Can the Woman Speak? - A Reading of Ross, Kroetsch and Atwood

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Canadian literature in contemporary times has been influenced by an intersection of postmodernist and feminist theories. Postmodernist readings of the alleged marginality of Canada is sought to be intertwined with feminist concerns of oppression, representation and resistance. The "conflation of feminism and nationalism" has been viewed as "suggesting the extent to which national selfhood is already a libidinally invested construct one which enmeshes the discourses of citizenry and sexuality and which therefore potentially confuses the traditional coordinates of feminist response" (Tomc 84). It can well be argued that issues of exploitation, at the national level or in the sphere of gender relations, are not isolated facts but have definite interconnections. But does postmodernism, as a school of thought, allow for an understanding of such interrelations between various spheres of social oppression as well as the continuing struggles against them? Can the politics of feminism be in any fruitful sense interlinked with that of postmodernism? This paper will attempt to address these issues by focusing on three Canadian writers, Sinclair Ross, Robert Kroetsch and Margaret Atwood.

Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* (1941) preempts much of later Canadian fiction in that it is a first-person narration as well as an exploration of the female consciousness. The novel itself predates postmodernist theories and their application to literature. However, today it will be hard to attempt a critical reading of the novel without addressing the central postmodern concerns of authenticity and representation. A dominant strain within the postmodern school holds that there is a need of a history of the oppressed *by* the oppressed. History written from a privileged position about the underprivileged, it maintains, is invariably a distortion (Spivak 271-313). In this context, Ross's work - a male author's representation of a female consciousness - becomes significant.

Written in the form of a diary kept by a Mrs. Bentley, the wife of a country preacher, the work becomes a classic exposition of the psychological trauma of a married woman within the framework of a society that perpetuates unequal and unjust gender relations. In my reading of the text, I will try to show that the author's gender does not compromise the "authenticity" of the work. I argue that it is not essential for the subaltern to always speak in her own voice to be authentic. Oppression in the form of gender, race or class are knowable facets of social life. The cognition of these

The Indian Review of World Literature in English, Vol. 5 No.II – July, 2009

facts, in other words, cannot depend on the *accident* of birth into a certain class, race or gender.

Ross had originally intended *As For Me and My House* to be the story of Philip as narrated by his wife, who as an observer, would be in a position to reveal his character with more insight and honesty than could Philip himself. However, as the story progressed, the author admits, Mrs. Bentley's character became more central than he had originally anticipated (Qtd. in McMullen 103). The centrality of Mrs. Bentley owes, perhaps more than anything else, to the confessional mode of writing. Through the pages of her diary emerges the picture of a woman who is an artist at heart. Although surrounded by the contingencies of a rather difficult life, she exhibits a detachment from the mundane and the materialistic plane. This spirit was manifested early in her life in her attitude to music:

> One of my teachers used to wonder at what he called my masculine attitude to music. Other girls fluttered about their dresses, what their friends thought about the pieces they played, but I never thought or cared for anything but the music itself (198).

However, such a "masculine attitude" is completely dissolved in her relationship with her husband. Mrs. Bentley's diary is the sad testimony of a woman who, after twelve years of marriage, is still desperately in need of love and companionship from her husband, to the exclusion of everything else. This overwhelming need surpasses any other:

> I'm a failure too, a small-town preacher's wife instead of what I so faithfully set out to be [a musician] - but I have to stop deliberately like this to remember. To have him notice, speak to me as if I really mattered in his life, after twelve years with him that's all I want or need. It arranges my world for me, strengthens and quickens it, makes it immune to all other worlds (23).

It is not that Philip did not have any place in his life for Mrs. Bentley: "in his own aloof way he must care a little for his dowdy wife" (14). It is just that the nature and intensity of his feelings for her are very different. Like his wife, Philip is also a "failure." He had wanted to be an artist - a painter but unlike her, it is a failure that he does not allow himself to forget. In his room of his own, which is shut to his wife, there is still a space for his passion for painting. As Mrs. Bentley observes, in spite of everything he retains his selfhood: "[h]is own world was shattered and empty, but at that it was better than a woman's. He remained in it" (85).

