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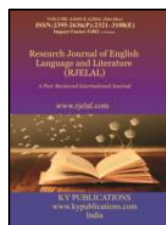
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## MOTHER AND DAUGHTER PEERS OF EQUAL WAVELENGTH IN JOYCE CAROL OATES CHILDWOLD

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### ABSTRACT

Joyce Carol Oates is a leading American woman novelist who has produced a large number of fictional works in American Literature. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to compare and contrast two major women characters in Oates's novel, *Childwold* a poetic prose saga that reveals the authors portrayal of women against the background of Eden Valley, a suburb of New York during the years of the Great Depression in America. Arlene the mother and Laney the daughter, represent two women characters who are unique in a sense but are symbolic of a universal situation at large.

The novel *Childwold* (1976) has a special significance in Oates's oeuvre. As the novel for Oates, is a return to the rural landscape of the earlier novels, the Eden Valley, a world that represents the environs of Millersport, New York, where she grew up. In fact, this has been the setting for most of her earlier fiction. *Childwold* the name of a village has a symbolic implication that the village is not suitable for the development of children (since 'wold' means moor). The time of the novel is also approximately, the time of its publication (1976).

Speaking of her novel *Childwold*, Oates significantly remarks in an interview with Robert Phillips:

. . . i am personally very fond of *Childwold*, since it represents, in a kind of diffract way, a complete world made of memory and imagination, a blending together of different times. (199-206)

In the same interview, Oates continues to explain the form of the novel. Accepting the general view that *Childwold* is a poetic novel, Oates says that by choosing this new form in writing, she,

. . . wanted to create a prose poem in the form of a novel, or a novel in the form of a prose poem. (199-206)

Oates has never made high claims of having done anything extraordinary, so far as form is concerned. She uses her technique primarily to highlight the dilemmas of her characters. Their experiences become the basis of all her writing. The point of view is that of an omniscient narrator intersperse very often with that of a single or more characters. Because of this narrative style it becomes difficult to the reader to distinguish the narrator's voice from that of a character. In this sense, this novel may be considered as one of Oates's novels of experiment in the narrative technique.

*Childwold* is an isolated village inhabited by loners, misfits, country folks and dreamers, whose farms are as strangling as their lives. The characters which are seen in her earlier novels are also seen here but with a more psychological deepening. In such an environment Oates focuses on two middle and lower middle-class farmer families namely, Bartlett's of Yewville and Hurley's of *Childwold* who lost all of their property in the Great Depression in America. In fact, Oates places three generations from the Hurley's family, each showing the emergence of one stage out of the other. Joseph Hurley the Grandfather a victim of the Great

Depression in America lost all his wealth and now is living on just eight acres of land out of two hundred and fifty acres. He also lost his wife Anna Hurley, Anna Hurley was a submissive woman, died of too many pregnancies. Joseph lives within his own memories with silence and stubbornness having faced the realities of life. Arlene Bartlett her father's favourite daughter married to Lyle Bartlett represents the mother earth figure, full of life and energy and never fails as she has learnt to live within her limitations. She is a lively forerunner of the family, a cheerful promiscuous widow, representing the typical middle class sub-urban woman. Her adolescent daughter Laney Bartlett is a beautiful, intelligent, sensitive and courageous girl whose future prospects are stunted because of her sexual abuse as a young girl of fourteen years. As an optimist, Laney looks forward to what is in store for her in future.

Arlene Bartlett and her second daughter Laney Bartlett ---mother and daughter, peers of equal wavelength --- are the major women characters considered to understand what kind of images of women these two characters reflect.

Arlene, daughter of Joseph and Anna Hurley had been the last baby of the family, the last-born of the six children who had lived. Her mother must have been at least thirty-eight when Arlene was born, and she had never been well. So sad, Arlene's lost her mother a few years after her birth. Arlene Bartlett was her father's favourite daughter and as she was very beautiful her father used to call her fondly Big Eyes, sitting her on his knee. Joseph lives within his own memories with silence and stubbornness and suffers the victimization of the depression. He is mournful and nostalgic, preoccupied with death and the dead. Having faced the realities of life and realizing to some extent its limitations, he can only survive due to his ability to stay rooted to a family, a house and a piece of land. Arlene loves and respects her father Joseph Hurley, who is a widower, now working hard on the eight acres of his land. She never complained and said nothing that would hurt her father.

