



THE METAPHORS OF OMNIPOTENT OPPRESSIVE OF POWER HIERARCHY IN THE SEXUALITY OF VINELAND

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Abstract

Vineland is the fourth novel of reclusive postmodern American novelist, Thomas Pynchon. Postmodern novels are replete with sexual symbols and metaphors in its attempt to create a delusory trail of meaning. All the novels of Pynchon feature this common feature of postmodern literature. The literary, cultural and psychological studies of this period also pay keen attention to sexual metaphors in postmodern discourse and have illustrated the gust of resentment towards oppressive power in them. The paper aims to explore a couple of sexual metaphors in *Vineland* to explore the complex and deceptive modes of oppression of omnipotent, omniscient power hierarchy.

Keywords: *Vineland*, Postmodern, Metaphor, omnipotent, omniscient, power hierarchy, and sexuality

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Thomas Ruggles Pynchon Jr., was born on May 8, 1937. His maiden novel *V.* (1963) generated tremors in the literary world with its wild density and complexity. He followed it up with eight more novels. His third novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) is text book of postmodernism and it is revered as encyclopedia of postmodern reality. Thomas Pynchon has taken seventeen years long breather to bring out the successor novel to his magnum opus *Gravity's Rainbow* (1977). There is a decade plus seven years of break between his third novel - *Gravity's Rainbow* and the fourth - novel *Vineland* (1990). The novel is a key to unlock the illusionary meaning in Pynchon's literary oeuvre. Pynchon deals with the core conflict in postmodern era and also presents a resolution to it.

The historic hierarchal relationship between the privileged and the unprivileged, the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiter and the exploited, the despotic power and the dissidence, "The Real Ones" (*Vineland* 276) and their subjects are enclosed

in a complex sexuality symbol in *Vineland*. The virginity, the celibacy, the Anus threat, the rape, and the homosocial desire comprise the sexuality symbol. These five sexual behaviors are involved in the interaction between "The Real Ones", the omnipotent capitalistic transcendental power, and the rest of the nation under them. The novel specifies the genders of the two segments in the pyramid of tyrannical power. "The Real Ones" are the male and his subjects are the female. The novel indubitably gives the appellation to the unconscious libido of the possession of the nation by the plundering corporate and the subjects beneath his command; it is rape. The male, abusive "Real Ones" rape the female, the slavish public. The love-and-hate relationship between Frenesi Gates, a traitor hippie and Brock Vond, a thug of the real ones, is representative of the unconscious libido in the corporate autocracy. The chase of lovelorn cop Brock Vond after Frenesi is named as rape in these words, "But this was going to be like trying to explain

rape ... not talk about sex" (*Vineland* 102). Isn't rape a despotic possession in sexuality? Yes, it is. Brock Vond commands the erotic/political relationship he has with Frenesi Gates who pleasantly yields to his dictums. Frenesi's slavish erotic submission to Vond resembles Scarlett O'Hara's submission to Rhett Butler's erotic ravage in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936). The ravish abuse by Rhett thrills Scarlett as depicted in the following extract from the novel:

She was darkness and he was darkness and there had never been anything before. This time, only darkness and his lips upon her. She tried to speak and his mouth was over hers again suddenly she had a wild thrill such as she had never known: joy, fear, madness, excitement, surrender to arms that were too strong, lips too bruising, fate that moved too fast...; someone she could neither bully nor break, someone who was bullying and breaking her.... (929)

The critics, mainly feminist critics, quote this scene as an instance of white female capitulation to white male erotic ravish. In chapter six, "The Rhett and The Black", of the book *Disarming the Nation: Women's writing and the American Civil War*, Elizabeth Young reviews Scarlett's erotic slavery, "Rhett's love solve, Scarlett inhabits a doubly subservient posture – explicitly sexual implicitly racial – whose constraints are racially reinforced cover beneath which she can experience pleasure" (269). The complex erotic metaphor in *Vineland* connotes "doubly subservient posture," "explicitly sexual," and "implicitly racial." The sexuality of the white male and the white female transpires the symbolic sexuality in *Vineland*. So, the sexuality metaphor has racial overtones. The sexual partners of the novel's erotic symbol, Brock Vond, and Frenesi Gates, are the white male and female. Frenesi's white female sexuality simulates that of Scarlett's wild thrill from white males' sexual assault and exploitation. The following passage inspires the parallels between the Frenesi and Scarlett's servile female sexuality:

