

FEMINIST CONCERNS IN CANADIAN NOVELIST CAROL ANN SHIELDS' *UNLESS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the feminist concerns in the Canadian novelist Carol Ann Shields' novel entitled UNLESS. Carol Ann Shields has written novels, poems, biography and plays. The paper explores the feminist approach dealt by Shields in this novel. Shields has used the theme of immanence and transcendence in Unless by her main character Reta Winter. "Immanence", to her, is the historic domain assigned to woman: a closed-off realm where women are interior, passive, static and immersed in them. Whereas 'Transcendence' signifies male realm: active, creative, productive, powerful, extending outward into the external universe. Every human life should have a balance of these two forces. But from the ancient time, women are deprived of 'Transcendence'. Women can possess only the role of immanence. She gives her female protagonist, Reta Winter a different shape of self-reliance and self-identity. The paper also throws light on different views of feminism dealt by many prolific feminist writers such as: Simone De Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Adrienne Rich and Susan Brown Miller.

Keywords: Existentialism, Immanence, transcendence, goodness, *The Second Sex*, motherhood, Sexual politics.

INTRODUCTION

*"I think women are foolish to
pretend they are equal to men,
they are far superior and always have been.*

-William Golding in Lord of the Flies (1954)

This excerpt from William Golding underscores a cultural construct so different from that of the members of the patriarchal thinkers.

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Unless(2002), the last novel written by Carol Ann Shields was a finalist for the Canada Reads Contest for the best Canadian novel of the first decade of the 20th century. It was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2002 and Scotia Bank/Giller Prize and shortlisted in 2003 for the Orange prize. This novel is full of feministic approach. It is written in women's ink. This novel deals the several aspects of feminism. It combines the English and French language. Rita Winters is the main protagonist of this novel. She is a writer and translator of French to English. She is pursuing research on the work of Danielle Westerman, French "feminist pioneer, Holocaust survivor, cynic and genius, Simone de Beauvoir's spiritual daughter." The novel deals with the second wave of feminism. To understand the feminist aspect in this novel, it will be useful to track the voices of feminism and their history in a nutshell.

Feminism is not a term that slips into anachronism. It was first used in France in the 1880's for describing the politics of equal rights for women. But in England, the term gained currency only after 1890. The term 'feminism' combined the French word for women, *femme* and *isme* which pointed to either a political ideology or social movement. To put it plainly, feminism is a belief that underscores those men and women are from their births not of unequal worth. The paradigm is that women can change their social place both consciously and collectively. Women's liberation in the west took a momentous turn in the mid-sixties of the twentieth century. Women's liberation movement aimed at the equality of women and men in different spheres: work and politics. Within the sphere of reproduction and sexuality, feminism stood for women's difference from men. Ever since the seventies, feminism became a world-wide movement and with that the role of women came to be viewed in an altogether different light. It was Aphra Behn(1640-1689), a British playwright who first stated that women are a distinct social category but her social status is not at all equal to that of man. Several names crop up as classic voices on feminist theories but the few that demands careful and elaborate attention are Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of The rights of Women (1792)*, Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century (1845)*, John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection Of Women (1869)* and Friedrich Engel's *The Origin of The Family, Private Property And The State (1884)*.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own (1929)* can be read on two counts: as an autobiographical account and a liberating account. A document deserves accolades for its excellence in form and content. As readers of feminist theories, our attention is drawn to that passage in Woolf's treatise where she writes feelingly how she was shown the door of an Oxbridge library because "ladies are only admitted if accompanied by a fellow of the college or furnished with a letter of introduction." (*A Room of One's Own*, p. 9). Woolf's remark is a significant pointer to the lack of equality between the two sexes. Much of the lack of creative expression in women, avers Woolf, can be ascribed to the material impoverishment which women face in their lives. Woolf bemoans the fact that women belonging to the middle class and upper middle class flaunt a life style that is luxurious but their control over fiscal matters in the family is negligible. The onerous task of bearing and rearing children has fallen to the lot of women, but throughout their lives they have been controlled by patriarchy, Woolf states. In the same breath, she does not spare Shakespeare for making his heroine play second fiddle to the fancies of his male protagonists: "Men have tended to write about women as sexual and romantic objects; even Shakespeare's heroines are generally important as characters through

their relationship with men" (*A Room of One's Own*, p. 37). The central argument of Woolf is that women not only become victims of men but also victim of themselves and they further become victims of an unjust, social order or patriarchy by presenting themselves as flattering mirrors before their menfolk: "women have solved all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of men at twice its natural size without that power the earth would still be swamp and jungle." (*A Room of One's Own*, 37)

