



The Interpolation of Feminism in the Novels of Carol Shields

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Abstract

For the purpose of this paper, Feminism is limited to the following perceptions of Feminism: Feminism is a long struggle for the recognition of Women's Cultural roles and achievements and for her social and political rights. It is a movement for social, legal and cultural freedom. It is a transgressive, oppositional voice against cultural, economic and educational disabilities in a society dominated by men hindering or preventing women from actualizing their creative possibilities. It is a critique of the general culture that identifies a woman as negative object or the other to man. It negates the assumption that man represents the humanity.

The present discourse analysis of Carol Shields' novels pertains only to the above stated feminist perceptions. The paper limits its scrutiny to the stance she signifies in her narrative-discourse. It is to find out if there are any transgressive acts which attempt at advancing a new social formation in favour of women and if it registers repressive acts committed against women. The paper also looks for subversive aspects of her texts and to identify the text's intervention

Keywords: *Transgressive voice, Discourse, Intervention, Interpolation.*

1. Introduction

The novels of Carol shields are a discourse on a variety of subjects and some of which are on marital relationship, love, poetry, biography, history, creative-writing, gardening, mazes, folklore, existentialism and others. She employs innovative techniques with its racy language and poignant narratives. Almost all the central characters of her words are women except in the novel, *Larry's Party*. And even in *Larry's Party* the narrative space is controlled by the lives of other women in unsteady life of Larry. Women and men experience disappointments, sorrow, pain and angst. The novels bring out the structure of feelings of the women and men. The study tries to identify the text's commitment to transgressive and oppositional voices. It is to concentrate on the interventions the text makes in favour of feminism.

Here is a very tiny model of a narrative that signifies a discourse and an intervention, though political. The narrative is, of-course, bereft of the structures of feeling but it contains the seeds which grow into a resistance against dominant social order and the oppressive power behind it. The narrative in *Empowering Women* by Sakuntala Narasimham reads.

“There isn’t a single country in the world – not one – where men and women enjoy completely equal opportunities...that is why we must change attitudes and policies. The aim must be to give each and every human being greater freedom to make choices about their own lives [...]

Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway at the Fourth World conference on Women, Beijing, 1995” (23)

The Box Garden is the story of Charleen who is divorced from Watson. It is not the case of a conflict due to male aggression or domination. It was due to Watson’s shifting unconscious reactions to aging, his hankering after eastern ideologies, mysticism, yoga, celibacy and so on. Charleen’s sorrow and pain are because of her insufficient income and her snap with the creative ability in poetry. She develops a new and steady relationship with Eugene, the orthodontist. Even Eugene’s estrangement from his first wife Jeri was not caused by any repressive act against Jeri. She actually “abandoned him for the women’s movement” (37). The text only inform it but does not develop into concretized lived experience. All the resentment and opposition expressed by Charleen or other women characters are against any male dominated oppressive social order. Charleen, in fact, says that they both are “secondary victims of separate modern disease, mid-century maladies hatched by the heartless new social order” (37). This statement, too, is not actualized by the instants in the narrative. The final part of the story involves twisty hurried turns of anxiety, fear and angst brought into by Greta’s cranky desire to help Watson meet his son by clandestinely taking away in a car. The couples Doug and Greta are not affected by any hatred or prejudice based on gender. All the characters move about in a decentred world. There is not any inequalities in it.