By the time she began to see that she might, nonetheless, have gone through with it,

Brock Vond had reentered the picture, at the head of a small motorcade of unmarked Buicks, forcing her over near pico and Fairfax, ordering her up against her car, kicking apart her legs and frisking her himself, and before she knew it there they were in another motel room;... (*Vineland* 292)

The violent ravish attack from Vond has been received by Frenesi's sheepish submission in the above scene. Both cases of Scarlett and Frenesi reflect Catherine Mackinnon's statement in her book *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. MacKinnon posits, "Socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms" (110). Catherine Mackinnon expands this thought and outlines female sexuality in all the issues of gender in the following words,

Each element of the female gender stereotype is revealed as, in fact, sexual. Vulnerability means the appearance/reality of easy sexual access; passivity means receptivity and disabled resistance Narcissism ensures that woman identifies with the image for herself that man holds up Masochism means that pleasure in violation becomes her sexuality. (Mackinnon 110)

Frenesi's female sexuality is inclusive of all the highlights in the above Mackinnon's gist of sexuality. She is vulnerable, passive disabled resistance, "Narcissism," and "Masochism." Her attire and profession showcase her feminine passive disabled resistance and accessibility. Hippie miniskirts are her signature style, posing her sexual availability. Darryl Louise (DL) impersonates Frenesi, in the Death Palm scene, as part of her plot to administer Death Palm Ninja trick on seducing Brock Vond by wearing a mini skirt. With an unbuttoned shirt, Frenesi stands in a compromising position in front of the cop who has been at her door to deliver her stipend cheque, acting careless about the brimming voluptuousness. "She'd remembered to zip her pants on the way to the door, but had only done up a button or two of her shirt, no bra on, of

course" (*Vineland* 84). Frenesi is the Queen of 24fps Frames camera crew which works for hippie cause and shoots the activities and programs organized by Hippies. It is a double-edged strategic position that places her in a significant position in the two camps, the Hippies and the Federal jury. The footage is the access point that Brock hooked onto. He has possessed her footage and her. She is mentally eager to offer her services to Brock. No apprehensions, she has, to hand over the footage, information, and her body to his authority. The negligible resistance she has put up against the hard-hearted enrapture of Vond. Her Narcissism lies in visualizing her identity only in blind obedience to Brock's command. Out of sexual narcissism, she murders Atman Weed, kills Rex, abandons her infant child, and her ideology of justice. Pleasure, she has felt, in the violation, humiliation and drug abuse inflicted on her by Brock. Conducting masochism is her sexuality. If not anything she had expected Brock would avert her appearance in front of her grand jury. Brock rewards her services in his bed and off his bed by deceiving her. Brock himself presents her before a jury of white males,

that Brock, her inconstant moon, brought and took ... he would have everything, the little fucker would get it all his way, because from then on, though they would still now and then pretend, both knew she had nothing more to negotiate with. He would not even spare her from the first thing she had sworn to him she'd never do – at some point she had to go up in front of his grand jury, in a city,... (*Vineland* 242)

Frenesi is detained in PREP camp under Brock's supervision, along with other hippies. Her lover does not take her to his home to share his goods with her. He dumps her on his camp to humiliate her in front of the staring PREP camp - "One day he would order her down on her knees in front of all these cryptically staring children, put a pistol to her head, and give her something to do with her smart mouth" (*Vineland* 273). She obeyed him and smiled about it. Drug abuse follows the humiliation. She shares with Darryl Louise (DL), her female partner, the narcotic harassment she has

been through on the camp in the following passage from the novel-

"He took me behind the Thorazine curtain, man," ... They'd started her on 5mg Stelazine plus 50 of Thorazine, injected in ever-increasing doses till they thought she was calmed down enough to take it orally. She learned to spit it out slowly, a sly dribbling. "They hid it in my food, I made myself throw up, so they went back to shots and suppositories. They classified me as a Persistent Drug Evader, but I was just teasing. What happened was ... I got to like it. Only took a couple of days. I started looking forward to it – I wanted them to come and hold me down, stick needles in me, push things up my ass. Wanted that ritual ... like they had to keep the two drugs out of the light till the last minute, then they'd mix them together, real quick, and give it to me... Handle me, hold me still, pull apart the cheeks of my ass, they knew all right, 'cause they were digging it just as much as I was..." (*Vineland* 260-61)

