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ELIMINATING THE STIGMA: A READING OF ERICA JONG'S *FANNY*

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**Abstract**

Patriarchy as an integral system has constantly put the reins on women on account of their sexuality. Patriarchal ideology propagates the idea of passive female sexuality and active male sexuality. It constructs the notions of femininity, female body and sexuality and women are forced to internalise the same. The society has always been male - centered and in all cultural domains; familial, religious, political, economic and social, women have been relegated as "the Other." The novels of Erica Jong attempt to give voice to this "Other" and articulate her perception of female body, sexuality, power relations and the notion of femininity. Jong like other women writers of the age considered it her responsibility to represent the entire body of female culture and the different female erotic experiences. This genre of women's writing articulates female body, female desire, and female sexuality and their longing for personal liberation with a clear political message. The paper attempts to study how Jong undermines negative associations regarding femininity in her novel *Fanny*. It analyses how Jong's female protagonist in the novel challenges the constructed ideas of gender and sexuality and eliminates the stigma associated with female body, sexuality and desire.

**Keywords** – Patriarchy, Femininity, Gender socialisation, Sexuality, Picaresque

**Introduction**

In various contexts, feminist scholars have defined the terms gender and sexuality and confronted the socio-cultural, psycho-historical background of the same. Gender and sexuality are socially constructed activity assimilated by individuals through the process of socialisation. Feminist scholars maintain that it is not a natural process that originates from the body. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* maintains: "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and

masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one" (12). Butler considers gender as fluid and hence in her opinion gender roles are not to be determined by biological sex. Butler rejects the dualistic nature of gender, heterosexual normativity and biological determinism. Catherine Stimson in her work states: "Cultural laws of gender demand that feminine and masculine must play off against each other in the great drama of binary opposition" (1). In patriarchal culture, Stimson states that the struggle ends in the victory of the male.

Feminist writers down the ages have challenged the assumptions about masculinity and femininity and exposed that such classification is a patriarchal construction premised upon male and female bodies. Gale Rubin states: "Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes...Men and women are, of course, different. But they are not as different as day and night, earth and sky, yin and yang, life and death. In fact, from the standpoint of nature, men and women are closer to each other than either is to anything else..." (40). The male/female biological opposition associates men with power and activity, and women with powerlessness and passivity. As Butler observes "gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized" (*Undoing Gender* 42). Patriarchy indoctrinates the dynamics of domination and subordination with regard to gender roles in men and women through the process of socialisation. Kate Millet maintains that masculinity and femininity operate through family, She notes: "The chief contribution of the family in patriarchy is the socialization of the young (largely through the example and admonition of their parents) into patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament and status" (35). Millet explains that sexual politics acquires approval through the process of socialisation of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics.

#### **Erica Jong's *Fanny***

An American novelist, essayist, and poet, Erica Jong shot to fame with the publication of her debut novel *Fear of Flying*. Her works that parallels the second wave feminism are strong outbursts against the prevailing socio-cultural situation that smothered creative female selves of her protagonists. Her novels portray her multifaceted personality in all its glory and power. Jong explores the innermost depths of female psyche, female body and sexuality with an exemplary courage and conviction. She considers femininity as a socio-cultural construct that can be deconstructed with deliberate attempts by women. In an attempt to give unhindered expression to her true self, Jong often blends

autobiographical elements into her fictional works. Through her unconventional female protagonists, she exposes the mechanics of patriarchy and also transforms female consciousness.

*Fanny: Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout Jones* is a picaresque novel by Jong. The unwarranted importance given to patriarchally constructed gender roles and their ultimate absurdity is at the forefront of the novel. The eighteenth century heroine Fanny is given a twentieth century consciousness. Jong states that "in every age there are people whose consciousness transcends their own time and that these people, whether fictional or historical, are those with whom we most closely identify" (*Fanny* 504). Simone de Beauvoir argues that the socially constructed norms and gender roles allotted to women have always kept them in a subservient position. The position of universal subject has been allotted to men in order to maintain patriarchal ideologies thereby denying women autonomy and agency. Shoshana Felman in her essay "Woman and Madness: The Critical Phallacy" writes in this regard: "women are theoretically subordinated to the concept of masculinity, the woman is viewed by the man as his opponent... as his other, the negative of the positive, and not, in her own right, different, other, otherness itself" (9). However, breaking all conventions, Fanny represents women who empower themselves against the constructed notions of the eternal feminine. Through Fanny, Jong launches a frontal attack on the conventional gender norms that confine women. The eighteenth century setting and its picaresque form of narration offers unlimited opportunity for Jong to register her resistance against the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society. Commenting on her purpose in creating Fanny, Jong states: "having explored our right to anger and sexuality in literature, having asserted our right to tell the truths about our lives, we must now also assert our right to explore imaginary and invented worlds" (Templin 103). The first person narrator Fanny appears as a woman with modern sensibility and this quality distinguishes her from other female characters of the novel that are victimized by patriarchal power structures. Fanny's step-mother is one of the miserable characters in