Close on the heels of the Second World War in 1945, the rights of women came to be sounded in a manner unheard of before. Small wonder, shops across Europe were deluged with books that dealt with the cultural and literary implication of feminism. Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) based on the existentialist philosophy of Sartre was a highly radical work. In this highly thought-provoking work, Beauvoir presents the male as the positive norm and women as the negative norm and she prefers to label the women as *second sex* or the *other*: "the humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being..... For him she is sex-----absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to men and not he with reference to her: she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute----- She is the other." (*The Second Sex*, p. 16). A perceptive reader of Beauvoir's radical views finds her views anticipated by Wollstonecraft's in her eye opening book, *A Vindication of The Rights of Women* (1792): she was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reasons chooses to be amused (*A Vindication of The Rights of Women*, p.66). In order to prove that women is the '*Other*' Beauvoir examines biological, Marxist and psychoanalytic theories to show that all aspects of social life are governed by the assumption that man is the superior norm and woman, the inferior norm. Another thought central to her feminist concerns, is the marginal position of women and the arts. Her critiquing is not merely confined to this. She includes within the purview of her theories 'the great collective myths' pertaining to women, particularly in those works authored by men. Making ample use of anthropological, philosophical, sociological and physiological evidence in support of this contention, Beauvoir urges his female readers not to regard her theory of the "otherness of women as a stumbling block on their thought process". (*Women in The house of Fiction*, p. 12).

One of seminal books on the movement of modern women is Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1963, in the hey-days of women's liberation movement. It is rightly recognized as an indispensable book for a proper understanding of the movement. The problem/question that makes Friedan ponder over is, "what accounts for the unhappiness?" The answer to her question is equally strange -----'the problem that has no name'. Then she tries to decipher the reason that causes the problem. In the course of a research, she critically examines statistical data, theories and personal interviews drawing her inferences. The mystique of feminism that she talks about is built on a high-flown image of femininity. According to Friedan, women have been encouraged to become the ideal home maker. They cannot think of soaring above the limited range of the home maker or mother. In the process of becoming impeccable housewives, they ignore the need for education and career aspiration.

Friedan argues that women can develop their own identities but for the feminine mystique. The feminine mystique thwarts the growth of proper sensibility of women and makes them blind to several career options which are open to them. Such a mind-set creates unsurmountable problems both for the housewives and their families. Friedan has written other books on the need for freedom of women and the indispensability of careers for women but most of them are marked by controversy.

Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) marks a water-shed in the history of feminism. This is a highly informative book as it relies on several sources: social sciences such as history and politics and the humanities such as literature and cultural studies. Much of Greer's social commentary is based upon her critical examination of the operation of women and the human face of her polemical work is its strongly-worded argument which is passionately rendered. Greer looks at marriage as something which is no better than slavery for the womenfolk, albeit a slavery that is legalised. She makes a virulent attack on the male dominant society for the way it misrepresents female sexuality on the one hand and on the other hand, denies women in a highly systematic manner. In other book *The Whole Women* (2012), she takes up the theme on which she had scripted *The Female Eunuch*. Without mincing matters, she states that feminism has been relegated to the background and the female question has not been answered. She takes a close, hard look at the issues which women face at the close of the twentieth century and in doing so, combines her wild humour with passionate rhetoric-script. Greer exposes the discriminatory attitude of the males towards the females. Whether a woman is in her kitchen, in the super market or in her place of work, the ugly monster of discrimination dogs her footsteps and makes her days unbearable, she states.

