

**FAMILY AND MARRIAGE AS AN INSTITUTIONALIZED AGENT OF
VICTIMIZATION IN SELECT NOVELS OF CAROL SHIELDS.**

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Abstract

This paper aims to attempt to trace the myriad types of victimization under the pretext of family, marriage and vocation in multiple genre in select novels of Carol Shields, a Canadian novelist. To substantiate and to bring out the sense of trauma of the victimization, the Longman Dictionary defines the term 'victim' originally meant to be 'killed' and 'destroyed', (p.1678). Women, even today cutting across religion and country are mercilessly beaten up, crucified, raped, murdered, and their voices are silenced and confined within the four walls. Women's freedom and freedom of expression of their views in home and in the society is scientifically and conditioned by machismo. On the passage of exploring the untold agony of the women in their home and society, Shields unearths the conundrum and mayhem of women who encounter the labyrinthine in their everyday life.

Keywords: Family, Marriage, Institution, Victimization, Isolation, Claustrophobia, Adversity, etc.

More importantly the notion of 'family' is a central and driving force in which Shields heroines are trapped and victimized by all possible means at the hands of men. In fact the victimization of women differs according to the education they possess. The *Small Ceremonies* the first novel of Shields featured an academic couple Judith Gill and Martin Gill. Judith Gill's internal conflict is portrayed in the novel. The victimization of myriad types is exorbitantly perpetrated by the man under the pretext of offering shelter, social image in the name of marriage and family to the woman folks.

In *Swann: A Mystery*, Swann, a poetess was murdered by her husband Agnus

Swann on the account of that she is an intellectual in the public sphere. Also she underwent innumerable sufferings in her domestic life. Her familial life had one that usurped away her kismet.

The Stone Diaries is a much celebrated work of Carol Shields. It deals with the life of Daisy Goodwill Flett. The novel in which Shields portrays the life of an ordinary woman which includes marriages, deaths, children the tragedy of isolation, orphan hood, through the use of both first-person and third person narrative voices, Shields explores the tensions between Daisy's inner life and her outer life. It is evident that almost all the woman characters of Shields novels were confined under the pretext of marriage, family, and job that ultimately had led them to the claustrophobic and adversity in their life.

Shields' last novel, *Unless* managed to expose, even explode, the artifice at the heart of fiction's conventions. Reta, being assuming the status of wife to Martin, her agony was about her elder daughter Norah, who had dropped out of the university, had a kind of mental trauma and was begging in the street called Barthust Bloor, with a sign board around her neck that reads of GOODNESS and stayed in Promise Hotel. Though man is the head of the institution of family, the harder reality is that woman has to shoulder almost all the more responsibilities in doing all sorts of domestic chores in the guise of the family.

Hence, Shields' novels show that women are conditioned by the circumstances. Though some of her women are featured as superiors, many are portrayed as relegated into inferiors such as beggars, victims, holocaust survivors, widows assuming the status of being dubious wives.

Women, even today cutting across religion and country are mercilessly beaten up, crucified, raped, murdered, and their voices are silenced and confined within the four walls. Women's freedom and freedom of expression of their views in home and in the society is scientifically and conditioned by machismo. Commonalities of pronouncement of verdict has also become comic and myopic especially for women in kangaroo courts of our social temporal reality. Though women are literate and have achieved accolades in academics, status and dignity in the public sphere, they have been neglected, relegated and ignored only on the pretext of gender.

Carol Shields, a Canadian novelist, taken into account of all that evils imposed upon the second sex, has explored the everyday lives of average women with honesty and compassion. Her recurring theme and concern for women in all her novels include personal identity, self-perception as well as love, marriage and family. She loves the idea

of the family, the issues of middle class's suffering, struggle for survival, quest for identity and quandary of in-betweens, status quo of power and predicament of being a woman, love and lust, marriage and divorce, have become the leitmotif of her novels. On the passage of exploring the untold agony of the women in their home and society, Shields unearths the conundrum and mayhem of women who encounter the labyrinthine in their everyday life. And it is very obvious to note that most of her woman is at stake and suffocation under the stigma of family, marriage, relationship and home especially when they strive to achieve something in their life.

