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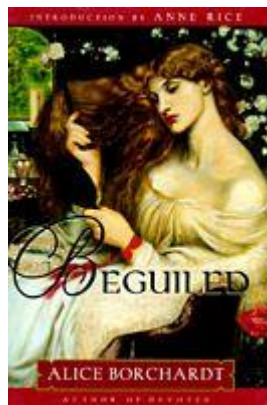
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Raising the Roof: The Postmodern Feminist Reconsiderations of History in Alice Borchardt's *Beguiled*

K. Vijila, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed.



Raising the Roof

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The primary aim of my article is to capitalize on the idiomatic expression “Raising the Roof” so that it is expanded into demonstrating a postmodern feminist paradigm. Hence, I undertake an analysis as to how Alice Borchardt, a renowned American novelist, interacts with history, with feminist concerns. The interaction is one post-modernist demonstration of art which permeates the narratives of the recent times.



Alice Borchardt (1939-2007)

I consider Alice Borchardt *Beguiled* as one specimen of postmodern feminist art which has incorporated a wide variety of the postmodern discourse. Within the parameter of my analysis I have attempted to demonstrate how her novel *Beguiled* excavates the very real history of history as “a complimentary perspective from which to view the recent revival of interest in questions of history in literary studies in the United States. (Montrose 25). I infer that by problematizing history, Alice Borchardt carves out a new worth, a new response and a new deliberation in her text.

Alice Borchardt is one writer, whose collection of fiction is not much talked about in the American literary scenario, the simple reason being that much of her fictional materials run at a tangent with magical and non-human elements. At one point it may look like a Harry

Porter movie, at another, it eventuates a feeling of animal comics. This is one postmodern crisis, I wish to make a reference to. While post modernism is pivoted upon *pastiche*, naturally then Alice Borchardt's fictional materials demonstrate configurations of magic realism and new historicism. Eventually Alice Borchardt can be regarded as a postmodern feminist, in that she saddles her texts with new historicist ventures. Thus, *Beguiled* is expressive of manifestations of historical perception of the artist who "began with a desire to speak with the dead" (Greenblatt 1)

French History and *Beguiled*

Beguiled invokes the French history of 900AD The Bishop Owen of Chantalon and his pagan wife Elin, attempt to refurbish history with eco humanist values. Elin is the relegated and the subjugated other of history as evidenced in her cultural status as a slave rubbished to whoredom. The Bishop Owen and Elin chance upon each other while fighting a common enemy of the Viking camp. Pushed into a spiritual crisis emanating from the ecclesiastical status, Owen has not fully accepted Christ as his savior. On the Other hand Elin is part of nature's multitude represented by the people of the forest, historically the natives of Europe who were not Christians. Soon after his marriage with Elin, Owen is forced into human experiences like betrayal, treason and cheating by his own clansmen like Reynold. Reynold and his wife Elspeth are again Christians who burden Owen with a sense of displacement and dislocation for one simple reason, he has taken a sorceress, Elin his wife. When Reynold is killed by Elin, Lord Hakon like the Biblical David, converts his general's wife Elspeth into a fetished commodity. Elspeth becomes Hakon's wife as she joins Hakonto destroy Owen and his people. Owen and Elin are sustained by a strong will of the benevolent people and the former's cousin Godwin. They are also backed Sybilla, Alshan and the forest people.

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Physical Conflicts and Combats

The novel is encapsulated by a lot of physical conflicts and combats between Lord Hakon and the Bishop. It includes quite a lot of picaresque adventures by Bishop Owen who experiences the baptismal grandeur of the pagan glory. Elin is part of the immaculate nature who is all set to recover the lost ethics of her community. Owen in one of his picaresque adventures encounters a new community, marshalled by Elutides. Elutides seeks shelter from the berserks, the historical rogues. Owen not only wins over the berserks for Elutides' sake but also redeems certain values for himself. In the process he rejects Gyneth a young girl of the community, who is offered as the trophy for Owen. This he does for Elin's sake. The novel is able to forge a conglomerate whole of the heterogeneous materials of Christianity and paganism. The closing chapter of this novel turns out to be the evidence when Elin is captured by the Lord Hakon. She is followed by Owen and his men. When Owen and Elin face each other with disastrous threats, Elin proclaims the humanist declaration, the ultimate quintessence of the evolution of life, "God is He turns the night of the death into morning" *Beguiled*(603)

Working Out Redemption for the Community

Elsbeth, like the biblical Esther works out redemption of her community, and ultimately humanity. For instance Elin gives birth to a child right at Hakon's camp, attended by Elsbeth's women. Elin is the guest now. This is one historic position Alice Borchardt eventually creates as the final principle. One can see that the Bishop's struggles are constituted by a set of power struggles. *Beguiled* inevitably involves a maximum bridging of gap between the postmodern text and its contest with history.