Drug abuse on her, while she is on Brock's camp, does not degenerate her feelings towards Brock Vond into adversity. The next time they meet, it is rape. Sexual masochism is discernable in these recounted three episodes. This erotic symbol is an intersection of sexuality and political behavior under capitalistic repression. The slavishness of Frenesi portrays the sexual behavior of the female under patriarchal dominance. The author operates Frenesi's servile sexuality to emanate the slavishness of the American masses. The slavish masses desire repression homogenous to Frenesi's craving for Brocks violations, humiliation and assault. *Anti-Oedipus*, a book by French authors Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, analyses the contradictory phenomenon in the mass mood amidst fascism whereby an individual or a group comes to desire their own oppression. Deleuze, the philosopher, and Guattari, the psychologist, explain the condition that

"Why do men fight for servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?"

How can people possibly reach the point of shouting: "Why taxes! Less bread!" As Reich remarks, the astonishing thing is not that some people steal or that others occasionally go out on strike, but rather that all those who are starving do not steal as a regular practice, and all those who are exploited are not continually out on strike: after centuries of exploitation, why do people still tolerate being humiliated and enslaved, to such a point, indeed, that they *actually want* humiliation and slavery not only for others but for themselves? (Deleuze 31)

Brock Vond capitalized on the narcissism and masochism of Frenesi to shroud his homophobia. Nevertheless, his repression of her prods her narcissism and masochism. The capitalistic world is the world of cutthroat competition among men. Let us be reminded that Western capitalism has race and gender 'White Male', the novel affirms this reality. Guy Hocquenghem notes in chapter four titled, "Capitalistic, the family and the Anus," of the book *Homosexual Desire* that the western capitalism is a phallocratic society – "ours is a competitive society: competition between males, between phallus bearers" (104). Therefore, jealousy and competition trigger the actions and thoughts of men. To make or break a man's fortune depends on making or breaking other man/men's fortune. As such, men promote the interests of those men who, retrospective effect, benefit them. At the same time, men do not hang back to ruin other man/men's lives to feather their nests. In either the case men desire other men. Accordingly, Brock Vond desires The Real Ones, the final power, and the men under his power i.e. Atman Weed, Rex, Zoyd Wheeler, etc. Brock Vond dreams to raise his status to the level of the Real Ones. Thereupon his agenda matches with the agenda of the Real Ones. So, he promotes their interests within his preview. Brock reaps from the mala-fide system that the corporate hoods nurture in the nation. On the flip end, the hippie movement threatens the marketing system that is skimming the national wealth from the top. The system is cold enough to exterminate men to quench their demand, crookedly. Brock bears jealousy and competition towards the Real Ones the hierarchal

superiors to him. Hence, his jealousy and competition are humbled by this knowledge. The hippies, he is chasing, are distant from the power than he is. They occupy the bottom segment of the national power. So, he has aggressive jealousy and competition. Wherefore, he humbly desires the real ones and desires aggressively the hippies. The political and social desires are chained to the unconscious libido. "The phallus draws on libidinal energy in the same way that money draws on labour" (95), says Guy Hocquenghem in his book *Homosexual Desire*. Phallic libidinal energy, in correspondence with the jealousy and competition among men, channels through the hierarchal circuit of men. To describe this phenomenon in sexuality, it is hierarchal homosexuality. But the Western capitalistic society is homophobic. As a result, the homophobia of men suppresses their homosexual attraction towards one another. Guy remarks, "Capitalist society can only organize its relationships around the jealousy-competition system by means of the dual action of repression and sublimation of homosexuality;..." (105) Owing to that account, "repression and sublimation of homosexuality" shapes up as male homosocial desire. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's arguments about "male homosocial desire" in the book *Between Men* have popularized Homosocial Desire. According to Eve Sedgwick "homosocial desire" is an oxymoron. Homosocial is a common term in history and social sciences used to call social friendship, strictly nonsexual, among the people of same-sex. Eve employs the word 'Desire' analogous to psychological libido, emboldening the term with all the potentiality of homosexuality. It is to say that homosocial desire equals disguised homosexuality. In the wake of homophobia, hatred or fear of homosexuality, men maintain straight relationships, however, they channel their phallic libidinal attraction through a woman, pointedly, the beloved woman. Guy spells out on this that