Larry’s Party is the story of Larry’s failure in perceptions of women’s needs. Larry is not an antifeminist character. The separation between Dorrie and Larry take place because of Larry’s infatuation with his mazes and of the maze in front of their house. He does not understand the discomfort it gave Dorrie. She finally moved down some portion of the maze. Larry leaves Dorrie and his son in a scuffle. It is not a feminist conundrum but a lack of perception in human relationship. Beth, Larry’s second wife is a signifying feminist character among all the women in Shields’ novels. Beth likes to claim she’s “a third wave feminist” and she is “anxious to understand the mysteries of men as well as women”(139). She is fond of quoting what Toni Morrison says about “the other”. As an academic she tries to intellectualize what is physical and sexual in teenage boys’ erection and day-dreams. She really enjoys space free of any male aggression but there is one incident in which she feels discriminated. Her application for Guggenheim Fellowship is turned down. She feels she is a victim of “the jury who were, she suspected all men, white European men with men’s circumscribed and testosterone – limited bias” (212-213). At the same time Larry’s fluke application is accepted. She seems justified in her invective against male- dominated academic system. But soon they both make their educational tour together on the single Fellowship. This seems to be the only significant intervention by the narrative as an act of transgression, against the oppressive system. Later, Beth leaves Larry for a teaching job in England. “Beth left him not for another man but for a teaching job in England” (297). Beth continues her propensities as a feminist in choosing to be a single mother with the baby conceived of a choiced sperm from a sperm-bank. The text on some pages is full of parody on the sexuality and of the sexual organ of men. This is a transgressive oppositional act to the conservative silence of the male dominant discourse. At the final scene of the party, the men are invited to the table-talk on the changed ideological position of men with reference to disruptious brought in by feminism.

Dorrie tells that her company that prints greeting cards now have “women-to –men cards. Or cards for the gay sector” (324). The other women at the table makes complaints against men hogging the armrest on planes, the natural hatred men have once the women have done their reproductive duty. Beth says, “Confusion is the natural climate – the only climate for the post-feminist age” (321). The question of a feminist intervention is absent. The discourse of the novel neither tries to expand nor interpret the feminist’s urgency. Each woman in the novel is in her freedom of choice, choice of her work, personal belongings, houses, travel, pursuit in education and so on. They are in the middle of a maze of their

own trying to come out only to enter into another. "From the start, the maze was a cause for conflict" (158).

Mary Swann has a statement that signifies the stand of the author in her stance on feminism. It represents almost all her novels in her relation to feminism. It says, "God is dead, peace is dead, John Lennon and Simone de Beauvoir are dead, the women's movement is dozing – checking its inventory, let's say - so what's left" (26). The text itself points to the fact that references to feminism in the narrative is a dozing off and only thing left to say of feminism is the everyday commonplace thoughts and actions. The text uses the word "quotidian". The references to feminists and feminism may not be central but may be peripheral in the story. The lives of the characters that are alive are not geared by feminist issues but attachments to feminists like Virginia Woolf and others.

Sarah Maloney claims that she is "a feminist writer and teacher who's having second thoughts about the direction of feminist writing in America" (13). Her passionate crying: My wife is my own, She says has fizzled out her real sense of freedom. As a feminist Sarah finds the poetic works of Mary Swann, as an accomplishment in modern poetry. She finds it a break from the legacy of the patriarchy and the dominant constructed myth that their art was from mysterious materials that are inaccessible to women. Sarah has a persuasive feminist discourse which advances a theory that "women have been knitting socks for centuries and probably they've been constructing in their heads, lines of poetry that never got written down" (39). This is quite an acceptable stance in favour of feminism. Mary Eagleton in her essay dated Spring 2003, says: "Sarah sees not only the general workings of the field but the part that gender play within it. It is the rivalry powerful men over the literary output of a powerless woman that rises Sarah's feminist and protective responses" (Burns 346).

Sarah finds herself comfortable to the company of her women friends. Theirs is "a universe in which men are only marginally visible" (47). Some of them are lesbians. Half of her graduate students are "determined to carry their own tent pegs, to hell with the male power structure and to hell with penetration as sexual expression" (47). Sarah finds it necessary to bring 'Mary Swann's poetic achievements to the world at large but at the Template of the Imagination', "not the blazing feminist banner" (69) she had planned earlier. Now she has pitched on a vague postmodern appreciation. Sarah is credited with the book *The Female Prism*. The book is an activist's expression of feminism. Sarah on her way to the symposium has surprise encounter with a women passenger on the bus. The woman with a fur cat asks her if she was Sarah Maloney. She has Sarah's book at home and had seen her interviewed on television twice. Sarah who was so positive on feminist view of the world in her book tells her she is a little less positive now. Her militant position on female power and her view of men as the masked enemy is mellowed down. She tells the woman that she got married and hers a case of love and marriage. Marriage to Maloney is no more a compromise but love. She concludes with the fact that she is pregnant and implying of that motherhood is an accepted feminine role. She feels that she is no more a female victim but was "invented a new strategy" (329) to survive from being a killed-victim. The narrative does not signify failure of feminism but a mellowing down. Sarah, though less fervent now, continues to carry on her feminist agenda. She finds a sisterhood in Rose and other women, students and the reading public.