Arlene dropped out of school at the age of twelve, being needed at home. She fell in love with Lyle Bartlett whose father was much richer than the

Hurley's was also a victim of the Great Depression in America. At fifteen she married Lyle Bartlett, who was in his mid-twenties but looked younger, handsome, small-boned and sweet in preference to other suitors like Fitz John Kasch who was very rich and highly educated but not good-looking. This shows her independent nature in decision-making. Arlene had her first baby Nancy, at the age of sixteen. Arlene and Lyle lived happily for some time, but the Great Depression of America affected the farmers worst. The Bartlett's of Yewville were broken, were unable to cultivate the vast land due to lack of funds therefore sold the land cheap and moved to Yewville and owned a hardware store. Arlene's father, Joseph, generally didn't like city people who were not farmers, but he liked Lyle Bartlett. But the store was closed due to loss in business after Lyle's father died. Failure in life affected Lyle Bartlett badly. They shifted to the town. He borrowed three thousand dollars from the bank and invested the money in a new project. The project failed and Lyle started quarrelling with her. Arlene was shaken but optimistic.

Slender, boyish with curly fawn-coloured hair and large gray eyes, so sweet . . . the sweetest man Arlene had ever known until he changed. (204-205)

Arlene as a loving wife gave him moral support and stood by her husband during their financial crisis. Though they had small quarrels, their mutual love was not lessened. Lyle got a part-time job at Vanderdeen's Auto Sales and worked there even during weekends. Neglecting family he lived a luxurious life and was given to drinking. It was during this time that Arlene took a bold step and moved to her father's place in Childwold. Later she attends the funeral of her husband in town after his death in a car accident.

Arlene, a young woman in her mid-thirties had become a widow after having two children with Lyle Bartlett. Instead of marrying another man, Arlene without losing heart started living with her father in Childwold to help her old father until his death. This shows Arlene's love for her father.

Arlene is a lively protector of the family, and a cheerful promiscuous widow. She works very hard and not only helps her lonely father and her

eldest daughter Nancy and her two daughters as Nancy's husband Prentiss left the village for Pilot School in Kansas in search of a job but also takes care of her other children both legitimate and illegitimate, of different ages and of different fathers. Arlene may be considered as mother earth, full of life and energy and in love with so many of her pregnancies. Arlene took the responsibility of the complete family and never complained about her burden. She never fails for she has learnt to live with her limitations. Her world signifies the hope and affirmation that Oates often hints at.

As a young and beautiful woman and widow, Arlene had a series of affairs with men. One of them was younger than her and deserted her when she became pregnant. Next, another fellow, Bickner, could not continue his relation with her because he was a married man. The third was Earl Tuller who was a divorcee, handsome, talkative, sportive and rich. He would come to her house and would take her out. He also gave her a new car as a birthday gift. Nancy and Laney also liked him. On one occasion, when they both went out, they drank, but Earl was drunk. In that condition he suspected Arlene being friendly with a stranger and beat her cruelly and that was the end of their love. He leaves her and after sometime phones to her to forgive him. In spite of his repeated phone calls and promises Arlene keeps him away. This shows how Arlene is courageous and maintains her strength of decision-making and self-respect.

Arlene cried in the kitchen saying "*I never did anything, I swear I never did anything to provoke—*" (53). Even in such a situation, she advises Laney in a gentle manner to be careful. In the words of Laney:

Momma says people are always telling tales about Bartletts, always telling lies, lies, Laney, she says pulling you around to face her, don't you give them anything more to talk about, do you know what I mean? ... because we are as good as anyone, we are as good as anyone on earth. (12)

When they receive a big box of Christmas presents by parcel sent in her name and without the sender's name, she wants to send it back again. Nancy and Laney guess that the presents must be

from Earl. They had already opened the parcel and started examining the contents. Look at Arlene's words in this context, which reveal her self-respect and her ability to be firm in her decisions and her sense of responsibility of her family:

"The address is Mrs. Lyle Bartlett, which is me! Me! Me and not You", Arlene cried. "Put that sweater down, who says it's for you? All these things are going back! I won't have them in the house! I told him and told him — I begged him — he's got to let me alone, I said, I've got a family to take care of, I've got so many responsibilities I could die — I'm a widow, I have my father to take care of too, and this house is caving in, and —" (188)

Arlene in her relationship with other men had never neglected her family. She proves herself, an embodiment of womanly love as lover, wife, mother and daughter. When people criticize on her back, she never cares because she knows she is not wrong. She faces things courageously as they confront her. Except on one or two occasions, she never loses her heart. As a single mother Arlene was very much worried about the future of her children. But fortunately, Nancy accompanies her husband Prentiss along with her two children after he gets a good job in town.