This discrepancy, between the needs of a man and a woman, is the focus of the novel. The choice of the diary form, that can record the most personal feelings and responses, becomes very significant. In her discussion of the novel, Lorraine McMullen, however, takes exception to this view:

The Indian Review of World Literature in English, Vol. 5 No.II – July, 2009

> Because she is writing of herself and her own experiences and attitudes, of her husband and her attempts to reach him, her narrative is intensely subjective; there is no attempt on her part to step back and view her situation or herself dispassionately. Mrs. Bentley is thus not a reliable narrator (104).

It can be argued however, that the novel's feminist politics rests in this very *subjectivity* of the narrative which Mcmullen finds problematic. Ross's work draws attention to the *politics* behind the *personal* in Mrs. Bentley's case. Contrary to Mcmullen's caveat, Mrs. Bentley does step back to view her situation objectively. It is evidence of her devastating honesty that she compares herself to the dog, El Greco, in her relationship with her husband. Similarly even as she is intensely jealous of Judith, her husband's lover, she can yet be objective in her understanding of the needs of "the other woman": " . . . I can't believe there's anything treacherous about her [Judith]. I might have done a lot worse had she been the wife" (l 99).

Suppressing the artistic spirit within her, viewing the misery of her situation with a dogged honesty, she chooses the humiliation of remaining a mother to the child of her husband's lover. Such is the nature of her relationship with her husband. In her classic *The Second Sex* (1952), Simone De Beauvoir observes that a woman's single minded passion for a man needs to be viewed in the context of an unequal social system, that does not provide avenues for a woman to realize herself as it does to a man. Thus, woman fulfills her need for realization through the only means open to her -- relationship with a man. Mrs. Bentley shares this common predicament of womanhood.

In the introduction to her novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Doris Lessing insists on the need in our times to assert and defend the private feelings of a woman. She remarks that "the number of women prepared to stand up for what they really think, feel, experience with a man they are in love with is still small" (9). Sinclair Ross's work is precisely an attempt in this direction. The very act of publicizing a woman's personal feelings is a step towards politicizing it.

Like Ross, Robert Kroetsch also assumes a female narrative voice in his novel, *Badlands* (1975). However, writing four decades after Ross, Kroetsch makes use of explicit postmodern thought and strategies in his work. There is an attempt in the book to subvert the main male narrative by foregrounding the marginalized female narrative. In an interesting twist, the female narrative in the text also becomes a voice for Canada.

Anna Dawe, the central protagonist, begins by distancing herself from her father and the implications of his "great quest." The text privileges her intrusive voice granting her both the first and the last words. However, the female voice is not privileged at the expense of other voices. Anna's narrative occupies a privileged position precisely because she upholds the need for

The Indian Review of World Literature in English, Vol. 5 No.II – July, 2009

"plurality". Thus, for instance, she gives an account of the communication between her father, herself and her mother:

> We read in those sun-faded and water-wrinkled books, read not only words but the squashed mosquitoes, the spider legs, the stains of thick black coffee… and the message was always so clear that my mother could read finally, without unpuzzling the blurred letters or the hasty, intense scrawl. She could read her own boredom and possibly her loneliness, if not his intense outrageous joy.

The text is therefore neither fixed nor stable, as it has different signification for different readers. However, there is always a totalitarian dimension to the male narrative. Anna's mediation of the story punctures this very attempt: " . . . total and absurd male that he was, he assumed, like a male author, an omniscience that was never his" (64).