More importantly the notion of 'family' is a central and driving force in which Shields heroines are trapped and victimized by all possible means at the hands of men. In fact the victimization of women differs according to the education they possess. The ground reality is that they raise the family-economy and become the breadwinner of the family but their role in the family is neither independent nor significant.

Virginia Woolf describes it as, 'a cat without a tail' (AROO 9). Considering the overall disparity between men and women, Woolf wondered: "Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?" (AROO 23)

In a similar vein, Shields too has commented on the thematic concerns of her novels: "Most novels are about ordinary people. There is a gender prejudice here when men write about "ordinary people." Women are thought to be subtle and sensitive. And their novels are classified as domestic" (CLC Vol.193, 348)

The *Small Ceremonies* the first novel of Shields featured an academic couple. Judith Gill, wife of Martin Gill, a biographer. Martin Gill was an associate professor of English, specialized in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. But Judith was in a position to borrow the plot from Spalding's novels but clandestinely this plot is reused again by her male novelist friend Furlong Eberhart in his commercially successful and critically acclaimed book, ' *Graven Images*'. Judith feels victimized. She speaks with depression of the betrayal as,

.... the world did indeed seem full of obscure threatening dangers, treachery, mean cuts, thrusts and insults briskly traded, conniving jealousies, nursed grudges, selfish hang-ups, greed, opportunism, ego desperation and stupidity. (105)

The suppression against women has many hues. Woman is vulnerable to lose her

power. Her hard work is susceptible to be shunned and her knowledge is sidelined by the hands of male values. Assuming Eberhart is an embodiment of plagiarism, Judith calls it as 'nefarious, barefaced theft', (SC 106). As Judith considers her creative work as her own child, she could not tolerate that her child (creativity) was missing. She says: "Tears stood like pin pricks in the back of my eyes. I was prepared to cry over anything." The frustration is revealed when she says, 'A thief is a thief is a thief. (SC 107).

Being a wife and exercising the domestic chores, Judith says, "We are into the wife. She endures. There is nothing more to say about her except that she endures..... Limb frozen in the storm and requiring tense kitchenable amputation" (SC-28). And away from performing domestic chores, all her attempt to achieve something in academics is also a huge hindrance for the woman folks of Shields.

Judith laments, 'I wanted to write the kind of novel I couldn't find on the library shelf. Where were the novels about the kind of women I knew, women who had a reflective life, a moral system, women who had a recognizable domestic context, a loyalty to their families, and a love for their children? (SC 20).

The term 'home' is often used by Shields's characters believing that women expressed their personalities through their houses as Woolf says, 'we think back through our mothers if we are women' (AROO 73). Woman and her home is inseparable."(SC 176) And in her another novel *Swann: A Mystery* has a mysterious and shocking death of a poet, Swann, a farmer's wife, uneducated, lived in the Nadeau area of Ontario.

The Earth accommodates men and women without any discrimination but men accommodate women in their lives with as slaves and domestic beasts to carry out the burdens. Sarah, a researcher of Swann's life was longing for her identity in exploring the mystery buried in Swann's death.

In *Swann: A Mystery*, Swann, a poetess was struggling even in her childhood. According to the biographical information available in the novel, she underwent innumerable sufferings in her domestic sphere. Sarah Maloney adds: "Swann might have performed night rituals, might have had a kitchen, window into the windy, have looked starry night, trying to guess at the next days' weather. Perhaps there was a cat or dog but all had not been found in her poems" (SAM 30).

In Sarah's words, Women have been knitting socks for centuries, and probably they've been constructing, in their heads, lines of poetry that never got down. Mary Swann happened to have a pen, a Parker 51 as a matter of fact, as well as an eye for the surface of things. Plus the kind of heart breaking persistence that made her sit down at

the end of the day tired day?(SAM 31).

Under the umbrella of the family what Swann exactly wanted was the family and her pen. But the family and world constructed by the men did no longer permitted her to lead even the simple life that she expected. Swann's life was unearthed by many scholars. The version goes as she was married to a farmer and moved to the Nadeau district, where she bore a daughter, wrote poems, and got herself killed at the age of fifty at the hand of her husband. Though Swann, the poetess has inked much poetry on myriad themes, her life note seems to be minimal. When exploring the life of Swann, Sarah herself faced hard labour assigned by her own professional friends. With a sense of frustration, Sarah says: "These guys are greedy! They would eat her up, inch by inch scavengers. Brutus. This is a wicked world, and the innocent need protection, which is why I find it impossible to forget myself for losing her notebook' (SAM 32).