Having known through others that Laney was having an affair with a man in Yewville i.e., Fitz John Kasch she warned Laney who was hardly fifteen and threatened that she would report it to the police as Laney was only a minor in age. But Laney assured Arlene that Kasch was only her friend and not a lover. He was over forty years of age.

Arlene's fear about her second daughter Laney's future forces her to meet Kasch at midnight at his residence in Yewville, to request him not to ruin Laney's life. Kasch welcomed her and tried to make love to her. She responded positively and he knelt before her. Kasch's words are significant "The girl drew her hands away from her face; the woman opened her arms to me." (252) Later, Kasch, driven totally mad by his attempt to embrace the physicality represented by Arlene and her brood, retires as a hermit to the old Hurley homestead.

Arlene's first son Vale is a Vietnam veteran, he left Childwold and joined the Army, but the war affected his health, he was admitted and treated in a hospital and lives in a cheap hotel in town. Later he goes to the city and enters the world of chaos. Mutilated both physically and mentally by Vietnam casualty and the frustrating life of the materialistic society, he gets too disfigured to return to Childwold and expresses his despair and longing by sending anonymously, a truck full of gifts, bought with stolen money. His violent experience and its following agony have a destructive effect on his mind. He finally fails to comprehend life in its chronological order. And her second son Ronnie who resembles Vale also was not settled in life and never understands Arlene's worries and responsibilities. Arlene as mother was worried about Vale's future and Ronnie's attitude but she is helpless.

Joseph Hurley, Arlene's father who was 83 years old feels desperate, regretting his wife's death and sitting lonely in the lawn wants to work at least to develop the kitchen garden. Sometimes his grandson Vale, Arlene's eldest son, used to help him. Joseph had a heart attack but never allowed people to take him to hospital. One night he dreamed of Pearl, lover of his youth and became restless. Early the next morning he went alone to the river, stepped into the deep and cold water and killed himself by drowning in the water.

Arlene regrets that it was her fault to have allowed him to go alone. Arlene already knew one day before his death that something would happen to her father. In the words of Arlene's second son Ronnie:

Yesterday she was crying on and scaring the little kids, *my fault, it's my fault, I shouldn't have let him go out like that, I knew he'd have an accident, I knew something would happen. . . .* (263)

Further in the words of Ronnie:

Everyone was acting strange; everyone was clumsy and embarrassed. Mamma kept holding a tissue crumpled her hand, a yellow tissue she brought to her nose again and again. She wore a hat with a veil. Her face looked puffy. (264)

According to Ronnie, Arlene also had a premonition that her father wanted to die deliberately and his death was not an accident.

After the death of both Kasch and her father Joseph Hurley, Arlene falls in love with a middle-aged divorcee, Stephen Wallace, a State Trooper, who divorced his wife. They loved each other, though Wallace reminded her of Earl, he was sweet and gentle. They moved to a rented house, the old McInnis house, as she thought she would be haunted by her father's thoughts if she had stayed in her father's old house.

Arlene represents the image of a courageous, beautiful, hardworking, sturdy and loving family woman as a daughter, lover, wife and mother. It seems that the author, by portraying the character of Arlene, gives a message to poor and vain-glorious middle-class women, to be like Arlene because she is an ideal, independent, brave and typical middle-class suburban woman in Upstate of New York. Arlene also represents thousands of such women all over the world. Thus, the image of Arlene acquires a universal and realistic character and appeal.