No book on feminism takes up the theme of the institution of motherhood as much as *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) by Adrienne Rich. The book endeavors to make a clear-cut distinction between the social institution of motherhood and the experience of motherhood. A woman's reproductive and sexual possibilities are an integral part of her physiology and it is the institution of motherhood which controls it. On the other hand, when a woman undergoes the experience of motherhood, she derives immense pleasure and power. The theme of sex role stereotyping and the resultant mental illness is the subject of the book *Women and Madness* (1972) by Phyllis Chesler. Chesler is concerned with female identity not in past societies but in contemporary societies. Her research shows that female identity is integrally connected with sickness and insanity, more particular when women belong to contemporary societies. Chesler's findings are that when women do not choose to follow gender norms intentionally or unintentionally, society does not form a healthy impression about them. Society tends to look down on such rebellious tendencies of women as clear manifestations of insanity or psychological imbalance.

There was a spate of books on radical feminism in the seventies of the twentieth century and theorists like Susan Brownmiller, Susan Griffin and Mary Daly made us sit and ponder deeply over there themes on radical feminism. Most of the themes pivoted on men's hostility against women and the in-born aggressive instinct prevalent in the psychological thought process of males. Susan Brownmiller makes the fact-finding sociological discovery that sexual violence becomes a pliant to albeit a devious tool in the hands of men to subjugate women. In

her eye opening book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*(1975), Brownmiller argues how men spin their web over women either by committing rape on women or by intimidating them with their rapacious designs. Susan Griffin is more downright in her views against rape which she castigates as an all-American crime. She makes a close study of the several metaphors and actual rape practices in America in her highly readable book, *Rape: The Power of Consciousness* (1979) that they become a paradigm of masculine violence of the not too remote American society. Of the three American radical feminists cited above, Mary Daly is the most remarkable in her thought-provoking book, *Gyn/Ecology: The Meta Ethics of Radical Feminism* (1978). She makes an in-depth study of the major histories and major cultures of the world to conclude logically that male dominance and sexual violence goes hand in hand. Mary White Stewart also harps on the theme of violence against women but from a different perspective. Her study of political and economic conditions made her conclude that sexual violence is an immediate fall-out of decisions both on the political and the economic sphere and is backed by the cultural constructs which underscores that males are superior whereas females are inferior. This is the theme of the book of Mary White Stewart entitled, *Ordinary Violence: Everyday Assaults against Women* (2002). Many feminist theorists interpret violent acts against women as the venting of individual anger or a characteristic trait of the violent person. Stewart makes it pointedly clear that such opinions are fallacious. According to her, women will continue to be abused flagrantly so long as they do not enjoy equal socio-political and economic power as men. Many atrocities are being committed the world over by the patriarchal society against women. She labels such acts against women as acts of terrorism. She cites female infanticide, bride burning, female genital mutilation, sex slavery and circumcision as acts of terrorism against women.

Feminist literary criticism, particularly, modern critics began in America in 1968 with the publication of the book by Mary Ellman entitled *Thinking about Women* (1968). Her interest in feminist studies is evident in her candid admission in the preface of the book: "*I am most interested in woman as words.*" It is through her literary analysis that she takes up the historical and political implications of patriarchy. Kate Millett's polemic becomes limpidly clear in *Sexual Politics* (1969). In her terminology, sexual politics is the process by which the dominant sex (the male sex) extends its power over the weaker sex (the female sex). The domination of man over woman, according to her, is possible in western societies where the institution employs secret methods in manipulating power so that domination of man over woman continues unabatedly. According to Millett, a woman is oppressed not on account of her biological state but owing to the social construct of femininity. She arraigns the patriarchal authority because, in her opinion it is patriarchy that has reduced her to a minor. A woman is so afflicted by the thought of her minority status that her mind is full of "self-hatred and self-rejection, contempt both for herself and her fellows." Freud had created a sensation by his theory of '*phallus envy*'. Millett opposes the theory of Freud by her convincing logic. Girls in her opinion do not envy the penis, but envy all that the penis stands for in a phallocratic world.

Many feminist theorists of the seventies of the twentieth century engaged themselves in a re-reading of literature and they furnished proof of their profound reading in their works. The first name that figures in our minds is none other than that of Patricia Myer Spacks. Her

book, *The Female Imagination* (1975) was a study of the English and American novels of the past three hundred years. Close on the heels of the book of Spacks emerged another book entitled, *Literary Women* (1976). Authored by Ellen Moers, the book is more comprehensive in the sense that Moers' study is not merely confined to a study of the novelists of England and America, it includes examination of the work of the poets as well. Other books on feminist theories which have universal acclaim are Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Woman Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in The Attic* and *No Man's Land: The Place of Woman Writer in The Twentieth Century* (1988). These entire feminist writers try to uphold the female tradition or 'sub-culture' as they try to define that tradition.

Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own: British Woman Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) describes three phases of the literary development. The first phase which she labels the 'feminist' phase spans the period 1840-1880. This was the period during which woman wrote primarily in imitation of masculine models but their concerns were distinctly feminine. The second phase (1880-1920) was a period marked by feminine protests and demands. The third phase could broadly be described as the 'female' phase spanning from 1920 to till the present. In the current period, women theories move towards discoveries of inner space for women. In this work of epic dimension, she brings to light the works of the neglected women writers. Sandra Gilbert and Sandra Gubar's *The Mad Woman in The Attic* (1979) can best be described as a monumental piece of work. Gilbert and Gubar make an exhaustive treatment of the major women writers of nineteenth century belonging to different decades: Jane Austen, Mary Shirley, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Christiana Rossetti, Elizabeth Browning and Emily Dickinson. These feminist theorists take within the purview of their study the literary activities of the women writers with their discerning minds.

Mary Wollstonecraft supports and demands the women's education in her book, *A Vindication of The Rights of Women* (1792) to improve the aspects of her social role and to increase rationality by using logical arguments. According to her, women education can change the face of society. Women should be encouraged to develop their own talents and interests. The personality of a woman, her beliefs and morals along with her intelligence, character, humor, grace and energy are the crux of her desirability.

She discusses that an educated women can be a better companion to man and a fit mother capable to educate her children. Wollstonecraft accepts the role of women as wife and mother; she accepts her culturally appointed gender role, but hopes to reform the ideals.

Virginia Woolf has presented the idea of women to be financially strong and independent. In *A Room Of One's Own* (1929), she addresses female audience and speaks to women's status in literature, economic sphere and the psychology of anger. She advises women to obtain wealth and a room for themselves to attain creative freedom.

In the *Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir writes, "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day." Domestic work, for De Beauvoir, is a negative and stultifying pursuit that 'provides no escape from immanence and little affirmation of

individuality' (470). Similar basic assumption pervades much of the subsequent second wave feminist discourse on domesticity. Shields views on feminism can be said to be the balance of Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf.

In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir has asked some question such as: *What is a woman?* And provides the simplistic answer that woman is a womb! It means that a woman is just a machine to bear children. They don't have any importance of their own. She totally rejects this aspect and considers woman as a powerful word. She wants that woman should be treated as human beings.

The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In reality, the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of men to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. Man thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. "The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities", said Aristotle, 'we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness'. And St Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an imperfect man, an incidental being which is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as being made from what Bossuet called a supernumerary bone of Adam. Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.

Next, De Beauvoir says that woman efforts have never been anything more than a symbolic agitation what men have been willing to grant, they have taken nothing, they have only received. De Beauvoir criticizes Plato also as the first among the blessings for which Plato thanked the gods was that he had been created free, not enslaved the second, a man, not a woman.

In *The Second Sex* Simon De Beauvoir has said, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman". It means that women are different from men because of what they have been taught and socialized to and be. She considers "motherhood" a way of turning woman into slaves. Because when a woman becomes a mother she is forced to concern themselves with their divine nature. They were compelled to focus on motherhood not in politics, technology or anything else outside of home and family. "Given that one can hardly tell women that washing up saucepans is their divine mission, they are told that bringing up children is their divine mission.(Simon De Beauvoir, 1982).

From Beauvoir's point of view, the work of feminism was to transform society and women's place in it.

On the other hand, Shields point of view is that a woman should not ignore her ideal role of a wife and a mother but she should have right to make her own place and identity in the world. In the novel *Unless*, Shields has also taken this aspect of independence of economic condition of women. *Unless* can be considered as most explicit feminist novel of Shields.

Shields has discussed the social role of a women in a society. She does not agree with second wave analyses of domesticity.

Shields has used the theme of immanence and transcendence in *Unless* by her character Reta Winter. "Immanence", she describes as the historic domain assigned to woman: a closed-off realm where woman are interior, passive, static and immersed in them. 'Transcendence' describes male lot: active, creative, productive, powerful, extending outward into the external universe. Every human life should have a balance of these two forces. But from the ancient time, women are deprived of 'Transcendence'. Women can possess only immanence role.

