

Participatory Evolution Towards Women's Liberation :
A Study of the Select Novels of Gail Godwin

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Chapter VII

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Summation

Gail Godwin's works transmit the elements of an anti-thesis to the insignia of women's liberation for centuries which had been the exclusion of the race from the society. The belief of the society and literature as witnessed through the years advocates a popular culture of women's emancipation paralleling women's separation from the society. A stereotyped portrayal signifying liberated women saw them as having disregard for others and moving away from the relationships formed of the people with and around them.

This thesis has attempted to recognize the inclusive structures within the society that complement the liberation of women.

Similar to feminisms key political and theoretical stance that states "the inequalities that exist between men and women are not natural but social, not pre-ordained but created by men"(83), the theories towards women's liberation created by men have been centered on a woman forgoing her affinity with her family and her society. A woman had to either be a subordinate to the dominance by others or a rebel who does not heed to anybody or anything. Her co-existence with her environment was never a subject for consideration so as to keep up with the radical ideologies that predestined the role of women be it a woman or a new woman.

There were a few among the women and the women writers who were also bound by the social norms which began even before the times of emergence of feminist thoughts and that which continued into the twentieth century measured the freedom of women through their non-allegiance with others in the society. Consequently there crept up literature that showed isolated women as upholding the independence of women.

A woman's evolvment that is made possible in a comprehensive environment is more significant and effective. She, who is "the cultural reproducer"(106) proving herself without abandoning the society is commendable as the foundation of feminism is growth and equality for women in the society and not seclusion or exclusion of the race of women from the society. The parameter against which a woman's success is measured is from the society and she who is a part of it evolves out of it.

A woman's identity is created by everything and everybody around and this is integral to any deliberation on feminism. To expound on this theory where inclusion is recognized as the essence of women's evolution, the women in the select novels of Gail Godwin have been studied taking into consideration the five factors that support them as they pace towards reclamation of self : the immediate family, the women in the extended family, the arts, the South and the author's writing style that contribute towards women's evolvment. The exploration of seven novels by the author Gail Godwin which presumably has her autobiographical elements shows the role played in the lives of her women characters by the environment that encompasses family, the relationships formed outside the family, the culture in which the women have grown and the art forms that is a part of them.

Surviving one's own past and carrying the useful parts of it into the future is what the select novels of Gail Godwin, and the writer from the American South herself advocate. Life is like a puzzle that arrives at its completion when the seemingly ambivalent relationships between and among people are mobilized to a decisive affirmation of the eternal faith in the prolific goodness of togetherness. Gail Godwin's women in the novels taken up for the study retrace their steps in the past to understand that a retrospection of the events unravel the configuration of the life of the individual that is intertwined with the lives of those around.

Godwin's women have close connections with their families similar to their author herself who grew in a women only family and are indeed tend to be influenced by its members. A woman's early and immediate association is with her family members and it marks the essentials for the formation of self and the development of personality. There are undeniably some characteristics in women that can be traced back to their family which find their way into the conduct of a woman and are influential. The novelist making the women turning homewards is in itself symbolic of their identification of family as a place of solace where they can be on their own. This autonomy conceivable only at home is savored by a woman as her family members support her in her belief in herself.

Gail Godwin's protagonists, who are women, return home for some occasion usually an unhappy one like the funeral of one of its members to be caught in a mire of emotions which are the import of various precedents in the family. Whatever be the nature of these emotions they are still emphatic as all these combine to make a woman a person of her choice. The daughters in the works of Godwin taken for the study cherish their association with their mothers and the return home of these daughters is hopeful, and for solutions to their adult dilemmas they rely on their mothers for comfort. The mothers form a major part of the psyche of the daughters and how much ever they are distanced geographically they carry each other in their minds. As Pramoedya Ananta Toer has written in his work it is a mother who knows whatever her child is undergone even if she did not see for herself what her child experienced. The mother whom they are formed from offer assistance necessary for the growth of their daughters and when the daughters set aside their personal prejudices and imbibe their noble characteristics there is a vast hope for understanding the transformation it can make in the context of female identity and liberation. In *The*

Odd Woman, A Mother and Two Daughters, A Southern Family and *Glass People*, the daughters understand their mothers better when they grow into situations similar to the ones faced by them. They derive strength out of the knowledge of these mothers gained through their myriad experiences that has lent itself to wisdom.