There is a mirror woman character, Audrey, Jimroy's former spouse. Though Audrey was a fine companion and a supportive and considerate mate to Jimroy, he suffered from an incapacity to love. She was estranged from Jimroy because he was often sarcastic but he made anonymous phone calls in the deepest of the night to Audrey in Florida. He also makes an anonymous call to Sarah in a self-deception that he was in love with Sarah. None of these narratives prove the women in the novel were under duress because of male dominant oppression but enjoyed their space and freedom. The only woman is Mary Swan. She lived in an oppressive living condition and was brutalized and killed by her husband. She is heroic in her stand to express her lived experience through creativity which was her only way to resent, oppose, subvert and to transgress against the male power. The story of Mary Swan, though very little is said if it, has the potentials for a real creative exploration of feminism. The novel tries to keep it merely at the background to tell the private anguish and angst of other characters like Sarah, Jimroy, cruzzi and Rose and Feminism in it is a useable catalytic element for a rich and

complex novel whose centrality and concern is not feminism. There is the brief scene in which cruzzi in his unconscious reaction to a loss of Swann's manuscripts, acts violently against his wife Hilde. It is a sure case of domestic violence and an oppressive act against women. The text tries to pacify his act as an accidental mental aberration "something had come balanced and something had snapped" (292). The text supposes that Cruzzi's act did not signify an aggression against the feminine gender.

The spaces of the story, *The Stone Diaries*, is filled with the lives of women beginning with Mercy Goodwill and Clarentine Flett followed by Daisy and her generation of friends and cousins of women. Nowhere does the narrative portray a situation in which they are a suppressed lot under the oppressive patriarchal system or the repressive male power. The sorrows angst of Mercy or Clarentine or that of Daisy, in the latter part of the story is due to adverse situations in life and their anxieties are existential ones which drive towards a self-realization. They are dure to a sudden demise of their most loved ones, a wife in the case of Cuyler and mother to Daisy; the sudden death of Clarentine who was Daisy's Godmother; the sudden death of Harold while on their honeymoon stay in France are the major heart pricking events that stir up deep sorrow.

Mr. Flett seems to be the only man in the narrative who is an excess amount of male ego and male arrogance and hubris. This is Clarentine Flett's reason for abandoning him: "he'd been mean with money. And wanting in soft words and ways (99). He was not bereft of any love for Clarentine but shows an inability to reach her although he goes after her to Winnipeg only to catch "glimpses of her figure coming and going and working in that garden of hers" (99). He is able to only cry within himself saying, "Clarentine, come home, come home, my darling one, my only, only love" (101). He did not know she died, when he said these words. Finding no one to connect with Magnus Flett returns to Orkney Islands, England as a lonely man. And when Daisy finds Flett in Orkeny Islands and aged hundred and fifteen and lying in a carehome and his power of memory and hearing faded, it is a poignant scene. Other than being a compelling classic among her novels, it possess no series thoughts, nor is it persuasive enough a discourse on feminism.

The Stone Diaries too is not without any statements of reference to feminism. They are here and there thrown at random like the shooting stars at night and do not lighten up the vision on feminism. Some of them run like this: "The real troubles in this world tend to settle on the misalignment between men and women. ...men behave in one manner and women in another. But how we do love to brush these injustices aside. We accept, as a cosmic joke, the separate ways of men and women, their different levels of foolishness" (121).

Fraidy Hoyt among all the characters in the novel is the most liberated woman in every possible way. She was Daisy's confidante. They discussed sexuality theirs and general without reservation. Fraidy claims having affairs with fifty four lovers. She calls them her "phantom" lovers. She states: "What do women want, Freud asked. The old fool, the Charlatan. He knew what women wanted they wanted nothing. Nothing was good enough. Everyone know that. Everyone but me" (246). These random statements cannot be said as a thorough going discourse on feminism or a political intervention.

