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## **A Housewife's Desperation: Reading April Wheeler in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road***

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### **Abstract:**

Richard Yates's novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961) illustrates the complications in the lives of suburban American couple, Frank and April Wheeler. The novel makes a stirring, study of characters who represent many of the social and cultural anxieties suffered by the educated, aspiring corporate class of America, during the Post War years. In my paper, I would like to primarily analyse the character of April Wheeler. Her rebellion against the boredom of domestic perfection and her quest for freedom, ultimately through death, explicates her response to the "problem that has no name" as described by Betty Friedan in the *Feminine Mystique*. I would like to show how Yates illustrates the American response to the creation of Barbie doll like luxurious yet suffocating suburbia in the then emerging corporate America and the contemporary cultural and literary relevance of the novel.

**Keywords:** Suburbia, corporate, desperation, housewife, Richard Yates.

### **Introduction**

Richard Yates's novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961) illustrates the complications in the lives of suburban American couple, Frank and April Wheeler. A relatively low-profile novel, it makes a stirring, often suffocating, yet a brilliant poetic study of characters who represent many of the social and cultural anxieties suffered by the educated, aspiring corporate class of America, during the Post War years. This paper will firstly focus on the character of April Wheeler and her constant attempts to overcome the "problem" of suburban housewives which as Betty Friedan wrote, had "no name". I argue that, Yates creates April as a post-Friedan character who knew her problem and was willing to deal with it.

Secondly, it will enquire whether April Wheeler with her emancipatory dreams could be considered a representative feminist of her age? Is April a champion of American housewives' right to a life beyond domesticity or is she merely a romantic dreamer trying to escape from America so that she can define herself according to her own standards of success?

Finally, I would like to reflect on the enduring significance of the novel. Why are we talking about April Wheeler Now? I would briefly like to revisit the film "Revolutionary Road" directed by Sam Mendes, produced in the year 2008 and ponder upon the recreation of April

in post-millennial times when the jazz of corporate glory has popularised a new form of American fifties-like conformism.

### **What's Eating April Wheeler?**

After the World War Two ended, the United States of America emerged as a world super power. In an effort to accomplish this Herculean feat, it first had to prove to the rest of the world that its people deserved the envy they sought. Common people were desperate to re-establish a sense of normalcy and took this opportunity to create a citadel of domestic conformity.

In 1945, American women were finally able to refocus their efforts and continue their pursuit of the American Dream that their parents had desired during the previous decades. The entrenched want to create the idealistic family with a male breadwinner, female homemaker, and several children with a piece of land to call their own sprouted during the Post-World War I Economic Boom of the 1920s and came to fruition following the Allied victory of World War II (Fox 1). The rebirth of the American Dream gave to the rise of American suburbia. While the cities became the hub of corporate offices, the nearby suburbs became the idyllic residential centres (Fox 1).

Richard Yates's novel *Revolutionary Road* is about one such family living in the Connecticut suburbs. Frank and April Wheeler with their two healthy children, a big beautiful house and make an envious couple. Frank works for Knox Corporation, and although ambitious, deep inside he is tired of his monotonous life. Frank's frustration makes us see the bureaucratic world as Max Weber described, "an "iron-cage" where bureaucratisation of the human spirit is inescapable. He poetically observed that, "not summer's bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardship" (Bennet 5). Thus inside, Frank and April were very unhappy, their world was falling apart. April and Frank both were disgusted at the choking capitalist promises of the American Dream, or so they thought. They criticised everyone and took pride in their being different from others. What was then April's problem? The first suspicion is on that strange problem that Betty Freidan in her landmark book, *The Feminine Mystic* (1963) described as the one that had no name. She criticised the way women were being brainwashed to believe that their feminity was the key to power and respect. In the concluding lines of the Introduction she finally described it as, "we can no longer ignore the voice in women as I want something more than my husband and children" (Friedan 32). However, Yates, the brilliant realist writer that he is, crafts April in a clever and subtle way. American critic Jerome Klinkowitz has termed Yates's work as an updated incarnation of the novel of manners, namely "the novel of manners in a post- realistic age" (Bull 8).

*Revolutionary Road* begins with April's clumsy performance in the play *The Petrified Forest*, by the local theatre group, The Laurel Players. In spite of her failure as an upcoming actor, April has a heroic and commanding presence over her husband. Here Yates, seem to question Freidan's view by creating a woman who actually tries to break free from the monotony of her regular life. Research by writers like Eugenia Kaledin has shown that in a time when many female historians focused on the suffocating housewife soon to be awakened

by Betty Freidan's *Feminine Mystique*, there were women who struggled to work as authors, artists, and scholars, and fought not only against gender discrimination but also racial discrimination. Such type of engagements outside the home helped these women maintain the sense of independence and power they once tasted during the war years (Fox 5). But we are yet to see if April was truly fighting for any cause.