Prioritizing History

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The literary connotations about *Beguiled* is possible only when forges a link between history and modernity. History is prioritized as it simultaneously constitutes the contemporaneity of the text. The two different possibilities are seen here. One is the historical development of history and the other is nonlinear progression of postmodernism. For instance in more than a few chapters Alice Borchardt pastes three components of historical events. One is connected to a historical Bishop Owen and Elin, the other being Godwin and his men engaged in domesticity and lastly Hakon's plot to unmake the ecclesiastical privilege of the Bishop Owen. This is one postmodern dimension in which the text is chained to the evolution of future through the evolution of history of the past. Borchardt conceives history as an imperative of the process of evolution.

Focus on Endurance

In the opening chapter Elin's people demonstrate endurance as revealed in the behavior of the persons "who feared them protected them, and sometimes worshiped them" (4) This is how Alice Borchardt establishes the native endurance of the people of the forest against the great civilization. (4-5)

Before the Romans marched, their stolid tread tramping out stone roads, before the Gauls raided, fought and threw up their green ring forts, Elin's people wandered under the trees. They gathered acorns, chestnuts and honey to make bread. They netted fish in the dense forests, and frock ducks and geese in the marshes along the coast (4).

Establishing Superiority over Vikings

Though relatively a minor number the opening chapter establishes the native superiority over the Vikings. Hakon appears a sadistic marauder of history as witnessed in his

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cruel act of killing a female slave, who “stopped screaming when the rope closed her throat” (15). This gruesome act is a cultural situation as Fredric Jameson terms it, “random cannibalization” (202).

Anarchy of Civilization

Alice Borchartd regrets the historical holy order, the native order and the anarchy of civilization. The Viking presence constitutes the anarchy of history and this is one perspective in which Alice Borchartd wishes to drive home the fact that history with all its anarchic propositions, represents a lop sided temporality. As Bruno Latour observes, “We do have [in the text] a future and a past, but the future takes the form of a circle, extending in all direction, and the past has not surpassed the revisited and reshuffled... in such a frame work, our actions are recognized at last as poly temporal” (75-76)

Status of Women

The reader gets an account of the state of the domestic status of women who necessarily supplement support to the ecclesiastical hegemony. The events establish Alice Borchartd, as a typical collector of historical materials hitherto unfamiliar in history. And here Walter Benjamin’s idea of the task of historical materialist warrants mentions. He writes,

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past; historical materialism supplies a *unique experience with the past*. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called “once upon a time” in historicism’s bordello. He

remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history". (254)

Mindless about Threats

Though frequently, threatened by Viking invasions, one finds Elin as a busy housekeeper taking care of the entire community. She is the caretaker of Godwin soldiers, as well as their families. This is how Alice Borchardt makes of the situation as she writes,

Don't be so sure they are lies," Edgar muttered.

Elin went down to the cellar to supervise Enar. She found him already distracted by a jug of beer. Sternly, she ordered him back to his task and stood over him while he completed it. When he was finished, she sat down wearily on the cellar steps to await Ine's arrival with the grain sacks.

Domestic Past and the Present – Postmodern Approach

Alice Borchardt provides the domestic past to explain the present in which women are cultural residuals. The domesticity of the past, explicitly links the present as an interpretive context in which women are equated to the victimized position called the cultural residuals. No wonder one can assert, at the moment that *Beguiled* though a postmodern text, incorporates the novelist's preconceived assumptions about history, before creating a meaning of the present As Pierre Macherey writes: "the work that the author wrote is not precisely the work that is explicated by the critic. Let us say, provisionally, that the critic, employing a new language, brings out a difference with in the work by demonstrating that it is other than it is" (7)

This is one historical impulse one finds in postmodern writers and Alice Borchardt is no exception. As Glenn Burger writes,

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To bring postmodern and premodern historicist and theoretical, marginal and hegemonic into a different, less knowable relationship with each other, to imagine a productive middle in which relationships between the past and present, marginal and dominant, canonical and noncanonical can proliferate. (XIII)

Also this is again a postmodern feminist impulse, which tends towards transcending space and time. As Carolyn Dinshaw writes:

A queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, text and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now” (1)

Feminist Poetics

The understanding of *Beguiled* is an understanding of the feminist poetics. The poetics emerges as a means of identifying the unique moments of historical sequences that collaborate with male hegemony to break the female autonomy and space. In this regard, Alice Borchardt hence, can be regarded as an artist turned to history to proclaim a new humanist poetics.

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Prof. K. Vijila, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed.
Assistant Professor of English
St. John's College
Palayamkottai-627002
Tamilnadu
India
arunji2010@gmail.com

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