

Fettered Womanhood as Evinced in Michael Ondaatje's Novels

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Role of woman in the society has been defined and it hasn't undergone any change with the passage of time. Man is gifted with the female of the species to provide all sorts of comforts to his life. "And the Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a help meet for him." (Bible Genesis 1:18) He used religion and politics to bend the rules for him. Hierarchal orders in religion taught the woman to be submissive in this male Chauvinistic world. Literature is the only place where the voices of women are heard. Religious fundamentalists try to silence even them.

The strength of woman remains in her emotional bond with the family members. She is the warmth and comfort of children. She provides moral support to husband even if she can not approve many of his deeds. He gathers strength form her, strength but finds delight in her helplessness. There is a contrast in it. Woman expects her man to be strong and projects him to be strong in the society where he gets scared at the strength of his partner.

KaryeshuDasi,
KaraneshuManthri,
Bokeshu Mata,
Shayaneshu Rambha,
Roopeshu Lakshmi,
Kshamayaeshu
Dharitri, Shat
Dharmayukta,
Kuladharmathri
(Neeti Sara:
By Badenaaks
BgadraBhupala)

This explains what man expects from her. He exploits her in every aspect. Explicitly it eulogies woman, the wife. How an ideal woman performs her duty to her husband. At the bottom of all these it underlines the fact that she must be an instrument, a servant to her husband. Man is afraid of woman's strength. Man is afraid of letting her know that he is unpleasant about her acceptance in the society. Her role as a mother pins her to a limited-sphere. She is faltered by the responsibilities as a wife. Natural

feelings of womanhood make it impossible for her to think beyond children and that makes everything convenient for man to enslave her.

Voting rights empowered women in the second decade of twentieth century. England, France, America and Canada showed changes in Political and literary field. “The women’s movement was a significant factor in twentieth- century Canadian Politics, playing a key role in winning Political rights for women, influencing public policy, and constructing the numerical under representation of women in elected office as a salient political issue...” (John C. Courtney & David E. Smith, *The Oxford Hand Book Of Canadian Politics*. P. 322-323)

Michael Ondaatje’s women are not differently treated from the common type we meet in everyday life. From ‘Coming Through Slaughter’ to ‘Cat in the Table’ we find a variety of women characters cutting across the society. Compared to the male counter-part women’s achievements are down played. There is a collective move from males to make her glory dull. In literary world or in politics the scene is not different. Not many tolerant husbands there to encourage their wives to shoot to fame. While wives becoming supportive, husbands remain a stumbling block on their path.

Author’s curiosity to study women resulted in successful portrayal them. “*Coming through Slaughter*” exposes the social condition of woman as a prostitute and how woman is exploited by the society. She amuses, entertains but at the end cornered to Oblivion.

There were 2000 prostitutes in the brothel district of story Ville. Tom Anderson, the king of the Brothel District published a Blue Book every year which listed every whore in New Orleans. This was the guide to the sporting district. Here every whore was treated as a commodity and the type of commodity that lost its value with the arrival of new. She had to make the maximum money in the limited period of her glamour. Business here was very tough. Everyone tried their own marketing strategy. In the attempts, they failed or hardly got time for thinking that they too were human beings. Status of man was just an enviable position for her. As being the profession of their mother’s they wouldn’t have much difficulty to put with the infamous position as a prostitute. Her identity as a prostitute emboldened her to do anything to an extent. Her status in the society made her even dangerous. In the red street, every whore was having her own method to drain customer’s pocket. French Emma’s ‘60 seconds plan’ was one such.

“... whoever could restrain his orgasm with her for a whole minute after penetration was excused the \$2 payment. Emma allowed the odd success to encourage others but boasted privately that there was no man she couldn’t win” (*Coming Through Slaughter* 9)

Exploitation of women by men is in everywhere but the exploitation at the Prostitution brothel homes, are the most-cruel of all. Author’s narration of the ageing prostitutes at the story Ville is telling

exactly what happens to a whore after her glamorous few years. She becomes an unwanted guest, an obnoxious object. The moments she gifted him is forgotten, insult is such big that, that would nearly kill her.