April lived a dull life before she met Frank Wheeler, the man who made her dream of a freer and culturally refined life in Europe. Frank makes April see herself as a refined bohemian stuck in the company of intellectually incapacitated American couples in their small Connecticut neighbourhood. But he never actually does anything to realise his Stephen Daedalus like dreams to reach Europe. Rather April makes an Icarian flight beyond the patriarchal panorama of Frank and the society. In chapter seven, at one point she convinces Frank that she would become the bread winner of the family in Europe and Frank could take time off to discover himself. April says, "The point is you won't be getting any kind of a job, because I will. Don't laugh—listen a minute. Have you any idea how much they pay for secretarial work?" (Yates 113) and she assures Frank, "You'll be doing what you should've been allowed to do seven years ago. You'll be finding yourself. You'll be reading and studying and taking long walks and thinking. You'll have time (Yates 115). To make their European renaissance true, she even fights with Frank to abort the third child. Frank is disgusted at that thought and asks April to get psychiatric help. She is stereotyped as a mad woman and almost becomes Charlotte Perkins Gillman's female lead in the *Yellow Wall Paper*. Later on, her contempt and desperation makes her manipulate situations and she spends a night of dance and love making with one their family friends, Shep Campbell. Although, heartlessly selfish, April makes numerous attempts to escape from the wilderness of her perfect American home to the promised land of Paris, Rome or Italy. She unlike Frank continuously tries to break free from the loop of cultural conformity and suburban confinement and in her final act of resistance she attains eternal freedom: April dies. Yates, in a poignant and remarkably artistic way makes us mourn the death of woman who wanted to fly, not alone but along with man she loved. April is the woman who has grown out of the problem, and is desperate to reach beyond the Barbie- doll like setting of the American suburbia.

### **Is April Wheeler a Feminist?**

In the previous section, I listed out the ways in which April Wheeler consistently tries to resist the suburban limitations and restrains. But do her emancipatory aspirations make her a feminist? If we read April's resistance in the context of the "sociological imagination" (as described by C. Wright Mills) of her time, then does she come across as an activist who was fighting for the collective growth of women around her? Probably, not!

Yates shows his realist deviation once again. April is a woman who is in love with an image of herself. Her ultimate goal is to hang around her philosopher like, husband, trying to impress with his astounding existential conclusions, certain receptive audience in some romantic city in Europe. Frank is April's medium of escape from her desire for a safe and secure life. April's vision is too small to look at her demands from the bigger picture. She is

never sympathetic towards the other women characters such as Milly Campbell or Mrs Givings. Never once does she think about carefully refashioning the minds of women around her. April does not educate her daughter about the importance of understanding gender roles. Her approach is deeply self-oriented and not community centric. Throughout the novel, Yates never mentions about the colour crises in America. And if April truly was artistic, bohemian and a believer in high ideals of human existence, at least once she should have mentioned her stand on the raging cultural tumult in America. There is no Black America in April's imagination. Her mind is filled with her desperation to escape America, not alone but with Frank, her unacknowledged source of marital safety and security. So we must weigh and consider before we study her great escape from America as a feminist leap. Her final attempt to secure her right over her body ends in a foolish attempt, at a self-administered abortion. It results in her death. The children go to live with their uncle and Frank is promoted at work. Now, Frank is absolutely relieved from the pressure to become his aspired image as a flaneur-like thinker, writer and an intellectual strolling the streets of Europe without a care.

Yates creates a protagonist who appears brave but has a myopic view of life. She is not the woman who truly wants something beyond the home. She wants her home, the safety and security of love, the warm hug of a man, silly talks with children and a comfortable role-play as a wife and mother not in America but in Europe, a country she has seen only through Frank's words. She keeps him at a pedestal for his intellectual brilliance which she thinks she lacks. April wants to grow as a woman through Frank. She does not realise her own potential as a woman.