the novel. Fanny records her mother's experiences and poignantly states that had her mother been a man, her fortune and beauty would have made her life blissful. Another stereotypical character victimized by the painful betrayal of her husband is Mrs. Bellars. She is driven mad by her husband's indifference, long absences, and extra-marital relationships and gambling. Lord Bellars' decision to marry her was a tyrannical selfish choice derived from his greed for the huge dowry she brought along with her.

Jong's *Fanny* that parodies John Cleland's text about Fanny Hill traces the development of a woman in a male dominated society. The novel registers Jong's resistance against the object position enforced on women. Jong writes: women are subordinated as "part of Nature's Great Plan. As Angels; are above Men and God is above Angels, so Women are below Men and above Children and Dogs..." (*Fanny* 43). Fanny who is capable of facing the challenges was aware of discriminations based on gender from her childhood. Through the characterization of Fanny, Jong exposes the double standards of the androcentric society that hinders the personal growth of a female child. In spite of being a quick and enthusiastic learner, Fanny was denied the privilege to go to school while her lethargic step brother Daniel was sent to learn Latin, Greek and Algebra. Fanny was forced to do domestic chores and encouraged only in making pastries and dancing. She was often mocked by her friends and family for showing interest in writing. The socially constructed image of woman confines her to domesticity and prohibits her from entering the public realm. Despite all the odds, she continued her education by reading and writing in the library of the house.

The opening chapter sets the tone for the entire novel. Combining the genres of confession and picaresque, Jong presents Fanny as a doubly marginalised character oppressed for being a woman and a step-daughter. Fanny responds to the androcentric society from her double marginalised position: "Had I been born a Man, I thought, my orphan'd date should not have been great a bar to Preferment, but as a Woman, I suffer'd double Disadvantage. Orphan'd, female, and a secret

Scribbler- what worse might the fates bestow?" (33). Being treated as the "Other" haunts Fanny throughout the novel. In the first sentence, Jong makes clear that Fanny is recording the history of her life as a testimony for Belinda, her only daughter. Fanny is motivated by the desire to provide the true version of her life that has been "distorted, slandered or used to inspire scandalous Novels, lascivious Plays and wanton Odes" (20). She desires to be a role model to Belinda and prove that women are not mere embodiments of virtue or vice, but a "mixture of Sweets and Bitters" (21). Fanny is conscious that her daughter too will have to encounter similar situations and therefore she deliberately wishes "to give her the Benefit of Experience, of that sublime Teacher" (369). The interest of the reader is held tight with the writer protagonists' desire to communicate her true female self. The novel thus becomes a lengthy clarification for a daughter of a mother's life misrepresented by the male writer. Jong deliberately attempts to rewrite the story of a woman of a canonical text of female desires and pleasures written from the perspective of a man for men and thereby challenge phallogocentrism.

The novel *Fanny* portrays a female protagonist who goes beyond the societal expectations for a female of her age. The conventional gender norms prescribed for a female child that hinders her progress forces Fanny to dress like a boy. Her disguise, her life experiences and her account of it becomes significant and touching as she is forced by circumstances to diverge from the conformist norms of the society, that is, to resist the sexual harassment of her stepfather and her half-brother. The eighteenth century setting of the novel prohibits young women of respectable families from moving out without proper escorts. Fanny asks in the novel: "Can you conceive the freedom of suddenly being disguised as a Boy?" (61). Fanny waves off the sexual assaults and exploitation from men outside who considered her to be a woman of loose morals by disguising herself as a boy. The entire novel records the innovative experiences of the unconventional female protagonist who bravely endeavours into a journey that shatters the socially constructed roles destined for women in an

androcentric society. Jong states that the society attempts to curb Fanny's creativity and hinder her success as a writer. She is often called unfeminine for giving expression of her desires through poetry.