“...Women riddled with the pot, remnants of the good life good time ever loving story Ville who, when they are finished there, steal their mattress and with a sling hang it on their backs and learn to run fast when they see parades with a stick. Otherwise they drop the mattress down and take men right there on the dark pavements, the fat, poor, the sadist who use them to piss in as often as not because the disease they carry has punched their cants inside out, taking so long as the quarter is in their hands”
(Coming Through Slaughter 118)

A whore is one who has to suppress her feelings to help her customer vent his feelings. She in fact falsifies sex before a husband carrying wrong notice about sexuality.

“... The prostitute tolerates and holds the intolerable and unbearable aggression, frustration and pain which convention requires be kept out of the home, and the relationship between husband and wife. It is to fulfill this crucial need that prostitution has always existed. The need is greater where men and women are forced to live up expectations which they cannot realistically fulfill”.

Missing husband shocked Nora. She did not go to complain the Police about it. She knew that such a thing would be dragging further troubles into her life. In the meantime friend of her husband Mr. Webb, a police detective arrived her home extending his full help in finding out him. But she felt uneasy about the ways of the police detective towards her. He had been a thick friend of Mr. Buddy Bolden for a long time. They lived together and even spent their early days sharing everything. Not much intelligence was needed to know that Mr. Webb was interested in her than in investigating her missing husband. Moral obligation or friendship did not prevent him from viewing Nora sexually.

“Do you want me to?
Looking hard at him.
I’m not going to hire you Webb.
Jesus, I don’t want your fucking money!

I don’t want your fucking compassion Web. If you look for him then do it for yourself, not for me.” (Coming Through Slaughter 20)

Nora’s mother a former prostitute of Story Ville did not want her daughter to be in the profession. But death of her husband compelled her to let her girl children into the profession. Before Buddy married Nora, he slept even with her sister. Here the marriage was a status gifted by Mr. Bolden and hence Nora had to be extremely careful with him to maintain the marital bliss. Also, there after the

marriage she began to adore him as a savior who offered life to her. She was having tough time managing the present life and the haunting the past. She tried her best to provide all sorts of comforts and support to the husband.

Michael Ondaatje's family was rich and influential. Their fortunes forsook them when Michael's father Mervin Ondaatje lost himself to alcohol. They started losing everything, Estates, friends and celebrations. Finally the decision to part ways broke the children. All through years, Doris Gratiaen, his wife, lived with a hope that some miracle would happen in their life to stop the alcoholism of her husband. The insult incurred, and pains suffered were high. The novel speaks volumes about the capacity of a woman who in most places plays the fool to satisfy the husbands. In the novel '*Coming Through Slaughter*' Ondaatje deals about the life of the prostitutes where their profession feed the mouths of the family. They are not worried about the source of money. They dealt daily business from that dirty buck. Women in most places are used in their primes and thrown when withered. '*Running In The Family*' exposes how even the decent women of Sri Lanka managed to sleep with jockeys of the days both to fulfill the dream of sleeping with a hero and to influence the rider.

“Gambling was so crucial to the economy of certain household that semi- respectable women slept with jockeys to get closer to ‘the horse’s mouth’ (Running In The Family 44)

There is a misconception about freedom of woman. The question of liberation doesn't arise if a woman chooses her to be at home and enjoy the household duties and lead a life that she thinks comfortable. It is her choice. In certain other cases women work in the office like men and enjoy the busy schedule there. It is not about the work a woman does, it is all about the individuals' interest in doing this,

“I say, let the aproned house wife enjoy her choice as freely and as confidently as the silk- bloused executive enjoys hers. Freedom is as freedom allows.” (Susan Frank Ballentine & Jessica Barksdale in Clan, Diverse Voices of Women 35)

Michael Ondaatje's Grandmother Lalla wished to live a free life with no worries but fate awaited was just the opposite, she had to wage a war throughout her life, at the age of twenty, she was tentatively engaged to Shelton de Saram, a good looking and utterly selfish man. Seeing a wealthy lady from England he changed his mind and married her. This was the first blow in the life of Lalla. She was broken hearted. She could not decide what to do except avenge the society that always sided with rich. Her rage was so high that she was not aware what she was doing. Inflicted women become more prone to the exploitation there from.

