised earlier.

Love, sex and marriage are surely the primary needs of the human race, and the women writers often treat of these themes with a sense of ease and confidence. As contrasted to the tense and troubled love of some women writers, we have the soft and satisfied sort of love in Mrs. Wright. Take the latter's poem "Woman to Man" as an illustration of it:

This is the strength that your arm knows,
the arc of flesh that is my breast,
the precise crystals of our eyes.
This is the blood's wild tree that grows
the intricate and folded rose.⁸

This highly poetic passage abounding in arresting images and symbols (e.g., 'arc of flesh', 'precise crystals of our eyes', 'the

blood's wild tree', and 'the intricate and folded rose') points unquestionably to a harmonious and tension-free relationship between man and woman. This kind of relationship has the power to transcend the barriers of flesh and passion; it tends to confirm that love and marriage are a sanctimonious thing and not merely a social or legal contract between a man and a woman. Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1922) laments the erosion of moral and spiritual values in modern man, especially in the sphere of love-making. In the second Section of the poem, "The Game of Chess", Bianca is being seduced by the Duke while her mother-in-law's attention is diverted by a game of chess -- a situation reminding us of the pitiable rape of Philomel by her brother-in-law. Such sordid scenes of sterile love are re-enacted by the typist and the clerk in the furnished room and by the low level of conversation among the pub-women. In a state of exasperation, the persona asks the question: "What you get married for if you don't want children?"⁹ Eliot does make a point here-- that one gets into wedlock for the sake of children to perpetrate the human race. A little onward in the fifth Section of that poem, he asserts: "By this, and this only, we have existed."¹⁰ And Judith Wright in her poem "Woman to Man" is also of the same opinion. The above-quoted passage by her underlines the necessity of procreation-- that is how Nature works and that is how the human world goes on.

Procreation constitutes the core of love and sex between males and females; it also forms the basis of a happy family life and society. Judith's poem "Ishtar" articulates this very idea in a logical and convincing way. Here, woman is presented as a votary of Ishtar who fully knows the truth of the body but who can't read her thoughts or hopes. She is actually an inseparable part of the entire procreative system-- of child-birth and of continuity of life. Judith expresses the hopes and fears of a mother in the following extract:

When I in fear became a woman
 I first felt your hand.
 When the shadow of the future first fell across me
 it was your shadow, my grave and hooded attendant.

(*Collected poems*, p. 103)

The epigraph prefixed to the poetical collection, *Woman to Man* (1949), partly runs thus: "Love was the most ancient of all the gods, and existed before everything else, except Chaos, which is

held coeval therewith....(*Collected Poems*, p. 27). Love is certainly as old as the history of the universe, but as compared to the animal love, human beings put it to a better use by rendering it purpose-oriented or creation-oriented.

Viewed in this light, two of the loveliest songs by Mrs. Wright are: "Woman's Song" and "Woman to Child", where the poetess is least bothered about the equality of man and woman, but where she seems to maintain the view that woman is a superior partner in the drama of love and sex. According to her, man is 'a helpless victim of desire; whereas woman is the controller of his desire and the recipient of his seed. The following stanzas from "Woman's Song" betray her exultation and sense of pride over becoming a mother:

O move in me, my darling,
for now the sun must rise;
the sun that will draw open
the lids upon your eyes.
O wake in me, my darling.
The knife of day is bright
to cut the thread that binds you
within the flesh of night.

(*Collected Poems*, pp. 29-30)

Motherhood and child-bearing are the prerogatives of woman-kind. They offer a sense of fulfilment and contentment-- that she is the mother of man. In the role of mother, woman is not different from the earth (which also produces all kinds of trees, fruits, flowers, grains, etc.). The fourth and last stanza of "Woman to Child" highlights this truth:

I wither and you break from me;
yet though you dance in living light
I am the earth, I am the root,
I am the stem that fed the fruit,
the link that joins you to the night.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 31)

Mrs. Wright has very graphically portrayed here the mother's role in child-bearing. There is a sense of joy and exultation in her. She is the subsequent feeder to the child and forms a solid link with it. How soft and sweet, how womanly, is Mrs. Wright here!

In some other poems, too, Judith exults in tracing the tender,

loving relationship between the mother and her child. Thus, the poem "The World and the Child" describes the painful birth of a child at a time when the mother is crying out for life in her labour throes. But her unavoidable grief is an unshakable companion to child-birth. Nature has ordained it so, and without the necessary pain the child can't be procured. Hence, the child is advised:

Do not weaken for their grief; do not give in or pardon.
Only through this pain, this black desire, this anger,
Shall you at last return to your lost garden.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 39)

Later when the child grows up, it weaves a net of illusions and shadows and attempts 'to hold the world', but that is not within its power. In "The Unborn", the careful mother waits anxiously for the moment of the child's arrival in this world:

Neither awake nor asleep
on the rack of dark I lie,
hearing my own not-voice.
"What was I? I? I?"

(*Ibid.*, p. 51)

Only a woman having conceived and given birth to a child can fully understand the psychological anxiety and tension of her kind. Another poem, "Night and the Child", underlines the prevalence of darkness ('the black sea' is the phrase used herein) out of which a child is born (*Ibid.*, p. 64). Obviously, the poems mentioned above tend to highlight the softest and sweetest relations between the mother and her child. Mrs. Wright values this relationship very much and airs out her views and feelings about it time and again, particularly in the poetical volume *Woman to Man* (1949).

Feminine sensibility comes out at its best in the writings of perceptive women gifted with a fertile imagination. Such women writers are very convincing when they write about certain purely feminine subjects like menstruation, motherhood, child-bearing and child-rearing, and occasionally abortion. So is Judith Wright when she jots down in "Woman to Child", which partly runs as under:

You who were darkness warmed my flesh
Where out of darkness rose the seed.
Then all a world I made in me;

all the world you hear and see
hung upon my dreaming blood.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 30)

A child evidently springs out of 'darkness' into the world of light, and the mother's mysterious womb signals this 'darkness'. The symbol of 'darkness' signifying the mother's womb has been employed by Mrs. Wright in many of her poems. As we all know, the child is the creation of mother's 'flesh' or still better 'ovum' and father's 'seed'. The mother's 'blood' particularly lends shape, size and strength to the foetus in her womb. In "Woman to Child" the mother imagines herself as the 'well' containing the maternal waters of procreation. Another significant symbol used by Mrs. Wright in her verse, and it is related to the 'well' by all means, is that of the 'earth', which she has a fondness to use in many a poem of hers. T.S. Eliot employs the symbols of 'the pool' and 'the lotus' in his poetry (especially in "Burnt Norton") to denote the procreative involvements of the two opposite sexes. The noted Indian English poet, A.K.Ramanujan, in his poem "Elements of Composition," pertinently refers to "father's seed and mother's egg," which go into the making of a child. The fourth and last stanza of this very poem compares the poet-persona to 'the earth,' a powerful source of reproduction beyond a shadow of doubt. Elsewhere Mrs. Wright writes as follows:

I hold the crimson fruit
and plumage of the palm;
flame-tree, that scarlet spirit,
in my soil takes root.

("The Maker", *Collected Poems*, p. 32)

The above-quoted poetic passage emphasises the creative purpose or reproductive role of a fertile woman. Fertility is certainly a strong weapon with womankind, and Mrs. Wright takes pride in it. She has written more poems on this procreative strength of women than on any other aspect of feminine sensitivity. A woman is not merely an object of entertainment or pleasure as many men may think of her; she is rather an embodiment of love leading to the propagation of the humanity. Without her, this process will run into a rough weather and the procreation will cease altogether. It is through this power that a woman can wield profound charm over her man, life, and even nature. In her procreative role, according to

Mrs. Wright, she is even superior to man (who is just a helpless victim of his desire or passion). She is undoubtedly the root-cause of all reproduction, all procreation, and thus the very sustaining force of the world. In "Camphor Laurel," Judith employs a thick layer of images and symbols: "Here in the slack of night/ the tree breathes honey and moonlight" (Ibid., p. 37). Mrs. Wright describes the conception and birth of a child very skilfully in the following passage:

Under the house the roots go deep,
down down, while the sleepers sleep;
splitting the rock where the house is set.
cracking the paved and broken street.

(Ibid., p. 37)

And yet nothing is said directly, and that is the real art. One comes across a number of images and symbols herein. The experience is purely feminine. The passage successfully maintains the mystery of womankind. The naked display of private parts -- of the body, the breasts, the lean legs, and the pubis -- that one finds in Mrs. Das is certainly missing here. Yet, Mrs. Wright adroitly recounts the rootedness and the depth of the mother. She also recalls in this passage the difficult process of child-bearing; it is like the 'splitting' of 'the rock' and the 'cracking' of 'the paved and broken street'. Who else but an imaginative woman could have penned down like this! Apart from procreation, abortion is also an intimate experience of womankind. Judith's fertile imagination tries to recreate a scene of abortion by means of glowing words and living language in the poem "To a Child Outside Time":

Forgive my tenderness: forgive my love: forgive.
If I had let you learn to live,
believe that I believed I would deserve
that which, alone, there can be now between us---
the inconsolable silence of your hatred.

(*The Two Fires*, 1955; *Collected Poems*, p. 151)

The woman is deeply sorry and remorseful here for not being able to impart life to a tender creature. This fact surely pains her, hurts her immeasurably. Living a full-grown life has ever been the concern of Mrs. Wright, and her most Eliotic poem "Fire Sermon" (*Shadow*, 1970) emphatically bears it out:

Let me out of this dream, I cry.
I belong to a simple people
and all we want is *to live*.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 280; Italics mine)

Without learning or teaching the art of living, humanity will remain entangled in the fires of lust, hatred, anger and illusion. This is the message of Judith's Muse to modern man.

Any discussion of a woman writer's attitude towards the human world would remain tentative and inconclusive without taking into account her opinions of and reactions to the males, particularly to her own man. Judith herself confesses that her relationships with men, including her husband, have been harmonious and tensionless. Hence her poems breathe an air of sweetness and tenderness, carrying no or little sense of guilt or complaint, anger or hatred. Judith usually speaks of her love without any malice or rancour; for example, in "The Man Beneath the Tree" she writes thus:

Nothing is as strange as love--
love is like a foreign land.
Yet its natives find their way
natural as hand-in-hand.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 128)

She seems to be self-satisfied in love that comes to her as naturally as leaves to a growing tree. The self-same idea finds an outlet also in "Our Love Is So Natural", which may be partly quoted here:

Our love is so natural,
the wild animals move
gentle and light on
the shores of our love.
My eyes rest upon you,
to me your eyes turn,
as bee goes to honey,
as fire will burn.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 96)

Here the contented poetess is speaking of her love from the depths of her heart. This is certainly the aspect of union in love. She also speaks touchingly about the aspect of separation in love immediately afterwards in the same poem. Feeling the pangs of separation, she blurts out:

My heart crouches under,
 silent and still,
 and the avalanche gathers
 above the green hill.

(Ibid., p. 96)

At times, Judith talks of her love in an exalted mystical tone, and invites her lover to "Look beyond my flesh and see/that in it which never dies;/ that which neither sleeps nor wakes" ("Lion", *Collected Poems*, p. 88). And in a mood of utter joy and relaxation, the poetess turns inward in her quest of love and then writes thus:

It is the crystal glance of love
 earth turns on sun as the two move.
 It is the jewel I was given
 in exchange of your heaven.

(Ibid., p. 89)

The combined power of love-- which is mutually shared and sustained between man and woman-- can surely bring down 'heaven' from above. It can look direct into the face of Truth: "So we may meet at last, and meeting bless,/and turn into one truth in singleness" ("The Other Half," Ibid., p. 217). The poem, "The Maker", also speaks of the magical power of love:

Since love, who cancels fear
 with his fixed will,
 burned my vision clear
 and bid my sense be still

(*Collected Poems* , p. 32)

Through the power of love, the loving heart can strike at the very root of fear and doubt, sin and infidelity. Love renders the vision clear, freeing it from all distractions and passions. This is a very positive affirmation of Judith's belief in a noble and healthy aspect of love. She does not nourish the aching cares and tense anxieties of a distrustful and revengeful woman. Her love does not have a venomous and vitriolic touch about it-- a touch which is found in plenty in Kamala Das and Anne Sexton and in a lesser degree in Gauri Deshpande and Sylvia Plath.

These women poets make statements boldly, even at the risk of being dubbed 'exhibitionists' or 'poseurs'; they sometimes cross the limits of decency and dignity, and hence they are charged of baring their "sighs and thighs." But Judith Wright

maintains her dignity and sobriety throughout, without unduly raving at the males. This may be sensed even from a casual reading of her most famous poem titled "Woman to Man", where she presents herself as "The eyeless labourer in the night,/ the selfless, shapeless seed I hold" (*Collected Poems*, p. 29). This is a very poetic and suggestive passage revealing Judith's sense of joy, contentment and fulfilment. She knows well that the actual purpose of sexual act with her life-partner is procreation or propagation of the human race. It is through this act that she can assert her supremacy over the others, including the males. Her choice of words and phrases and expressions only tends to reinforce her sense of joy and fulfilment-- 'the unimagined light', 'our hunter and our chase', 'the third who lay in our embrace,' 'the precise crystals of our eyes,' 'the intricate and folded rose,' 'the maker and the made,' 'the question and replay,' etc. The general belief is that a child, particularly a son in the Indian context, ensures a bright future for the couple and the family. Though the whole poem is saturated with the intimate motherly experience of the poetess, the last stanza is especially to be marked for this:

This is the maker and the made;...
The blind head butting at the dark
the blaze of light along the blade.
Oh, hold me, for I am afraid.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 29)

The mother's perception of the child trying to come out of her womb and having 'the blaze of light' about it (elsewhere the child is frequently alluded to as the 'sun'), at least as she sees it at first, and her haunting fears of the pangs of delivery: these are all put together here in a sober and subtle way. In the entire text of the poem, nowhere does the poetess utter even a single word of protest or anger against her man despite the impending fears and pangs of motherhood which she will have to bear herself. I am sure the Indian poetess-cum-critic (more poet than critic), Monika Varma, would approve of Judith's sober utterances. Her *Woman to Man* contains the felt experiences of a woman, and hence it is adjudged as her 'best work' or at least 'the most important work'. Speaking of this poetical collection Judith Wright comments as follows:

I expect the poems which use the experience of women are probably my best, if only because they came from a depth that isn't accessible to men, and

perhaps express this in ways that were at the time at least rather new. Also they were written at a time when I myself was deeply engaged in that experience, as well as in what might be called the 'poetic experience' of living.¹⁸

Judith thus knows well where to cast her net for her poetic experiences, and this domain is perfectly feminine and hence quite convincing.

To sum up, Judith Wright is a contemporary Australian poetess quite conscious of her artistic design and purpose as well as of her responsibility towards her people and her kind. Hers is undoubtedly a feminist voice articulating the hopes and fears, the concerns and tensions, of womankind. Obviously, she writes about love, sex and marriage--all well within her experience and knowledge. She does not have any grudge against the institution of marriage, nor raises her voice against the male-oriented society or the male values. The question of equality between man and woman does not touch her because she believes that it is already there in her society. But from the core of her heart she supports the concept of 'new-woman' and the cause of 'lib' movement. If she maintains a certain sobriety and discipline in this matter, it should not be misconstrued as retrogressive or opposed to the woman's cause. This rather suits her intellectual temper and poetic taste. In articulating her thoughts and feelings, she does not stifle her voice or suppress her individuality in any way. Her poetic voice imbued with a feminine cum-feminist sensibility is typically her own and it can't be confused with anyone else's.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹Robert S. Phillips in his book, *The Confessional Poets* (London & Amsterdam: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1973), p. 8, comments that all the 'confessional' poetry arises from the need to 'confess', and that each poem cast in this mode is in some way "a declaration of dependence", or of guilt, or of anguish and suffering.

²Syed Amanuddin, "A Moment with Judith Wright: An Interview," *World Poetry in English* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1981), p. 101.

³Ibid., p. 105.

⁴Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess* (1847), *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, II (London: Macmillan & Co., 1984), p. 78.

⁵Kamala Das, *Summer in Calcutta* (New Delhi: Everest Press, 1965), p. 52.

⁶Judith Wright, "Myth," *Collected Poems* (Sydney & London: Angus & Robertson Publishers), p. 79.

⁷Syed, *loc. cit.*, p. 104.

⁸J. Wright, *Collected Poems*, p. 29.

Subsequent references to this collection are absorbed in the article itself.

⁹T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), p.69

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 78.

SELF- ACTUALIZATION AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN ELLEN GLASGOW'S *BARREN GROUND*

**S.S. Deo
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Feminism, down the American as well as the British Women Liberation Movements, is an aesthetic reality born of its reaction to the naturalists. However, several of the reasons like the social and the cultural developments, as also the emergence of women writers, are very often held responsible for the feminist activities. It is certainly not that the woman has unfurled the inception of the liberation movements just because of her political frenzy for equality; instead, it is a call for the expression of her identity with complete outlet to her energies, equating men on all fronts of existential reality.

It is true that the woman, in the liberation movements onwards 1860's, stands for the course of woman's emancipation at both the social and the political levels, but the female protagonist in the literature written by women authors is different to embark upon the issues of her individuality, highlighting her activities in a psychological liberation of herself and the being from the set rules of male-dominated culture. At times, she has the spirit of a rebel, breaking away from the bonds of the natural barriers to an independent creature of a self-identity as well as a self-actualized soul. The literature, consisting of the works of the male writers before the twentieth century, presents woman as a second line character, complementing to the demands of a male character, either as a means or a fulfilment.