Among the novels of Carol Shields *Unless* has a larger discourse on feminism. Reta is a long standing feminist and has an enduring sisterhood of friends. She is a translator for a French feminist writer Danielle Westerman. Reta has three daughters but her eldest daughter Norah is expressing her transgressive opposition to a poignant expensive she had recently. She sits cross-legged with a begging bowl in her lap and wears a cardboard sign that reads Goodness. She asks nothing of the world. The narrative tells how the feminist look at Norah's act. The paper tries to find out how serious, in its the narrative, the feminist discourse is.

Reta Winters says: "Away from home, liberated from my responsibility for meals, my unexecuted calculations steal into my dreams" (84). Reta perceives that what they want. She says, "None of us was going to get what we wanted. ...we're asking ourselves questions, endlessly but not nearly sternly enough" (97). Reta feels that the world is not ready for women yet. She thinks that her daughter

Norah is asking for too much too early. She tells that the feminists “are too kind, too-willing- too unwilling too- reaching out blindly with a grasping hand but not knowing how to ask for what we don’t even know we want” (98). The text intervenes stating that “we have arrive at the new millennium and we haven’t arrived” (99). To her the male dominant power structure is strong over the weak women and there is livelihood of defeat for the feminist movement. People interviewed on television channel still go about saying their major influences were writers who were men. No one refers to Virginia Woolf, Danielle Westerman or Iris Murdoch. Women to the male-chauvinist are busy bearing children, busy gathering edible grasses or bulbs. They often use the word hampered conceptualized to mean that men can not be blamed. Danielle refers to this trick of the male oppressive power structure which she defeated by the publication of her first book of poems. “The poems were ...full of puns and allusions to early feminism” (101). The text’s discourse tells of women and sisterhood – “as each of us is equipped with women’s elemental anatomy, women’s plumbing and deployment of soft tissue with women’s merciless cycles that bring on surprising similar attacks of inquietude” (103). She perceives penetration as an act of “tyranny”.

Danielle Westerman perceives Norah as one who “has simply succumbed to the traditional refuge of women without power. It is a kind of passivity, a kind of impotent piety. In doing nothing, she has claimed everything” (104). Danielle’s kind of feminism is an audacity to compel every feminist to a single closed approach to liberation. Norah is not concerned with power but one more act of transgression against male-constructed way of life for women which has pushed a moslem women to self-immolation. Norah was not seeking goodness in herself but was turning attention to the need of goodness in the humanity, a goodness which is a decentering process, a goodness that negates all inequalities and a goodness which sees oneself as also the other where no bias of gender, race, colour or language exists.

The text’s discourse also includes Lynn’s idea that “Inclusion isn’t enough. Women have to be listened to and understood” (116). Sally tells that men constructed a myth to occupy the window seat while on travel saying “that men like wind but women don’t” (119). Linda refers to men’s general posturing as if they are “sitting-on- a- throne kind of kingly” and “sort of surveying his vast domain and looking over the heads of his subjects, who are bowing down before him” (122). The hegemonic power of the male really does show and consider every other women and men as subjects.

There are letters Reta writes to different publishers writers and personalities. In every letter she reminds them of the urgency to make space for women achievers and women writers. She finds these apparatus of power having “a callous lack of curiosity about great women’s minds” (137). She finds these as criminal neglect of “half the world’s population” (220). She sees in it “a moral dilemma” (220). The text states that men do not let women to be at peace even in her grave. Tom and Reta find an inscription on a grave that reads: “she took good care of her chickens” (230). The feminist in Danielle finds the constructs of women saints as “only appeasement, divagation, crumbs” (251). She finds the legislative steps as hardly helpful to liberate women. She hoped for the big step forward.

Reta is able to perceive the fault line of the society of the social oppression saying that men “are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes forever and ever”. The women fall into the “uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang. That’s the problem” (270). Only this novel, Unless, among the rest of Shields’ novels, register potent intervention and voice of opposition to male-constructed structures of power and social orders that are oppressive.