Hence a woman's life is often marked by love and sacrifice. Agnus, Swann's husband, handled his wife enigmatically. As Swann was a voracious reader, she often visited library. This provoked Agnus who usually waited outside in his truck giving her only few minutes to get her books, honking the horn when he got impatient. In addition to that, Agnus was not even ready to permit poor Mary Swann to check out more than two books. Moreover, Agnus Swann beat his wife regularly.

A woman's' life at the hands of man is obviously precarious, has been rattled. What Agnus Swann did was that he shot Mary in the head at close range, probably in the early evening shortly after she returned home. He pounded her face with a hammer, dismembered her body - crudely with an axe – head and severed legs before shooting himself on the mouth as he sat at the kitchen and hid the bloodied parts and dumped in a silo. But no one knows for sure what happened between them. There was no explanation, no note or sign, but one of Swann's last poems points to her growing sense of claustrophobia. It seemed that the women's intelligence was unclaimed and unappreciated.

Swann's last poems points to her sense of helplessness as this stanza reveals:

Minutes hide their tiny
tear And days weep into
Aprons
A stifled sobbing from the years
And silence from the eons. (SAM 44)

Thus, Mary Swann, in her last days felt suffocated and exhausted.

Swann's daughter Frances Moore also suffered from solitude. She is always alone. Her loneliness is put as:

“Alone in the House”. Especially those
illnesses- Pity my bold hidden and licked
Pity my mouth shut
tight
Pity my passing
unlocked
Hours, pity my unwatched night. (SAM 97)

And there is another character in the novel called Morton, a male biographer, was not only interested in Swann's life but also in her paraphernalia. He met Swann's daughter Frances and interviewed and stole the Swann' pen the Parker 51. He indulged in the stealing of the possession of Swann for want of fame and name. It is said in the text as '*Thief Robber*' (SAM 113).

After Swann was begrudged and bludgeoned to death, her poetry collection was mishandled. Cruzzi throwoff his wife violently with the whole force of his body when he found that his wife using the poetry papers to clean the fish remains. It seemed that being a husband Cruzzi was entitled to beat his wife for whatever the cause. So, Mary Swann's poems were drenched. Half of the poems only had escaped from serious damage.

At one point, her poetry was supplied with missing lines and even greater part of missing stanza. Hilde herself puts it as, 'she could feel what inside of Mary Swann's head must look like. It seemed to be inhabiting into another woman. It is axiom that the woman's hard earned name has also been tempered posthumously in the name of guardianship and guidance. Finally in the Swann's symposium at Harbor view Hotel, all the relics of Swans's was looted.

The Stone Diaries is a much celebrated work of Carol Shields. It deals with the life of Daisy Goodwill Flett. Here, Shields portrays the life of an ordinary woman which includes marriages, deaths, children and a brief stint as the writer of a newspaper's gardening column. Through the use of both first-person and third person narrative voices, Shields explores the tensions between Daisy's inner life and her outer life. It is evident that almost all the woman characters of Shields novels, were confined under the pretext of marriage, family, and job that ultimately had led them to the claustrophobic and adversity in their life.

Also the novel traces Daisy in her seventies as widow, retired news paper columnist, grandmother, great aunt, and friend and explores her contemplative inner life as an old woman of 80. In the first chapter, the narrator recounts, 'My mother name was Mercy Stone Goodwill. She was only thirty year old when she took sick, on a boiling hot day, standing there in her back kitchen, making a Malvern pudding for her husband's supper' (TSD 1). Her mother reared in the Stone, an orphanage as good house keeper where infants are given to the institution's care. The unmarried mothers were called, Stones. The predicament of life is that Mercy did not even know about her own pregnancy.