The gamut of English literature abounds with writings and researches in the subject of the liberation of women and the means to it which incline toward asserting the possibility of women valuing liberty only when they rebel against the society and environment. But Gail Godwin's women in her works are different in that these women move towards the society for assertion of their selves as the author envisions her women claiming varied experiences from the people around and in turn transmitting the ensuing wisdom to the others with them.

Godwin's women protective of the structure of the family shoulder the responsibility of carrying the tradition of interrelations forward. This is a mutually benefitting process where the women understand that they are remnants of the members of their family. The new women in her works specifically experience within themselves the bearing of their mothers they had sprung from and their relatedness with their family. Their self-designs nurtured by the valuable ideals of their culture inherited by them from their mother turn reciprocative of the expectations of others in the society. The protagonists in the novels *The Odd Woman, A Mother and Two Daughters, A Southern Family* and *Glass People* are beneficiaries of their continued relationship with mothers and families.

All these women in Godwin like Jane, Nell, Lydia, Francesca, Cate and Lily rewrite the common belief that marks family as a hindrance to a woman's growth pulling her from the heights that she yearns to traverse. The debate on whether family supports or

deters a woman's growth is perennial. However, her novels tend to repute the significant support systems provided by the families to the women who aspire for higher things. For these women, it is in the family where the first sign for allowing recognition of self and identity is marked. The relation between mother and daughter seen in the light of the theory of Object Relations by Melanie Klein and Ivan Boszormenyi Nagy expounds how the relationship with the mothers in the novels who are the foremost to whom the daughters relate to continues throughout the life and this unaffected monitoring is valuable as it provides confidence to discrete in their negotiation for self-identity that alters between the habits at home and the expectations of the world outside conclusively aiding the daughters affirm their belief in themselves.

The mothers and daughters share a relationship that stands separate from any other relationships formed on earth . According to Amy Tan, to a daughter “ A mother is always the beginning. She is how things begin.”(*The Bonesetter's Daughter* 263). Speaking of mothers Alice Hoffman wrote in *The Dovekeepers: A Novel* that, a mother can understand that “...woman had secrets, and that some of these were only to be told to daughters. In this way we were bound together for eternity.” (7) women's evolution is a strenuous journey and their alteration of emotions is accepted at home as a part of the person and is valued by the mothers and sisters who see the reflection of their self in the other allowing liberty to express thoughts. The sisters play mother to each other placed under situations that demand the change. The differences in them promote growth as each one is careful to improvise her ideas to fit into their responsibilities in the family. The experiences shared at home by these women are common and in the broader sense is also integrating unbridled thoughts and ideas carried from outside. The familial cord of a woman is a major factor contributing towards the sustenance of the self.

Despite the difference in their stance of self-actualization, Godwin's daughters incorporate the individual factors from the lives of their mothers and sisters that can fit into their everyday lives. Francesca in *Glass People* is seen assimilating the changes her mother had allowed to herself in her new found life, returns to her husband's place with the decision to live a life allowing the required amendments in her which are now made easier through the understanding that adjustments in life does not always demand forgoing self.

The new transformation witnessed in the mothers and sisters in turn metamorphoses the daughters who learn to accept the change and move further in life. This new woman changed thus has a better control over herself as she has gained the ability to clear unfathomable complexities through identification of self.

The support rendered by the extended family, chiefly by the women around is studied and the theory of sisterhood is used to interpret it. Godwin often deals with three generation of women in her novels- the grand mother, the mother and the daughter. Of the generational differences the obvious is their conventional education. The daughters move away from home for further education and jobs and are exposed to the world outside. From the time when people left their homes for education and jobs in the other regions they have been building relationships with others outside their family. These relationships turn out to be a surrogate to one's family and are a part of the formation of the self of a person since these associations have the advantage of not being influenced by the habits of the family of the other. The objective view of the person by the one disconnected to the family is beneficial and this is an enriching experience to the subject who can learn from their unreserved criticism. In the absence of the families, these people in the outside world

who replace those families fill in the vacuum. These women around see beyond the familial sentiments and restrictions that hold a woman back. In the process of the definition of the self they perform the task of unbiased analyzers and from their critique the modifications required for the betterment of self can be inferred. When the importance of the relationships formed outside ones family is traced in the novels *The Odd Woman*, *A Mother and Two Daughters*, *A Southern Family*, *Glass People*, *Flora* and *Evenings At Five*, the influence on the main characters by the members of the kinship group is found to be advantageous and the women are seen learning to discern the relevant material out of those for their betterment of the self. The theory of Sisterhood used here for the study traces explicitly the relationship of the women protagonists in the stories with the women outside their own family.