The next major woman character in the novel Childwold is Arlene's second daughter Laney, who is hardly fourteen. Her full name is Evangeline Ann Bartlett, named after her grandmother. She is as beautiful and courageous as her mother but is more independent and intelligent than Arlene. Both of them behave more like friends than like mother and daughter. Her grandfather, Joseph, calls her fondly Curly Hairs and she is his favourite among his grand-children. At school she proves herself to be a brilliant student.

In spite of her rich lineage, now reduced to the status of a poor middle-class family girl, Laney never loses her courage. Further, she gives comfort to her mother in times of difficulty. Even though, very independent by nature and fully aware of the stories of sex that influenced the other girls of her age, in spite of the love openly revealed to her by young boys like Brad, she never succumbs either to love or lust because she has developed a philosophical and seemingly detached attitude to life having seen the life of women like her mother, and the fate of young girls like her, particularly girls

from middle and lower middle class farmer community. That she is detached does not mean that she is a cynic. Laney loves her mother, elder sister Nancy and her children, elder brothers Vale and Ronnie greatly. Particularly she loves Vale more because Vale had once saved her life from drowning in a lake of marshy and drainage water when she was three years old. She takes care of her siblings as well as her sister's children, as if she were their second mother. She also takes care of her grandfather Joseph Hurley, who is eighty-three years old. He used to tell her and other children stories and anecdotes of his life, the adventures of Red Indians, fairy tales and many interesting and frightening things. This shows her sense of responsibility even as a teenage girl.

Laney, like many teenage girls at school, used to read secretly magazines and comic books on sex. Some of them are *The Romance*, *True Confessions*, *True Love*, *My Romance*, *My Secrets*, *Secret Story* etc. Apart from these she also read articles published in some newspapers like "God Sent Me a Defective Baby", "My Abortion", "My Shame", etc. which hold mirror to the miserable life of poor girls and women in Upstate New York in those days.

Laney used to skim the stories, study the photographs and used to read one magazine after another and keep these magazines in secret places but it is interesting to note here that even her mother used to read these stories secretly. There is nothing wrong about it because it depicts the fundamental curiosity of human beings in the mysteries of sex.

A very important trait in the character of Laney is her precocity, that is, her mental age is much higher than her biological age. In her teenage, (i.e., 14 years) itself, she attains the maturity of a grown-up woman. In this sense, her thoughts are more elderly than those of her own mother, Arlene. This is the reason that makes her mother talk to her like a friend. Her love for her mother is revealed when the latter expresses her bitter experience with Earl who insulted and beat her for no provocation on her part. That night Laney had a dream in which she shoots Earl dead.

The boards were splintery and strong beneath your feet. You waited. Finger on the trigger as you'd been taught; you waited. Are waiting. You were trembling and the trembling got worse but you stood there with the gun, . . . .when the car slowed and you saw his face you would offer no greeting, no warning, you would not call him by name, you would raise the rifle and fire, and fire again, and run to the car and fire again, again bringing the barrel of the rifle up against him —

You were trembling, stooped over the pain of your bowels. You are trembling. You died, are dying. You died. (53)

This passage depicts Laney as a teenage girl who is very angry at the strong man Earl who had suspected and injured her mother, and who she wants to avenge her mother's suffering.

Her friendship with Fitz John Kasch though accidental, she continues it by visiting him often. She has courage and self-respect and is proud of her lineage. For instance, when Kasch takes her for the first time to his residence, she tells him that the young boys who were teasing her:

— wouldn't dare hurt me, you said, because I'm a Bartlett; because my brother or one of my cousins would hurt *them*. The other side of my family's the Hurleys — From *Childwold*. (37)

Laney loves Fitz John Kasch for his gentle behaviour and for his high learning, not knowing that he was one of the suitors who had wanted to marry her mother when her mother was a teenage girl. Laney is also unaware of her mother's visit to Kasch's residence at Yewville. When her mother who has some inkling about her daughter's relationship with Kasch, asks her to bring her lover home, Laney flatly refuses saying that it would be funny. However, when Arlene warns her about her relationship with Kasch:

"... but a man of that age, in his forties, they said, and you go to his apartment with him. ... Laney, my God, why didn't I know anything about this, why didn't somebody tell me before? ... Why didn't you tell me?"