It has never been true that women writers react to the literature written by men because they "tend to cast her as a type,"¹ and present her as a scape-goat for the breach of happiness between man and woman. The option is to show woman on the war-foot of revolt against man, to have been responsible for all kinds of after effects, whether in the family or the social life. If some of the nineteenth century novelists present the new woman as an idealized heroine, desexed creature, brimming over with pity, purity and innocence, it does not mean that the woman

enjoys a place to her own identity. The writers of the age project her as an ethereally beautiful, sensitive, living, kind, generous and wilful creature, but, after all, she remains a creature spoken so highly of her magnificences, having no other goal in life except marriage and domestic duties. Even the realistic movements with figures like G.B. Shaw, Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Gaskell failed to explore the individual identity of woman in a clear perspective of her psychological existence. Most of the writers, including some of the leading women authors of the age, have tried to glorify woman as if pacifying her as a woman demanding political emancipation from man in both the family and the social life. The fact is different. Woman in the literature written by the female writers does not struggle for the political equality, but fights her conditions of identity which suit her inside the orbit of the male-oriented society. Otherwise, the fair statement about the female protagonists should be that the women writers have worked for liberalizing woman as an identity, an individual, and not the idol of beauty and love. Neither does she hanker for a political equality. She just projects her source of the potentialities like a river which must create a doubt, if diverted. The condition is that she ought to understand herself and the politics of the day must be sick to her identity.

Although "the awakening of the female writers to a sense of their own identity begins at the turn of the century,"² projecting woman as a free, self-actualized being, they still remain "the reflections of the prevailing images of woman in the nineteenth century, and alike the pre-dominantly male creators of the Utopian scheme."³ It is certainly with the female protagonists in the novels of Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather and Margaret Mitchell that "a special female awareness emerges through"⁴ them. Unlike the male authors, the female novelists between 1890-1960 evince the fact that a woman is an equal creature with her equal rights to be liberated as an individual, and not a creature supposed to carry on with the load of the traditional morality and dedication. It is, perhaps Ellen Glasgow, the precursor of the female cause, who has best exhibited the journey of the woman from her traditionally male-chauvinated society to an individual being. The liberation of a woman from the traditions of the society, which are not in tune with her happiness, is more vital than demanding a political equality in the external world. Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* does not only present the

female journey from getting away with the male dominance towards establishing her own identity but also symbolizes woman's sterility in a domesticated society, to have been fertilized by her self-actualized efforts.

Ellen Glasgow is a feminist because she has worked for the complete emancipation of woman, but a feminist of another kind, one who projects the ideal of liberating woman through self-actualization and the understanding of self-identity. Considering *Barren Ground* as a "Victory over defeat in some very personal way,"⁵ she writes in the preface to the "Old Dominion Edition" of the novel:

Not only in this the kind of novel I like to read and had always wished to write, but it became for me, while I was working upon it, almost a vehicle of liberation.⁶

Infact, like many of her contemporaries, she has tried to voice liberation through the recognition of one's identity through self-actualization and discarding the rules ordained to her by the society. Tradition is the enemy to woman, setting her ready for the uncoded responsibility of both the man and his society. Home is very sagaciously appended to her lot, out of which she can come but for the moral risks. She is treated as a second citizen to man, following his rules as her conduct. As Glasgow believes and presents for consideration, the woman has to be aware of her identity as a being and think for herself. Woman should be an independent identity by being aware of the choices open to her. She is a perfect feminist to reject the social possessiveness. By virtue of being a feminist like Kate Chopin and Margaret Mitchell, she disowns the idea of being the property of man, responsible for looking after him and his home. The moral as well as the domestic values are inter-behaviorial issues, which woman should not accept as her sole duty. Whether it is sex, or the social life, she is as free as her identity. Nowhere should she be dependent upon man as a follower. Glasgow, through her female protagonist in *Barren Ground*, has established the similar issues by showing the independent as well as the self-actualized heroine, Dorinda Oakley.

Glasgow is unique among her contemporaries in regard to feminist ideals as also the methods of emancipation. She transpires her female characters to a self-actualized position through the discovery of an independent self in which psychology,

particularly individuality, plays a decisive role, and not the simple, political fulfilment of the inevitable, physical demands. She discovers the individual in each woman and puts her on a way which seldom reaches man. The identification of the individual in all her female protagonists has been performed on a latent and vigorous system of self-actualization.

Where theorists believe that the self-actualized persons are those who are aware of themselves and discover their talents by knowing and accepting their strength as well as shortcomings, it is always there that such people respond to their inner selves with the complete inertia of the genetically dilated potentials. Each individual lacks something, and hence needs a fulfilment. Whether it is the poet, or the artist, the creative activity is always an effort in balancing the lack like a psychological synaesthesia. The self-actualized person looks inward and works in order to complete the impulsive lack wherein he becomes an individual to whom the realities of society are just unrelated dreams. On a similar ground does Abraham Maslow believe that the self-actualizing people are "committed to their vision; they use their intelligence: they are realistic about their options and they take risk to achieve their goals."⁷

In a similar context of analysis, Kurt Goldstein, the famous medical scientist and neuro-psychologist, explains self-actualization as a "pre-requisite for the self-realization of the total organism."⁸ He describes it as a "creative trend of human nature,"⁹ an organic principle, by which "the organism becomes more fully developed and more complete."¹⁰ He writes that "any need is a deficit state that motivates the person to replenish the deficit. It is like a hole that demands to be filled in. This replenishment, or fulfilment of a need, is what is meant by self-actualization, or self-realization."¹¹

However, Ellen Glasgow had declared that "she liked to write about woman because their complexity fascinated her."¹² It is beyond her acceptance that her *Barren Ground* bears a startling difference of opinion between her age and her when she writes that women wait "for the first word of love from their lovers, waiting, with all the inherited belief in the omnipotence of love, for the birth of their sons, women waiting, during the civil war, for news of their sons and husbands, women, waiting beside the

beds of the sick and dying, waiting, waiting, waiting,"¹³ she indirectly declares her awareness of 'self', it not an immediate hate for home.

Dorinda Oakley in *Barren Ground* is a highly romantic girl of twenty, discarded by Jason Greylock in love. She tends Jason for her love even after knowing his marriage to Geneva. She is dejected by her rejection and understands her dependence upon man. The 'Pine' and the 'Barren Ground' inspire her not to exist but live, actualizing her identity by finding a way for herself, in which the shadow of a man is not for the name sake. She proves her worth and courage by doing the job which her past had seen only as a void. Jason is unhappy and Dorinda feels satisfied with it. Courage, independence, estrangement and even feeling independent sex-wise, Ms. Oakley proves Glasgow's aspirations of a self-actualized feminist.

Although Dorinda has a tendency to live rather than exist, and accordingly carries potential to stand above man, she cannot be considered as a perfect woman like any other feminist. It is true that she prefers to be a victor than a victim, "hungered for adventure, happiness, even unhappiness,"¹⁴ but, for the reasons of her saddistic attitude, she can equally be treated to the endless frustration and also failure of her mother, Mrs. Oakley. She is bold, courageous and emerges as a liberated woman by the end of the novel, but her estrangement from tradition, so to say, the traditional values, does not fulfil her 'self' for a perfected soul. The loss of her virginity in the seduction does free her from the bondage of generality, making her an essential individual. It is also there that she "struggles to escape from the endless captivity of things,"¹⁵ and embarks upon an individual effort of overcoming her dependence upon anything, including the man and his conditions. Treating the customs as a traditional character, she develops the wholesomeness of living through emphasis upon self-actualization. She sounds to be most perfect when she treads life as a destiny after character, ceaselessly directing her efforts towards the rehabilitation of her land.

But neither does her strength to stand alone, nor reaction to the dependence upon matrimony make her perfect. She opposes her mother's view of "marriage as a lord's own institution,"¹⁶ and accepts her independence as a will-maker, "functioning,

productive, and striving."¹⁷ Despite her repeated fury for triumph over circumstances and complexions, Dorinda is most imperfect in her detachment in an unending privacy. Her efforts of victory over circumstances, and also individual fulfilment, lead to a saddistic cynicism. True is her approach, and truly great are her intentions to diminish Jason's importance in her life. But all these things end in a suppressed self, ending in an incomplete void of failure. When she declares that "she has finished with love, finished love,"¹⁸ and that until she finds something else to fill her life she shall "only be an empty shell,"¹⁹ she evinces her inner frustration of personal lack and loneliness. In spite of her strong mental equilibrium, she shows more of her frustration for a companion than a grudge of overcoming her circumstantial challenges. She is a negativity, an imperfect character. She can grow independently, but she has hardly any chance for happiness. At a natural level of things, she lacks a phenomenal balance for which her attainments can be said a revengeful deed rather than a saintly, human happiness. All minus her family and children is the remainder of a feminist stubbornness. So long as she avoids the institutional companionship for a natural living, she can not be said even a perfecting character. Life, after all, cannot be full of happiness without a phenomenal naturalness. Perfection, in this regard, is not the concern of Dorinda.

Notwithstanding Ellen Glasgow's feministic activity of projecting woman as an ideal of glorious revolt against chauvinism, *Barren Ground* tells more of her personal inhibition than a feminist gospel of liberation. What is to be liberated is most unnatural and what really has been liberated is naturally ignored. Glasgow transposes more of her romantic infatuation into Dorinda's character than a perfectly emancipated woman of feministic order. Initially, the theme of *Barren Ground* portrays her own years of love, dejection and finally alienated living. It is neither the feminist conviction of revolt, nor the individual recovery over her personal loss, but a simple narration of a frustrated past, to have undergone her experience. Glasgow says: "I have finished with all that."²⁰ The 'finish' is naturally of her romantic fallacy which ended after a genuine relationship without a chance of re-association. She is open-hearted to tell that her "real love lasted but seventeen months"²¹ with Henry Anderson, ultimately ending in the implications of being a spinster. The sense of imperfection, and also an individual living, she had learnt

with her mother's experience of discovering her father's "black mistress"²² and her death, which ended in a orphaned state of the family. Dorinda's guts to live with her 'land' and overcome Jason's feats show not the feministic boldness to have inherited as a reaction for the alienated living but a frustration carried forth from her childhood. It was the year 1916-17 which was the most passionate in her life, a year that ended with Anderson's going abroad in service to the Red Cross. Eventually, the year also became the pre-writing period of her novel, *Barren Ground*. The emotional gauge of the unavoidable break in her relationship with Anderson's departure, in fact, makes Dorinda to remember the Canadian Jason, and subsequently accommodate her own loss about him. The end of the novel, *Barren Ground*, speaks less about her saddistic pleasure over Jason and more of her nostalgia about his absence.

In many ways, Dorinda's comparison to her mother with conventional views has been presented as an inevitable contrast to Ellen Glasgow's own style of thinking. Dorinda, as a foil to her mother, develops as a very strong character in view of the experience enriched into her by Glasgow from her own life. If Dorinda "does not breathe within the stark limitations of her mother's point of view,"²³ it is because Glasgow's own experience of her mother and also her frustration teach her that the deep instinct for survival had to cease the "negative quality,"²⁴ and need strengthening in a "dynamic force."²⁵

It is in the third and the last section of the novel, "Life-Everlasting", that Glasgow's autobiographical meanings become more apparent. Jason appreciates her efforts in cultivating the Oaks and applauds her heart. She, in reply to him, remarks that the revival of the Oaks is a success achieved not through "heart, but head."²⁶ It implies that Dorinda has completely submitted her love, and now revives in her reasoning. A feminist is always a creature in quest of self-satisfying means, including love and livelihood. But Dorinda's characteristic in this regard is not feministic but autobiographical. Her success both in the cultivation of her land and in finding an independent means of survival projects a resigned mood to have emanated from a dejected living.

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¹Judith Fryer, *The Faces of Eve* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. X.

²*Ibid.*, p. 26.

³*Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴Elaine Showalter, *Women's Liberation and Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1971), p. 173.

⁵Ellen Glasgow, *Barren Ground* (Old Dominion Edition; New York, Garden City: Doubleday, 1925), p. VII.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Abraham Maslow, *Dominance, Self-Esteem, Self-Actualization*, ed. Richard J. Lowry (Monterey: Brooks, 1973), p. 172.

⁸Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey, *Theories of Personality* (New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Limited, 1989), p. 250.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Ellen Glasgow, *The Woman Within* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 24.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁴*Barren Ground, Op. Cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 298.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 176.

²¹*The Woman Within, op. Cit.*, p. 25.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 39.

²³*Barren Ground, Op. Cit.*, p. 298.

²⁴*The Woman Within, Op. Cit.*, p. 251.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 251.

²⁶*Barren Ground, Op. Cit.*, p. 261.

THE DYNAMICS OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION AND PROTEST IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

M. Adhikari

The contemporary Afro-American literature by women scrutinizes not the stereotyped roles assigned to women in society, but some major dilemmas encountered by the female protagonists with their father, brother, lover, husband, sister, society and culture at critical moments. The search for self-definition is emphasised; the experience of black women from their point of view is projected with all its intensity, diversity and complexity. Howsoever controversial, they are prepared to delve into their agonizing past, amend and transform their present misfortunes into a meaningful existence, and aspire afresh for self-recreation. Their battle against sexist and racist oppression is fraught with the desire of sharing power and celebrating the values and beliefs, uniquely characteristic of women.

Women writers have "an imaginative continuum," says Showalter and accordingly, "there is the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems and images from generation to generation" (Showalter 11). The feminist critic has been alluding to the themes and images of a particular tradition and culture. But one is amazed to recognize the common concern of women writers all over the world. The fundamental reason behind this unified disquietude is the knowledge that women forever and everywhere are marginalized by the patriarchal prejudices. Against this long, lasting victimization, the creative female consciousness has set out to inquire into the legitimacy of racial and sexual discrimination and class segregation practised by the male judgement. In the androcentric culture, ideals of womanhood firmly entrenched in society and manoeuvred by masculine attitudes, have held women responsible for all sufferings. She is also considered inferior to man as she is said to be motivated only by "erotic longings" (Freud 48). Despite Alder's vehement disagreement with Freud and his comment regarding the notion of women having lesser capability than men "as a palpable fable" (130), negative images of women remain firmly enthroned.

With the insurgence of black women writers since 1960s, literary studies of race and gender have recorded enthusiastically

the diversity of women's voices previously excluded or silenced. Afro-American writers have participated in the struggle more vigorously than others because they have found themselves hedged in by "triple oppressions": as blacks in white supermacist society, as women in a patriarchy, and as workers under capitalism" (Ruthven, quoted in Leitch, 310). With determination they have communicated the traditions of their community and also have participated in the new modalities of cultural pluralism.

Black women writers have unequivocally stated their intentions of writing. Frances Harper in *Iola LeRoy* (1892) had set out to establish the positive image of black women. But the search for self-definition in women is not to be found before the creation of Janie Stark, the female protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). In Hurston's heroine, one can see a definite tension between the conventional femininity and the ambitious woman's striving for self-fulfilment. Her novels are the forerunners of the fiction of the seventies and the eighties. With Gwendolyn Brook's *Maud Martha* (1953) and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl Brownstones* (1959), the self-aware protagonists march towards self-definition, and self-liberation becomes very evident. The process of empowering black women can no longer be halted and it is realised through an emphasis on the community and the black culture. But in the seventies, black women writers changed their stance and projected the black community as a force of oppression that brings about all the tragedy (*The Bluest Eye*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*). By the mid-seventies, once again the wind of change is perceptible. Woman can no longer be isolated and thrust outside her community; she may willingly depart or remain inside, revolting against the oppression and redefining herself. Thus pictures of women's victimization is followed by the language of protest. Women writers have realized that for them silence is seldom golden. If they do not record their subjective experiences, others would and do it badly. Alice Walker's women in *The Color Purple*, from being "the mule of the world," emerge as riders with reins in their hands. They very conclusively overcome the crippling circumstances of their lives. The conventional images are demolished and new concepts of womanhood are established; their physical and psychological oppressions and muted expressions are recorded; the prohibited body language of woman is not smothered but included insistingly; lesbianism is accepted as a strengthening

force not to be disparaged; the challenges of the new consciousness are accepted with an élan. In short, Walker "demaximizes" (Miller, ed. Showalter 341) her women characters and motivates them to handle their problems *de novo*.

Walker's purpose of writing is abundantly clear through her own words:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of Black Women (O'Brian 192)

Her intentions are well reflected in her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). It spans the life of the black protagonist Celie and mirrors her experiences collected through the difficult process of self-encounter. The inter-mingling of the American history with the African cultural heritage is credibly and authentically brought out through her sister Nettie's story. Walker presents an account of Celie's degeneration and regeneration through the epistolary method, the conventional favourite mode of women's expression. This also happens to be the central technique of her other two novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*. With the use of this method, Walker conveniently mingles and shuffles the subjective and the objective points of view.

Alice Walker has dedicated the book, "To the Spirits: / Without whose assistance / Neither this book / Nor I / Would have been / Written" (Walker 1985). They are "ancient spirits all very happy to see me [Walker] consulting and acknowledging them and eager to let me know through the joy of their presence that, indeed, I am not alone" (Walker, ed. Evans 453). Truly, they, mostly women, are the collective consciousness of her ancestors. Their private voices mingle with the voices of Walker's fictional female creations who reveal through their words, acts, dreams etc., their identity, their experiences and their hopes of a meaningful existence.