A Celibate Season is a narrative in the form of a series of letters written between Jock and Chas. The discourse of the story tries to set standards for a joyful relationship between the wife and the husband. There are statements, opinions and occurrences which point to feminist issues. Jocelyn alias Jock is away from home on a short assignment of a legal counsel for a commission to look into the feminization of poverty. She and Jessica are women and the others in the commission are men, Dr.

Grey and Senator Pierce Vance who heads the commission. Jessica is an active feminist and is the president of the Canadian social Welfare Council. The women in the commission do enjoy space and freedom. The narratives of the private lives of people do show some instances of a few women under oppressive social conditions. A few of them are pathetic, sorrowful or poignant but they are not central to the story of Charles and Jocelyn. Their relationship and wrangles and misapprehensions are not feminist in nature but are a privileged perceptions leading to uncertainties and angst due to a temporary separation brought in by a job assignment.

Though Vance and Jessica knew each other and were pals for quite a longtime, he seems to be exerting a rude demand for character in her. She is about to light up a cigarette. Vance asks, "Where is your character woman? I thought you were quitting" (22). He could not perceive that her act was a transgressive opposition to the male dominated world. In spite of her rough exterior and manners, she is a dependable companion and sisterhood to other women. Jock too becomes pally with Jessica and is able to sense "The disparity in men's and women's incomes" (31). And Chas in his turn is able to see the slow attachment that develops between Jock and Jessica. He writes, "For Chrissake don't go and write me a Jessica-inspired Sermonette about feminine stereotypes and male perceptions" (34).

Jock's heart gets wrung up when she hears a brief from single mothers and their poverty stricken life living in roach fested rooms and babies suffering from malnutrition. The narration of mothers deserting her guilt thirteen and of women whose support is taken away by the sudden demise of their husbands is very pathetic. Jessica is real a fighter for women's right and liberation. She had "the indignation, the sense of self-worth the outrage" (50). Jock says that she should "support Jessica for the sake of feminism" (172).

Chas writes of meeting Sue's friend at a café who spoke yelling and said "And men. Men are scum. Men are shits. Men are not ready or willing to surrender their power and so it has to be wrested from them" (89). This is a political intervention to another unrelated situation. The creative energy is wasted on a story different from a feminist conflict. Catherine may appear to be arrogant and snobbish but she blends with the narrative's context in which she signifies a feminist whose message is that a woman who is economically independent can decentre the male dominated structure with pride and style. Catherine is an academic as well as a breeder of horses. The narrative discourse of *A Celibate Season* effectively and subtly blends Catherine character as a voice of transgression rather than adding mere statements that are sound and fury, signifying nothing concrete.

Happenstance register's in its narrative some statements that are feminist in nature but they do not influence the plot or events that are profound or dramatic arousing feelings and thought, representing the lived experiences of people in the story. The conflict, the characters face, is not due to gender differences or because of feminist related bias. The temporary breaks in the relationship of Brenda and Jack or the suicidal attempt of Larry carpenter or that of the break in the marriage of Bernie and Sue, none of them are because of oppression by women haters. We find Charlotte at the Annual National Handicrafts exhibition raising a point of order. She says, "The problem I want to raise it not exactly political but it does concern us because it concerns the violation of our rights as women" (59). Her complaint is that the hotel where they booked for accommodation acts like every other male dominated commercial institution and now in order to delegates of the Metallurgists Society, who are all men, the women were asked to fill up two to a room and some women at far off hotels. The Handicrafts Society was an organization made up entirely of women and have booked their rooms well ahead of time than the Metallurgists. She says that the hotel management shows "a blatant lack of moral responsibility" (61). She enforces a committee to link into the matter at once. She also wants her fellow delegates to throw away the unasked for the make-up kit from an Industry which calls itself New Women Industries. The discourse fits well into the context and remarkably stated its premise for feminist action against male domination that tries to hoodwink them into acceptance of their hegemony. Brenda perceives that there is enough rationality in the new world order proposed by Feminism. She now remembers the magazine articles she read of "women who set up their own law firms, women who conducted symphony orchestras, did photographic essays on Cambodia. Articles about women who lived alone in wilderness cabins and loved it" (85). Brenda feels that at her awkward age of forty, it

was too soon to be one of the new women. The women around her “were defending and proclaiming their femininity” (139). Brenda is “silent and” between stunned by wilderment and boiling laughter” (139). She is merely feminist in the making while being still at unease.