The recognition of the absurdity of totalitarian versions also extends to the delineation of the Canadian position. In *The Lovely Treachery of Words,* Kroetsch writes, "Canada is supremely a country of margins . . the willingness to refuse privileges to a restricted or restrictive cluster of metanarratives is becoming a Canadian strategy for survival" (22). This strategy, then, becomes a means of empowerment both for the marginal status of women as well as the country.

The postmodern concept of history, of time, becomes another strategy for empowerment. Linear historiography is often debunked in postmodernist thought as overwhelmingly biased towards the prevalent power structures. Kroetsch would contend that the concept of linearity denies the fullness of history to both Canada and to women. Other dominant nations like William Dawe's male narrative "have their open spaces and translate them into a fabled hunting. We [women] have only time to survive in, without either lies or mystery or suspense. We live and then die in time" (27).

William Dawe, however, attempts to construct his history. His search for dead dinosaur bones is a search for roots, for origin. Such search in postmodern thought, especially after Foucault, is viewed to be rooted in nostalgia. And nostalgia, kroetsch believes, is the basis or linear historiography. For Willlam Dawe, the past is single, knowable and authentically representable. For Anna, in contrast, the past may well be re-presented, but it will only be one possible version among so many. Nor is there any great loss, according to this strain in postmodern thought, in the view that the past is unknowable. For the past is steeped in patriarchy. As Anna observes: "[w]omen are not supposed to have stories, Penelopes to their war and their sex. As my mother did. As I was doing" (3). The past is also associated with the colonizing male role. This past, then, the domain of Penelopes and oppressors must be summarily rejected.

The Indian Review of World Literature in English, Vol. 5 No.II – July, 2009

The liberating potential of such a world-view can hardly be underestimated. Anna Dawe refuses to remain a Penelope; she rewrites her story. Her rewriting, however, unlike her father's, destabilizes rather than constructs. As Susan Rudy Droscht observes in her commentary on the novel, "[Anna's] identity is both posited and immediately called into question. As author she writes, but her works tell us that she does not have the omniscience that was never his" (39). Anna's final rejection of the field book challenges not just the book's authority but the very possibility of an authorship. What is posited instead is the plurality of meanings. For any kind of "grand-narrative" can stifle the very survival of the peripheral.

The various strands of postmodernist ideas in the text reinforce a certain view of History. The study of History, it is claimed, is essentially rooted in nostalgia. Any attempt to canonize, interpret and understand the past is seen as a garb for a meta-narrative that claims absolute truth value. Thus Kroetsch's text ends with a casual flinging away of the *past*: "[w]e walked all the way out. And we did not once look back, not once ever" (270). Such a debunking of History, however, has serious implications for feminist thought and its political agenda.

The past undoubtedly is woven with the anguished cries of Penelopes, with systematic oppression and the legitimization of totalitarian and exploitative social orders. Yet, is not that the very reason that we can never afford to forget that past? Anna's claim that women live in the present - in time, is ultimately, a reductive claim. For there is no present that can deny a past. To deny the past or the possibility of a knowable history is also effectually a denial of meaningful interventions into the historical process. That there is a difference between Anna and her mother is a fact of history. Unlike her mother, whose oppression she has seen, Anna seeks to undermine the thought-structure that perpetuates such oppression. History, understood in this way is neither linear nor circular. But the focus of the text, and quite consciously so, is not a progressive understanding of history. Instead it postulates the overarching reach of patriarchy throughout history. Resistance as made by an Anna Dawe is deliberately made out to be tenuous and localized in character. For postmodern thought necessitates an under-playing of concrete political gestures. Thus in an obvious parody of the idea of sisterhood and the empowerment that such a bond implies, the novel ends with the words: "We walked all the way out of there hand in hand, arm in arm, holding each other" (270).

The marginality of Canada is repeatedly stressed in Kroetsch's writings. This marginality is sought to be strategically interlinked with the oppression of women. However, the alleged marginality of Canada and the oppression of women are two very different facts. Krotsch writes of Canada:

> The first half of the twentieth century made us almost irrelevant to history. I remember the shock, after the second world war, of

> reading a pop history of that war and finding Canada mentioned only once and that in connection with the Dieppe raid (*Lovely Treachery* 26).