Celie's story of physical and psychological exploitation and her final triumph over the dynamics of oppression is revealed through her sensitive letters. In all her novels, Walker reinforces the idea that the motivation to battle against the societal oppression and compartmentalization should come from within, though the rescue operation may be vitalized by others inside the ethnic

group. Celie's survival in the determinative society is linked with the problems of Nettie, Shug, Sofia and others. The cultural and the racial subordination by the whites is primarily experienced by Sofia and Nettie; others fortunately remain unscathed by its branding. It reaches Shug and Celie as a second hand experience, toothless, stingless; but for Sofia, Celie's step-daughter-in-law, it turns out to be a disintegrating nightmare. The hostile confrontation between the blacks and the whites, males and females, is not only divergent but also symptomatic of black women's survival instinct.

The novel opens with Celie's first letter to God. The reader is horrified with the contents. She recoils from revealing her extremely degrading experiences to others. She craves for impersonal distancing, anonymity and thus she writes to God: "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl" (Walker 1982: 1). The cancellation of the word 'I am' clearly demonstrates that she no longer considers herself to be 'good.' Ironically, though she is the victim, being raped by her step-father, yet it is she who has been defiled. The androcentric culture refuses to admit its crime. It is the woman who is condemned as unchaste and immoral. This is the form of oppression that is practised by the male-dominated society. Celie's so-called loss of virtue vitiates her mind with 'inferiorization'. She would never enjoy the pleasures of normal sex life. Her mother screams at her and 'cuss' (curses) her because she is 'big' (ibidem: 3). She cries and is physically hurt by the sexual violence committed by her 'pa.' He 'choke' her and say, "You better shut up and git used to it" (ibidem: 2). Her pathetic words are: "I don't never git used to it." (ibidem: 2). Her trauma is aggravated when her two children, born out of this sexual violence, are forcefully removed from her. Her breasts overflow with milk, but she has none to feed. She is ordered by the callous father to look decent and her miserable answer is, "what I am sposed to put on? I don't have nothing" (ibidem: 4). Her rural idiomatic language clearly voices her pain, physical oppression, emotional distress and impoverishment. One comes to realise that sexist abuse of black women is not an up-shoot of racist philosophy only; the disease is rooted in the patriarchal society.

The 'pa', vested with authority, has the power to enforce obedience. Now, he wishes to get rid of ugly, thus unworthy (a

conventional assessment of women) Celie because his lust has been satisfied and also because like a mother-figure she persistently protects Nettie, her younger sister, from his illicit advances. She is handed over to a widower with four children who inspects her as a prospective buyer of animals. Her dehumanization and vulnerability as a woman is too obvious to be missed. The man, Albert, very reluctantly agrees to marry her because his help had deserted him, "he could do everything just like he want to" (ibidem: 9) with her; she was good with children, she could work like a man and he could also take the cow that she had reared. She is bullied into matrimony, a typical male gesture to demonstrate his supremacy and authority. Treated worse than a slave by her step-children and husband, she is abused in all possible manner; she is beaten, belted, humiliated, "cause she my wife. Plus she stubborn. All women good for —" (ibidem: 23). No one asks her, "How come you his wife?" (ibidem: 23). Celie's question compels the reader to ponder over a woman's plight in society. Even though individual freedom is a fairy tale for Celie, yet she resists the inhuman treatment and oppression by becoming the 'mule' of the family: "This form of submission, humility, self-repression, resilience, is a form of revolt often to be observed in woman" (Adler 13). The combination of docility and stubbornness is Celie's mode of protest. Her husband, defeated by her inner strength that he can neither break nor destroy, torments her mercilessly.

Celie's quest for meaningful identity and self-exploration begins with her first sexual exploitation. She asks God, "May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (Walker 1). Her questioning mind quietly battles with the dynamics of all possible oppressions. She desists from following the method of vociferous protestations lodged by Shug and Sofia. When assaulted, she makes herself 'a wood.' Her dignified resignation, non-violent dissent, unquestionable perseverance, enable her to establish finally her endangered identity.

Celie's relationship with Sofia, her step-daughter-in-law, begins on a wrong footing. Psychologically and physically strong, Sofia, unknowingly reminds Celie that she 'jumps' every time her husband calls her "and like she pity me [Celie]." Thus torn by jealousy, she advises Harpo, her step-son, to beat her. But the next time when she finds "Harpo his face a mess of bruises"

(ibidem: 38), her envy is transformed into admiration. She begins to appreciate Sofia's strength and realises that Sofia can challenge Harpo and defeat him. Sofia's victory satisfies her repressed desire and also minimises the impact of the physical and the psychological tortures inflicted on her by her husband. They join hands as sisters and it is symbolically presented through the act of quilting. The image of quilt making as a symbol of sisterhood is central in Walker's novels.

Celie's psychological and physical humiliation continues unabated. Albert throws Nettie out of his house, and keeps her letters away from Celie for some twenty years just to punish the sisters and to make an exhibition of his power. Celie's exploitation touches the crest when her status in the family is jeopardized by the arrival of Shug Avery, the mistress of her husband. Shug is Celie's traditional rival: beautiful, confident, glamorous and enticing; in short, everything that Celie always wanted to be but could never be. Shug had destroyed Albert's first wife, and again she joins the forces of oppression. Though ailing, she comes to annihilate Celie, psychologically and physically. Celie is pressed into service like a bonded labourer by her ruthless husband. She cleans Shug's filth and body with dignified silence and very soon falls in love with her arch-enemy. Shug, a heterosexual, responds with love and Celie begins to mend with the realization of being human, an individual. "Walker approaches the forbidden subject of incest and black lesbianism as something natural and liberating" (Christian 1985: 94). Lesbianism is not ostracised, but is presented as a strengthening process for both. For Celie, love acts as a defence mechanism and Shug finally surrenders before the woman whom she had come to conquer. Her appreciation of Celie's non-violent struggle for self-identity is demonstrated through her participation in the quilt-making activity shared by Sofia and Celie. The design of the quilt, suggestively known as the 'sister's choice,' welds together the two women. Shug partially overcomes Celie's sexist oppression by asserting that she must accompany her to the night club. The husband disapproves because "wives don't go to places like that" (Walker 1982: 76). Walker pointedly refers to the dual standards of morality practised in society and suggests means of conquering it through the concept of sisterhood, the saviour of black women. Celie is given an opportunity to savour and build from this experience. Shug, again, boosts up her confidence by dedicating a song to Celie and

her surprise reaction is, "First time somebody made something and name it after me" (ibidem: 77).

Celie, the throwaway, while waging a brave battle against the oppressive forces of society, realizes that her husband would never permit her to wear a red or a purple dress because it would make her happy (Walker 1982: 22). She observes from a vantage point this conscious manipulation to keep her impoverished emotionally and physically. Much later, when she overcomes such crippling manoeuvrings and attains sovereignty, she decorates her room with the royal purple colour. Her action proclaims her right to be happy. This is the shape her protests take: silent, dignified but effective. Celie liberates herself through the support of black sisters and reciprocates by lending her strength to other needy women. She nurses Shug back to health, loves her when men spit at her, protects Nettie from the lecherous advances of her step-father, advises Sofia not to take Harpo's beatings quietly, and also helps her to overcome the emotional shocks of racial discrimination. Celie learns to stitch pants, wear them and thus symbolically reclaims the lost identity, individuality and power. Despite her lack of education, her rejuvenation begins slowly but definitely. Increasingly, her self-awareness propels her towards the search of personal liberty, and finally she hoists the flag of revolt by severing the destructive relationship with her husband. The humiliating remarks of men she refuses to digest and strikes back, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly [thus unworthy], and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (ibidem: 214). With this statement, she moves beyond the reach of all oppressions perpetrated by patriarchy. Her victory over her husband, the symbol of male hegemony, is complete when he requests her to remarry him. She refuses but accepts him as a friend. The novel closes with a complete reversal of circumstances: We find Albert learning to stitch under Celie's supervision. Her marginal existence changes into a central one.

It is interesting to note that Celie's relationship with God also changes radically as she moves towards self-actualization. She begins with being completely dependent on Him like the stereotyped black women characters. She would not mind being buried alive as "long as I can spell G-o-d" (ibidem: 18). This blind reliance and faith fades and soon she becomes critical as her confidence grows. To Nettie she writes, "The God I have been

praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens. I know. Trifling forgetful and lowdown" (ibidem: 199). It is Shug who enlightens her, "God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (ibidem: 202). If God looks old, tall, grey bearded and white, it is because the "white folks white bible" (ibidem: 201) has taught them so. One cannot but agree with Shug that the Christian God has become a white man merely to impose the concept of white supremacy over black people. She is right when she comments, 'God is inside you and everybody else' (ibidem: 202) "and it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (ibidem: 203). The realization of this highly philosophical idea in Shug and Celie is a sign of their development from ignorance to knowledge. Walker makes it clear that the prevalent concepts of God and religion are popularized because of the sexist and the racist politics. Shug had overcome these constricting influences long back and now she initiates Celie into its mysteries. It is not that Celie and Shug's world is Godless. The fact becomes amply clear through Celie's last letter addressed to "Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (ibidem: 292). It is quite evident now that she can no longer be deceived by the religious dogmatism preached and practised by the androcentric culture. Her God is all-pervasive, and immanent in creation.

Nettie, Celie's sister, who is chiefly exposed to racial discrimination, has a taste of gender and sexual exploitation also. Their 'pa' and Celie's husband, the primitive, sensual prototype of black men, obsessed by their virility, attempt to oppress her sexually, but it is thwarted by her and Celie's efforts. To liberate herself from this oppressive situation, "All day she read, she study, she practice her handwriting and try to git us to think" (ibidem: 17). Nettie, being educated, is not restricted by space. She accompanies a black missionary team to Africa and has a better opportunity of interacting with her own people. Her expectations are shaken when she finds that men all over the world are just the same. She is ostracized and considered an 'outcaste,' an object of 'pity and contempt' because she neither has a father nor an uncle nor a husband to protect her (ibidem: 167). She recounts in her letters how black men have four wives, treat them as their slaves, prevent girls from being educated because "A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" (ibidem: 162). The institution of motherhood is eulogized

on the assumption that women prefer self-sacrifice to self-realization. These experiences disillusion her, but she is really shocked to have the first taste of racial discrimination. Her white Bishop in England accuses her of having an illicit relationship with the head of the missionary team, Mr. Samuel, because he had lost his wife. The Bishop is more concerned about 'appearances' than the grievances of the Olinka people. Nettie rightly wonders if the same humiliation would have been meted out to a white missionary woman. She feels quite powerless in the male dominated white culture. But she can no longer be intimidated or crushed. She records her protest through her striving for self-betterment and the betterment of her own people.

Through Sofia, Walker scrutinizes the dangerous implications of racist and classist oppression. The strong willed and strong built Sofia is a victim of gender and sexual oppression. In the beginning, Harpo, her husband, wishes to have a docile wife and thus beats her to tame her. She retaliates by giving him a black eye. Soon, it is she who is wearing the 'pants' in the family. Her husband's desire to prove his sexual supremacy is defeated, though it is only a botheration and nothing more. The real damage to her indomitable spirit is brought about by racial oppression. Punished for assaulting a white couple and forced to work as a maid in the same family, she is separated from her children for twelve long years. This turns the vibrant Sofia into stone. Walker presents the confrontation with the white culture through an emblem and not through definite characters. But it continues till the end. Eleanor, the white master's daughter, brings her son to Sofia with the hope that she would love him. But her unequivocal answer is, "I don't love Reynold.... He can't even walk and already he in my house messing it up" (ibidem: 271). The child climbs on the chest of Sofia's daughter "...slobbering and sucking ... trying to kiss... sit down with a bounce on top of her chest and grin" (ibidem: 273). This sight is quite unpleasant to Sofia as she imagines that the present act is the reflection of the future when her daughter would be abused sexually by a white man. Her strong protest against racial and sexual exploitation is symbolically articulated through dismemberment of all relations with the white society. Her non-confirmity with the established culture is registered definitely.

Mary Agnes, nicknamed Squeak, is trapped into the stereo-

typed role of a faithful wife, though she is Harpo's mistress only. Dominated by Harpo, she is deprived of her identity, her name. Quite legitimately, she clarifies to all, "When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public" (ibidem: 210). Fortunately, with the help of community sisters, she retrieves her name and identity. Twice she tries to lead a normal family life and twice she fails. It is interesting to note that though none of the women in *The Color Purple* receive security and love from their male partners, yet the metaphor of motherhood is not negated. The novel begins with the portraits of marginalized women but closes with the images of marginalized men.

Shug Avery, radically different from other female characters, is introduced into the story as a force of oppression. Independent and unconventional, she wears 'red pants' and sings in night clubs. She has enough confidence to ignore societal ostracism and resurrect her damaged reputation. Shug had come to destroy Celie, but Celie's silent determination to fight the gender and sexual exploitation compels her to change her attitude. She is the one who gives Celie courage to rebuild her life. She also teaches her to stitch and wear pants and become financially independent. Flamboyant Shug can have a deep emotional and physical relationship with a man of her age or half her age or a woman and emerge enriched by the experience. In the presence of forceful Shug, oppression and exploitation are empty words. Through this emancipated woman, Walker emphasises that black women must assume ultimate responsibility for their behaviour if they wish to overcome social, racial, sexual oppression.

The novel, *The Color Purple*, indubitably reveals the dark dynamics of oppression practised by men against women, but it also suggests ways and means to women to articulate their protests to activate the liberating process. Shug ignores the concept of oppression altogether; Celie, Phoenix-like, rises from her ashes; Sofia wages a never-ending battle against racism and finally can see the light at the end of the tunnel; Nettie overcomes white and black male dominance through sheer grit and self-education; Mary Agnes throws off the chains of oppression by becoming financially independent. The liberty of these women is realised through covert and overt protests. They recreate themselves with their individual and combined efforts. The multi-hued quilt of Alice Walker epitomises woman's power. The striving towards 'wholeness' stalls and stops the dynamics of exploitation

and oppression. Celie leads the march of revolt through silence, resilience, determination and the final result, though inconsequential, is favourable. Walker, through the trials and tribulations of some black girls, narrates the story of their community and emphatically drives home women's protests against sexism, gender discrimination and racism.

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BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

T. Asoka Rani

The real nature of the place of woman in the avowedly male-dominated African society has for long not been in the focus in the literature of that continent, almost entirely originating from men. Writers like Okara, Soyinka, Okigbo, Achebe, Nzekwu and Ngugi seem to have drawn the picture of woman as a happy and contented person, may be due to her meek acquiescence to play the role assigned to her in the society with traditions and customs heavily biased in favour of man. It is only after the appearance on the African literary scene of women writers that the true nature of the plight of the African woman has been exposed to public gaze. Almost all the women writers— Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Rebecca Njáu and Mariama Ba— have targeted in their works the blatant sexism inhibiting woman in all spheres of social life. Of them, Buchi Emecheta has been ruthless in her attack on the prevailing gender inequality condemning woman to a humiliating role in the society:

Of all the women writers in contemporary African literature, Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria has been the most sustained and vigorous voice of direct, feminist protest.¹

Buchi Emecheta has written five novels over a span of less than seven years: *In the Ditch*, *Second Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood*. Katherine Frank has been loud in her praise for Buchi Emecheta when she says:

... it is revealing to look at the five novels as parts or "chapters" of a larger whole — a single, continuous narrative which amounts to a kind of epic of female experience in twentieth century Africa. Taken together, in fact, Emecheta's novels compose the most exhaustive and moving portrayal extant of the African woman, an unparalleled portrayal in African fiction and with few equals in other literatures as well.²

In Buchi Emecheta's novels, one can perceive a direct and forceful attack on sexist ideology, female despondency and male chauvinism. Her protest is explicit and unequivocal:

... Emecheta's account of African Womanhood is an unapologetically feminist one. She exposes and repudiates the feminine stereo-types of male writers... and reveals the dark underside of their fictional celebrations of the

African woman. She explores the psychological and physical toll on women of such things as arranged marriages, polygamy, perpetual pregnancy and childbirth and widowhood... and an entirely new drama emerges as a result of this radical change in sexual perspective.³

Adah of *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen* is the most educated, resourceful and energetic of all Buchi Emecheta's heroines. She is the only one who is free without a male figure controlling her destiny. Aku-nna of *The Bride Price* bravely flouts the established customs and traditions. She rejects an arranged marriage with a view to marrying a man of her choice, a descendant of slaves, an outcast. Ojebeta of *The Slave Girl* is an actual slave. Even after she is released from her slavery and is married to a man of her own choice, she is not free as her man becomes her master. Emecheta refers to this aspect of Ojebeta's life ironically as a change of masters. Freedom eludes her. Nnu Ego of the fifth novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, is a tradition-bound, illiterate and the most oppressed of all the novelist's heroines. Katherine Frank traces in the sequence of heroines in Buchi Emecheta's fiction a sort of 'retrogressive movement,' the first denoting optimism and the last, despair. She comments:

The feminist narrative that we can discern in Emecheta's five novels would seem to conclude with the liberated, self-sufficient heroine of her first and second books... with each succeeding novel Emecheta moves progressively backward....⁴

Adah's promise of fulfilment through liberation, portrayed by the novelist in her first two novels, seems to have been invalidated by Aku-nna, Ojebeta and Nnu Ego who succeed her. One can even assume that the novelist's vision has steadily darkened with each succeeding novel. It is also said that

... when we look at Emecheta's five novels as a tale of the African woman's evolution from enslavement to qualified liberation, Nnu Ego's life is the point at which we must begin.⁵

It is not surprising for an enlightened woman like Adah, living in London, to seek self-reliance and independence. What would really be significant is for a tradition-bound, uneducated rural woman to achieve such emancipation or at least to be aware of it and to aspire for it. The novelist demonstrates such a possibility through the achievement of Nnu Ego of *The Joys of Motherhood*. Hailing from the custom-bound village Ibuza, Nnu Ego, an illiterate and docile woman, whose life revolves around marriage and motherhood, gradually changes her perspective and ulti-

mately achieves emancipation by breaking loose from the shackles constraining her life all along.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta delves into the oppressive nature of life of the African women, tries to identify and analyse the causes contributing to such a state of affairs, and suggests remedial measures to humanize and improve their lot. She finds education as imperative for women to achieve self-reliance and emancipation. She pinpoints the rural and urban divide in the values and wants the women to set themselves to the task of doing away with this conflict of interests. She probes into the plight of the contemporary African women caught in the cross-fire between the inhibiting traditional culture and the innate urge for feminism.

