

The Yoke and The Flight – A Study of Women Characters in Timothy Findley's *The Butterfly Plague*

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Abstract- The paper proposes to make a socio- feminist study of Findley's *The Butterfly Plague*. At the preliminary level, it is proposed to analyze the women in *The Butterfly Plague*. From the perspective of the sociological concept of role play. The twin aspects of fulfilling the role(s) assigned and playing role(s) for aspiration- fulfillment form the ground analysis at this level. Attitudes ranging from unquestioning submissiveness of women to the demands of their counterparts, to their barrier-breaking manipulative play of situations will be the next plane of analysis. The implications inherent in such attitudes will be analyzed from the perspectives of social and interpersonal relationships. It is also proposed to examine how they repressed materials of the women in the novel seek outlet through indulgence in factual rigorousness and/or fantasy visions which take in historical and racial aspects. The paper also proposes to turn its focus on the dialectic between professional aspirations of women in the novel and the real world contingencies and the kind of resolution achieved in *The Butterfly Plague* from the perspective of the exterior and the interior in the conditions of existence.

Keywords: *Sociological Concept, Barrier-Breaking Manipulative, Factual Rigorousness, Fantasy Visions, the Real World Contingencies.*

I. INTRODUCTION

“That ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature’ is the thesis of Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘The Second Sex’.

(Greene Gayle, 1985)

Traditionally, the role of a woman is to perform supportive tasks and to appear submissive and subordinate. Not free to choose, they are expected to play the role assigned to them. Their aspirations that are deviant from or opposed to role – expectations could only be partially fulfilled or not at all. The socio – biologist’s deterministic principle that ‘anatomy is destiny’ looks both operative and non-operative in the case of the women in *The Butterfly Plague*. Naomi and Ruth, the mother and the daughter, Letitia Virden, Myra and B.J. Trelford seem to play roles ‘destined’ to them by their gender. But at the same time some of them show a tendency, in different degrees, to break beyond their assigned role- limits. In choice of career, of conjugal roles and in encountering problems in these spheres, the women in the novel seem both to abide by role expectations and to go beyond or violate such expectations.

II. STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS

Ruth, a female hero of *The Butterfly Plague* has chosen to be a competitive swimmer, an activity that requires both physical strenuousness and mental toughness. She displays a high degree of both, by winning medals in German Olympics. In that, she may be considered to have moved out of traditional conception of woman as someone who cannot withstand the strenuous culturing of the body. This exceptional

departure from the gentle notion of woman has been counterpoised by Ruth in another domain of experience. She falls in love with Bruno, her coach, which might be explained as a result of the dependant’s viewing of the other as a surrogate figure. But her love is strangely initiated. Bruno cuts-off her braid – the braid which she loves. It is an act of violation on her femininity, her cherished hair biers an index of her feminine nature. Done against her will, the rape of her lock may be construed as an attempt by Bruno to degender her. Like Samson, who loses his never shaved ‘seven braids’ were sheaved off, Ruth loses her gender index when Bruno debraids her. This is the first of a series of act of Bruno to vitiate her female identity.

Bruno’s making her wear, the breast-truss is another instance. When she wears the over tight truss, her breasts become deformed and she feels great physical discomfort. She accounts this as a major factor in debilitating her health and mind. With the shoven hair, the deformedly flattened breast takes away her biological identity. To Bruno, whom she loves, she is not a woman, not a human being, but a thing, a guinea pig necessary for testing his strange physiological theories or in his long process to formulate a training method that will maximize all swimmers efficiency, not simply Ruth’s. Initially, it is this experimental attitude of Bruno, which reduces his wife to a mere object to be acted upon that catches the fancy of the NAZIS. But Ruth plays her role as a wife perfectly. Her faith in conjugality enables her to bear any kind of torture – psychological or biological, imposed on her by Bruno, her husband. She loves Bruno to love her as much as she loves him. She is the traditional submissive with who is ready to give up her distinct identity and her country for the man she loves. She is the Biblical Ruth, who finds finally Bruno and Germany alien to her spirit.