The alleged inattention to the role of Canada in modern historiography notwithstanding, the country's marginality is more of a discursive construction than a social fact. In a world, bitterly divided by vastly unequal access to resources, the "marginality" of an advanced capitalist country like Canada does not seem to have much of a case. The oppression of women, however, the world over, is very much grounded in economics and politics. Thus categorizing the subjective or textual marginality of Canada with the oppression of women can only end in a dilution of feminist struggles.

To the charge that "master narratives" have been employed for centuries to subjugate women, it can only be said that feminist struggles then can hardly be waged without alternative structures of thought that have well defined political agendas. The postmodernist debunking of all vantage points or privileged positions is not itself ideologically innocent. By questioning not just the *dominant* but also the *insurgent* position, postmodernism becomes an unwitting complicit in the power structures that it critiques. It is thus that there is an inherent contradiction between the politics of postmodernism and feminism:

> Feminisms will continue to resist incorporation into postmodernism, largely because of their revolutionary force as political movements working for real social change. They go beyond making Ideology explicit and deconstructing it in order to argue a need to change that ideology, to effect a real transformation of art that can only come with a transformation of patriarchal social practices. Postmodernism has not theorized agency; it has no strategies of real resistance that would correspond to the feminist ones. It cannot. This is the price to pay for that incredulity toward metanarrative (Hutcheon 79-80).

Like Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Atwood also uses explicit postmodern strategies to characterize both the totalitarian nature of oppression as well as the resistance against it. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is set in a future that is a logical extension of the trends in the present world. Professor Pieixoto, in the novel reminds his audience of the horrors of the previous age:

> . . . this was the age of the R - strain syphilis and also the infamous AIDS epidemic… Still births, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shut downs and incidents of sabotage . . . .(317)

The Gilead regime, in Atwood's novel, attempts to gain its moral legitimacy by claiming to provide an alternative order where the maladies of the past can be erased. This order, however, takes the form of a totalitarian

regime with an established power hierarchy. At the top, the commanders are the structural and functional heads of the state. They have wives whose function is to provide future commanders. If they are unable to do so, there are the handmaids who bear children on behalf of the wives. The lives of women in this state are governed by the philosophy that their only and significant contribution to society is to produce children. This is considered to be an advance over an earlier world where women had to suffer routine humiliation:

> We've given them [women] more than we have taken away . . . Don't you remember the singles bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market .... the terrible gap between those who could get a man and the ones who couldn't? . . . Think of the human misery (231).

The commander thus reminds Offred, a "handmaid" and the main protagonist, of the plight of women in the advanced capitalist world. He paints a picture of a commodified world where concepts like freedom and equality are an illusion. The critique of capitalism is not without its insights as it portrays men and women constricted within the parameters of a culture where they are unable to realize their actual needs and capacities. It points to an unequal and unjust social and economic system supported by a dominant culture that helps to generate and perpetuate its values. However, the Gilead regime seeks to cure the inhumanity and restrictions of the capitalist world by erasing the very possibilities of humanity and freedom. What the Gilead regime in fact offers as an alternative to Capitalism is Fascism.

The fascist nature of the state takes on a formidable color for women. The problem with the earlier capitalist world, according to the supporters of the Gilead regime, was that it did not provide women with circumstances conducive to their central function, viz. reproduction. The new regime proceeds to not only make available but also compulsory those very circumstances: "...this way they are protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace, with full support and encouragement" (231). Women are thus reduced to their "biological destinies." Progress for women, Malashri Lal observes, is viewed in the regime not as a movement away from physical functions but rather as a return to them:

> . . . the bland recording of contemporary events juxtaposed with scraggy memories of the past combine into a poignant tale of female biological determinism. In this case 'anatomy is destiny', precisely what feminism has been fighting against (317-318).