(84) Laney replies: "Why should I tell you? You!" (84)

Laney shows her independence on several occasions like this. Arlene finds resemblance of Laney's late father's eyes in Laney's eyes and in frustration abuses Laney as 'bitch'. Saying this, Arlene enters Laney's room and is surprised the way Laney keeps her room cozy, neat and attractive. Arlene says:

"Why you're breaking my heart!" Arlene exclaimed, as if it were a truth she should have recognized long ago. Then she sighed and looked around the little room, and could not help but admire it, and said: "Now I know why you're always hidden up here, away from the rest of us." (85)

To this Laney replies that she doesn't want to be away from her mother, but the noise made by the kids. She runs her both hands through her mother's hair and says sorry to her. There are many antiques and photographs of the family neatly arranged in Laney's small room. She preserves all of her childhood dresses which are beautiful. The way Laney keeps her attic room reveal her love for beauty and order. This shows Laney's spirit of independence as a daughter in spite of her love for her mother. Now Arlene feels satisfied that the small room is her daughter's "Kingdom" and feels like sleeping there by the side of her daughter. That is, a mother feels her daughter to be her mother. It is in this context that Arlene regrets that their family is too poor to her lofty-minded and prettiest daughter. Laney is a highly positive character full of confidence and hope for a bright future. Laney consoles her by saying:

"We're not poor", Laney said. ... "We get along all right. Next year I can get a job, we'll have more money. We're not poor now. Vale might get a better job, he said something about a training school or night school, going to college, and he'll send money, and ... and... We're not poor as some people, are we? We get along all right". (87)

These words show clearly how optimistic and knowledgeable Laney is in spite of her young age. Thus, Arlene, though she wants to warn Laney

about Kasch, is almost silenced and pleased with her daughter. Laney also tells her mother that Kasch is very rich and offers her money and expensive gifts, but she has never taken anything from him. Kasch is only her friend and not lover. He is unmarried and lonely. She has brought some books from him and has read them. Arlene takes a book and tries to read something written on a page but fails to make any sense out of it. Now she sees Laney as a stranger who she cannot understand. This reflects that Laney's world was not confined to the physical world alone like her mother but her world is wide and highly elevated.

To understand the image of Laney in love, it is relevant to understand the background of Fitz John Kasch, as a large portion of the narrative is devoted to Laney and Kasch who commits suicide, out of repentance, eventually by hanging himself.

Fitz John Kasch is named after his great-grandfather who was a very rich and prosperous trader. He won and lost in Congress elections and became an anti-Republican in 1860, opposed Abraham Lincoln and supported the cause of the South on slavery. His life was threatened. To protect his life he had constructed a strong and big stone building at Yewville, a small city. His son was Sydney Kasch who married Elvira. The present Fitz John Kasch is their son. He was born with a split brain and behaves strangely at times because of his split personality. He studied at Harvard University and obtained his Ph.D. degree for his doctoral thesis on "Savagery and Mysticism". He is well-read including scriptures of Hindu philosophy like the *Katha Upanishad*. As his wife had eloped with a neighbour, he travelled widely. Now he is in his forties. At twenty, he had left Yewville and returned to his native place after twenty years. He is alone and his only relative, Aunt Leita, is very old and lives separately in her old house in Yewville. Kasch has inherited not only property from his parents but also migraine from his mother, Elvira. Kasch's parents were generous and built the Kasch Memorial Museum, a school etc., in Yewville. Kasch after returning from abroad lives in a carriage house attached to the Museum.

Kasch in his forties has already been through life of despair and frustration. He had

behind him a broken marriage and also a shattered career as a scholar. Kasch, as a pilgrim, a poet or a pervert aims to forget his past and overcome any sense of belonging. Kasch thinks that he can live with the strength of his writing, creating a world in his solitude, but he fails miserably. Kasch, is actually sick minded, Kasch, secretly moves in different places voyeuring how young girls and boys make love to each other, thereby deriving a kind of sexual satisfaction just by watching youngsters secretly. Obsessed, by his so-called meditations, he speculates on whether to kill himself or possibly someone else. When he sets out to take a life, accidentally he meets Laney Bartlett a fourteen-year-old daughter of Arlene, who is full of life and spirit. With the sight of Laney Kasch changes his plans. He saves Laney from a group of drunken boys who were teasing her and takes her to his carriage house, and Laney washes herself. And after Laney is slightly recovered from fear, that night Kasch attempts to rape her in spite of her r sistance. It is not clear whether he really rapes Laney. In the words of Kasch himself:

