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The Feministic Space in Margaret Clarke's *The Cutting Season*

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Abstract:

Margaret Clarke, one of the famous writers of Canada, is known for her feministic approach which is the underlying theme of the universe. *The Cutting Season* is considered to be the very first novel that renowned her as the best Canadian novelist. In this novel, Clarke brings out her concern for the female characters in the male-dominated society. The novel creates a feministic space in the life of its two women characters, the central figures in the plot. The focus of the novel is obviously on the women-minorities who find themselves living in a restraint-free world. The non-restrictive space of the novel is further affirmed by its symbolic texture and thematically relevant title that transform the plot into a suggestive and complex narrative piece.

Keywords: Feministic approach, renowned, dominated society.

The Cutting Season (1984), the first of Margaret Clarke's two novels, creates a feministic space in the life of its two women characters, the central figures in the plot. The picture that emerges in the novel is rather unconventional as the emphasis here is on the minority, the female, as against the majority, the male, on the emancipated female warring with the authoritative male. The liberated Maureen and the independent Joanne who inherit the mother-daughter conflict from Laurence's *A Jest of God* and the defiant will of Morag Gunn of *The Diviners* represent the quintessential Canadian women with their love for individuality and freedom and total rejection of established social conventions.

The twenty-four-year-old Maureen is an emancipated woman who takes life very casually, yields to her impulse quite naturally and meets the demands of her days through her emotions. The restraints of the society she intentionally sets aside as she has devised her own. Highly individualistic and adventurous right from her teenage, she openly admits to her mother that she lost her virginity at fifteen and that she is on pills since then. With her peculiar notions about life, she has lived with Stephen, a man of her own age group, conceived a child through him, but is not prepared to marry him because she hates marriage. A permanent, legally bound settlement with a man, she is scared, might suffocate her. Analyzing her views on marriage, she questions herself: "Is it because she is too selfish to share her house with a man?" She is amused at the awareness that "she who could not share rooms with another person was sharing her body with this stranger" (117).

The focal point in the novel is Maureen around whom several characters appear; all of them, to the exception of her mother, subscribe to a traditional attitude to life, obviously contrary to Maureen's. Though Maureen moves with them cordially on the basis of a warm friendship, she is not prepared to modify her way of life on the line of others. In her interactions with them, she remains a catalyst, causing the others to contemplate change, herself not changing. She is steadily stubborn and unyielding from start to finish.

Andrew and Betty, her brother and sister-in-law, the submissive woman and authoritative male combination, attempt to clarify with her the genuineness of her love for Stephen and her plans about her pregnancy. Her decision to abort the pregnancy, in her view, is not a sin, for it is "only a potential child and not a living one" (104). Maureen is so impulsive and given to violence that "she picked up one of her father's curling trophies and threw it at Andrew" (110). Her impudence is well illustrated in another situation where she knocks down Stephen and shows her anger, sudden and strong. She also swept her arms and pushed with all her might against Stephen's chest and he landed on the ground beside the bed and started moaning.

When Laura, Maureen's only friend, an orthodox woman who marries the man she loves and bears him children, gets to know that Maureen has given up the idea of aborting her pregnancy, she curiously asks Maureen whether she has decided to marry Stephen; the insolent Maureen furiously shouts, "Well, Laura, you know, you must stop this silly happy-ever aftering that you are in these last few years. I have decided to keep my child and last night I made love with Stephen. These two events do not necessarily mean wedding bells and baptisms and a cul-

de-sac in the suburbs” (117). Thus in Maureen’s vision of life, physical relationship with a man and carrying his child in the womb do not presuppose marriage and she is not prepared to labour within such emotional bonds. She mercilessly hurts Laura and contemptuously referring to her second pregnancy that followed her love affair and subsequent motherhood.

One of her patients in the hospital where she works as a nurse, Mrs.Verna Bullock, a woman noted for her sentimental notions about marriage and motherhood, tells Maureen that with marriage a new kind of person is started; both of them [man and woman] find new parts in themselves and when the man, of course, achieves nothing, the woman gets a bonus in marriage, i.e. her child. Verna earnestly asks the cynical Maureen, “Have you ever looked at the faces of the man and the woman when they meet after the birth of the child? It is as if God were there in the room, as if Lord himself were there with the woman.... She’s the mother” (86). The benevolence which Verna attaches to motherhood attained through marriage, Maureen is not prepared to believe or accept. She leaves the room with her characteristic skepticism.

Maureen often suffers from a strange sense of insecurity arising from her psychological complex that she was an unwanted child in her family. She impulsively asks her mother that “Don’t you ever regret having me? When the frantic mother asks her in turn, “How can you say that? You were the most welcome baby in the world? What makes you feel such a thing?” Maureen retorts, “I have never felt welcome in your life. I wish I had been Andrew. He was welcome” (104).