As one in love and as wife, Ruth is submissively traditional. But Bruno abuses her personally and exploits her for Nazi political ends. Her capacity as a swimmer is exploited by the Germans, through Bruno to fathom the limits of physical endurance in order to devise extreme kinds of tortures to be inflicted on the Jews. But all her submissive sincerity is rewarded with divorce, when she refuses to have babies because of her tainted blood. Denied existence as an individual human being, she returns to America, wondering in despair:

“We are living dead, walking around dead, until we are forced by circumstances to live”. She fulfills her traditional role, but her aspirations even in the traditional domain get frustrated, leaving her simply a husk of a human being. Understandably this retreat from her role makes her abandon her career – role as a swimmer.

“Marriage is a public legal contract” and it unites two in a sphere of emotional attachment; but to Bruno it is only a weapon to enslave Ruth to his research ideology. All her submissive gestures are manipulated by Bruno to reduce her to an object of his experiments. In a reflective mood Ruth says,

I wore strange fins on my forearms and rubber things strapped to my legs. My breasts became deformed. I got ill. I was sick. I had headaches, nausea, rashes and torn muscles. I stood in cold, I swam in ice, I stood against walls, I was placed in snow banks, nude. I was told to run, walk, lie down, stand up, sit, crouch, stoop, stop and start..... I developed piles and chilblains”.

(*The Butterfly Plague*, 100)

Her liberation from the convention – imposed misconceptions regarding the biological inferiority of women does not extend into or alter her outlook in man-woman relationship. Her desire to love Bruno and to be loved is so obsessively traditional that she willingly enslaves herself to the designs of Bruno.

I wanted every muscle to be obedient to his will, not my own... I wanted to obey. I wanted to be obedient. I wanted to function, without thought, to respond to his voice like a dog... I had wanted so much to be obedient. Now obedience had become a habit – something automatic.

(*The Butterfly Plague*, 79)

But when Bruno asks her to beget his children, hoping to raise better swimmers through her, though knowing well her hemophilic nature, an attitude of protest and refusal begins to grow in her. Her murmuring acquiescence is at its end and this explicitly determined refusal to be under Bruno’s yoke leads to her separation from the connubial role she had so willingly take on.

In Ruth, certain essential aspects of her benign had been repressed mostly by Bruno, and partly by her own self-effacing love for Bruno. Ruth’s psychological and biological repression seeks out let thorough fantasies and nightmares. The suppression of her femininity gets protected in her vision of the repressed Jews. She says, “I realized that I was one of them; I was their extension to the outside” (*The Butterfly Plague*, 103). She sees Bruno and Nazism as the fire that burns everything. The world of facts has nothing happy to offer, or, rather it has made her life a long stretch of burden bearing from precarious life clinically to repressed feminine psyche. To take flight from this oppression, she unconsciously finds refuge in fantasies. Her visions of the wall of Jews and of the animals engulfed by fire in Alvarez Canyon could be read as her projection of herself into the suffering victims. Her vision of the charred body of a young girl on the beach may be seen in the same light. But there is another side of Ruth’s fantasy vision, a more complex one.

She who refused to have children through Bruno, later on wants to have a baby by the blond man who follows her from Germany to California the blonde German is a model of racist perfection in physical features and he should have been a pestilence to Ruth who had been subjected to repressive treatment by Bruno, and his German masters. But, by some irrational instinct, Ruth is driven to have the baby of the blonde German. It may be another fantasy vision of Ruth. Her meeting the man amidst the lonely grass, the fire that engulfs her and her escape could be viewed as a re-dramatization of her earlier exploitation and escape. Perhaps, the urge to flee the forces of repression has, somehow taken her back to the same symbolic force that she tries to flee. That the fantasy fail is revealed by the fact that what she had believed to be a baby in her womb, finally proves to be ‘false conception’.

Ruth tells Naomi that accepting facts does not help living: but escape into fantasy provides escape from repressed life. But Naomi blames Ruth that she does not cope with truth when she lives in nightmare fantasy and nightmares exaggerate and distort. She says dreaming is the damnable quest for perfection that is impossible. She adds:

When I think of the misery and dispatch caused by people like you who will not accept – and who will not cope with reality as it is, I find it small wonder that humanity is condemned to suffering”.

(*The Butterfly Plague*, 156)

To Ruth, remembering reality is the cause of suffering.

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