Memories and glimpses of the earlier world become ambiguous signifiers of freedom in the Gilead regime. The Japanese tourists with their short skirts, their lipstick, and "exposed" hair evoke the sensuousness of freedom. Yet the reader is quickly reminded that "the high heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet are like delicate instruments of torture" (38).

The Indian Review of World Literature in English, Vol. 5 No.II – July, 2009

Consistent with postmodern thought, the two worlds - one represented by the Japanese tourists and the other by the Gilead regime - are both repudiated: Offred reminiscences ". . . I used to dress like that. That was freedom, *Westernized,* they used to call it" (38). At one stroke, the concept of 'freedom' as well as the critique of 'westernization' are both parodied. The same technique is at play when the commander asks Offred "What did we overlook?" Offred's reply represents a politics of resistance that holds the promise of "endless possibilities" without being threatening. She answers: "Love" (231). Commenting on the politics of postmodernist feminism in the novel, H. Carminero-Santangelo observes:

> *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests a… space for resistance - a space located *within* the discourses of the symbolic order (including technologically produced and disseminated discourses) rather than in opposition to them. Such a position depends upon postmodern insights about the contextual nature of meaning and value, the multiple construction of subjectivity . . . (39).

Postmodernist politics conceptualizes resistance not simply as opposed to power but also as constituted by power. It chooses to view the resistance to patriarchy, for instance, not as conscious and determined struggles against the system but as located within the interstices of the repressive structure. As power structures are viewed to be invincible, it has the tendency to cushion criticism and make it comfortable. The dystopia in Atwood's novel is thus portrayed by presenting the Gilead regime as all-powerful and impenetrable. The novel's critique of the regime, as Chimmoy Banerjee insightfully observes, remains ineffectual:

> Dystopia as such, however grim, is by no means necessarily disturbing; it is a very popular form of entertainment . . . Such entertainment needless to say doesn't challenge, transform or advance consciousness . . . Its function is ideological in that it denatures criticism by making it consumable and comfortable (Qtd. in Santagelo 22).

Such postmodernist resistance then, can well be contained within the status-quo. It can be radical without being threatening, Thus, like Anna Dawe, Moira's struggles in Atwood's novel do not in any way challenge the dominant order of things. These texts seem to declare in no uncertain terms that it is resistance and not subversion or change that is at all possible in the postmodern world. It is consistent with the Foucauldian paradigm in postmodern thought, in which as Aijaz Ahmad describes:

> Only power was universal and immortal; resistance could only be local; knowledge even of power, always partial. Affiliation could only be shifting and multiple, to speak of a stable subject position was to chase the chimera of the myth of origins (70).

Sinclair Ross's *As For Me And My House* does not perhaps fulfill the postmodern requirement for authenticity. Yet, it portrays the travails of a woman's consciousness with an acute discernment of nuance. There may not be any evidence of concrete struggle in Ross's work. However, the very strength and poignancy of the portrayal is such that it puts forth a politics which is unambiguously feminist. In the works of Kroetsch and Atwood, however, the very possibility of a definite feminist consciousness and struggle are consciously punctured. The resistance of an Offred, a Moira or an Anna Dawe is made out to be localized and tenuous compared to the overarching reach of oppressive systems.

Nevertheless, postmodern thought has contributed to feminism in some crucial ways. These Canadian texts testify to the insights and strategies of postmodernism which help to expose oppressive ideologies by dethroning them from the seat of 'grand' and 'master' narratives. However, it then goes on to deflate and parody ideologies of meaningful struggles as well. And that is the point where progressive feminist politics has to part ways with postmodernism. Echoing a central postmodern insight, Offred reflects, "context is all." Feminism, however, needs to move beyond particular contexts and base itself on the 'knowable history' of women's oppression and have faith in the vision of an egalitarian society.

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