The main protagonist of the novel "*Unless*", Reta epitomizes the idea of goodness vs. greatness of De Beauvoir as immanence and transcendence. The main concern of Reta is to know the reason of her daughter's decision to desert her from family and society. The separation of her daughter is very painful for her. Norah, her dearest and intelligent daughter among her three daughters, suddenly leaves her life and family and sits on a Toronto street corner wearing a sign of goodness. Reta thinks that Norah is the embodiment of female powerlessness, and her speculation on the causes of Norah's self-destruction nearly consumes her.

Reta is a writer in this novel. She not only rewrites the reality of woman but also tries to bring a new understanding of realities of what is good for women. She compares goodness and greatness that is closely related to De Beauvoir's 'Expansion of existence or transcendence'.

Unless is composed of thirty-seven brief chapters related to Reta Winter's life- her home, her family, her friends, her work. Each chapter has a title-words like once, nearly, only, hardly, hence and nevertheless. These all words signify an event of her life.

"Unless you're lucky, unless you're healthy, fertile, unless you're loved and fed, unless you are clear about your sexual direction, unless you're offered what others are offered, you go down into the darkness, down to despair(*Unless*,p. 224). These lines are a glimpse of the feminist aspects in the novel.

Reta writes letters to the authors and excluded women writers from the name of scholar and the world's greatest to show the absence of women in society. Reta is inspired by her original editor, the suitably named Mr. Scribano, to write a sequel to her first novel, "*The Art of Diversion*" (*Unless*,p. 23), the story of Alicia, a fashion editor, and Romanian Albanian trombonist. She finds that "Alicia was not as happy as she deserved to be"(*Unless*,p. 15). Reta changes her story of novel due to the condition of Norah. Reta wanted to have happy ending and "happy endings are her specialty"(*Unless*,p. 38). But she thinks that marriage may not be happy ending in novel for Alicia. She recalls, " Norah, the most literary, the most mercurial of the three..... mumbled that[My Thyme is Up] might have been a better book if I'd skipped the happy ending, if Alicia had decided on going to Paris after all, and if Roman had denied her his affection. There was, my daughter postulated, may be too much over the top sweetness in thyme seeds Alicia planted in her widow box (*Unless*,p . 81).

And at last she decides to cancel the 'doomed wedding' planned for 'Thyme in Bloom'.

Norah returns to her home and Reta's pain and wounds of separation recovers. Reta plans to write "Thyme" trilogy as '*Autumn Thyme*' and want to give a powerful characterization of

Alicia as follow: *Alicia is intelligent and inventive and capable of moral resolution, the same qualities we presume, without demonstration, in a male hero.*

The word 'Autumn' taps us on the head, whispering melancholy, brevity, which are tunes I know a little about. A certain amount of resignation too will attach itself to the pages of this third novel, a gift from Da Nielle Westernman, but also the left of stamina..... (*Unless*,p. 320).

Reta Winter's recalls of Helen Reddy's song, "*I Am Woman*" (*Unless*,p. 57) from the early sixties, when "feminism was in its chrysalis stage" (*Unless*,p. 59), also depicts the feminine underpinning of the novel. Goodness versus greatness depiction raises the issue of morality versus power.

Again, Reta thinks that "the world is split in two, between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the big bang(*Unless*,p. 270). Thus Reta's views show the powerlessness of women while felling the pangs at Norah's loss.

Reta also examines the burning issues of nineteenth century novels, such as George Elliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72), Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*(1847), or Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873-77) in the chapter "The Woman Question" (*Unless*,p. 100). In the next chapter she says, "I need to speak further about this problem of women how they are dismissed and excluded from the most primary of entitlements" (*Unless*,p. 99). Instead, we've been sent over to the side pocket of the snooker table and made to disappear. No one is blind as not to realize the power of the strong over the weak and, following that, the likelihood of defeat" (*Unless*,p. 99). Norah compares woman's life as black hole in the masculine game of pool, where female power is determined in patriarchal culture.

Thus it can be said that the *Unless* is a novel which deals with multiple aspects of feminism. We can sum up the theme of feminism weaved in the Shield' novel, by quoting Swami Vivekanada :

"The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence" (1893).

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