Buchi Emecheta draws a vivid picture of the contemporary traditional society in the same way as men writers do. But the marked difference in her approach lies in

... the prominence... of the female point of view registering its disgust at male chauvinism and its dissatisfaction with what it considers an unfair and oppressive system.⁶

The novelist effectively drives home her point of view through the character of Nnu Ego to register her abhorrence of the inequity of the system grossly discriminatory against women.

The roles of men and women are sharply defined in the traditional Nigerian society:

You are to give her children and food, she is to cook and bear the children and look after you and them.⁷

By all accounts, the husband is the most dominant partner and the wife is reduced to the role of a 'beast of burden'. She is a sexual convenience, a domestic helpmate and a breeder. She can be beaten into submission, if found self-willed. The novelist's shocking description of the Nigerian society provokes Adaku to speak of it as "... a man's world" (127).

Buchi Emecheta disapproves the evil custom in the traditional society, where boys are invariably preferred to girls. Nnu Ego heaves a sigh of relief when her still-born child is a girl. Adaku is agonised to lose her male child while Nnu Ego's twin girls survive. Adaku cries in grief:

O God, why didn't you take one of the girls and leave me with my male child?

My man child. (128)

Elders brain-wash children right from their early years:

My sons, you will all grow to be kings among men.

My daughters, you will all grow to rock your children's children,(29)

In such an environment boys naturally grow into self-conceited adults. Thus Nnaife

... never had much time for his daughters. One planned for and had sleepless nights over boys; girls, on the other hand, were to help in running the house and be disposed of as soon as possible....(204)

Ubani, an elderly, respectable Ibo man in Lagos sums up the prevailing view when he says:

A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never old. He matures with age and is dignified. (71)

The discrimination between boys and girls has gone to such an extent as mothers of boys and mothers of only daughters are also discriminated. Adaku who is sore about Nnu Ego, her senior co-wife, over the latter's ill-treatment of Adaku's cousin and who is clearly in the right, complains of her senior's misconduct. To her dismay, Adaku is rebuked, snubbed and is shown her proper place. Since she has no son, she has no right to complain against her more privileged senior, a mother of sons. Men who have come to settle the issue blame only Adaku:

Don't you know that according to the custom of our people you ... are committing an unforgivable sin? (166)

This incident serves as an eye-opener to Nnu Ego who understands the unfairness of the custom:

She also felt relief, knowing that her own fate could so easily have been like Adaku's. Yet all because she was the mother of three sons....(167)

Buchi Emecheta views with revulsion the practice of fathers choosing husbands for their daughters in utter disregard of the predilections of the latter. Such highhanded, indiscreet procedure, she thinks, often leads to disastrous consequences. Agbadi selects the ugly-looking Nnaife for his daughter, Nnu Ego. He does not pay heed to his friend's advice to select a handsome person in keeping with the changed times. Nnu Ego makes no bones about her hatred for Nnaife even though she keeps on tolerating him for the sake of children.

The novelist lashes out at the diabolical belief in the stigma associated with barrenness in women. Children are required to continue the family and the clan. A woman's primary obligation to the society, therefore, is to bear children. Agbadi tells his daughter: "What great honour is there for a woman than to be a mother..." (119). This belief is so engraved on the minds of women that Nnu Ego, on losing her baby son, thinks that she is not a woman any more since loss of motherhood means loss of womanhood. Through the character of Nnu Ego, Buchi Emecheta repudiates the stigma of barrenness. Nnu Ego, who achieves the status of mother, eventually dies broken-hearted because of her ungrateful sons. She realises that the joys of motherhood are illusory.

The novelist fulminates against the evil of polygamy in the African society. Polygamy has led to extended family system, and in the traditional Nigerian society the number of wives a man possesses enhances his prestige. All the wives are housed in separate huts and an order of seniority is maintained for them. Men writers depict polygamy as a practice perfectly accepted and welcomed by both men and women. However, Buchi Emecheta presents an entirely different picture in *The Joys of Motherhood*. She stresses the consequences of unfettered polygamy — the sexual dominance of man and the relegation of woman into subservience, domesticity and motherhood. Nnaife, who knows that his wife hates him, remains unperturbed. The novelist ironically comments:

...after all he was a man, and if a woman cared for him, very good; if not, there would always be another who would care. (95)

Polygamy encourages competition and envy among wives and naturally when they share a husband, they feel insecure for themselves and for their children. Eustace Palmer aptly comments that "*The Joys of Motherhood* presents one of the most compelling studies of jealousy from the female point of view in the whole history of the African novel."⁸ The novelist's condemnation of polygamy is loud and clear when she describes Agbadi's polygamous marriage thus:

Agbadi was no different from many men. He himself might take wives and then neglect them for years, apart from seeing that they each received their one yam a day. He could bring his mistress to sleep with him right in his courtyard while his wives pined and bit their nails for a word from him. (36)

All the wives of Agbadi are agonised when he is dangerously ill. But the moment he recovers, he amuses with Ona, his mistress, in the open courtyard leading to the collapse and death of the senior with shame and despair:

Any notion of the polygamous male operating in traditional society as a reasonable and considerate being is completely dispelled by Emecheta's presentation.⁹

Inheritance of the wives of the deceased brother by an elder or surviving brother is another evil the novelist comes up against. This arrangement may have been introduced to ensure both sexual and economic provision for the wives within the traditional society. But the author focuses on the inevitable misery and deprivation leading to economic disaster.

Adaku, the ambitious widow of the dead brother, makes sure that she is inherited by Nnaife. She comes to Lagos along with her four year old daughter to join Nnaife's family. As soon as Nnu Ego looks at her, sitting by the doorstep, "Jealousy, fear and anger seized Nnu Ego in turns" (118). She cannot control her feelings, and cannot welcome Adaku in her house. She also resents being addressed as 'Senior wife.' She strongly believes in the virtue of single-blessedness:

She was used to being the sole woman of this house, used to having Nnaife all to herself, planning with him what to do with the little money he earned.... But now, this new menace.... (118)

Even her father would not be of any help to her, and he would rather tell her:

Listen daughter, I have seven wives of my own. So why do you want to stand in your husband's way? Please don't disgrace the name of the family again. (119)

While the wife is agonised like this, the husband in question is delighted at his acquisition. Within a few hours of Adaku's arrival, Nnu Ego realises how precarious her position is and that hereafter she has to compete with Adaku for Nnaife's favour. Buchi Emecheta ironically comments: "Strange how in less than five hours Nnaife had become a rare commodity" (121). She minces no words in condemning this obnoxious tradition of inheritance of the widows and children of a dead brother.

The novelist's portrayal of female characters evokes a tremendous wave of sympathy. They are presented essentially as

underdogs. These characters display a spirit of camaraderie which enables them to cope up with the harsh realities of their lives. Nnu Ego and her first husband, Amatokwu, do not get on well with each other. But his second wife maintains cordial relations with Nnu Ego. In Lagos, Ubani's wife, Cordelia, and Nnu Ego also live on intimate terms. Cordelia tells Nnu Ego: "We are like sisters on a pilgrimage. Why should we not help one another?" (53). When Nnaife has been away in the sea or at war, Nnu Ego is helped by the women in the house on the Little Road. Nnaife's new wife, Okpo, is very warm towards Nnu Ego. She calls Nnu Ego 'mother': "She coiled up to her warmly as if she were her own daughter, and would do anything Nnu Ego said." (194). Buchi Emecheta appreciates the bond of sisterhood among the helpless African women. However, she feels that

... the ultimate solution rests with the individual woman alone, for she must recapture the initiative and restore the inner strength that has been sapped by poverty and institutionalized dependency.¹⁰

She wants every woman to develop strength of will even in the midst of hostile environment. This provides a clue to Emecheta's real forte as a protest writer.

While deploring the servile status of women in the African society, Buchi Emecheta holds women themselves responsible for their dependency and subordination. Women are essentially the possessions of men, first of their fathers and brothers, and then of their husbands and children. They are exploited by men at all stages in their lives. Nnu Ego exhibits her slave mentality when she allows her father to choose a husband for her. She says: "...if you wish it so, so it will be" (38). An African woman accepts without demur to follow all the customs which relegate her to an abject role in society. Realising this, Nnu Ego says:

But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build. (187)

Buchi Emecheta lashes out at the African male for mercilessly exploiting the credulous womenfolk. If the black men are treated as slaves by the whites, they in turn treat their own women as their slaves. So women are, so to say, doubly exploited, ethnically and sex-wise. She brings out clearly the callousness of men towards their women through Amatokwu's outburst of anger. He shouts to his wife, Nnu Ego:

I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile....If you really want to know, you don't appeal to me any more. (32)

He takes a new wife and degrades Nnu Ego to an unpaid farm labourer: "... if you can't produce sons, at least you can help harvest yams" (33). An African male has no stomach for a free and self-respecting woman. Eustace Palmer aptly observes:

The heroine Nnu Ego and her creator sternly reject this traditional concept which consigns the woman to cooking, providing comfort for her husband's bed and bearing children.¹¹

Though realisation comes to Nnu Ego not before the imminence of her death, there has been imperceptibly growing awareness in her about the woman - baiting tendency inherent in the social order of the day. Early in her life, even when she has been living with her first husband, Amatokwu, she realises that she is very docile and meek. She cries, "Oh, I wish I had the type of pride they say my mother had..." (32-33). When Adaku comes to Ibuza to be claimed by Nnaife as his wife, Nnu Ego gives vent to her resentment. She says:

... this type of woman who would flatter a man, depend on him, need him. Yes, Nnaife would like that. He had instinctively disliked her own independence, though he had gradually been forced to accept her. (118)

Buchi Emecheta sets much store by individual growth and self-reliance. Adaku and Mama Abby, by their success, stir an yearning for self-sufficiency in Nnu Ego. Although Adaku's success comes at the expense of her relationship with the family, Nnu Ego credits it and envies it. This is the clear indication of change in Nnu Ego's perspective.

The novelist's criticism of male chauvinism is evident from what she says about Nnu Ego's feelings after the latter becomes painfully aware of the slavery, though late in life:

... it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife...it was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. (137)

When Nnu Ego fervently prays

God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage... when will I be free? (186-7)

she is only voicing the genuine desire of all women for total

emancipation from serfdom. Nnu Ego also realises that education is the means through which a woman can become self-reliant and independent. It has been denied to her. Also, she does not want her children to go without it. She tells her son-in-law, Magnus: "My son, take Obiageli. See that in fifteen years' time she becomes a well-educated Miss" (223). Nnu Ego resents practices like polygamy, inheritance of dead brother's widows, preference for male children, stigma of barrenness, etc. But she is denied the necessary armour to fight out and eliminate these evils, thanks to her poverty, traditional upbringing and lack of education. Her refusal in granting prayers for children, after her deification, symbolises her revolt against such evil traditions.

Emecheta believes that to come out of the traditional bondage, education is *sine qua non* for the African women. The university educated Adah of her first two novels is the most self-willing and fulfilled heroine, whereas the illiterate Nnu Ego, at the other end of the spectrum, is the worst oppressed. She sees that men have the upperhand in the traditional society where women are degraded and brutalized. She knows that centuries of brain-washing has made it difficult for the African woman to change the order overnight. Aware of the efficacy of education, Nnu Ego reflects:

She and her children were ill-prepared for a life like this, where only the pen and not the mouth could really talk. Her children must learn. (179)

Knowing that mother-child relationship is sanctified in African society, the novelist emphasises the back-breaking grind of childbearing and childrearing in her novels. She comes out with a "harsh and embittered" portrayal of motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood*. A husband and children are portrayed as

... millstones around the mother's neck, or as greedy insects who suck out and drain her life's blood.¹²

Katherine Frank also observes:

The complete futility of motherhood that we find in *The Joys of Motherhood* is the most heretical and radical aspect of Emecheta's vision of the African women.¹³

Buchi Emecheta has contempt for conventionally submissive women. She strongly believes that the individual's strength of will and independence of spirit alone determine her success or failure: "It is not enough to complain about one's sexual victim-

ization; one needs to do something about it."¹⁴ It is not a matter of surprise if strong-willed and independent Adah Obi and Aku-nna refuse to accept predefined roles of female subordination. But if Nnu Ego, the most illiterate and traditional heroine, realises the importance of independence and yearns for it, it is a remarkable thing.

Adaku, the co-wife of Nnu Ego, serves as a motivating force for the latter in her realization of the need for self-reliance and freedom for woman. Adaku is a remarkably resourceful woman who undermines the tradition and defies the restrictive nature of an unfair polygamous system by simply walking out of her husband's life to become an independent woman, to do business on her own and to succeed in the male-dominated world. Spurred by her failure to bear male children, she takes up cudgels at the tyrannical tradition. The novelist uses Ona, Nnu Ego's mother, to register her protest against the stereotypes usually associated with women in the traditional society. Ona declines to marry Agbadi, Nnu Ego's father, because she thinks marriage leads to subservience. She does not want to stoop to any man and be bound by his authority.

The Joys of Motherhood gives the impression that Buchi Emecheta is still at the cross-roads for taking a decisive stand on the besetting evils afflicting the African woman. She has explored the past and the present of the living conditions of the African woman in all her five novels. The question now is whether

...Emecheta will be able to look ahead and imagine a future for African woman — a future which will embrace and integrate their African and female identities and bestow a measure of wholeness on lives that have been so fragmented and incomplete.¹⁵

In her next novel, *The Destination Biafra*, Buchi Emecheta has clearly defined her stand. A militantly feminist heroine, Debbi Ogedemgbe, is portrayed to show that the modern African woman does not accept the position prescribed to her by men. Debbi is Oxford-educated and highly independent. She joins the Nigerian army and plays a very important role in the Civil War. She rejects marriage and motherhood, which have been the goals of a traditional African woman:

... *Destination Biafra* clearly signals a turning point in Emecheta's development, for in it she attempts to create what can only be called a New

African Woman who departs radically from the roles, values, constraints and aspirations of the generations of women who have gone before her.¹⁶

Through her bitter denunciation of the male dominance and the male chauvinism responsible for the atrociously inhuman conditions of life of woman in her custom-bound society, Buchi Emecheta has revealed herself as an uncompromising feminist. To measure the depth of her feminist zeal, it is apt to quote an African woman critic who says:

Emecheta's solution to the woman's problem is *avante garde* and in itself brutal. The rejection of marriage and all it stands for runs through all her novels. She defines matrimony as slavery... hers is a crusade to debunk the myths of superiority of man over woman and the sacredness of the marriage institution....¹⁷

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¹⁰*Ibid.*

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FEMINISM IN *THE DAY IN SHADOW*: ARCHETYPAL PATTERNS AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Urbashi Barat

Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* (1971) has attracted little favourable critical attention from the feminists. While the realism of its portrayal of the protagonist's suffering has generally been acknowledged, the novel on the whole has been attacked as "a bad feminist book.... antifeminist, pro-male" (Jaidev 1991:59-60), and therefore irretrievably politically incorrect:

The litany of complaints is a formidable one. Simrit, its protagonist, is an educated woman, a professional writer, and yet she allows her self-image to be battered by Som's patriarchal domination. She gathers up courage to leave him only when he himself refuses to continue with a failed marriage (admittedly, however, the fact that she has already met someone who will later provide her a convenient shoulder to rest on has little to do with her decision). She signs the Consent Terms of her divorce settlement without understanding their implications, and when she is free of Som, she turns to Raj, not to her own inner resources, to achieve selfhood. Above all, the person upon whom she depends for mental and emotional sustenance displays, in spite of his aggressive feminist sentiments, the same male condescension, the same patriarchal impulses, that had shaped Som's behaviour towards her. The equilibrium that she achieves at the end of the novel is, then, all too probably a spurious one. What makes things worse is the impression that Sahgal herself, by sharing Simrit's acceptance of the status quo, "diminishes her women as much as men diminish them" (Jaidev 60). But is this view justified?

In the first place, the novelist's feminist stance cannot be evaluated only by a reading of Simrit's story. For *The Day in Shadow* is not only her story but Raj's, Som's, Sumer Singh's and Sardar Sahib's as well. It is a story of a woman's attempt to establish her personhood, of three men in their different ways aiming at success, of a nation trying to find direction in the midst of social and political upheaval; each story, each character, tells upon the others, so that each becomes a metaphor for changing human values and unchanging human nature. Hence, for ex-

ample, the contrast between Simrit's '*Brahmin* parents' (emphasis added) and Som's 'commercial flash' (3-4); the reference to caste is not a gratuitous inclusion, for the Brahmin has traditionally been the symbol of self-abnegation, withdrawal, renunciation and quiescence, and is identified here with the resignation of the weak and the victimized, of the values of a dying civilization under attack from a new world in which self-interest, self-aggrandizement and money force their way. Hence, too, the constant comparison that Raj makes between Hinduism and Christianity which would have been out of place if the novel were only about Simrit.