That night I grappled with her and snapped her fragile bones in my heated love, in my generous lust. I tore at her mouth with my own. . . . The image of what I sought danced from me and teased me, the curls on her forehead damp, clotted, her fine eyelashes clotted, I heard her voice echoing, in my skull that night and many nights thereafter, a litany, a sacred chant, the words of which were so beautiful, I woke weeping —

Childwold  
Childwood  
Childwide  
Childworld  
Childmold  
Childwoud  
Childtold. (48-49)

The passage above seems to be the description of an intercourse, a rape. But in view of Kasch’s split-brain and his controversial descriptions by the narrator as an ascetic, as a mad man, as an animal, as an impotent man and as a genius in different sections of the novel, it is difficult to believe whether he did the act of rape out of a mad excitement or only in his imagination, it is not clear. In another important passage in which an injured woman, probably Kasch’s wife, when he tries to kill or rape her, clearly declares:

You’re nothing, you don’t know how. You can’t. You’re not a man. There’s nothing there. There’s nothing in you, Nothing. (59)

Also, the adjective ‘impotent’ used by the narrator makes it enigmatic whether Kasch is capable of satisfying a woman as a man.

Whatever the case, an interaction begins between them. Laney was attracted towards Kasch by his polite and cultured behaviour in spite of their age difference. Impressed by his knowledge and intellect visits him often and her knowledge about him benefits her own knowledge. Kasch gets deeply attracted to her innocence and originality. His relationship with Laney draws him back to life, pulling him away from his attempted asceticism. His deliberate and perverse mind comes in contact with a life lived entirely through natural instincts. His desire for her is as fiery as his gentle approach towards her. Kasch, attracts Laney with his tender and polite conversation, he initiates Laney to the world of experience. He aims to guide her by taking her through the arranged and deliberate world of knowledge. He wants to possess Laney and her life and fix her in his own framework, and mould her as an art-object, silent, mute, and immobile.

I will transform her: I will invent her.  
I will write about her with devotion. . .  
(111)

Laney sustains all his influences, Kasch admits:  
. . . the books you read are not my books,  
the language you use is not my language.  
(290)

Under Kasch’s influence, Laney escapes the chaos to embrace abstraction when Kasch, describes the farm as “a universe of trash, of beauty” discovering that,

Life is organization, life is temporality, complexity, interactions that can be observed but not explained. There is always a direction to it--always a design. It insists upon its own fulfilment. It is that triumph of organization at the molecular level over a tendency toward chaos. But it is not to be understood, not even by its most scrupulous, faithful observers. (239)

But Laney a Nature's child fully absorbed in the flow of life despite of Kasch's manipulative hold on her; she continues to enjoy Nature's flow. As Nature's child Laney is still intact and grows into her womanhood with the same degree of excitement and enthusiasm as she had enjoyed in her childhood. Laney in any case is not the kind to take the other person's will for granted, she depends more on her impulses and intuitions. Unlike her mother Arlene, or the girls in the romantic magazines she devours, she is not "sinful and selfish and cruel and ignorant," imagining "the very centre of the universe lay between her legs." Laney yearns for something more than mere physical gratification.

Laney is transformed but not as Kasch desires. Laney experiences within her a flow of life and enjoys its vitality. Kasch fails to fix her in his framework, for Laney begins to grow in coherence to the natural process. Laney is an outstanding projection of a character who has her feet finely rooted in the ground. Therefore, the natural growth of Laney cannot be controlled by Kasch. In his obsession to control Laney's world, he even approaches her mother Arlene. He decides that his marriage to Arlene is the only way by which he can take into his power, the entire life force of Laney. But the scheme of events that follow the marriage are contrary to his dreams. Oates seems to suggest that Laney is in some way only a fragment of his imagination, whom he thinks he can manipulate. But he is mistaken; he cannot give a single meaning to his complex life. Kasch's obsessive desire to take into control Laney's life is defeated due to his own limitations. At one point of time he does realize that Laney is too vibrant to be set in a mould. Laney outpaces her mentor. Kasch cries out in despair.