The women from contrasting cultural and family settings who share similar ideas rise towards a union that is beneficial to each other as is the case in the bonding between Lydia and Renee in *A Mother and Two Daughters* and Clare and Julia and Gerda in *The Odd Woman*. It is observed that a woman ‘brings with her the rooting in her own membership and identity, but at the same time tries to shift in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with women who have different membership and identity.’(130). Such women who share sisterly bonds in the novels are a gratification as their influences positively impact the identity of the women on whom the narration focuses. The assimilation of the varied perspectives work in unison with the individual member’s otherwise narrow perception, shaping pronounced definition of self.

Lydia in *A Mother and Two Daughters* and Jane in *The Odd Woman* and the other woman Francesca in *Glass People* in their attempts at framing independent values and ideals that does not solely rely on that of their parents’ acculturate through these relationships of diverse nature.

The habit of the daughters relating to the mother is carried forward and an identity is created with the female figures who demonstrate the qualities of the mother. As they are not limited by the defined roles of playing a loving daughter or a dutiful sister or wife, the women are able to think aloud without reservations.

Gail Godwin, the story-teller, is fond of family myths and Jane in *The Odd Woman* who derived hope for fulfillment of some of her utopian dreams on romantic love and marriage out of her family myths finds listeners in the women in the extended family. This way the women reiterate their beliefs and readily appreciate and value the innermost psychological needs. Such of these relationships with the people around which are undemanding and unbound by duties provide freedom of expression. The educated and learned women closely observe the people around and infer materials which they offer taking in everything that attributes towards their growth.

While the mothers move with the existing social groups, the daughters choose to organize their own groups and as they grow they understand their mothers more and extend their relation to those of their mothers'. With mothers like Nell and Lily who are caught between the egoistic clashes of their husbands and their children, the women around help them pass through the ordeal. The loneliness, the sense of insecurity and the unexplainable fears which life brings turn bearable with the relationships formed through sisterhood that promise companionship and support at all times. Integration of the women through sisterhood complements familial bonding and this allegiance is respectable as a woman's position or identity is not at stake in such a situation.

Every woman is formed partly by the culture of her region and is indispensably united with the person. The contribution by the people around in shaping the personae of

a woman is directly proportional to the contribution by the region to which one belongs. Family, race and social class had been compelling issues of the literature from South and the society and the significant culture of the region are important parts of any work that is produced here. Any person is a product of his or her culture and the traditions and habits of the place are consciously or unconsciously imbibed by its people. Thus 'subjectivity is not always located in the individual alone, but is socially validated, determined and constructed.'(101). Though the author refuses to be identified as a Southern writer, her novels share some of the qualities which mark a Southern writer. The land, as in the case of the South in Godwin's novels, and its efficacies influences the characteristics of its dwellers. Many of her women characters derive materials for their sustenance from the components of the American South. South has in it the materials that support the sustenance of the self and formation of true subjectivities of its women. Inheriting the fondness for myth-making in the South, the women in the novels formulate family myths and in them they search for parts of their selves and solutions to their troubled thoughts that trace their selves in them. Adopting the Southern habit of story-telling the major women characters in the novels like Jane, Cate, Violet Clay and Christina are either writers, teachers or artists who articulate their Southern experiences in Their classrooms, books and pallets. The media they choose for articulation of their ideas turn out to be a forum for discussion of facts and assumptions around them.

The institution of family is important to any Southerner and is remembered here in these Southern novels by Godwin where the family homes are the happening places. Having returned to their roots the women are seen in sheer vulnerability in their native places which has memories holding them strong. They realize that to whichever part of

the world they move to, their identity will be with their region and they know they will always return to it. The women are conscious of the traditions and habits of South. The complex realms of their being like the sense of guilt these women and also the men of the region suffer but that which keeps them close to their people have been products of inheritance through generations traced back to its history that is set on regional and racial wars and its aftermath.

The women, following the practices of the South are always seen in family gatherings or social gatherings. These community gatherings are visibly defined with its primary focus on the union of its residents. The novels *The Odd Woman*, *A Mother and Two Daughters*, *A Southern Family* and *Evenings at Five* open with scenes of some such occasions that has drawn people to be together. Such an organizing pays attention to setting up an environment suitable for meeting of women and formation of sisterhoods. South with all its individual traits that are relation promoting advocates identification with the region and its people and reliance on one another if needs arise.