The Republic of Love is a story of Fay McLeod and Tom depicting their lives involving constant failure in their relationship with the opposite gender. They are not due to any bias at all. The women in the novel enjoy a liberated life-style. The failure in the marriages or their live together arrangements were ones that failed not because of the aggressive male domination or oppressive conservative social order. The novel has a few statements referring to feminism or gender issues. Sonya, who is Fay’s sister-in-law, is a lawyer for a women’s-rights group. She is often interviewed about feminism on television. A man once threw a rag doll at her. It was split open and threw up some red paint or Ketch up on to her “several times she received late-night phone calls” (35-36) which were intimidative.

There are other few private passing opinions on men like, “Well I’ve finally figured out that being male is the same thing, more or less, as having a personality disorder”(108). This was from one of Fay’s friend, Beverly Miles. Another which runs, “Men tend to make these kinds of jokes more than women, jokes that are meant to be chummy, to stimulate envy”. In another context, Fay in desperation, thinks of becoming a single mother with a baby born to her from “Someone else’s gene pool” (151). However these instances do not connect to the main plot or to an effective discourse on feminism.

The novel, *Small Ceremonies* is a narrative in the lines of Judith and Martin, and their two children Meredith and Richard, depicting their joys and sorrows that they invite upon themselves in their day to day relationship with others. Some of their moment of intense sorrowing or worry and angst are not because of a male-oppressive society or state authority. The narrative is not concerned with feminist issues and yet one may find a few references to women in general. Nancy of Judith’s friend quotes the feminist Simone de Beauvoir, “May be the whole thing is a big gyp the way Simone de Beauvoir says at the end of her autobiography, “Life is a gyp” (68). This was Nancy’s general remark on the difficulties in life.

At a party arranged by Furlong, the guests at each table pick up a topic of their own as a table-side conversation. “Talk drift from table to table, accumulating, rising, until it reaches the ceiling and “Valerie Hyde is saying: ofcourse women have come a long way, but don’t think for a minute that one or two women in Parliament are going to change a damn thing. Sex is built-in like bones and teeth” (88). This signifies the novelist’s desire to keep the dying ember of feminist fire glowing and nothing more. A kind of resolution to the feminist issue signified by a brief ditty that reads:

“Let peace descend upon this happy day
That Man and Woman may with conscience clear
Respect each other yet remain themselves
Their first commitment to the inner voice” (191)

Carol Ann Howells says,

Canadian women writers of the late 1960s and the 1970s and 80s were very concerned as was feminism at that time, with exposing the power politics of gender in heterosexual relations and with women’s quests to discover their individual identities by finding their voices and reclaiming their rights over their own bodies (Kroll 196-197)

While Atwood, Audrey Thomas Munro could be stated to be writers who were emphatic in their stance on feminism, Shields could be said as a woman writing about the lives of women in a multicultural setting. She was optimistic about fiction writing by women offers the possibilities of female empowerment beyond the closed system of orthodox narratives by men. Shields’ novels reveals a shift and diversification of themes in the era of multiculturalism and globalization Daisy in *The Stone Diaries* belongs to no one and no place. *The Republic of Love* is a romance fiction and full

of associations to the folklore of Mermaids. Shields in her novels “introduces other non-human mysteries relating to biology, Paleo botony via the dual motifs of flowers and stones from which she draws an analogy between the impossibility of knowing anyone’s subjective life and the intricacies of the life success” (Kroller 207).

2. Conclusion

Clandia Levy in her essay dated 18 July 2003, says, “I came to feminism late”. Mrs. Shields told Nation Public Radio’s Terry Gross on the “Fresh Air” program. I knew there was something wrong, I just did not know what it was”. I was astonished. I had no idea women thought like that or women could be anything other than what they were” (Burns 349).

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