Thus the woman-as-victim motif--which includes not just Simrit but also Pixie, the young widow forced to submit to Sumer Singh's sexual exploitation, and Shaila, Raj's erstwhile girlfriend who has to opt out of their relationship because of societal pressures and learns to believe it never existed--is an image of the exploitation inherent in a patriarchal society; and Sumer Singh's father, Brij, Sardar Sahib (and the India of the past he represents), and even Lalli are as much the victims of the power games played out here. *The Day in Shadow*, then, cannot and should not be read only as a deliberately or unconsciously anti-feminist work; indeed, its political framework is itself an indication of a feminist stance, for, as Margaret Atwood points out, politics is about power:

who's got it, who wants it, how it operates: in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how. (1982:353)

Sahgal's novel is, moreover, a characteristically feminine novel, not because the author is so thoroughly indoctrinated in patriarchal ideas that she "speak [s] and think [s] like men want [women] to" (Jaidev 60), but because the people, the situations and the narrative structure that she employs are based on recognizable feminine archetypes in which protest and hard-thinking analysis subvert the surface acceptance. As Annis Pratt notes,

to use our drive for authenticity in order to shape feminine archetypes into fiction, to bring elements of our inner world into consciousness and give them shape in the social form of the novel, is an act of defiance with perilous consequences. (1981:11)

Victimization and survival are thus the basic themes of women's fiction all over the world. They are an intrinsic part of

the feminine psyche, and reveal themselves in women's writing even if the authors do not directly engage in an open critique of a patriarchal society or present the woman's attempt to achieve selfhood. Certainly *The Day in Shadow* shows at least one woman clearly repudiating her role of victim and believing that she has achieved autonomy. How authentic that autonomy is, it is, of course, another matter, and this I will discuss later. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that a study of the archetypal patterns and the interpersonal situations in the novel will extend our understanding and enhance our appreciation of *The Day in Shadow*, and perhaps help to establish the novelist's feminist credentials. An archetype is, after all, not a rigid stereotype, and can indicate through its fluidity the possibility of positive change and growth.

Simrit's marriage is a typical example of the woman's archetypal "enclosure in the patriarchy" (Pratt 39-40). Matrimony in women's fiction--whether by Kate Chopin or Anita Desai, Alice Walker or Jean Rhys--is at once the inevitable destiny of the average woman and the weapon with which she is bludgeoned into accepting male hegemony, the retardation of her emotional and intellectual growth and the stifling of her attempts at selfhood. Having chosen her husband, Simrit finds she does not have the freedom to choose anything else, not even such trifling domestic matters as "chair covers and curtains" (38). Her tastes, her ideas, her values are quite different from her husband's, but it is Som's wishes and his desires which prevail, smothering her initiative and her interest in living, till in the end she feels she is just "a cog in the machine" (38)--the cliché symptomatic of a mind that can no longer think--unable to "look ahead, make decisions, actively be,... feeling as if large pieces of her had been cut out with scissors, with an icy wind blowing through the gaps" (16).

Archetypal images of suffocation recur through the novel's portrayal of marriage, especially in descriptions of Simrit and Som's sexual relationship: "at night she dreamt the incredible cliffs were leaning lower and lower over their car, preparing casually to crush it" (49). She can respond to Som only when she is pregnant, not because she wants children but because Som is different then, gentle and vulnerable. But after "the baby came he would go back to imprisoning them within the act" (25). His decision, therefore, not to have any more children effects a

permanent destruction of their sexual and marital relationship. Her complete marginalization from Som's world, in which her role is merely decorative and whose values she finds antagonistic to human feeling, now makes her sexually frigid, an emotional and nervous wreck, resembling the feminine archetype of the mad wife, who is torn apart by her own "complicity [in accepting conventional gender norms] and repressed critical intelligence" bearing upon "the other experiences of wifehood--limitations of freedom, submission to husbands, diminished eroticism" (Pratt 57).

In the eyes of the world, however, Som is an impeccable husband, good-looking, faithful, a good provider; yet he does not realize what he does to her by his instinctive and archetypal male response to the woman's longing for autonomy and space. There is further irony in the fact that, as in the archetypal woman's novel (Pratt 48), it is Simrit herself who has chosen to marry Som, and continues to submit to his destruction of her selfhood as though this were an inevitable and acceptable part of marriage. And when she breaks free of Som, her turning to Raj is one more instance (see *Middlemarch*, for instance) of the woman's continued quest for an equal relationship in which she can find both true love and herself, and of a promise of hope for the future.

Remarriage is actually Raj's idea. Simrit herself is not interested; she knows she does not need marriage (232). That is why Raj feels impelled to make that controversial one-sided announcement about their forthcoming marriage, without consulting her beforehand, so that he can forestall her objections and evasions. Simrit, characteristically, makes no commitment, but his promise of 'enduring comradeship' (233) and sexual fulfillment makes her believe that with him beside her--but not necessarily with him as husband--she has at last achieved autonomy: "From this high spot an immense valley of choices spread out before her gaze and she felt free at last to choose what her life would be" (236). She looks forward, that is, to a renewal of her freedom, not to marriage, even if it is to the archetypal "green-world lover" (Pratt 16).

But Simrit does hero-worship Raj; she believes "Men like him were born to lead and educate, sometimes to triumph just when it seemed fortunes could go no lower" (236). Raj himself treats Simrit like a concerned parent with a recalcitrant child; he

'orders' her around, condescends to her, and always tries to make her accept his point of view. Ram Krishan thinks affectionately, "Raj's eyes on his woman were those of a man in charge" (232). In spite of his feminist convictions, and his admiration for Simrit's integrity and grit (38), Raj, then, seems to exemplify R. W. Connell's view that

Men...enjoy patriarchal power, but accept it as if it were given to them by an external force, by nature or convention or even by women themselves, rather than by an active social subordination of women going on here and now. (1987:125)

Simrit's admiration for him, her acceptance of his assertiveness, very naturally gives rise to doubts about whether she has in reality been able to reject the power of patriarchy. This may also, however, and in my view more accurately, be regarded as an expression of the novelist's ironic view of the ambiguity in man-woman relationships in an unequal society.

It must also be borne in mind that Raj is no simple patriarchal symbol nor idealized "green-world lover," but a typical Indian male (note the emphasis on his muscular Christianity) who is genuinely unselfish in his hopes and desires for Simrit: "It was not a question of Simrit for himself--at least not until he had some sign from her. It was Simrit for herself he wanted, Simrit to forsake her shadows and begin to live" (167). Besides, he may help Simrit in practical ways to cope with the problems of day-to-day living without a husband after seventeen years of marriage; but he cannot and does not change her life for her. Simrit has to do that herself.

His description of her children as her 'litter' is insensitive, but it is, Simrit realizes, an appropriate term for the kind of maternal instinct she feels. She is pushed towards understanding her relationship with them, towards recognizing that her children might have needs and desires different from hers, towards accepting that the woman is more than a role, even if it is that of the apparently hallowed one of mother, one of the fetishes of patriarchy. At the end of the novel, she can leave the children occasionally to their own devices without feeling guilty, and she can even acquiesce in Brij's desertion, painful though it is, without making him feel guilty. As Margaret Hall points out:

Many kinds of crises and conflict result from changes in identity, but these are potentially constructive transitions rather than destructive occurrences.

If we fear or resist change, crises and conflict become destructive for ourselves and others. (1990:42)

Simrit accepts the challenge of change not because she is too weak to resist it or because Raj forces it on her, but because she is strong enough to "reformulate [her] assumptions" (Hall 4) about life and individual fulfilment.

Her search for this fulfilment leads her to initiate, again without guilt, her sexual involvement with Raj-- a development which would normally have been unthinkable for a woman of her social conditioning (and in the social climate of the period when the novel was written). The awakening of her Eros-- "one of the primal forces leading the personality through growth towards maturity, as necessary to human development as intellectual growth and the opportunity for significant work" (Pratt 74)-- helps her to break out of the patriarchal enclosure. Despite Raj's domination, it is clearly Simrit who makes her own decisions about their relationship.

Neither does she agree with everything he says. He may insist that living is "acquaintance with things in the raw," but Simrit's "own replenishment" comes from "another source, from untouched unspoilt non-human things" (34). Her writings continue to centre not on people but on nature, the "great objective inheritance, unbegun and unending, with its cycles of steady passionless renewal" (36). This involvement with nature is, again, archetypally feminine; as Simone de Beauvoir remarks, "nature represents what woman herself represents for man, herself and her negation, a kingdom and a place of exile; the whole in the guise of the other" (1953:710-11). Simrit's lack of interest in politics, similarly, has behind it the archetypally feminine rejection of conventional notions of time and space because they have little relevance to those who are excluded, marginalized, victimized (Pratt 11). When at the end of the novel "an active interest in the people around her" begins to stir in Simrit, it is a mark of her participation in life, of her renewal, and not of her being overwhelmed by the force of Raj's personality (Pankaj K. Singh 1991:139). "When women have time to think and reflect about themselves and the world, they can develop a sense of who they are and cultivate this conscious identity" (Hall 2). Simrit's quietness is restraint, not quiescence; her silence is a mark not of acceptance but of disagreement.

Simrit's responses are the subversive protest of the weak, the disinherited and the marginalized. Her personality has been shaped by her feminine experience in a patriarchal society, which, as Karen Horney points out in *Feminine Psychology*, prevents her from achieving self-confidence, and inculcates in her a degree of dependence on love in relationships that the men in *The Day in Shadow* cannot share. Above all, she is the child of a "scholarly, gentle-dealing" father and an "unworldly mother" (31), "Brahmin parents with their instinctive withdrawal from anything outside their fold" (3). Sahgal's characters have been shaped and defined by their past; the novel, therefore, constantly interposes past and present to suggest their interpenetration and to show how interpersonal relationships form character and destiny. This mingling of past and present, this feeling that time has

a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away.

--as Elaine Risley, Atwood's narrator-protagonist in *Cat's Eye*, puts it (3) --instead of a clear linear progression, is again archetypally feminine (Pratt 11).

The novel's subliminal message and the novelist's own political position may be understood, in fact, by an examination of the interpersonal relationships in *The Day in Shadow*. Interpersonal theories of personality and behaviour (incidentally, much in vogue in the two decades that shaped Sahgal's vision, the late fifties to the mid-seventies), generally, hold that personality is created by and exists only within a social context (Sullivan 1953:110-11). Naturally, all the men in the novel, all part of a male-dominated and male-oriented world, should have similar attitudes to man-woman relationships (as do all the women). Both Som and Sumer Singh's patriarchal harshness and Raj and Ram Krishan's paternalistic "rich warm concern" (16) are part of the same social conditioning. Moreover, since interpersonal relationships at various stages of a person's development shape his or her subsequent behaviour, the novel constantly emphasizes the differences in experiences with parents and peers of the three major characters to explain the differences in their relationships with each other.

Som is a survivor of the trauma of the Partition that has deprived him of his roots and the material comforts that had spelt security and well-being for him; he has managed to scramble ahead by an unscrupulous exploitation of everyone he has come into contact with. What in Sullivan's phrase is his "malevolence" (Sullivan 213) is really the response of his self-system to his anxieties about survival. Raj, too, belongs to what is now Pakistan (the contrast between the original homeland of the two men and Simrit's 'Brahmin' India is deliberate), and like Som he has no family. But where Som had lost everything during the partition, it was Raj's father who had been deprived of stability and ties with the past, again, not through cataclysmic political upheaval like Som but by his own action, his conversion to Christianity which had forced him to "brave [e] the rough emotional weather of an immigrant on his own soil" (104). From his parents, then, Raj has learnt of the importance of an active commitment to people, to principles and causes, and to decry the pull of the past that matters so much to Simrit (104-5). His ill-fated love-affair with Shaila has further strengthened his Christian-convert anger over Hindu quiescence and resignation; he sees Simrit's tax burden, as he had seen Shaila's withdrawal, as a Christian views Hindu inaction: "the mirror of a whole culture, people--especially women--forever taking things lying down" (140).

The differences between the two men are particularly apparent in the way they respond to Simrit's basic interpersonal need of tenderness (Sullivan 37-41)--a term that recurs through the novel whenever her feelings are described. Som, however, is so self-engrossed that he cannot give her the tenderness she longs for, nor arouse her own tenderness. Instead, his continued attacks on her self-system lead her deeper into anxiety, humiliation, nightmarish fears and other neurotic symptoms such as tears and emotional outbursts. There is no interpersonal accommodation between them which can help them to build a satisfying relationship. Interpersonal theorists have pointed out how faulty communication is, especially common in family relationships (Koestler 1954:218); the final phase of their marriage is thus marked by their inability to communicate and then by the closing of all communication channels. Raj, however, is able to satisfy Simrit's need for tenderness, because he is sensitive about other people's feelings and is hurt easily; their relationship is an adult and intimate one, for he regards her as an equal and not an object of

gratification. Where Som and Simrit had different role expectations from each other, neither Raj nor Simrit expect each other to act according to set roles. This relationship is, therefore, likely to last.

Som and Simrit's marriage exhibits many of the characteristic marital/sexual "games people play" (Berne 1964), for interpersonal relationships are usually based on satisfying individual needs: each person in the relationship wants something from the other to satisfy a lack he or she perceives in himself or herself (Thibault and Kelley 1959). Simrit had married Som because he had contrasted "so vividly with her solitary book-loving childhood. Som was colour and life and action"(4). As she begins to realize how his very vividness has destroyed her selfhood, she tries at first to compromise, and they create a game in which there is no intensity, depth, devotion or partnership. Such games are finally self-defeating, and Simrit has to decide to terminate the relationship in order to regain autonomy.

When, however, she tries to establish a new love-relationship, she again chooses someone who in his assertiveness, confidence and domination is characteristically male and a contrast to herself--an archetypally feminine choice (Pratt 78). There is irony, therefore, in both the choices she makes, but there is also considerable psychological truth. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose* --a feeling that is reinforced by the cyclical nature of the story, which begins and ends with a party in a luxury hotel in Delhi in honour of Sumer Singh to which Raj takes Simrit. Raj's purpose on the first occasion was to get her to socialize and establish herself as a person in her own right in a society which recognizes women only as decorative appendages to their husbands, and sees a divorcee as the object of unhealthy speculation, "as if divorce were a disease that left pock marks" (4): a purpose which is defeated in the very step he takes, for Simrit feels an outsider in this "husband-centered [sic]" world in which she needs a man by her side for identity. And she is invited again to Shah's party at the end of the novel not because her host accepts her personhood but because the new Foreign Minister, Sumer Singh, wishes her to be his new sexual conquest.

Does Sahgal wryly suggest, then, that there is no escape for women, that the new confidence that Simrit feels in her selfhood will soon prove illusory? The novelist's attitude is, as this paper

has attempted to show, an ambivalent one. What she has done is to indicate that the woman's path to authentic personhood is full of thorns and unexpected pitfalls, and that it is in her power to extricate herself and find her own happiness. Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier had walked into the sea when she had discovered that autonomy was not possible in a patriarchal society. Nayantara Sahgal's Simrit survives, though not entirely on her own terms, in an imperfect world where no one, not even man, can live entirely on his or her own terms.

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THE FEMINIST UPSURGE IN JAYA'S EGO IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE*

J.P. Tripathi

Like Virginia Woolf or Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande is a prose rhapsodist of feelings, sentiments and emotions passing through human consciousness. Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande specialise in depicting the undulations of the female ego or self under the pressure of critical human situations and emotional relationships. Their attention is also focused on feminine suffering in the complex cultural stresses and strains in Indian society, having strong past moorings. Both Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande explore human relationships in modern Indian society, particularly the husband- wife relationship. Shashi Deshpande's women, like those of her predecessor, are tolerant, obedient and submissive. But a feminist awakening and upsurge is all along notable in their feelings and conduct. The title of the novel *That Long Silence* implies a belated rebellion, a postponement of aggressive behaviour for long till postponement cannot be made any more. The dam of silence and tolerance is broken and the result is flood of egotistical assertions and emotional explosion.

The wisdom that Jaya derives in this situation is to follow her will and act accordingly. If we focus our attention on the propriety or justifiability of her will or ego, the result may be mixed. Her conduct is not the model of righteousness or even right; she may be wrong or very wrong, but she is human and her reaction has a feminine modernist quality, making her a modern or new woman without abjuring the totality of the obligations of the typically traditional woman in India. As the title of the novel indicates, Jaya for very long in her past life tried to play the role of traditional woman, the embodiment of tolerance, suffering and courage. However, her courage deserts her and she becomes the modern egotistical self-assertive rebellious woman -- all these being marks of modern feminist awakening. But the desertion of the traditional submissive role and adoption of the new role do not leave the psyche of Jaya unstinted and intact. She is in great emotional turmoil. It is this emotional turmoil and suffering that the novelist depicts with rare skill, and as has been rightly pointed out by Prof. Iyenger : "Raji, Shashi and Juliette all three write about the tears in things, the little upsets in life, the price one has

to pay for one's acute self-awareness, and the loneliness that becomes more pronounced as one gets older and older."¹

When the human ego sinks into the flood of sufferings and its power of toleration reaches the brink of negation, freedom to act becomes an existential necessity. Otherwise freedom to act at will may lead to perfect libertinism and disorder in social and human relationships. Truly speaking, the right of action at will is granted only to the *sthita pragya*, the man with discretion and enlightenment. Jaya is exactly the opposite of the enlightened creature with discretion. She is torn between love and hate, liking and disliking for her own husband and life situations. Such a creature is the least entitled for the right of free action. She must follow rules and customs and should continue as an obedient and submissive wife as part of the Hindu Culture and righteous path for a married woman. But this would be another extreme of tyranny and mechanical subservience to a husband as if he were a god to his wife. The novelist Shashi Deshpande has chosen a humanistic by-line, a psychological solution to Jaya's problem. She is allowed indulgence in her own egotistical feelings. The smouldering fire of suppressed feelings, the maintenance of self-control, the pursuit of the mechanical role of mother and son, the need to cater to the physical and emotional needs of husband and children must remain suspended for a while, or be forgotten and her real feminine soul, her pent up sufferings and feelings must find an outlet. The lid of self-control must be opened and left open for a while to allow the smouldering feelings an outlet.