Godwin's women are no ordinary thinkers as she suggests through the nature of the professions and interests of the women characters in her novels. Their conduct keeps pace with the rich nature of the art forms they practice. They aid them through loneliness and loss.

The searches by the women find expression in their arts and these arts are like torches handed down through generations, and the responsibility of carrying them that represent the tradition of the family and the region holds them to the ground. Jane and Cate utilize storytelling and myths for discussion in the class. They place their unclear ideas also for discussion and listen to the unbiased view of those by the students. A solidarity with others is built through such dialogues and discussions.

On the other hand Clare the writer in *A Southern Family* uses the art of narration of the region in her novels. She assigns her characters the roles that she wants to play or witness in real life and by making those characters speak her thoughts she also evaluates her actions. To Christina in *Evenings at Five*, her longtime companion Rudy who is dead, is no more dead as he lives in the musical notes he has made as a composer and thus the art form is a carrier of the thoughts of the living to the dead. Violet Clay uses her painting brush to illustrate her moods and ideas. Their arts speaks of themselves in a way and accommodates their desires, wishes and longings that cannot be expressed otherwise. They speak of things that traverse the realms of ordinary human comprehension. Women make their art forms like writing, painting and music as a means for connecting themselves with the people who have been rendering them strength. The painstaking vacuum left by them is filled in by an art form which they have been sharing mutually. The art practiced by the women in the novels are more convincingly an orientation of the living to the dead. The art forms thus connecting the living and the dead bridges the gap between reality and the innermost longings and thus result in wish fulfillment. The experiences the women shared with the other is as personal as the arts to which they have intimate association. The art forms also carry with them the richness of the tradition of the form that has been carried forward through ages surpassing time and space. The novels *A Mother and Two Daughters*, *The Odd Woman*, *A Southern Family*, *Evenings at Five* and *Violet Clay* have various forms of arts mentioned that serve as therapy to the protagonists.

Gail Godwin can be seen as a woman writer and learned and intellectual women populate her novel. She has a style that is typical of her writings that does not sound overtly feministic but advocates strengthening of women's liberation through the

formation of healthy relationships with family, friends and society and suggests inclusion over alienation as the means for achieving the liberation desired by them. Her novels speak for the identification and recognition of women by themselves and by the society.

The author Gail Godwin portrays liberated women who do not embrace isolation to affirm their individuality but who believe in interdependence and accept to learn from others around who could be influential over them . The outcome of their association with their mothers, siblings, friends, acquaintances, culture and art forms are referred to here to reinstate that women need not remain isolated to remain liberated and can derive strength from the supporting systems around . The women's legal history in the United States is long enforcing a wide range of laws advocating the liberation of women covering a multitude of rights starting from jury rights to the right of a woman to choose her own profession. These legislative rights aim at mitigating the gender prejudices against women and protecting the legal, social, and economic rights of a woman and are invariably solid structures that recognize the place of women in the society. Such laws of the State contributing towards the development of women can be traced in the novels of Godwin. However they have not been included in the study. Apart from the women, the influence and companionship of some of the men around Godwin's women too endorse women's liberation and this factor though important have not been studied here.

Of Gail Godwin's fourteen novels, seven novels that feature women characters prominently and those that provide scope for the topic of study have been taken up here for research. Only the genre of novel where her primary literary accomplishment lies is considered for analysis. The other seven novels and her short story collections, non-fiction books and libretti are not explored.

Modern American feminist literature apparently tends to incline towards a genre that principally establishes the foundation of women's liberation on the exclusion of the women from the environs. The recurrent suggestion of women's detachment as the means to their individuality is the reversal to the feminist pragmatic ideologies that conventionally work for attaining identification of self and gender equality in an inclusive environment. A participatory charter for women's liberation is more significant when the women evolve together with the others around them reaffirming their faith in themselves and in the interdependent existence of individuals.

Inter dependence is a vivacious indication of strength and this turns out to be an exemplary feature when a redefinition of women's liberation is attempted at. A woman in an inclusive environs is disposed to experiencing the root of freedom which is identification of the innermost self as in such a circumstance the prospects for integrating the interims of the nature of a person for betterment of the self is plausible. It allows for the reversal and revisal of some of the self-induced and societal ideologies of a woman that have been holding her down. A distinct transformation is witnessed in them when they attempt for a communion with people.

At a time when 'the 'woman question' is often merged with the nation question' (CLT 106) for a woman is an integral part of the nation, acknowledging the evolution of woman through participation constitutes the foundations indispensable for the development of a nation.