Jong through Fanny challenges the role played by gender socialisation in carving women's experiences. Germaine Greer maintains that femininity is the consequence of socialisation on women and hence has to be rejected. She writes: "What we ought to see in the agonies of puberty is the result of the conditioning that maims the female personality in creating the feminine" (89). The patriarchal hegemony is proliferated through the process of gender socialisation. The great poet Alexander Pope appears as a character in the novel, to make Fanny internalise the role of women in society and in the realm of literature. When Fanny attempts to discuss literature with him, he indoctrinates her: "Men are Poets; women are meant to be their Muses upon the Earth. You are the Inspiration of the Poems, not the creator of Poems, and why should you wish it otherwise?" (42). In his opinion, woman is the muse and therefore she cannot be a writer. Jong here exposes the patriarchal strategy that tries to curtail women's creativity by imposing the position of the muse. The views expressed by Pope about women's creative potential portray the conventional attitude of men about women's creativity and talent:

....a Women Poet is an Absurdity of Nature, a vile, despis'd Creature whose Fate must e'er be Loneliness, Melancholy, Despair, and eventually Self-Slaughter. However, if she chooses the sensible Path, and devotes her whole Life to serving a Poet of the Masculine Gender, the Gods shall bless her, and all the Universe resound with her Praise....as angles are above Men and God is above Angels, so Women are below Men an above Children and dogs;..." (42)

Using the deliberations of Pope, Jong attacks the rationale behind the constructed nature of gender roles and women's adherence to the existing social order at the cost their personal freedom. Fanny's admiration and reverence for the literary legend renders her helpless in thwarting his erotic

advances. She was too young, innocent and riveted in theoretical matters to perceive what was happening. However Fanny shocks the patriarchal social order by turning the table against men. She states: "...for just as he drew near my tender virgin Cunnikin, his own Eagerness brought on the Ultimate Period of his Hot Fit of Lust, of which my firm young Thighs and clean Petticoats receiv'd the egregious Effusion....his Eyes let fall few hot Tears of Distress" (42). Fanny reduces them to mere laughing stock by blowing up the myth of male superiority, virility and potentialities.

Fanny's first published novel "Piratiat" becomes a bestseller and she turns out to be a literary figure. However, when it is identified that the author is a woman, her literary career starts declining. The male critics who once praised her finds fault with her work. Fanny is brave enough to step out of her comfort zone, breaking the shackles of exclusion. Through her central protagonist Fanny, Jong not only criticises the androcentric norms of the society, but also urges women to unlearn the patriarchal dictates: "Thus 'tis that every Woman's most Profound Lesson must be to learn to disregard the World's Opinion of her and to rest her Case solely upon her own Opinion of herself..." (225). Fanny who is described by men as the "woman of town, a tart, a bawd, a wanton, a bawdy basket, the-game, a bit of stuff..." successfully proves the hypocrisy of men in constructing such an image for her. Jong belittles the Magistrate who enjoys "blaming Harlots for the Sins of Men" (237). The androcentric notion of the harlot is estimated by Jong as the outcome of "The Sins of Men." Jong's female psyche in control of her femininity inspires Fanny to reaffirm control over her life and career.

Challenging the patriarchal conventions, Jong has discussed female sexuality and lesbianism explicitly in the novel. Through the process of socialisation, androcentric society indoctrinates the dynamics of male domination and female submissiveness. Catherine Mackinnon explains: "Gender socialization is the process through which women come to identify themselves as sexual beings, as beings that exist for men...It is that process through which women internalize (make their own) a male image of their sexuality as their

identity as women and thus make it real in the world" (110-111). Jong attempts to rewrite this image of women. Adrienne Rich in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" considers heterosexuality as a manmade institution. According to her, heterosexuality is "like motherhood...a political institution" that enacts "...women's total emotional, erotic loyalty and subservience to men" (232). She argues that women's erotic choices "must deepen and expand into conscious woman-identification - into lesbian/feminism" (245). In her opinion women should stop competing with each other for men's approval. Lillian Faderman, one of the radical feminists defines lesbianism as a "...relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other" (17-18). Faderman considers female homosexuality can be as fulfilling as heterosexuality except the procreative functions of marriage. Rich coined the term *lesbian continuum* to describe an experience that does lead to sexual affairs:

... a woman had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. We expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support ... breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of lesbianism. (239).

Rich argues that lesbianism is an act of resistance to the hegemonic power structures that propagate the notion of normative heterosexuality. In the novel, Fanny describes how she got attracted towards Poly and how they engaged in lesbian love. She narrates her experience: "Whilst I bent my Lips to Polly's tender Cleft and play'd Arepeggios with my own astonish'd Tongue. 'T was salt as the Sea and tasted not unlike sweet Baby Oysters plucked from the Bosom of the Deep" (104). Jong deliberately repeats

such scenes and passages to debunk the patriarchal social order.