With such deep-seated psychological grievance, she tries to claim her dead father Henry more as her own possession than her mother Joanne’s. To her extravagant mother she shouts that it is her father’s money and not her [mother’s] own earning. The image of her father sits so strong in her heart even years after his death she arranges the dinner table to five as if her father was still there. Whenever she reminds of her father she feels empty and completely deserted. All on a sudden she burst into tears and had to sit down to control herself. Maureen remembers every little event wherein she and her father were participants. Referring to her habit of losing things and being absent-minded Henry would often jocularly says that Maureen is losing herself again and the situation clings to her memory remaining fresh for ever. Probably, her love for her father is so obsessive that she can neither get married to a man and surrender herself totally, nor can she love her mother wholeheartedly for her mother is her rival competing for her father’s love.

Joanne, a foil to the character of Maureen subscribes to a style of living which is a blend of tradition and modernity. She always likes to lead a life in a lake side where she remembers the beautiful memories of her loving husband. When Ben makes advances to her, she cannot give in because her dead husband continues to live in her, haunting her often and offering her solace whenever she needs it. That he taught her fishing and that he helped her to keep things neat and orderly are not as very important as that he showered on her extraordinary love and affection.

Joanne might have closed out the possibilities of urban, emancipated life which her daughter Maureen leads. But when Ben and Joe attempt to misbehave, it is Joanne who rises to the occasion. Using a chainsaw, she drives them out with a physical force and moral strength which her revolutionary daughter does not possess. After the fight, the rebel Maureen who keeps the child but refuses to marry Stephen “wept but Joanne did not” (155). But Joanne has no regrets when the two men soon die in a road accident. She cleans the house, washing them off her life once for all. When Maureen pleads her mother to leave things untouched, Joanne has a practical question: “Do you want to go through hearing and things with the local authorities?” (155). Joanne is not prepared for such nuisance because she is a typical woman who is always nervous and fights against the maleworld.

Joanne is perturbed by horrible dreams four times in the novel. Her first dream is about a party where she finds men who include her husband Henry and son Andrew, giggling and exchanging filthy words; and she drives them out with a broom. Just before the dream she thought that Joe whose services she has hired for her household repair work is malformed; now, in her dream, her own men, husband and son, are malformed at least spiritually, for they are found to be vulgar and cheap. Once again, after hearing from her daughter about her intention to abort the child, she dreams of children, deformed, sobbing and moaning. These dream-children, while being an extension of her thoughts about Maureen's desire to abort the pregnancy, has another dimension of significance as well, for soon after the two dreams, Joanne builds a snowman with the help of Maureen using her husband Henry's scarf. The white colour of the snow represents Henry's purity and integrity; it is Joanne's symbolic gesture to set right her mistake of having seen him in her first dream as a morally degraded man. The moaning and sobbing children of her second dream are hers, the father-loving children weeping over what the mother has made of their dear father; and it is as if to pacify them she involves Maureen in her attempt to make the snowman. “This is the snowman of Maureen and Andrew's early years”

(53), the image of the pure father which the children, particularly Maureen, has been cherishing, and this image Joanne can never tarnish and hence her remedial work through the making of a snowman. The snowman symbolizes her attempt to resolve the inherent conflict between herself and her daughter. Joanne significantly places the snow figure beside her bedroom, the room where she shared many joys of life with Henry.

Her second dream about a huge and heavy male figure struggling to molest her is the consequence of her repressed fear of Joe. Ever since she gets to know Joe, she has an apprehension that he might make advances to her and this suppressed impulse gets manifested in the form of a dream. Yielding to Joe would be a betrayal of the evergreen memories of her husband; no wonder she beats up Joe and Ben when they act villainously and is totally unsympathetic when they get killed. Next, having come away from the lake cottage she tells her daughter, “I was dreaming of a cottage; I dreamt some one broke in” (102) this dream of Joanne symbolizes her fear that some man might break open her heart and find a place there in the absence of Henry, her husband. Naturally, she gets terrifying dreams, moaning and crying in the midst of her sleep. All the four dreams of Joanne form a closely-knit network capturing her love relationship with her husband and children.

This orthodox Joanne has otherwise chosen a male’s profession as hers. She chops the wood all along the day and all through the seasons. Different kinds of trees have taught her different lessons as disparate saws have given her multifarious experiences. Her job as a woodcutter and her later disguise as a male to secure the job of a mechanic are her symbolic efforts to achieve an identity on par with the male. The title of the novel is thus connotatively rich as it indicates Joanne’s attempt to enter the sworn male sphere and establish a male-like identity. Probably, Joe and Ben cannot cut as much as Joanne for Joanne’s will is stronger. For a life lived in wilderness, both natural and psychological, cutting/pruning is essential; the act means the removal of the unwanted and the retention of the relevant. To Joanne and Maureen, placed as they are in the world of male arrogance and prerogatives, it is ‘cutting’ that makes life meaningful.

