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THE NON HEROES: A STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF MOTHERS IN *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* AND *THE MOTHER*

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ABSTRACT

Across cultures and civilizations, across ages, mothers have played stereotypical roles. The degree of personal liberty, independence- financial or otherwise, freedom of expression and action for a woman may vary but the one constant is that as mother she has always been primarily responsible for providing food, sustenance and protection to her children. The present paper aims to explore the portrayal of Mothers in the two novels: *The Grapes of Wrath* by Steinbeck and in Gorky's *The Mother*. The two novels are set in two different worlds and represent two diverse dreams. The dreams are not of the Mothers. The mothers in the two novels are not the hero. Yet it is the Mother, more than any other character that impacts the narrative in each novel.

Key Words: Motherhood, Ideals, Stereotypes, Social Construct, Heroic

INTRODUCTION

In the years 1906 and 1939 respectively were published two iconic novels- *The Mother* by Maxim Gorky and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Though set in geographically and politically diverse lands, there are many similarities between the two novels. Both are tales of the struggling masses. Both are tales of Quest. The Russian Revolutionaries sought to see a New World of liberty, equality and freedom. The Dustbowl migrants of America set out on a journey to the Promised Land – a land of plenty, a land free from hunger and oppression. The journeys are epic and the rewards transcendental. Yet another point of similarity between the two novels is that both lack a hero in classical terms. The novels have protagonists. These protagonists are the mothers.

The Objectives of the present paper are to explore

- i. Hero as a construct in literature
- ii. Mother as a social construct
- iii. Portrayal of the mothers in the two novels

The Hero in Literature

The art of storytelling requires the creation of a central character which would be interesting and intriguing. With changing times this central figure underwent changes to suit the zeitgeist. In a lucid classification of heroes, Vera Norman mentions four conceptions of heroes: The Classical Heroes who were men of high birth and who performed extraordinary feats, the Medieval Heroes who were not necessarily of high birth but were of extraordinary moral character and courage, the Romantic Hero who waged an internal war and whose physical courage was immaterial and finally the Modern Hero who creates a pool of light in the world of darkness. In *Heroes, Hero worship and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle talks of hero as divinity, hero as a prophet, as a poet, as a priest, as a man of letters and hero as a king. He insists that a hero has to inspire hero worship –'genuine admiration, loyalty, adoration'. Beginning with *Bueawulf*, to *Dr Faustus* to Shakespearean heroes, the heroes in English literature were men of exceptional courage,

rectitude, ability. The women who appeared in literature on the contrary were worshipped for other qualities: chastity, sacrifice, obedience and love. In his galaxy of pilgrims, Chaucer portrayed the Wife of Bath and the Prioress – both talking of love in the Canterbury Tales. Helen is the temptress in Dr Faustus. Shakespeare of course had a complete array of chaste, obedient, virtuous women: Ophelia, Desdemona, Cordelia to name a few. Even in Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra never acquires heroic proportions. In Milton, Eve is ‘the mother of mankind’. Infact women were always cast in the roles of wives, mothers, daughters, mistresses and definitely not as a hero.

Mothers in Literature

Allan posited that a mother’s role is perhaps a woman’s most enduring role in the Western World (Alan :57) and “ Mother hood has long held a special place of honor in the symbolism of American Life. Still a dominant value today the ideal of motherhood probably achieved its quintessential expression in the writings of the mid nineteenth century. Women according to the prevailing Victorian image were supremely virtuous, pious, tender and understanding. Although women were also idealized as virgins, wives and Christians, it was above all as mothers that women were attributed social influence...”.(Bloch :100-126)

D Jill Savit in *Female Stereotypes in Literature* comments , “While male characters have been given free reign to be and become what they like, even to fail if they choose, women characters have been written to play and re play the same themes, limited as they are. Thus when the female character deviates from the norm, from these stringent stereotypes more attention is then called to the purity of what the female character is supposed to be.” Thus the social construct for the ideal woman is the Mother Woman and ideals for this woman are self sacrifice, piety, virtue, patience and nurturing. Their place in history, in the march of civilization, in revolutionary events is on the sidelines only. “They (woman) hover on the fringes, creating a milieu for discussion in their salons offering their personal and moral support to male friends and lovers, but making only minor intellectual contributions.” (Kerber: 187-188) Beauvoir suggests that in this new

creation of life, the woman loses herself, seeing herself as no longer anything (but) a passive instrument.