Mrs. Flett, Clarentine, a neighbor of Mercy, a mother of three children, is a neat bodied woman, married to Magnus, a master stone cutter, a cold, lean Orkeneyman, who estranged her and migrated to Canada at the age of nineteen. The victimization of women put by Shields: "A Woman's life is not worth a plateful of cabbage if she has not felt life stir under her heart (TSD 9). Clarentine Flett, a mother of several children and deserted by her husband experiences the sufferings of solitude and quotes as,

The men, her husband and sons, leave for quarry at seven 'o' clock sharp and return at five. What do they imagine she does all day?... pair of eyes can see through the roof and walls of her house . . . She moves through her dream like days, bargaining from minute to minute with indolence, that temper. (TSD 11)

Mercy, in her life, having faced trials and tribulations, and after giving birth to Daisy, died in eclampsia. The pathetic state is that a poor obese woman was to a greater extent was not aware of her own pregnancy. In such a way woman life is precarious and perilous in the name of home and marriage. Daisy's children clearly show that their mother's suffering was something immeasurable and uncountable. They say,

Colic, chicken pox, measles, bronchial pneumonia, allergies, influenza, menstrual cramps, eczema cystitis, childbirth, blood pressure, menopause, depression, angina, blocked arteries, broken bones, coronary bypass, kidney failure, cancer, bladder infection, stroke, bed sores, ulcerated leg, incontinence, stroke, memory loss, failing eyesight, inappropriate response, speech deficiency, depression, stroke, stroke. (TSD 35)

For Daisy, life has become an endless strife. Lying in her bed, she apprehends life going around her. Her life is, at last depicted as, 'lived- blinded, throttled, erased

from the record of her own existence' (TSD 76). De Beauvoir and Cixous tell us that woman has always been measured against the traditional masculine standard. Apart from being voiceless, Daisy is also invisible as are the other women in the text. Mercy's 'look' is one of "being unspotted by the world" (TSD 10).

For generations together, the sufferings and solitude seemed to have been following woman's life. Daisy, a daughter of Mercy, world is very small. Daisy was married to an alcoholic member of respectable family who died in another freak accident during their honey moon in England. It was not too honey and moony. Daisy's first marriage with a Hoad from an affluent class was portrayed in the perspective of Shields as, 'When woman marries, she must be constantly alert to the possibility of harm' (TSD 104). Daisy's husband sleeps and snores, and vomits into the life basin in their first class sleeper. She was unable to stop her young husband from drinking and her husband Hoad dies in their honeymoon.

As physical contact between man and woman becomes the stress busters, to the most extent, this relationship is often exploited by most men in the world as women are inferior to men. Daisy herself internalizes and incorporates her sufferings due to various causes and she is of the opinion that "every night' would be a lot to put up with' (TSD 186). Also she corroborates with the statement that, 'Try to make your husband believe that you are always ready for his entreaties even though his actual sex feeling may be sporadic and unpredictable' (TSD 186).

When women believe that man is everything for her life, she transforms and surrenders her body as a sumptuous prey to the ravenous hungry of man in the name of family unknowingly sometimes unknowingly. Though Daisy was a talented horticulturist, she was mostly confined to kitchen. Thus, while her husband Baker hogged all the limelight as an expert horticulturist, Daisy remained in his shadows. A mere two months after Baker's death, Daisy took over the horticultural column at the 'Recorder' and becomes Mrs. Green Thumb. After her husband's death, the identity of 'Mrs. Green Thumb for Daisy' in the intellectual world was snatched away by Pinky Fulham which led her to deep distress and despair. Sandra Birdsell comments: "Few of Shields men are villains." In Shields' *The Stone Diaries* the protagonist herself recounts her agony. Daisy puts it: From the third person narrative, Daisy's solitary confinement is showcased, 'she lie on her bed, though in the early morning her eyes turned toward the window staring at the hard Florida light that creeps in between the slats of her blinds and feeling its unforgiving brilliance. (TSD 282). Her solace is that there are billions of other

men and women in the world who wake up early in their separate beds. Daisy's life has been examined after her death:

Flett, Daisy once Goodwill who due to historical accident, due to carelessness, due to ignorance, due to lack of opportunity and courage, never once in her many years of life experienced the excitement and challenge of oil painting, of skiing, sailing, nude bathing, emerald jewellery, cigarettes, oral sex, pierced ears, Swedish dogs, water beds, science fiction, pornographic movies, religious ecstasy, truffles, kirsch, Jalapeno peppers, Peking duck, Vienna, Moscow, Madrid, group therapy, body massage, hunger, distinguished hours, outraged condemnation, ... she knew she had lived in her life, did she ever hear the words 'I love you, Daisy' uttered aloud (such a simple phrase) and only during the long, thin uneventful sleep that preceded her death did she have the wit (and leisure) to ponder the injustice of this. (TSD 345)

The tragedy of isolation, orphan hood, and worthlessness that Daisy sometimes felt was somewhat dispelled and dissipated when she saw herself as a stone. In the end, *The Stone Diaries* is the story of an incomplete and frustrating attempt by a woman trying to reconstruct her long life. Daisy's final lucid thought, 'I am not at peace' (TSD 361) shows her frustrations in trying to find a way to share her life story.