In Clarke’s fictional world of the northwestern lake region, living amidst the liberated and bold women are two types of men: i) the vicious and the criminal, and ii) the humane and the fair-minded; the vicious encounter a tragic death, their deeds acting as nemesis; the fair-minded ones survive and flourish. The Canadian landscape and the prairie are divine, god-like, indeed.

The lake and the forest offer sustenance to the just while evacuating the atrocious and the unjust; thus Nature both preserves and destroys; it destroys Ben and Joe who indulge in mud-slinging, while it protects Art and Stephen who believe in love, marriage and legally permitted parenthood. Art has married Laura and is settled; Stephen is all ambitious to do it. For Ben and Joe, women are toys to be whimsically played with; to Art and Stephen, they are respectable individuals whose feelings and desires count a lot.

The frequently recurring theme of death is the leit-motif in the novel presented from the point of view of Maureen who, as a nurse, prepares the dying with all concern and commitment for their last journey. She is obsessed with death throughout the novel. "When she was ten or eleven... she used to have those fantasies about dying and her parents and her brother Andrew, especially Andrew, weeping over her open coffin. She even used to imagine the details of her funeral clothing ... she could be dead!"(36) Maureen's childhood fantasy extends into reality when she takes the profession of a nurse in a hospital-ward where "people always died in the end, no matter how strong they were, even people like Verna Bullock, all her patients died. That's why they were there on her territory, her ward- to die" (36). Next she plans to cause death to the child in her womb. She very casually tells her mother, "I'm booked for an abortion next week across the borders in the states. A private clinic" (49). Marriage, she lets her mother understand, would mean 'death' to her. Thinking of the possibility of a transfer to the obstetrics or paediatrics ward, she analyses death as she has perceived it in the hospital and discriminates the death of a child from that of an adult: "When a child dies it was so unnatural, not the same as the adults dying" (88) and so she cannot serve in a place where children die. She prefers to sit with the dying because "between herself and the dying person she always felt an honesty of communication that she never felt in her own life" (90) and she whispers into the ears of her dying patient Verna, "I'm here. You are not alone. I am here" (91).

Such is the prevalence of the leit-motif 'death' in the novel. This instinct of death, it is relevant to note, is felt only by Maureen, and not by any other character. Significantly so, since it is Maureen who revolts against the codes of the society constructed by men and such a fight against the long-established conventions implies a death-in-life. While she is staying with her mother in their lake-view cottage during the last stage of pregnancy, George informs her of people's gossip about her and her mother, particularly about her illegal pregnancy; she cannot understand as to how her pregnancy could affect the people around. Her cold logic is that it is

she who is going to take care of herself and her baby. Gossip leads to violence when Ben and Joe attempt to hurt her. The death instinct, the prerogative of Maureen, is not felt by Joanne for the latter's not a total protest against the male world. She has abided by the laws of the society by marrying Henry, bearing him children and living as his faithful widow; she violates no social code in spite of her boldness and independent will.

In the midst of all social contempt, Maureen is not cheated in the bargain of life. The closing pages of the novel portray her as a full-fledged and successful individual. The redeeming trait in Maureen is her willingness to keep her pregnancy, her acceptance of motherhood and her concern for her child. Maureen of the opening pages is little exposed to the hard and stern realities of life; Maureen, the mother, is sane and mature; the birth of her child and her eventual motherhood have invested on her a new identity; it is as if Joanne is reborn after suffering a death-like trauma during the hours of her labour and child-birth. Maureen's metaphorical death and rebirth are enacted in the novel through the frequent references to lake and water, the two images that often signify suffering culminating in the possibilities of survival, and death leading to resurrection. The novel's opening note on "the lake [as seen] in the autumn sun" (7) consummates in the closing page with the reference to the lighting lake and "all the lakes spreading far to the north [being] lit in a moment of sharp brightness" (180). It is a note of affirmation suggesting a bright future for all its characters.

The novel subsists on a circular structure ending where it begins. It opens with Joanne's exploration of the thick forest in the company of Maureen and ends with her exploration of the sky, after her farewell to Maureen. While exploring the land she is just a woodcutter surveying the forest for carrying out her job, and at the end when she flies in the air she is a skilled mechanic amply trained to set right the faulty machines. Thus the inexperienced women of the opening pages evolve into mature and enlightened individuals at the end. The cutting season has taught the mother and daughter rich and valuable lessons.

The Cutting Season is obviously feministic as its focus is on the women-minorities who find themselves living in a restraint-free world. The non-restrictive space of the novel is further affirmed by its symbolic texture and thematically relevant title that transform the plot into a suggestive and complex narrative piece.

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