The element of tiredness and disgust, the bearing of many types of burdens while playing the role of ideal Hindu wife, the discard of her selfhood and identity as a writer and subordinating everything to the wifely role accumulate and tell upon her nerves and weaken her emotional equipoise, effortfully maintained all along. But Mohan, under the pressure of his suspension and social complications arising from it and nervous irritations caused by humiliation and the need of hiding facts from family and friends, accuses Jaya of changed behaviour in the days of adversity. The undesirable and untimely accusation puts her into an aggressive and almost sadistic posture, almost unnatural and insane. A mood of aggressiveness and revenge, anger and irritation, overpower her. The pressure of irony and bitterness, the agony of being misunderstood, overtake her and she giggles fiercely on Mohan's

accusations: "I had to control myself, I had to cork in this laughter. But it was too late. I could not hold it any longer. Laughter burst out of me, spilled over, and Mohan stared at me in horror as I rocked helplessly."²

Jaya, like every wife, had fed Mohan and her son Rahul on affections and love in and out of time in all circumstances of life in the past. The novelist does not point out the fact that Jaya needed to be loved herself or that hers was a love-impoverished heart. In fact, the process of loving is itself rewarding enough; loving blesses doubly. But the novelist keeps silent on this side of the story. The smouldering firewood of bitterness, waiting, accumulated hurts and injuries, disgust with the role of a wife and mother--primarily a feminine role -- and undesirable feelings of every type tolerated so far but intolerable from now onwards, go up in flames; Jaya's disgusted laughter is a cathartic act for her, less violent, but similar to that of Maya, the heroine of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*. Jaya's laughter is a purgative act for her but a stimulant to the misery of Mohan, her husband, whose miseries are increased manifold and who in humiliation deserts the house and runs away in disgust from society because of the accusation of accepting bribe.

This is a moment of crisis in the development of the plot of the novel. It is followed by a denouement which is very short and which is based on implication. The hint is that Mohan will come back again as he tried to ring and the phone rang many times in the empty house. Jaya also visualises the future life of the family and children for her. This is also the acme in the growth of the characters of Jaya and Mohan. The earlier revelation of the character of the hero and the heroine was only a preparation for this moment. Jaya is positively in a state of remorse and a mood of reconciliation. Life is to go ahead and will give a limited liberty to both to act *yathe chchhasi tatha kuru*-- every individual is left with a choice, very limited though it is, almost an existentialist predicament for man.

Jaya's preparations and training should have made her a more stout and mentally and emotionally strong lady; forbearance and toleration are supposed to be the strong traits in her character and in fact they are. Had her emotional balances continued and not failed, perhaps the novel would have been different. In her failure Jaya is a weak woman; in her failure she is a new, modern woman

who is weaker than the traditional woman of Hindu society. This is the new feminist element in the novel, as well as in Shashi Deshpande. The depiction of such intense feelings of the female ego gives a sharp focus to the psychological insights of Shashi Deshpande. All incidents are presented psychologically. Like the female protagonists in Jane Austen's novels, Jaya is in pursuit of self-knowledge: "Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real you never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces."³ So we have Jaya trying to know herself, the narrator heroine painting her own picture of life.

There has been an egocentric note in Jaya's character right from her childhood. Her father loved the classical music of Polushkar and Faiyaz and recommended it to Jaya, but the child Jaya was fond of the lilting music of Rafi and Lata.⁴ Her rebellion to her own father speaks of her temperamental nature. As a wedded lady, sleeping with Mohan, she is invaded by sights and sounds of her neighbour's emotions: "Anger, fear, hatred, envy, tenderness, love--all of these came to me as I lay in bed, a fascinated listener."⁵ Her oversensitive nature has been emphasised in these scenes.

Shashi Deshpande focuses on male-female rivalry as felt by Jaya. The egocentric vein in her temperament does not strive for the total fusion of identity with Mohan; she keeps intact a little bit of her own identity, her own individuality. As a married lady she has become dependent on Mohan and this she considers derogatory; she feels she is reduced to "the stereotype of a woman; nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support."⁶ In married life she wishes to maintain her separate identity. Her desire for self-knowledge makes her realise her "awesome power over him."⁷ Dada reveals humorously another strain of her character as a child and calls her a "pampered, bad-tempered only daughter."⁸

The novelist endows Jaya with a healthy insight into her own temperamental weaknesses. Thus Jaya's desire to get the trinkets and jewellery for her children's sake is nothing but her greed under disguise: "Peel off the excuses and the avarice remained."⁹ A predominant adolescent trait characterises Jaya's nature even when she has become a grown up lady and complains of her mother's selling the house making her homeless and causing her father's untimely death. Kamat considers her a "sulky, glowering

teenager"¹⁰ when Jaya reveals her over-preoccupation with her parents. Kamat's other comment on her character is very meaningful: "I must say you have the monstrous ego of a child."¹¹

Shashi Deshpande has made the revelation of Jaya's real nature the very core of the novel. Jaya is in conscious pursuit of self-knowledge. Thus various discordant notes meet and unite in her complex nature. She is a model of patience, endurance, devotion, integrity, rebellion, defiance and disobedience at the same time. She is all along pursuing the idea of a separate female identity. She finds it difficult to put together the different discordant facts of her personality. Thus the young bride Suhasini is at loggerheads with the mature and seasoned Jaya who is both restrictive and destructive. The tradition-bound docile woman in Jaya is irreconcilable with the modernist individuality-seeking Jaya. The loyal, loving Jaya -- the devoted wife of Mohan -- is irreconcilable with the epicurean Jaya relishing a momentary embrace with Kamat. So, the novelist is able to impart a complex identity to Jaya, focusing at the same time on the egoistic and the altruistic aspects of womanhood.

It is impossible to present an objective picture of a person, for every body has a prejudiced personal view.¹² Thus the young, happy bride Suhasini is different from the "soft, smiling, placid, motherly"¹³ Jaya. In Jaya's view the "poor idiotic Suhasini"¹⁴ believes in security, while the mature Jaya sees security nowhere. Jaya the mature woman has to play two roles: one that of a loyal wife serving her husband and son and keeping her mind off the office-life, like Gandhari bandaging her eyes;¹⁵ and the other one of a modernist wife, befriending the CE for the protection of her husband. She plays well the first role, but in the second she fails badly. Mohan's insistence on her playing the second role leads to misunderstanding and rebellion. It is the second role that goes against her grain and provides a sound logical basis for her contemptuous laughter as described earlier. Further, this reveals that her conduct is not totally illogical, though it is exaggeratedly disproportionate.

The novelist measures the relationship of Jaya with Mohan against the backdrop of Maitreyi and Yajnavalkya, the former desirous of immortality¹⁶ which is regarded foolish by Jaya, the modernist woman seeking only the security of family.¹⁷ Jaya is her real self in moments of loneliness. Her writer-self is her real

self: "Mohan's wife. Rahul and Rati's mother. Not myself."¹⁸ Her experience about selfhood is that there is no "one self in a man which may be discovered."¹⁹ One has one's self tied to all persons one is closely related to and a man changes with time. True, man's self is subject to flux and one has no absolute identity-- the self is in a melting pot. Thus Mohan's desertion and disappearance left Jaya free as a writer with wifely burdens gone; but Mohan's desertion makes her unbalanced and she would fail to work as a writer also with her emotional bonds totally broken. And so she is not free to act at will; she is a slave of her emotional affiliations and under limited conditions only she can follow the doctrine of *yathe chchhasi tatha kuru*. Shashi Deshpande is with Jane Austen in presenting the inner feelings in objective manner. The narrative burden is put on Jaya, the heroine and every thing is presented in first person narrative technique. The technique enables Jaya to present her subjective states as faithfully as she can. She is the least concerned with the presentation of the feelings of Mohan.

The novelist manages to create tension by presenting the conflict between the earlier self of Suhasini, the optimistic bride who considers wifhood as a great fortress of happiness, and the later disillusioned wife resembling the mature Jaya. The earlier self is dead, the later one is wriggling under pain: "Suhasini was dead, yes, that was it, she was the one Mohan was mourning... we had killed her between us.... I had finally to bear it myself, the burden of wifhood."²⁰ Jaya is able to maintain adequate psychological balance and avoid the state of split personality.

The desertion of Mohan has dazed and puzzled Jaya; she is no more herself. She is forced to ponder on her past as a girl, as an adolescent lover, as a married wife and mother and as a writer. She is forced to resort to soul-dissection. There is a parallelism between Maya, the heroine of *Cry, the Peacock*, and Jaya--both were pampered children. But whereas Maya is love-impooverished and also sex-starved, Jaya is not. No wonder the psychological imbalance of Maya results in insanity and violence, while that of Jaya ends only in violent giggle. It is only Jaya's self as writer that is being crushed and this leads her to a rebellion.

After Mohan deserts her, she loses her composure and "goes crazy"²¹ like her former friend Kusum. Her inner state is expressionistically described by the novelist in the following words: "I could feel myself gasping, drowning in the darkness, the wild,

flailing, panic-stricken movement that I was making taking me lower and lower into the vortex."²² The rhythm, the cadence, and the syntax of this prose are reminiscent of *Cry, the Peacock*. As writer Jaya is accused by Mohan of exhibitionism, particularly in the story in which she presents a couple with the husband not reaching out to the wife except in body.²³ The suppression of her artistic self, the writer's ego, is another sound reason for her emotional flare up, leading to Mohan's desertion. During Mohan's disappearance, she frantically resorts to hectic writing.

Jaya herself describes how she gave up writing for the joy of wifehood and motherhood: "Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine--as Mohan's wife, as Rahul's and Rati's mother...and so I had stopped writing."²⁴ Jaya's first shock in life came from her father's death: "They all stared at me...but I was blank again."²⁵ It is the child in her that often blossoms into independence as a woman and throws her into the temporary embrace of Kamat.²⁶ The rebellious and libertine strain in her heads her to the arms of Kamat for a while. There is a partial transparency in Jaya's actions and reactions. Soon she disengages herself from "that scarcely touching grasp" of Kamat. She believes for a while the loyal Hindu ideal of devotion to husband. Her romantic embrace is the feminist mark of the new woman. But after all the turmoil and travail, she concludes that a husband is a "sheltering tree" and she plays again the role of an orthodox Hindu wife. There can be no life without Mohan. His telegram confirms that he is coming. But life with Mohan now must be put on a new footing: "If Mohan returns, I thought, if only Rahul and Rati come back, we can begin living afresh."²⁷

The feminist upsurge of Jaya's ego becomes evident when we consider the husband-wife relationships of the old Hindu women and the modern woman. Jaya's mother never raised a voice against her father. Mohan thinks Jaya is not sufficiently trained to play the role of a good wife and that a woman in anger is "ugly and unwomanly."²⁸ Shashi Deshpande through Jaya-Mohan relationship has shed some light on modern love, sex, marital relationships, and has hinted at the domestic warfare of married couples.

The novelist focusses on some modernist elements in the novel, *That Long Silence*. The first is the pre-marital love of Jaya and Mohan before they are under the yoke of marriage. Mohan

was enamoured of Jaya's modernity and her modern education. With a new feminist frankness Jaya talks of interdependence of love and sex: "First there's love, then there's sex -- that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after living with Mohan I had realised that it could so easily be the other way round."²⁹ Woman's realisation between of her aloneness in the "act of sex"³⁰ and the possibility of love without bodily union³¹ (as in the case of the relationship between Jaya and Kamat) are discussed clearly and add an unorthodox frankness to an esoteric experience.

Tolerance and suffering, "Silence and Surrender"³² are seen as marks of goodness, but tyrannical mother-in-laws are considered as "Ghouls."³³ The Greek thought that "a woman is her womb"³⁴ fills Jaya with remorse and guilt after the abortion. At the face of it Jaya's predicament seems existential insofar as she often finds life absurd and meaningless. However, the feminist rebellion and defiance, epitomised in Jaya's conduct, are based on the balance of the rejection of bad and the acceptance of good in the time-honoured values and traditions. Different from Maitreyi concerned with the immortality of her husband only, Jaya, like most of the modern women, wants only worldly joys, security and family harmony.

Jaya's feminist awareness has a note of deterministic pessimism: "I felt a thickening in my throat, as if I was to burst into tears. It's not that life is cruel, but that in the process of our birth we submit to life's cruelty."³⁵ This cosmic awareness leads her to momentary gloom and to her adoption of aggressive tactics as a psychological defence, and this partly explains her mysterious giggle at Mohan and desertion of the dying Kamat. A modernist trait of Jaya's temper is her agnostic treatment of religion as symbol of tyranny and violence: "So many chariots of Jagannath promising us Moksha. But there was no moksha any more."³⁶ Nevertheless, the novelist gives an optimistic message through these words of Jaya: "...we have to go on trying."³⁷ One has to believe in one's self; Jaya will begin life anew, for life provides many choices.³⁸ She feels a compulsive sense of embracing life's obligations as life "has always to be made possible."³⁹ This is the wisdom Jaya has learnt in the tribulations of her life. Perhaps, almost always she will have an opportunity in life to act according to her will.

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²Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (Penguin Books, 1989), p. 122.

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⁴*Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 1.

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¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 121.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 125.

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²³*Ibid.*, p. 144.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 148.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 156.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁹Ibid., p. 95.

³⁰Ibid., p. 98.

³¹Ibid., p. 157.

³²Ibid., p. 36.

³³Ibid., p. 45.

³⁴Ibid., p. 107.

³⁵Ibid., p. 102.

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³⁷*Indian Writing in English*, p. 758.

³⁸*That Long Silence*, p. 192.

³⁹Ibid., p. 193.

FEMINIST CONCERNS IN SHOBHA DE'S *SNAPSHOTS*

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I

In 1928, Virginia Woolf delivered a modest lecture called *A Room of One's Own*. No body could have foreseen at that time that one day it would give rise to a new thinking on issues pertaining to the status and role of women. Talking about women's relationships, Virginia Woolf says that they are "too simple" and that "So much has been left out, unattempted."¹ While books like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949-50) nurtured the feminist ideology, it was in the seventies and eighties of the present century that various issues touching women were considered systematically. A positive sense of feminine identity has found recognition now, and women are stepping out of the rigid sex roles assigned to them traditionally. They are busy, in the Western world and the urban patches in India, with "self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men."² Conscious of the evils originating from patriarchy, they would not endorse the wisdom of Tennysonian separation of roles and spheres of activity: "Man for the field and woman for the hearth:/ Man for the sword and for the needle she" (*The Princess*, V. 427). Indian women novelists have concentrated on women's problems in their work and have given vent to a new approach to and consciousness of the emerging phenomenon. What was just a beginning in writers like Anita Desai has assumed a strident posture in Shobha De and others.

Shobha De burst upon the literary scene in 1988 with her best-seller *Socialite Evenings*, which was followed by *Starry Nights* in 1990, *Sisters* and *Strange Obsession* in 1992, *Sultry Days* in 1994, and *Snapshots* in 1995. The popularity of Shobha De's novels is due to their contents, her mastery over the art of story telling, and her use of the language. In fact, her novels seem to be the modern version of picaresque novels of the eighteenth century. The picaro in this case is a woman, but she, too, is avid of experiences, in search of which she goes from place to place. Shobha De began her career as a journalist in 1970 in the course of which she founded and edited three popular magazines -- *Stardust*, *Society* and *Celebrity* and acted as Consulting Editor to *Sunday* and

Megacity. It may be partly on account of her experience as a journalist that she is able to say things interestingly and with a courage of conviction in a language uniquely her own. Her novels also owe their incomparable popularity to her intimate understanding of the psyche of women and their problems.

Shobha De claims to be "a pioneer" in the field of "popular fiction" writing. She also claims to be "among the first to explore the world of the urban woman in India."³ Through her novels and essays, De has tried to shatter patriarchal hegemony. Women's significant difference underlies her sexuality, and it is from her sexuality that most of their problems arise. As Alice Jardine puts it, "The putting into discourse of 'woman' as that *process* diagnosed ... is intrinsic to modernity; indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman, and her obligatory, that is historical, connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, and speaking."⁴ Any sensible analysis of a literary work from feminist point of view will do well to bear this fact in mind. It is this factor that lends authenticity to Shobha De's treatment of women's problems.