Fanny in the opening chapter states that truth is sterner Goddess than modesty. Jong sketches Fanny as a woman who appreciates and blissfully celebrates her sexuality. Fanny is discontented with the constructed norms of femininity. She informs her daughter that:

...most Men can only see us either as the Embodiment of Virtue or the Embodiment of Vice; either as Bluestockings or unlearn't Painted Whores;...But try to tell 'em, as I have, that a Women is made of Sweets and Bitters, that she is both Reason and Rump, both Wit and Wantonness...(176)

Instead of providing a male appraisal of virtue/virginity, Jong creates a female protagonist who recognizes and delightfully accepts her own sexual pleasure. She is brave enough to reprimand Coxtart, the brothel owner, when he attempts to control her like other prostitutes. Fanny is a free woman and prefers to starve on the streets than abide being treated like a chained mongrel.

Through Fanny, Jong digs at the male dominance that interferes with a woman's right to choose and manage her pregnancy and childbirth. The male hegemony is represented through Fanny's stepfather who entrusts Fanny to the care of Dr. Smellie. Jong has reduced his vocation to a mere greed for money and fame. Jong's resistance towards male interference in women's childbirth is visible when Fanny's mother Isobel and midwife utter: "We need no Men here. This is Women's Work" (317). Fanny tolerates the discomforts of pregnancy and pains of childbirth fearlessly. She takes pride in fortitude, resilience, sacrifice, and humanity of women:

I bit my lips; I held my Breath; I shut my Eyes until numerous salty Tears were squeez'd from their Corners; but moan and wail would I not, howsoe'er the Pain demanded it. I'faith, I felt a sort of Pride in being a Warrior Woman, a Mythick Amazon of Old, and thus enduring the Distress without a Cry. (306)

Jong deliberately makes the mid wife save Fanny and her child by performing a caesarean. On the other hand, Dr. Smellie employed by Mr. Bellars failed miserably to help Fanny. Unlike the glorified and constructed notions of female sexuality; pregnancy, childbirth and nurture become stages with wonderful creative potential in Fanny's life. Jong breaks the conventional narrative strategies as she describes Fanny's female experience. The maternal female body, the mother-child bond or the biological functions of the female body that were hitherto considered trivial, inferior or unhygienic, find expression in the novel. Jong's Fanny treats them as privileged identities of her being: "I'll ne'er forget, if I live as be a Hundred, how your little Mouth latch'tl on to my Nipples as if there were nothing upon this whole Earth but Mouth and Breast" (32). The different stages of her pregnancy augment her creative instincts as a writer. The maternal female body itself is treated as an invitation to writing. Fanny admits that as the foetus developed into a child, her creativity too flourished. "Tis said by some that bearing Babes is all a Woman's Fire and Inspiration; that as her Womb fills, her Head empties; that the Act of Bearing substitutes for all Acts of the Imagination. But I swear that 'tis not so! Rather as my Womb fill'd my Head teem'd as well with Fancies. As my belly grew so did the Children of my Brain" (292). Besides she flaunts and adores her bodily scars: "red and pucker'd Scar, so ugly yet strangely dear." For her, the surgery marks "become all the more precious now that the babe has been stolen by its maid Prudence Feral" (338). The voice of the central protagonist Fanny represents the voice of the silenced "Other." She claims that the female sexual experience is the vital terrain of all women's experience.

### Conclusion

Through *Fanny*, Jong attempts to rewrite the cultural paradigms to uncover the role of patriarchy in confining women and relegating them to the status of "the Other." Towards the end of the novel, Jong declares the fact that she has intended it "as a novel about a woman's life and development in a time when women suffered greater oppression..." (496). Fanny in the concluding part of the novel states from her experience that the male members

of one's own family and the binary division of gender hinder the progress and emergence of a true female self. She successfully ward off the masculine attack and write a history of her true female self for her daughter who has to develop an identity for herself in an androcentric hegemonic society that poses as a threat to women. Through the characterisation of Fanny, Jong questions the paradigmatic and timeless characteristics of the patriarchal hegemony. Jong argues that women's cognitive process of identification with the patriarchally constructed notions of gender results in women's oppression. By portraying Fanny's subjective experiences, Jong successfully eliminates the stigma associated with female sexuality and the female body.

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