Where are you, Laney? Where have you gone? I have lost you, Do you exist? Did you

ever exist? You have left Childwold, I sense that: but where have you gone? You stir, you wake, you come in consciousness heaved upon the sands of consciousness; but where are you, why have you gone so far? . . . no longer mine . . . (290)

Laney makes a sincere effort to draw Kasch out of the claustrophobic environments and his self-imprisonment. While Kasch endeavours to forget his past, Laney constantly pulls him towards it. Laney's openness comes in direct contrast to Kasch's closed mind who, in spite of Laney's presence remains locked in his melancholic self-imprisonment. Laney can only sympathize with Kasch's obsessions as she knows about the limitations of their relationship. Kasch's frustrations do not belittle her and his marriage to her mother Arlene, does not make her dejected. She has no malice towards Kasch and his neurotic obsessive and deluded life has no impact on Laney.

Kasch's frustration lies in his inability to accept the transience of the flow of life. The world that Laney represents is the cause of Kasch's bewilderment. He becomes conscious of the final reality of the imaginative vision of Laney and the life surrounding it, at the same time he apprehends his own inability to transcend time and reality. Kasch's obsession with withdrawal and defiance of the natural world lead to his final enclosure, hence no relationship helps him in anyway. He has no hope for a better life.

Kasch is aware that he has betrayed his true emotions for the cause of his obsession. In an agonized confession, he says:

Laney Evangeline, do you forgive me? Do you even remember me? I betrayed you with her; I had not the courage for you. Years pass. Our lifetimes pass. My dear, my lovely girl, my daughter, did I ruin your life, did I poison your childhood? (249)

Ultimately Kasch repents for cheating an innocent and beautiful girl Laney, who could have been his daughter, had he married Arlene, her mother. And this constant regret and guilty feeling drives him towards suicide.

In the closing chapter of the novel Laney prepares for the future –finding a new home with



Aunt Esther who is a spinster and a nurse in Yewville by earning some money from baby-sitting. Reading the books given by Kasch and the medical magazines brought by Aunt Esther from her hospital, Laney still feels lonely and ponders over her affair with Kasch. As Laney is not aware of Kasch's suicide still remembers him and yearns to meet him again. In this context she has a dream or hallucination about Kasch. She feels he is still around somewhere and calls him to meet her.

Kasch? Is it really you? Here after so long? But why? Am I here calling to you? Waiting for you? Kasch? My love? Are you really here, are you still alive? Is that you, hiding in there, in that ruin of a house? — hiding from me? Kasch? Bearded, gaunt, sickly—pale, hair colourless as dead hair, eyes in shadow, dry bitter mouth in shadow, is it Kasch, . . . (295)

Here the reader can assume that Laney is addressing the spirit or apparition of Kasch or it may be her hallucination. Oates doesn't hint at Laney's complete fulfillment in the novel, yet her last words to Kasch are full of vitality and genuine feeling of love and compassion. She feels confident that she can live with all contradictions, life has in store. Therefore, she is not repulsed by Kasch's megalomania. This confidence is authenticated by the throbbing landscape that complements her feelings.

So far as the image of Laney is concerned, we, as readers, start sympathizing with her, loving her for her sterling qualities at such a young age. Her image therefore becomes unforgettable representing innumerable young girls of her age all over the world. Laney's image is a special and unique one created by the author, Joyce Carol Oates.

Arlene Bartlett and her second daughter Laney Bartlett mother and daughter peers of equal wavelength are the major women characters considered here to understand what kind of images of women these two characters reflect. While Arlene, represents the image of a typical middle class suburban woman with her hard work, beauty, forbearance, strength, intelligence and independence, her adolescent daughter Laney, who

is clever, beautiful and intelligent is the projection of the image of an intelligent, sensitive and courageous girl whose future prospects are stunted because of her sexual abuse as a young girl of fourteen years. Her fate seems to have been sealed not only by her poverty but also by male atrocities inherent in the system of patriarchy. Yet Laney doesn't lose her heart and optimism. In spite of the difference of age both mother and daughter provide faithful images of a grown-up woman in her mid-thirties, and of an adolescent, precocious and brilliant daughter. Oates also highlighted the sense of belongingness among human beings irrespective of gender whether male or female in a realistic manner.

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