Shobha De's fictional world has aroused curiosity and interest on the one hand and downright rejection and denunciation on the other. The works of this "high priestess of gossip and innuendo"⁵ have been regarded as "equivalent of Hindi films with their peephole voyeurism."⁶ When first published, Shobha De's novels evoked hostile reviews. *Socialite Evenings*, for example, was branded as a "high society potpourri, bland and banal," bristling with orgy-laced parties and "voyeuristic servings of souped-up, four-wheel-drive-sex-in-all-directions."⁷ Another reviewer found it "choked with listless lust" and criticised its "witless dialogue."⁸ *Starry Nights*, which with its brazen portrayal of sex and 'sexploitation' steals over a march over the earlier novel, was described as "confession of a man-eater."⁹ Despite their titillating details, what Shobha De's novels indicate is the arrival of a new Indian woman eager to defy rebelliously against the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. Her novels are not just a series of "bodice ripper."¹⁰ To David Davidar, they are serious attempts at "discovering India through Indian eyes."¹¹ One may not like everything in De's fiction, but her treatment of the contemporary urban Indian woman's challenges, predicament, values and life-style is surely not without significance. De herself would consider the treatment

of the Woman Question as the most significant contribution made by her work. She once said: "I write with a great deal of empathy towards women. Without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the woman's situation."¹² The present paper aims at considering Shobha De's treatment of feminist issues as found in her novels with particular reference to her latest work, *Snapshots*.

II

Shobha De's explosive new novel presents 'snapshots' from the life of six women who were friends at school -- "the 'girls' from Santa Maria High School, leading predictable, mundane lives of domesticity and imagined bliss."¹³ These friends had drifted away in due course and "disintegrated through marriages, transfers and unshared interests" (11). One of them residing in London is called upon to write, direct and produce a "bold and meaty" serial on "the exciting world of the Nineties Indian urban women," for which she needs "authentic voices" (222). The get-together of these 'Sisters of the Subcontinent' at the house of one of them, Reema, begins well. Despite their problems and initial resistance, they all attend it. There is so much to catch on and memories start to surface -- some happy, others bittersweet and some downright poisonous. As Swati, the spirit behind this get-together, tells them:

We aren't here just to chit-chat. I want to know everthing about everybody from the time we left school. Every single dirty detail. What happened to all the boyfriends? Where did the school crushes go? And the breathless infatuations? (90).

Infidelity, incest, rape, lies and even death and the evil that lurks beneath the apparently placid everyday lives of these six women form the substance of the novel appropriately called *Snapshots*. These women represent different kinds of urban women in India. They are hardly better than "schoolgirls playing adult games" (181). Forced to confront dark secrets that they thought lay buried deep in the past, these women begin to turn against one another and the mood of the party turns nightmarish, ending with the suicide of one of them. It is through their behaviour and conversation that Shobha De throws significant light on the predicament of women in India.

III

The cardinal issue thrashed by Shobha De relates to power, the desire to dictate and direct action and thinking of others, which is uppermost in human psychology. Hobbes is not the only one to talk about mortals obsessed with "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceases only in death." Shobha De writes:

Eventually, every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level. ... Control over the situation has been a male prerogative over the centuries. Women's destinies have been determined largely in that context alone. ... It is time they were made aware of their own potential and power. Shakti needs to be harnessed, directed and exploited for the furtherance of overall human development. The very concept of the sexes locked in eternal battle is negative and destructive. ... When one talks of shakti unleashed, one also remembers the two connotations of shakti -- the destructive avtaar is as potent as the creative one. It is in maintaining the state of equilibrium between these two opposing forces that can lead to creative and dynamic harmony. ... Men will have to come to terms with woman power.¹⁴

Shobha De's novels have emphasised the value of equivalence of power. Whenever this balance collapses, there is tension in society and double-dealings and hypocrisy predominate. The novelist can easily visualise a change in this respect taking place in the contemporary society, but men, she says, are not willing to accept it and "many men expressed their anxiety over the changed power equation."¹⁵

Significantly enough, the term 'power' and its synonyms have been reiteratively used in *Snapshots*. Who would know about the power game better than Champabai, a brothel-owner, who says to Rashmi:

Never give yourself to any man for free. You know why? Men don't value anything they get so easily. That's why we are here: to satisfy their lust, not for sex but power. Power over women. Power over us -- you and me. If they buy your sex, pay for you, they feel like kings. Give it to them with love for nothing and they'll kick you in the gut. (43)

In an affair with her husband's younger brother, Reema is said "to have invested your all into this crazy arrangement He has the power. You don't." (116) A perfect rake like Balbir asks these six women to be honest with themselves and tell him: "Do you fuck because you enjoy fucking? Or is it power-play?" (162). It is "powerful" people like Juan Mendonca who can play politics as

fiercely as trade on international exchanges (194). Even women like Swati look like a small fly before their resources -- Swati who has had "some kind of power over" her friends and others; "All you have to do is snap your fingers and the rest of us will jump" (181). Her capacity to "manipulate" has been variously recognised (183). Even Aparna, who has for her a "mixture of revulsion and fascination," has no option but to "reluctantly acknowledge the power Swati still exerted over her and to a lesser degree over the rest of them" (209). The basic theme of Shobha De's novels can thus be described in terms of the cat-and-mouse syndrome of powerplay.

Shobha De has brought in pertinently economic aspects of power struggle. "Eventually," she says, "everything boils down to money -- that great leveller. There can be no talk of independence for women, without economic self-sufficiency. An independent mind or free spirit is meaningless so long as the body and soul are being kept together by somebody else."¹⁶ Aparna, in *Snapshots*, is a "corporate woman, an *Indian* corporate woman. A businesswoman" who can fend for herself at the time of need (180), and it is on account of economic considerations that Rashmi and Swati lead 'liberated' life. Having exhausted her passion on Raju and in the wake of the resultant frustration, Reema turns into "an unfeeling, mechanical woman with her eyes fixed on the next big guy -- piece of jewellery, a prized acre of farmland, [and] gold in its most basic form. It was greed that kept her going. A greed that no longer excited her" (93). The 'new' Indian women who have attained economic independence are "a breed apart" from others. They enjoy economic independence and their attitude is characterised by a rare seriousness:

They were no-nonsense women who had 'take me seriously' written all over them. They even wore business suits to work and carried burgandy-coloured briefcases. ... They took their jobs with an earnestness that was almost terrifying in its intensity. ... Workaholism for women had become very fashionable.¹⁷

Shobha De, however, while advocating economic independence of women, would not approve of mania for money. She makes Aasha Rani of *Starry Nights* burst out on her overpowering mother: "Money, money, money. That's all you think of. Well, I'm fed up of being your money machine. I've done enough for everybody ... now I want to live for myself and enjoy my life."¹⁸ Money is important, she seems to suggest, but living one's own

life is even more important.

IV

The institution of marriage is of unrivalled significance in the life of young people in India. In the life of a woman it marks a pointing of maturing; it signifies the flowering of life. According to Dharmasastras, marriage is a sacrament. The ideal, however, has now got diffused with time and it is being dominated by ulterior considerations. "Marriage," says Simone de Beauvoir, "is the destiny traditionally offered by society."¹⁹ It has been pointed out that "History proves that marriage is essential to the well-being of human society, and that celibacy brings ruin upon states."²⁰ The institution of marriage has provided for the society's needs for love, security and children. On account of various factors such as sexual promiscuity, women's growing economic independence, increased rate of divorce and, more particularly, "the restless, exacting, often hysterical spirit ... which tends towards discontent, indiscretion and divorce,"²¹ the institution however is now on the verge of breaking up. Marriages are no longer supposed to be made in heaven.

Educated and attractive, confident and assertive socialite women in Shobha De's novels define marriage afresh, in which mutual fidelity till death (*naticarami*) is replaced generally by sexual freedom. Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life, which can be terminated at any time depending upon the whims of the partners. The change in attitude towards marriage represents, according to De, "a big step forward":

The terms underlying marriage have ... been redefined in recent times. With some amount of economic freedom, women have changed the basic rules somewhat. If a self-sufficient woman with a roof over her chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense, not because she is looking for a lifelong meal-ticket. Divorce, too, has got to be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is not compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage because she has nowhere else to go.²²

In *Snapshots*, women have diverse marital status. Reema and Surekha are married housewives, who have had arranged marriages and were able to get "a prize catch" each in "the highly competitive marriage market" (104). Rashmi is an unwed mother saddled with the responsibility of a bastard son. Swati and Aparna are divorcees. Swati led a life of her own with her former husband

in London. They led "Separate but friendly lives. ... We loved each other dearly but we led strictly individual lives" (189). And now she lives the life of a liberated woman. As for Aparna, she is not prepared to repeat the "mistake" of marrying again (149), and even the term 'husband' is an "Awful word" for her (24). Noor is still a maid and is doomed to die unmarried at the end of the novel.

Marriage is not regarded as essential in the fictional world of Shobha De. In *Sultry Days*, Deb says: "Who knows about marriage-sharriage. ... I am happy as I am."²³ When he does agree to marry Nisha, it is out of practical considerations of his "daal-roti, a warm bed, twice-a-week *maalish* and a daily screw."²⁴ That he never marries Nisha even after having a prolonged affair with her, eloquently testifies to his belief in the irrelevance of the institution of marriage. There is also a reference in the novel to "Typical Bombay marriage" in which "She goes her way and he goes his."²⁵ Such marriages do not last long. The incompatibility of the partners may be the chief reason of their dissolution. As one of them confides, "We tried it. But he wanted to walk counter clockwise. And I prefer clockwise. ... we both wanted to go in different directions."²⁶ Constancy and faithfulness in married life are just unthinkable in the case of such persons. Reema, in *Snapshots*, represents the majority view when she remarks: "Imagine not knowing any other body, any other feeling, any other sensation. Forever. Sounds terrible. Like eating dal-chawal day in and day out" (152). Fidelity in such persons' conduct and relationships is too much to expect. Their sexual behaviour turns out to be amoral and in many cases even abnormal. To Anjali of *Socialite Evenings*, for example, an illicit love affair is a dream come true. "This is the most beautiful thing to have happened to me," she declares, "This is the experience I've been waiting for."²⁷ This kind of expedient relationship, devoid of caring and sharing, emotional warmth and mutual fidelity, very often breaks down, resulting ultimately in suicide, divorce or dissipation.

V

According to Shobha De, all people need sex. It is something special, something beautiful, something shared. The woman would get sex on her terms now. "The very fact," she adds, "that sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three-letter word in India, is enough cause to celebrate."²⁸ But there is nothing

derogatory or clandestine in sex. In fact, sex is "the bedrock of all relationships."²⁹ The novelist, not unlike D.H. Lawrence, is never in favour of making a 'dirty little secret' of sex. She voices her concerns through her characters in all her novels. Her women are not unaware of their sex potential; only some priggish, tradition-ridden persons speak ill of it. For example, Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights* is "the dreamgirl of the millions."³⁰ She says to Kishanbhai: "All of you are just the same, but wait I will screw you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all, beat you at your own game."³¹ Anjali's affairs, in *Socialite Evenings*, with the Income-tax official, who finds her "exotic and unreachable," is a brief interlude, but she continues to go "mate stalking." Karuna, in the same novel, also concludes that "men like dogs could be conditioned through reward and punishment,"³² and her rewards and punishments would obviously be in terms of offerings and withdrawals of sexual favours. Any sexual experience is a grist to their libidinous mill. Like Anjali, they would declare about illicit affairs: "This is the most beautiful thing to have happened to me," and "This is the experience I've been waiting for."

Shobha De tears to pieces all notion of respectability associated with marriage. Her women discuss and practise sex with unusual candour. All sexual taboos are broken by them with gusto. The novelist makes them put forth candidly what they always feel but are afraid and inhibited to show. The verbal encounter between conservative Malini and Rita, a frustrated wife and a busy body, is illustrative of the attitude of the novelist to marriage and sex. Malini cannot tolerate the very idea of free sex and bursts on Aasha Rani:

SEX ! That is all you have -- SEX ! That is what women like you use. Cheap bitches -- part your legs and let any man in. Sex, sex, sex, dirty, filthy sex ! Perverts ! You must be a pervert. What do you do to him [Akshay] -- hab ? Suck his cock? Or suffocate him with your breasts?... Eventually, a man needs his wife and children.³³

Rita is pragmatic in her approach. She tells Malini that if she greets her husband with hatred in her eyes when he comes to her every night, he will turn to Aasha Rani for relaxation and sexual gratification. To Rita, romance in marriage is figment of imagination, for it "finishes the morning after the wedding night"; men are avid of "variety" and what follows thereafter is a protected life of "boredom."³⁴ The following words of Rita sum the novelist's indictment of hollowness and hypocrisy inherent in Indian mar-

riages:

Most women hate their husbands -- it's a fact. They hate marriage. That's also a fact. But what else they can do? What is the choice? The only way to make a marriage work is through sex -- and most women hate that too. But the day a man feels that his woman has lost interest in sex, and therefore in him, the relationship is finished and he starts looking elsewhere. Aasha Rani and her kind are always waiting.³⁵

Rita pleads for compromise in the marital relationship. She is not averse to even pretension if it makes the marriage work -- "to shut your eyes and part your legs, whether you feel like it or not. Because if you don't some other woman will." "A wife is acting all the time," she adds, "this is the world's best-kept secret. ... Everything is decided by the bed. On the bed. ... No woman should be foolish enough to be honest with her husband where sex is concerned."³⁶ Shobha De's views on marriage and sex would drive the last nail in the coffin of the age-old institution of marriage and patriarchy.

In her latest novel, Shobha De's views seem to have crystallised further. Sex to Rashmi is a matter of "mutual need, mutual dependency." According to her, it is mediocre women who use "sex as a bait"; the shrewd ones "hold their men, [and] keep them enslaved" (49). Swati, who acts as the novelist's spokesperson, regards sex as "a hobby"; "For some it can be an all-consuming one. For others, a passing fancy" (116). She does not fight shy of her affairs, for "There's nothing to be ashamed of" (164). Women like her rejoice in their sexuality. "... we rejoice in our sexuality," says she, "we don't suppress it. We don't dismiss it. We don't find it dirty. Sex doesn't threaten us. I am not afraid to fuck. I feel sorry for all you women hanging on so desperately to outdated ideas of purity, morality, chastity. It's pathetic" (165). She calls herself "a cock-worshipper" and elucidates her stance further:

Sex isn't filthy, ... our minds make it so. Look at Khajuraho, Konark ... have any of you studied the *Kama Sutra*? Fascinating. It's a pity we got brainwashed by some frustrated, repressed idiots. I think sex is a celebration --- the highest form of religion. (164)

in a country which nurtured the genius of liberal thinkers on sex like Kalidas, Jayadeva, Vidyapati and, more recently, Rajnish and continues to take pride in erotic art of Khajuraho and Konark, sex would be something prurient only to those who possess a repressed sensibility and a prurient mind. There is Aparna, in *Snapshots*, who, on account of her background and conditioning

by her mother's teachings, always has problem with her sexuality (207). This "reserved, aloof, a bit of a dragon lady," who was left "high and dry" by her husband, can "discover her sexual potential" with a person like Prem (7). Repression breeds guilt, which is in-built in her:

Aparna had grown up with shame. Shame about her body. Shame about her adolescent looks. Shame about her background. Shame about practically every aspect of her life. It was the environment she was raised in. Guilt was its defining feature. She couldn't recall a time when she wasn't made to feel acutely conscious of every small pleasure-- emotional or physical. (6)

Noor is the product of even a more repressive ethos. She has been presented in the novel as a "prematurely old and exceedingly shabby" person (61), who looks like a shrivelled up "dehydrated pea pod" (142), who possesses a "whiny voice", "Thin and reedy like a badly scratched record" (216). The novelist would not be surprised if such a person comes to acquire a "peculiar sexual equation" with her own brother (121).

Shobha De recommends a mature attitude to sex. It is not like baby food. Rashmi is addicted to sex like a narcotic substance. She says: "I love sex like I love food. It's the same sort of hunger" (134). She also says that 'nympho' should be regarded as her 'middle name'. The novelist is all the more critical of mechanical, loveless, routine sex. The chemistry of bodies has its own relevance in De's novels. Sex should have no other axe to grind. Rashmi and many others like her would care for sex without strings attached to it (134). The plight of the neglected wife is a favourite theme with De. In all her novels we come across "Neglected wives of men too busy making money to bother with making love to the beautiful women with cold bodies they'd abandoned back at home" (57). Reema's husband, Ravi, for example, "was indifferent to his wife's disappointments and longings most of the time. It was when they impinged on his life and made him miserable that he felt drawn into her world" (65). On account of his strenuous routine, we are told, he is so tired at night that he would finish his dinner in ten minutes and go to bed (166). There is utter lack of warmth and excitement in his "mechanical, predictable love making," (105) which would leave Reema "completely cold, physically and emotionally" (106). The married life of Surekha is not much different from Reema's. Her husband does demand his conjugal rights periodically, but "Surekha hated having sex with him -- detested every coupling."

She continues to sleep with him only to keep the marriage going. She would often say: " 'What is there? It doesn't cost me anything. I open my legs mechanically and stare at the clock on the wall across the bed. It's all over in about six to eight minutes' " (158). In her desperation she continues her lesbian relations with Dolly: "Their lives had become inextricably intertwined. Dolly and Surekha were like a well-adjusted, happily married couple. There was no passion to deal with any longer. Just enough physical familiarity to provide regular comfort" (159). The lot of Noor's mother is also a "cold, unfriendly bed" (57). While the Nawab is busy elsewhere trying to snare beautiful women, this "distant, cold woman, entirely shut off from her family and, perhaps, the world" continues to live in her "private sealed-off" world (51). She would ostracise one if her edicts are disobeyed (57), and the children would see her only when she is ready to meet them (52). But she would have no hesitation in "weeping prettily in the arms of a man" Noor had never seen (53).