Hero Vs Protagonist

The Grapes of Wrath and The Mother both lack a ‘hero’ in the classical terms. The mothers are the figures who are closest to being the protagonists in the two novels. Not that they are by any means alike in temperament. Ma Joad is a feisty, bustling woman who does not hesitate to speak her mind and even threatens her husband with a physical fight, when it comes to the question of the well being of her family. Gorky’s Mother on the contrary is a docile, timid being who resorts to subterfuge to have her own way- and is proud of her ingenuity.

The two women are protagonists as mothers and not as individual women. All the stereotypical social motifs and signifiers are abundantly used to communicate this image. The principal preoccupation of the two women is cooking – forever behind the stove or heating the Samovar, and in case of Gorky’s mother, also knitting woollens to provide warmth to the ill clad young revolutionaries. Again when she volunteers to carry contraband into the factory, it is hidden beneath a load of food that she purports to sell. Indeed so typical is the association of motherhood and food that initially no guard thinks to question or search her. That which glorifies the mother in *The Grapes of Wrath* is her handing out food to the starving children out of her own dwindling resources and in an even more startling image, making Rose of Sharon offer her breast to a starving man. The other women who figure in *The Grapes of Wrath* other than Ma Joad are mothers too: Rose of Sharon, other mothers in the camp. In Gorky’s *Mother*, all the other females such as Natasha, Sashenka , are shadowy figures, and completely asexual beings. Young women, they are pitied by the mother for they had abandoned their femininity, their desire for love and marriage and children for the Cause.

Universally, as women, their lives are miserable. Pelagea Nilovna says, “All my life has been hard for no reason. Let it be hard for the sake of a good man like him.”(Gorky: 57)

GB Shaw chose to put an economic interpretation to the docility of women, their quiet

acceptance of the tragedy of their lives. He protests that when a marriage does not work, "when the parties are selfish, tyrannical, jealous, cruel, envious, with different and antagonistic tastes and beliefs, incapable of understanding one another: in short, antipathetic and incompatible, it produces much untold human unhappiness. Why is this unhappiness endured when the door is not locked and victim can walk into the street at any moment? Obviously because starvation awaits them at the other side of the door" (Shaw: 383)

Shaw's interpretation cannot justify the portrayal of the protagonists in the two novels. That Gorky chose to name his book *Mother* and not Pelagea Nilovna is significant. It is also significant that the apparent protagonist in *The Grapes of Wrath* is simply referred to as Ma Joad. The mother in Gorky had turned a widow, an event after which her life had neither improved nor deteriorated. And Ma Joad lives by only one dictum – to keep her family united. These women chose to stay on – not to avoid starvation but to protect their families from starvation.

The Second Sex was to be published only 10 years post the publication of these two novels. The zeitgeist would have prepared the ground for its publication. Steinbeck and Gorky were men of letters and young men at the time of its publication. Yet they apparently perpetuate this tradition of mother woman. Their books breathe not a word of this 'the new woman'. Abortion, control over their own bodies, freedom from domestic violence, these thoughts are not entertained by the characters in the two novels. And if there are no heroic men in their narrations, so be it. The novels tell tales without heroes. For Pavlov does not live up to the construct of a hero in *The Mother*. Tom Joad or Pa Joad do not acquire heroic proportions in *The Grapes*.

Conclusion

'The appearance of heroes in literature marks a revolution in thought that occurred when poets and their audiences turned their attention away from immortal gods to mortal men, who suffer pain and death but in defiance of this, live gallantly and fully and create through their own efforts a moment's glory that survives in the memory of their

descendants'(Britannica). But the two mothers are cheated of this honor. To borrow a phrase from *The Second Sex*, the two females chose to become women. Hence the women are mothers first-women later. They are only the protagonists. They are not heroes. In a man, similar deeds would have earned him the title of hero. In a woman these deeds are not even considered heroic. To be heroic the action has to be a demonstration of 'courage beyond the call of duty'. When a mother protects her family it is not beyond the call of duty. When she sacrifices her self for her offspring it is not beyond the call of duty. The social construct demands this be her duty.

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