Shields' last novel, *Unless* also dealt with familial subject. Shields managed to expose, even explode, the artifice at the heart of fiction's conventions. The novel begins with Reta's words: 'It happens that I am going through a period of great unhappiness and loss just now. All my life I've heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, I've lost' (U 1). It is a referendum that an ordinary woman's life's story and happiness have been questioned and it is put in in-betweens.

The very suffix of her name 'Winters' itself is self-explanatory that her life is something to be crucial and adversity. As the dictum of Tennyson quotes man for the earth woman for the hearth, while Tom her doctor-husband, exploring trilobites, Reta, a writer of light novel, is longing for material for her novels. Apart from being a writer, Reta's agony was about her elder daughter Norah, who had dropped out of the university, had a kind of mental trauma and was begging in the street called Barthust Bloor, with a sign board around her neck that reads of GOODNESS and stayed in Promise Hotel. Though man is the head of the institution of family, the harder reality is that woman has to shoulder almost all the more responsibilities in doing all sorts of domestic chores.

This novel shows that women are conditioned by the circumstances to which they

are attached to. In this experimental novel, men are shown superiors whereas women are relegated into inferiors such as beggars, victims, holocaust survivors, widows, struggling with unfulfilment, disillusionment and all kinds of neuroses.

Reta's daughter Norah has been depicted as representative of powerless women in the patriarchal society. Not being able to achieve greatness, reserved for men, Norah pursues only goodness. Norah is an intelligent and beautiful girl from a loving family, grows up in Orange Town, Ontario. The sad fact remains on the part of Reta is that her very life is full of strife and stress.

Danielle Westerman, a poet, essayist, feminist, a holocaust survivor and a holder of thirty seven degrees surprisingly believes that women have been enslaved by their possessions. Considering woman's body as a hilarious subject is a sort of denigration of women as a social being. In other words, men's possessions are meritorious whereas women's are hilarious and sensuous. My heart is broken"(U 66), Reta says as she has been entrapped between her vocation and familial duty:

Being a writer, a translator and a house wife, Reta speaks of her mundane and routine tasks in her family as, "For more than twenty years I've been responsible for producing three meals a day for the several individuals I live with I always wake with the sense of terror (U 84-85). The very institution of family and marriage has put her to undergo tensions in her life. Women reel under the male-dominated society and struggle to establish their identity. Lynn, Reta's friend says, 'men aren't interested in woman's lives.... He loves me, but, no, he really doesn't want to know about my brain and how I think" (U 119). It seemed that men treat woman's body as a hilarious subject to be consumed. As a soul care taker of the family, Reta's worry is all about her elder daughter Norah who is having sex in all the time with a person who had been a stranger. It is said as: "A short while ago and who now was intimate with every portion of her body; just thinking of this brought on a siege of panic". (U 125-26).

Reta's pendulum state of mind often swings for the remedy for her daughter's plight as Norah was alienated and the world does not belong to her as she has been told. Reta recounted her inner conflict in the letter saying, 'I am a woman and the mother of nineteen year old daughter, twenty in May, who is deeply troubled. Thus Reta conceded to the fact of her suffering that "I am the mother of a nineteen year old daughter who has been driven from the world. Family is the most prominent Institution of humans; it is a hall mark of civilization and symbolizes emotional bonding of humans. But the same inseparable and inevitable institution of family and marriage and the so called domestic

chores for women led the women to be a slaves and that prompt her to undergo mental agony and neurosis in their life. In the great human journey of life, family is the ultimate destination. Carol Shields' novels portray family marriage home and the domestic chores in its varied hues of institutionalized victimization in woman's life.

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