This "sexless existence" (108) or "unfulfilling relationship" (109) is bound to leave a scar on the psyche of a sensitive woman. One of the results is a widespread "restless feeling" (214), a deep-rooted frustration and disenchantment, which culminates in identity crisis -- the crisis of "growing up" and deciding "as to what one is and is going to be." Identity crisis, as Betty Friedan points out, has often been thought to be man's problem only and his exclusive prerogative to search for his identity, women having been told that "truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights, the independence and the opportunities."³⁷ What is expected of women, told a friend to Shobha De, is to be "a passive, obliging receptacle for their semen as and when they feel the urge to discharge in her body."³⁸ Under such circumstances, the marital bed is hardly different from "a cold battlefield with two unhappy people lying stiffly side by side, year after, dreaming different dreams and yearning for a closeness, comfort and satisfaction that eludes them completely."³⁹ It is significant to note that in *Snapshots* Shobha De has used the imagery of battlefield and conquest pertinently. Talking about her marital experience, Reema, for example, tells her friends about her husband's "clumsy coupling without arousal":

Passion wasn't even considered. ... They'd slipped into duty-fucking without having fucked in the first place ! ... Nights ... had an inbuilt pattern and rhythm without the slightest excitement or variation. Ravi discharged his

husbandly obligation -- literally. Sex was never discussed -- only perpetrated on the other. Like a minor war. (108-109)

When Raju had made love to Reema, "he raised himself over her body like a conqueror" and the expression in his eyes continues to haunt her:

Every man behaved similarly, Reema had concluded. Her husband was no better. And these days their love-making had to be squeezed in between her watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* and his business calls. During the cricket season, she recalled at least three sexual encounters accomplished to the drone of Test Match commentary with her husband pausing mid-thrust to applaud a stylish sixer.(93)

Her experience with Randhir has also not been much different. He took her in the lift: "A few swift thrusts and he'd been through. He'd stepped back from her with a triumphant smile" (117). Aparna's husband, Rohit, who appears to belong to a different kind, is not much different from others in this respect. "Boasting like a bloody schoolboy," he tries to impress Swati, the gorgeous, athletic and sexy Swati, with "his conquests -- 'body counts' as he calls them" (207). Even Swati, who has been described in a different context as "a wild, out-of-control cat" (197), finds herself subjugated by Juan, with whom she is "like a captive animal -- part of his zoo" and despite her reckless mood, begins "to feel like a snow leopard or something" (201). Placed in such a situation a woman is bound to behave irrationally and resort to abnormal relations such as lesbianism, masochism, air-borne and water-borne sex and so on.

VI

The archetypal Indian male in Shobha De's novels has been painted in the murkiest colours.⁴⁰ Her interviews revealed that "Indian men make the world's lousiest lovers," and that "They are high on ego. Low on performance."⁴¹ Their behaviour shows their real nature, and they are not different from animals. Malini, in *Starry Nights*, opines that "Men are all the same animals, and we women such fools."⁴² Men in *Snapshots* are no exceptions. Rashmi is convinced from her own experiences that most men lead "petty, self-obsessed lives." As for their worth, she asks: "But was any man [worth a woman's love]? She hadn't met one she genuinely felt like sharing her life with. ... They preferred flirts and flatterers. Even manipulators" (49). When Pip leaves her suddenly, she takes it in her stride. This is replicated in the case of Younes also. She tells her son: "All men leave, baby.

That's the way they are" (46). These simple words unfold an endless saga of male callousness. Men, she feels, are "Intrinsically, instinctively, intuitively dishonest" (49). So she asks: "So bloody what? Was being manless such a shame?" (50). Men may come and men may go, "Float in and out of her life like wipsy cotton balls on a summer day" (50), but she can go on for ever with her independence and way of life.

It would be instructive to have a look at the males populating the world of Shobha De's *Snapshots*. There is, for example, the "basic" Prem with "no bullshit" (7), who is "uninhibited" and "brash, arrogant and nauseatingly sure of himself" (7); Rohit, "Selfish and vain" endowed with ruthlessness and a terrifying "self-absorption" (21), and despite his sensitiveness to women, is "A selfish swine" and "A two-ting bastard" (185); the "wirey, nervous" Nawab (51) who can smell women and able-bodied young men in an instant; "Shifty-eyed, fleet-footed, sly and calculating" Nawaz (52), who takes to pimping for his father, while giving the impression of being a man of fine taste and rare sensibilities so that "Women were attracted to him like bees to honey" (55); "Flamboyantly dressed" Randhir, "Not good-looking, but rakish," who would not spare even his elder brother's wife; Balbir, "a natural achiever" who is so "full of confidence and bravura" (169) and a perfect womanizer; and swaggering Raju who is "swarthily sexy with foxy eyes, a flashy hungry mouth and a don't-care-a-damn Romeo demeanour" (96). It is not surprising that these men are insensitive to women's individuality, sensitivity and feelings. They can only aggravate women's problems in their own ways. Marriages with their ilk are bound to be doomed. Karuna, in *Socialite Evenings*, comes to realise that she had "married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time" and that her husband was just an average Indian husband, "unexciting, uninspiring, untutored" and "not made for introspection." Karuna sums up the average Indian woman's marital life as "an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left," marriage to whom is "like a skin allergy, an irritant all right."⁴³ The story in all of De's novels is the same.

Shobha De has created the characters that she has created and treated the themes that she has treated in her novels to call attention to the kind of treatment meted out to women in India. She does not present them for any idealistic purpose or aesthetic

effect. Like Deb of her *Sultry Days*, she herself might declare: "I am what I am-- take it or leave it."⁴⁴ She might find herself in Oscar Wilde's company when he says that ethical matters in a piece of art are "an unpardonable mannerism." We are pertinently told in *Snapshots* that in Bombay, the locale of the novel, "Nobody respected ethics" (71). The novelist has touched upon different facets of an urban woman's life and her plight, but no issue has received the same kind of full-throated expression as the question of matrimony and sex. Attention has been drawn to women's exploitation, discrimination and commodification, but De's voice is the most vociferous and striking. She lashes at hypocrisy with all her might whether she is taking up the issue of arranged marriage⁴⁵ or interference from the relatives.⁴⁶ She seems to be emphasising the value of what is most conspicuously missing in the Indian context, namely, 'communication,' full-blooded interpersonal normal relations. Shobha De makes Rita remark sarcastically: "...we demand communication, attention.... Arrey baba, forget it. We should be happy if they [husbands] don't beat us, burn us, torture us, insult us, discard us. That is all."⁴⁷ Modern feminists may learn a lesson or two from Shobha De or her women characters. Frailty's name is no longer woman; given chance she can easily become woe-man.

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¹²*The Hindustan Times Magazine*, 12 February 1995, p. 3.

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¹⁴Shobha De, *Shooting from the Hip: Selected Writings* (New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors, 1994), pp. 111-13.

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¹⁶*Shooting from the Hip*, p. 110.

¹⁷Shobha De, *Sultry Days* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1994), p. 119.

¹⁸Shobha De, *Starry Nights* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1991), p. 106.

¹⁹Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (Penguin, 1983), p. 445.

Simone de Beauvoir again remarks: "There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband-- or in some cases a 'protector'-- is for her (woman) the most important of undertakings....She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother's hold, she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of a new master...."²⁰ (p. 352).

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²¹Charles Cooley, *Social Consciousness*, p. 368.

²²*Shooting from the Hip*, p. 112.

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²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

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²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 185.

²⁷Shobha De, *Socialite Evenings* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1989), pp. 96,78.

²⁸*Uncertain Liaisons*, pp. xxi, 208.

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³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 50.

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³⁷Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Penguin, 1965), pp. 68,13.

³⁸*Uncertain Liaisons*, p. 4.

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⁴⁰For an analysis of male characters portrayed in *Sultry Days*, see R.S. Pathak, "Shobha De: From 'Starry Nights' to 'Sultry Days'," in R.K. Dhawan (ed.), *Indian Women Novelists* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1995), Set III, Vol. 1, pp. 150-56.

⁴¹*Uncertain Liaisons*, pp. 4, xxv.

⁴²*Starry Nights*, p. 50.

⁴³*Socialite Evenings*, p. 65.

⁴⁴*Sultry Days*, p. 4.

⁴⁵In *Snapshots*, for example, Reema says: "I was too young and inexperienced when I married Ravi. If I'd known how it would be with him, I'd have said no. But in our community these things don't happen. We marry the person we are told to marry." Swati, reacting to Reema's statement, says: "No,...my circumstances weren't all that different from yours. I *made* my choices. And was willing to pay the price-- that's what separates the women from the girls" (p. 109).

⁴⁶Uncalled for interference from relatives, according to Shobha De, may only compound individuals' problems. In *Starry Nights*, Aasha ruefully states: "What do they care about the people...[like her]. Nothing. But they only want to control their lives all right. They want to tell them [women] who to marry, who to sleep with, who to act with, who to be nice to, who to ignore, [and] who to snub" (p.16).

⁴⁷*Starry Nights*, p. 117.

THE FEMINIST QUEST FOR TRUTH IN KAMALA DAS'S POEMS

Subhas Chandra Saha

Kamala Das (b. 1934) published her first book of poems *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965, the second one *The Descendants* in 1967 and the third and last one *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* in 1973. Quantitatively, Das's poetic output is meagre. Still she earned repute (or disrepute) as a poet on a large scale. What is the origin of her disrepute? Indian critics and reviewers have found her poems titillating and sensual enough to rave about.

Citing a few critics as sample is sufficient to demonstrate the main thrust of the critical opinion about Das's poetry in India. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar pinpoints the theme of her poetry: "Love is crucified in sex, and sex defiles itself again and again."¹ M.K. Naik points out the same feature: "The most obvious (and to the casual reader, colourful) feature of Kamala Das's poetry is the uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex, referring nonchalantly to 'the musk of sweat between the breasts,' 'the warm shock of menstrual blood,' and even 'my pubis.'"² Vilas Sarang writes: "A desperate obsession with love is regarded as the most prominent feature of Kamala Das's poetry ... she has displayed a frankness of manner in dealing with love and sex."³ Sunanda P. Chavan makes the unambiguous remark: "The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfilment from the husband leads to her search for it in extra-marital relationships with other men."⁴

It is time that we salvage Kamala Das's poetry from the mess of notoriety, and highlight the positive traits, both thematic and stylistic, of her poetry. In this paper I'll analyse four of her poems, 'Summer in Calcutta', 'An Introduction', 'The Looking Glass' and 'Jaisurya' in order to find out the eternal and universal themes in Das's poetry and project the new idiomatic devices that she develops to communicate the themes in the linguistic discourse of the woman to liberate herself from the bondage of flimsy romance, slavery to man and the destiny of manipulation by man for being the mother of his children.

'Summer in Calcutta' does *not* speak about love and sex. The poet focuses on the sensuous absorption of sunlight which may be

considered a metaphor for the poet's attraction and fascination with life itself, here emblemized by the April Sun:

What is this drink but
The April Sun, squeezed
Like an orange in
My glass? I sip the
Fire, I drink and drink
Again, I am drunk,
Yes, but on the gold
Of suns.⁵

The collocation of the images culled from the world of nature and the images visualizing the poet's participation in the heady ecstasy and excitement of life underlines the poet's sensuous, emotional and aesthetic responses to the irresistible appeal of the vibrant spectrum of life at large. The set of nouns, 'the April Sun', 'an orange', 'my glass', 'the Fire', 'the gold of suns', interspersed with, and put into motion by, the set of verbs, 'drink', 'squeezed', 'sip', and the repetition of the verb 'drink' contribute a novel, dynamic form of energy and vitality to the language.

The poet's response to life is not only sensuous but also emotional:

What noble
Venom now flows through
My veins and fills my
Mind with unhurried
Laughter?

The poet feels the venom *flowing through veins*: it enters her mind and fills it with laughter (which is, however, not momentary as it is 'unhurried').

Das's response to life reminds us of Rabindranath Tagore's line: "How have the rays of the sun penetrated into my soul this dawn?" which is a literal translation by me from his famous Bengali poem 'Nirjharer Swapnabhanga' or 'The Awakening of the Fountain from Its Dream.'⁶ At the climax of her ecstatic participation in the warm flow of life, all worries and agonies are relegated to limbo: 'My worries/doze.'

The simile 'like a bride's nervous smile' not only makes the image vivid but also invests the same with a feminine context which lends further layers to the associational significance of the poem. The metaphoric dimension of the poem is intensified and

enlarged by the inclusion of the feminine image.

The heterosexual imagery in Das's poetry is often underscored by the critics. But this poem keeps at an arm's length the female's erotic connections with the masculine body. Steeped in her own participation in the joys of the world, the poet forgets the world of man:

Dear, forgive
This moment's lull in
Wanting you, the blur
In memory.

The masculine domination on the feminine psyche can be mitigated and nullified by the woman when she lets herself participate in the world of nature and in the excitement of life independently. The poet discovers this truth, and asserts it at the conclusion of the poem:

How
Brief the term of my
Devotion, how brief
Your reign when I with
Glass in hand, drink, drink
And drink again this
Juice of April Suns.

In the last three lines, the poet develops a syndrome of metaphors that imaginatively projects her inebriated infatuation with the spectacle of life proscribing the phobia of male domination from the inner core of her consciousness.

On the surface, 'Summer in Calcutta' celebrates the poet's joyful participation in life; but when read between the lines, the poem records the poet's deflation of the masculine hegemony over woman. Thus the poem demonstrates Das's quest for and discovery of truth which was hidden behind the screen by the phenomenon of man's subjugation of woman.

Das's search for truth compels her to throw away the trappings that the society laid on the woman. In the poem 'Introduction', Das minces no words while laying bare the reality. To communicate her quest and vision of truth, she uses words boldly, speaking in a manner in which people have not spoken before. Her resultant mode of speech becomes dramatic, powerful and iconoclastic:

I was child, and later they
 Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
 Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When
 I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
 For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
 Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
 But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
 The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
 Pitifully.⁷

The high pitch of her tone may appear hysterical but rather it is revelatory, though people label her protest as schizophrenic:

Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
 Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
 Jilted in love.

This, however, reminds us of what Juliet Mitchell says about the discourse of hysteria:

Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse.⁸

The particular and the general, the local and the universal merge together in her poem as she finds in herself the character of the whole humanity, and her humanity is replicated in other women:

I am sinner,
 I am saint. I am the beloved and the
 Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
 Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

Das's quest for truth is not partial; it is all-embracing and does not exclude man from the perspective. As a woman she allows man the proper place in her life. Her poem 'The Looking Glass' embodies her perception of truth regarding man-woman relational matrix. The looking glass provides the objectivity for projecting the woman vis-a-vis the man. Here also Das does not mince matters. Her representation of the perspective on man-woman juxtaposition betrays no partiality, no prejudice:

Stand nude before the glass with him
 So that he sees himself the stronger one
 And believes it so, and you so much more
 Softer, younger, lovelier Admit your
 Admiration. Notice the perfection
 Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
 Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor.

Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinates.⁹

Nudity as presented by Das in the poem does not smack of pornography; rather it is an art representation to reveal the truth that lay hidden under social taboos weighing down on poetic discourses in Indian English. To man, a woman may gift the carnal wealth of her body:

Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers.

In Das's works, the English language for poetry acquires a new dimension, a new vitality, a fresh look and strength as she uses body imagery to lay bare the stark reality of life. What Helen Cixous prompted women to do, Kamala Das has done through the language of her poetry. Cixous says:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse....¹⁰

In the context of the Feminist movement, Das has lent Indian English poetry a new discourse: the discourse of woman's body language from the point of view of woman. Hence Das's search for truth leads to her search for an appropriate medium that would be both novel and vital.

The poet's search for the truth continues. She searches it through life, nature and herself. Before she can reach the truth, she goes through pain, as nature goes through rain and darkness before reaching the stasis of light. And the poet is one with Nature in the process, as portrayed in the poem 'Jaisurya':

It rained on the day my son
Was born, a slanting rain that began with
The first labour pain and kept me
Company, sighing, wailing, and roaring
When I groaned so that I smiled and stopped my
Plaints to hear its grief.¹¹

The poet has rummaged through her body to flush out new images and metaphors in order to body forth her quest for truth, the Revelation and the Apocalypse. She writes:

For a while I too was earth.
In me the seed was silent, waiting as
A baby does, for the womb's quiet
Expulsion.

The poet's evaluation of the role of lust is modified and adjusted by her discovery of the birth of new life at the end of the lust-involvement:

Only that matters which forms as
Toadstool under lightning and rain, the soft
Stir in womb, the foetus growing, for,
Only the treasures matter that were washed
Ashore, not the long blue tides that washed them
In.

The truth ultimately appears, radiating light and hope, after vanquishing the forces of darkness: this is annunciated with a paean of celebration by Das in the concluding lines of 'Jaisurya':

Out of the mire of a moonless night was
He born, Jaisurya, my son, as out of
The wrong is born the right and out of night
The sun-drenched golden day.

The poet's search for truth ends happily and brightly in the metaphor of the birth of her son. The discovery of joy, happiness, hope and light is communicated through physical, tangible and sensuous images. Das has fought shy of the abstraction and sentimentality of majority of the pre-Independence Indian English poetry, and evolved a medium that is plangent, powerful and earthy. The assessment of Das's contribution to Indian English poetry should be based on an analysis of the theme and style of her poetry rather on a vicarious enjoyment of the sexual images. No doubt Das has given a berth to sex imagery in Indian English poetry, but that was necessitated by her feminist quest of truth.

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