Delusional jealousy is what is left of a homosexuality that has run its course.... As an attempt at defense against an unduly strong homosexual impulse it may, in a man, be described in the formula: I do not love him, she loves him?"⁷⁶ In other words I cannot love

him, since it is he whom I love and who loves him." (Hocquenghem 105)

Brock's relationship with Frenesi is the manifestation of this. DL's opinion on Brock's possession of Frenesi resonates Guy's concept of delusional jealousy. She says that,

I understand that, but this is something else between men, it's about whoever's runnin' Brock thinking, What can I get him to do for me, what are his limits, and Brock thinking, I did this deed for him, it wasn't so bad, but what'll he ask me to do next? Maybe your mom's only in there to make it look normal and human so the boys can go on discreetly porkin' each other." (*Vineland* 265-66)

The men porking each other through Frenesi are Brock and Atman Weed. Brock desires Atman Weed and Atman Weed desires Brock Vond, the contenders in the game of survival in the power hierarchy. Brock Vond has numerous affairs. So does Atman Weed. Frenesi is the latest in the latter's list of relationships. Brock chooses Frenesi, deliberately, as she is the beloved of Weed. Brock tells Frenesi, "But you're right there literally in bed with him – perfect placement." (*Vineland* 213) While communicating their delusional jealousy by making love to Frenesi, their spirits are making homosexual love. The erotic relationship between Brock and Atman Weed's spirits is revealed in this dialogue by Brock Vond, "I watched all the film footage, too, but I never saw anything about his spirit. That's what I'd like to hear about sometime. I want his spirit, hm? I'm happy to leave his body to you." (*Vineland* 213) Frenesi senses homophobia in his utterance. The homosocial desire or repressed/sublimated sexuality in Brock's game with Frenesi is unfurled like this, "Remember last time, when I told you not to bathe, hm? Because I knew you'd be seeing him that night, knew you'd be seeing him that night, knew he'd go down on you – didn't he? Ate your pussy, hm? Of course I know, because he told me. You were coming in his face and he was tasting me all the time" (*Vineland* 213-14). This dialogue stands out as one of the best testimonies of male homosocial desire or sublimated homosexuality in the literature. Eve Sedgwick borrows the erotic triangle concept

that is proposed in Rene Girard's work, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, she alludes that Rene' Girard's early book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, was itself something of schematization of the folk-

wisdom of erotic triangles. Through readings of major European fictions, Girard traced a calculus of power that was structured by the relation of rivalry between the two active members of an erotic triangle. What is most interesting for our purposes in his study is its insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of "rivalry" and "love", differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent.... The choice of the beloved is determined in the first place, not by the qualities of the beloved, but by the beloved's already being the choice of the person who has been chosen as a rival. Girard seems to see the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle as being even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved. (Sedgwick 702)

Vineland summons erotic triangle expounded in the above extract. Two rival men Brock Vond and Atman Weed besieged Frenesi to connect an erotic triangular bond of their strong rivalry. The erotic triangle of communication happens as, "You're the medium Weed and I use to communicate, that's all, this set of holes, pleasantly framed, this little femme scampering back and forth with scented messages tucked in her little secret places." (*Vineland* 214) Atman Weed decodes Vond's homosocial desire by doing to Frenesi what Vond has done her to encode the desire, making love. Atman Weed is responding to Brock, his stressful contempt for the power of Brock Vond, through Frenesi, "a 'medium,' goes in these four holes, comes out this one." (*Vineland* 215) Weed receives the messages of his death. He does not know how, but death for sure. So, he has communicated to Brock his enfeebled spirit through Frenesi as the novel unveils that "with Weed, whose fucking each time they met got wilder, less in his control, who with luck might make the Guinness

Book someday but was meanwhile not picking up too many points for emotional maturity, harassing her round the clock,..” (*Vineland* 237). Molly Hite, a studious critic of Pynchon’s *Vineland*, speculates that Pynchon could be reading Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men*, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Deleuze and Guathari’s *Italian Wedding Fake* during his seventeen years break after *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Her essay “Feminist Theory and the Politics of *Vineland*” opines that Pynchon carved the sexuality of the novel under the influence of these three reputed books. She argues,