“... she went into fits of rage, threw herself on and pounded various beds belonging to her immediate family, and quickly married Willi Grtiaen - a champion cricketer- on the rebound” (Running In The Family 117)

In every desperate attempt, women easily fall into the hands of men awaiting such an opportunity. Here, Lalla after collecting consciousness proceed with a married life in sight. Troubles did not stop showing even after. Her husband got ill shortly after he began a dairy, she supported him in that. She was ready to work hard for bettering their financial condition. But husband’s illness broke her. She ran into neighbor’s homes, pound on their beds and even promise to become a Catholic if Willie recovered. These adjustments yielded no result and Willie died leaving two children in her hands. It was in her thirty, it all happened, and for the next few years her neighbor Rene de saram was her closest friend. Rene also was running a dairy.

Soon Rene’s husband too died and both Lalla and Rene became the thickest friends, for they had no one to come between. In former’s case husband died a natural death where latter’s husband committed suicide. Both were thrown to difficult times after years of excessive high living. They had to live on their wits and character and beauty. In every difficulty there is an opportunity - the way of the world is that; here both widows become the centre of attraction of numerous bored husbands. Cunningly neither of them married again- a decision to go further with the support of the society that otherwise be a stumbling block.

Marjorie Griffin Cohen and Ruth Roach Pierson have discussed about, women’s issues in their book ‘Canadian Women’s issues,’ in this they vehemently criticize the idea that women’s place is at home. “Its great diversity of tasks and weighty responsibilities required, according to this view, a full-time home maker who would be fulfilled through her efficient and creative management of the household. This was “the feminine mystique” side of the argument. Once motherhood was factored in, these commentators agreed that

“A woman’s place is the home.” Fulfilling herself by fulfilling her principal responsibility to society: taking care of the children until they were grown.” (Ruth Roach Pierson & Marjorie Griffin Cohen, Canadian Women’s Issues P2)

If Life is a play, Man lets woman to play for him. She, for him plays, gets injured and bleeds all with an expectation of appreciation from him. He, like a cunning team manager obtains desired result through her. When it meets with failure, he simply puts the reasons on the players. The tired and injured woman has to bear the pain of insult as well.

All practices in the society began with a cause and was with an immediate need of that time. It had to be altered and given way for new things. When religious institutions adopt it, that comes to stay

forever. The practice how so ever evil and out dated cannot be removed. The fear of opposing sacred lives silences the rationales. They know that their voice would have no takers. All ears would evade such talks. No brain would accommodate such thoughts and the practice continues for centuries.

Woman protagonists ‘In The Skin Of A Lion’ allow themselves to be played in the whims of fate. It is true that no mortal can ever escape the diction of destiny and destiny is particularly cruel to women folks. Here, the life of Clare and Alice Gull reiterates the inevitability of woman’s miseries.

Tycoon Ambrose small owned ninety six theaters. He ascended the level working through every possible manipulation. Till the age of twenty eight he was nothing. Through marriage he alienated his sisters whom he thought a barrier for his development. Here the utilitarian attitude of man is obvious.

Man discards woman after he finds the woman is no longer needed, no matter whether it is mother or sister, he will separate himself from the back ground if it takes his enthusiasm away. So was Ambrose Small’s marriage with Theresa, who he found a chance to improve his status socially and financially. He was ready to please her at any cost. She was a prohibitionist and to satisfy her he offered the theater for night a week and she put on temperance shows where audience was only she. Usual plays were not of this kind. Performance of Ben-Hur and Naughty Miss Louise packed the th staggered out in the morning hours and strolled aimlessly home along the streets

“...Show girls, live peacocks, staggered out drunk in the morning hours and strolled aimlessly home along the Rosedale streets- the Chauffeurs of the rich following at a tactful distance in their car” (In The Skin Of A Lion 59)

Man’s domain expands with every penny he earns and in most cases with no difficulty he forgets the woman who has given him the break in careers. He knows that the energy he gets from the woman ushers him into the realms and that makes just impossible for him to get along. In Paris Ambrose met an actress named Clara Dickens and she became his lover. The twenty one year old Clara’s attraction in him was his variedness. He was a spinner, a hawk who hovered over the whole province, swooping down for the kill, buying up every field of wealth. This drew Clara to him. He knew, in general, women would be satisfied with anything thrown to them.

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