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The Dysfunctional Women in Mary Gordon's *The Other Side*

Raichel M. Sylus, M. A., M. Phil.

Women's Literature and Women's Interior Journey

Mary Gordon is a powerful novelist who vividly recapitulates, vehemently portrays, and complies with women of her era in all aspects. She was the 2008 New York State Author.

Women's literature is not just literature written by women about women, "it should deal with women's experience from within" (345) says Elizabeth Janeway in an essay on 'Women's Literature' in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*.

The "interior journey" that a woman undertakes is different from those of men. Amidst all these cacophonies, she is all the more entangled in the webs of powerlessness, victimization, failure to love and failure in being loved, loneliness, longing, defeat and alienation as a process of her interior journey.

This turns the individuals and the family to be disoriented. It is this assigned status to women that Gordon talks about in this novel, *The Other Side*, how the families are non-harmonious because of women. The bourgeois family reframes the primary identity of a woman. The discrimination, acknowledgement, power, freedom and understanding start from the four walls of the family.

The Other Side

Mary Gordon's fourth novel *The Other Side* is nothing out of the ordinary. Yet it stands apart. It is a narrative in 5 parts where the action takes place within a limited time span of one day – August 14, 1985.

Gordon uses the flashback technique to portray the lives of four generations of the MacNamaras.

The entire family is gathered together in one place to bid eternal goodbye to the aging Ellen. The paper takes into account only the women characters for its study. In one sweep, she delves deep into the recesses of the Irish immigrants, Catholic women, misery, failure and victimization of the women characters. Gordon was living under the restrictions of a strict Catholic background, but does not present any solutions for her fellow women. She describes their plight, thereby giving voice to her own frustrations.

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Inspired by Virginia Woolf, Powers and Jane Austen, she has etched herself as a woman novelist, not of the Victorian era but of the present age.

Dense Narrative of Conflicting Emotions, Hopes and Anxieties

We meet four generations of the MacNamaras on August 14th in a house on Linden Street in Queen's Village, New York. From each and every one of those assembled there, Gordon weaves a dense narrative of conflicting emotions, hopes, anxieties and dreams.

The family has gathered for an occasion that is very symbolic and thought provoking but with a heavy heart - to celebrate the home coming of Vincent and await Ellen's death. While Vincent's arrival brings joy to the families it is a sorrow when they think of Ellen's departure - a mixture of joy and sorrow seen in the very beginning of the novel.

The Interior Monologue

The interior monologues in the novel reveal the emotions of the characters and majority of them are women. The psychological pattern of family failure because of women is a clear indication of their behaviour in their family. The harsh physical labour and humiliating discrimination faced by them adds fuel to it.

The beginning of the novel is like casting a spell to the readers. "When this happened Vincent Macnamara thought it was the end of everything. As things turned out, it was not" (1). The novel ends with an irresolute note which reads "He believes that she can see him, but he's not quite sure" (497). So what goes on in between is a point to be pondered over- it is nothing but the chaos and disorder where each one tries to shirk off his/her job and meddles with the other.

Characters and Their Lives Vincent and Ellen

Vincent and Ellen, the patriarch and the matriarch form the root of the family and who begin the long winding maze that Gordon portrays in the novel. Ellen has lived 63 years in the same house out of the 66 years of her wedlock to her husband. The story also continues to portray Ellen as a person who hates others, the main reason behind it being her father and her experiences at Ireland. Ellen is also the starting point of the tangled web of women in the novel.

The following is the description that Gordon gives of Ellen: "Constant words fill the air around her bed. They are terrible words for an old woman taken up in the long business of her dying. Curses. Maledictions. Dreadful wishes. Also simple filth" (4). Looking at these words one would wonder if these were to describe a woman and more so a mother.

The very portrayal of Ellen sets a tone to the novel on how her relationship with the young generations would be. Blessed by God for a happy life even in this ripe old age in spite of her

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hardships, she hates him too. Whereas as a so-called loving daughter, she has a magnanimous mind towards her mother whom she wants to be brought to America to see her die with dignity, because she is also waiting for her end.

The typical, narrow minded Ellen is a good example, along with her husband of how the family is highly dysfunctional, embodying the nightmares of the America dream. The close relationship between the husband and wife duo, Vincent and Ellen, mars the relationship of Ellen with her daughters. Her need for revenge does not pave way to love her daughters and her love is invested into her favourite child John who is killed in World War II.

Theresa and Magdalene

Theresa and Magdalene are two young daughters of Ellen. Their growth is stunted by their mother's neglect. They are the second generation women vivified by Gordon. They follow the same traits of their mother. Their mother hardly loves them and Ellen switches over her love entirely to her only son John. She is a woman incapable of love, one who fails in loving her own daughters, thereby causing a rift among them. The weak bond of Ellen with the other members in her family shows the family set up too. Theresa is also described to be unloving and whose children are bored by her religious fanaticism. Magdalene is in contrast to her sister Theresa by being alcoholic.

The Third Generation

In the third generation, Camille, the granddaughter nurtured by Ellen is a successful divorce lawyer who devotes herself to her women clients. It is ironical to note that even after the failure of Camille's marriage; she lives with her husband in her mother's house. Cam has "no patience" (15) and along with Daniel she "specialize(s) in divorce" (15). They are successful in guiding the divorced families but not their own. Ellen, the non-stereotypical woman now shifts her love from John (after his death) to Camille and Daniel, John's son. Cam has no proper guidance either from her grandmother or her mother and she herself needs to be loved by someone. .

The Fourth Generation

Darci and Staci, Daniel's daughters form the fourth and the last generation in the novel among the women folk. Their portrayal is a pure representation of the next generation of the family and the direction they take in life, the readers hope that their life will be optimistic and not pessimistic as were the ancestral women in their family.

The Purpose

It is an open ended story left to the readers to ponder if they will make their families 'functional' unlike their ancestors.

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The mothers in question are the ones from the first till the third generation. Though they have to encounter innumerable personal and impersonal sacrifices, they are not ready to accept it. Their path is deviated from the normal course that they tend to avoid going with the current. Ellen, the great grand mother is mad and dying. Her anger has driven her from Ireland at the turn of the century. Therese is soured by the Church, grand daughter Camille is angry – so the novelist talks of raging women, women full of envy, who dread their lives, those who face disappointment. As for Cam, ‘those she can’t bear outnumber those she loves.’ (13) Almost all the female characters from the older to the younger can be entitled with a vice each.

The portrayal of Ellen in this old age is too heavy a cross to be carried by her. Her child hood experience has been carried over even at the point of her death recording that she has not been nurtured by anyone. She has lived a role of subordination though she is the matriarch of the family.

Mystique of Traditional American Marriage – 12 Assurances

According to the traditional American mystique of marriage women are given 12 types of assurances. To mention a few among them – there will be someone to make the wife happy, she will be loved and cherished, she will have a father for her children, she will be socially secure as part of the couple and she will be happy (Ruth 209). When these points are considered in the light of Gordon’s women in this novel they seem to be out of the way. The unfulfilled need for love in these women and the power of human beings to ruin others is because they are incapable of love.

Distorted and Dysfunctional Relations

The socio-economic conditions in the novel, the distorted mother-child relationship and immigrant theme are key issues which run through this novel. Gordon’s journey into such an American middleclass life was set off by the sensation, disturbing to a woman, conscious of her Jewish background and its valued culture.

Ultimately this story intertwines delineating the different fates of the mothers and daughters. No doubt the society has a telling impact on it. This impact is seen in their families where they are not able to go through a normal pace and lead a happy life. In spite of the fast changing world and into the 21st century, no change has been seen in them.

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