There is, of course, the by-now notorious reference to the “indispensable Italian Wedding Fake Book, by Deleuze and Guattari”.... But the allusions especially pertinent to the focus on gender are to two feminist classics, Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*. In *Vineland*, these allusions are woven into a reflection on the social and political construction of masculinity,... (Green 136)

Brock is a mini monomaniac with an eye on securing a place among the monomaniacs’ syndicate, the real ones’ syndicate. The male homosocial desire/sublimated homosexuality for the real ones is mediated in an erotic triangle where Brock’s position is reversed to the end of Atman Weed since on his end, descended the real ones. The medium is his anima; his oppressed other, the female. The transcendental individuals, the real ones, presence is felt in all the decisions and policies of the power. Duly an illusionary erotic triangle, as opposed to the concrete erotic triangle of Brock-Frenesi-Atman, appears in Vond’s dreams and enslaves his spirit. Brock has raped Atman through Frenesi. The homosocial desire, rape, is followed up by murder. Rex, a tricked hippie, gun down Atman to death. Here, in the dream triangle - the Real Ones, Brock’s anima, and Brock, the dreamer is raped by his superiors through his oppressed female other, his anima. His anima wears many guises, frequently in the guise of the Madwoman in the Attic. The madwoman in the attic attacks him and rapes him to death. Brock dreams and –

he was visited by his uneasy anima in a number of guises, notably as the Madwomen in the Attic. Brock would be moving thorough rooms of a large, splendid house belonging to people so rich and powerful he’d never even seen them. But while they allowed him to stay there, it was his job to make sure that all doors and windows, dozens of them everywhere, were secure, and that no one, nothing, had penetrated. This had to be done every day, and finished with before nightfall. Every closet and corner, every back staircase and distant storeroom, had to be checked, till at last there was only the attic left to do. The day would have grown, by then, quite late, the light almost gone. It was that phase of twilight, full of anxiety, when mercy in this world and the others is apt to be least available. Energies were on the loose, masses could materialize. He climbed the attic stairs in the dusk, paused in front of the door. He could hear her breathing, waiting for him – helplessly he opened, entered, as she advanced on him, blurry, underlit, except for the glittering eyes, the relentless animal smile, and accelerating leapt at him, on him, and underneath her assault he died, rising to wake into his own rooms, the counterpane white and neatly folded as butcher’s paper around a purchase of meat – face up, rigid, sweating, shaken by each heartbeat. (*Vineland* 275)

Only a dream yet a terrible dream which shatters Brock’s hopes to be the power himself. The dream erotic triangle of homosocial desire carries the message about his subordinate position in the hierarchy. The message is that he is meant to guard the castle doors of power keeping himself and the rest of the nation, outside the entrance. The madwoman in the attic communicates his final doom just like Frenesi has communicated death to Atman Weed. The novel attests to a corollary relation among Penis, Gun and Camera. The visible similarity of the shapes of these objects will be the simple idea for such a corollary. However, Pynchon has political and social purposes in painting the corollary relationship. In the below passage from the

novel the power and its libido are welded together in palpable terms-

Men had it so simple. When it wasn't about Sticking It In, it was about Having The Gun, a variation that allowed them to Stick It In from a distance. The details of how and when, day by working day, made up their real world. Bleak, to be sure, but a lot more simplified, and who couldn't use some simplification, what brought seekers into deserts, fishermen to streams, men to war, a seductive promise. She would have hated to admit how much of this came down to Brock's penis, straightforwardly erect, just to pick a random example. (*Vineland* 141)

The passage unmistakably pronounces that power promises seductive death in the world of men. Pynchon unveils the seductive power which fakes reality, the method of the power to maintain their fleece. Brock's episode is representative of the seductive male power. The sexuality symbol paints with deft strokes the undercurrent libido of authoritative patriarchal capitalistic power. The camera is an indispensable part of the power system. It does the job of seduction when a gun cannot run its show of male seductive oppression. "one always includes a camera somewhere, and the other always includes a gun, one is make-believe, one is real" (*Vineland* 241)? The camera by faking reality casts a seductive spell upon the public.

Conclusion

The persistent hypnotizing oppressive dominance of power is equated with the seduction and enwrapped in rape and homosocial sexuality in *Vineland*.

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