### **Revolutionary Road and the Corporate Novel**

*Revolutionary Road* made a glorious comeback in the year 2008. Director, Sam Mendes along with Hollywood superstars Kate Winslet and Leonardo Di Caprio recreated this post war American novel in times when human lives are completely under the control of giant corporations. This film hit the theatres when the global recession came along. Once again reminding us how the economic meltdown could affect people personally. Thus at an emotional level, April and Frank could even portray the marital tensions between an Indian couple, working for a foreign MNC and their constant desire to escape the conformation to an uber-cool, consumption oriented, dazzling NRI life. A theme that has been explored in many Indian novels on the corporate sector by writers like Ravi Subramanian, Nirupama Subramanian, Chetan Bhagat, Nishant Kaushik and Abhijit Bhaduri. Corporate novels are primarily about young men and women who work in multinational companies, party at expensive clubs, shop from expensive labels and travel to different parts of the world. They are a model to understand the post-global cultural life of the nation. These novels are an index to our present cultural life. They may be read not only as reflections on society but also as archives of rich cultural material that define our identities.

It would be pertinent here to briefly refer to the corporate novel, *Married but Available* by Abhijit Bhaduri. In this novel, Bhaduri recreates the suffocating atmosphere of a township and the bickering between an ambitious couple Abbey and Ayesha who dream to escape to a big city and become happy and successful like Frank and April Wheeler.

The novel narrates the early eighties when a graduate in management was the most sought after professional. It describes the first ten years of Abbey's life at Balwanpur industries in Balwanpur, a small town located few kilometres away from Delhi. Abbey's experiences encompass the urban, semi-urban and even rural culture of the nation. Abbey's early career anxieties remind us of Frank Wheeler. The story begins in the year 1994, when Abbey has returned to the Management Institute of Jamshedpur for attending the reunion of his batch after ten years. At that time, being employed in a multinational company was a sign of affluence and success. The youth in the novel were not worried about getting lost in the race for corporate success and a degree in management did not necessarily mean a career in the corporate sector. At the reunion, Abbey meets his classmates who have become film directors, rock band owners and even spiritual gurus. However, he feels a little diffident about his position. Not only has he been stuck in an American owned home grown business but is also on the verge of losing his job. A situation he did not anticipate when he got his degree. Abbey like Frank begins to feel the lack of intellectual exercise in his life. His job was not enough to make him happy.

Although, Abbey recalls how he sensed a "new respect" in his home the day he received his degree from MIJ (Bhaduri 15). His proud, middleclass, government-service holder parents were still sceptic of the private sector, and viewed with "awe and disgust for its flashy ways" (Bhaduri 24). But Abbey was hungry for some glitz and glamour in his professional life. His dreams did not take off since he joined a job in a small chemical industry in the town of Balwanpur. Abbey longed to tell captain Sobti, one of the senior most managers that he preferred to work in a corporate office with bigwigs rather than sweat all day at the factory. The sheen of office culture seemed to be the utopic solution to his dilemma. He became desperate to get away from the fishbowl of the township and enjoy the humdrum of metropolitan life. But it would take a lot of time.

Gradually, the fear of risk and resignation to comfort that affected Frank Wheeler began to influence Abbey. He taught himself to enjoy the simple life in Balwanpur. The township had staff quarters, schools, sports facilities and one ice cream parlour that had a colour television. He was himself the talk of the town for he was gifted a fridge by the company which none of the managers of his rank were offered so early. Since the policies of neo-liberalisation were yet to be implemented, the township was not under the influence of any private television channel. A company controlled cable television aired holy sermons, Bollywood movies and popular serials like *Humlog*.

Much later, Abbey shifts to Delhi. After a long time his cherished dream of enjoying the jazz and glamour of a job at a plush corporate office is fulfilled. However, his joy is short-termed as the Indian industry merges with an American company which is on a lay-off spree. All his life, Abbey wanted to work with a reputed multinational company. Yet, he is hesitant when it happens for real. Abbey is filled with scepticism once he learns that he is accountable to people from a different country with different set of values. His moment of awakening occurs when he learns that he has to work for the larger interest of the nation. Abbey does get a chance later on to travel for work in New York. But all of this comes at the cost of being

divorced from his wife who did not share Abbey's patience for a gradual rise in career. Ayesha, his wife, like April was beautiful, talented and an educated woman; She never wanted to spend her life in a township and dreamt of life in American cities. April kills herself, but Ayesha does not. Having fought with Abbey about the mediocrity in her life, she leaves him for a more happening life with another man in America. Ayesha breaks from her desperation and does something to achieve what she wanted. While April stifled by her failure to take any steps to realise her ambitions, loses her own life by mistake. Both April and Ayesha create a controversial space for themselves in the theoretical spectrum of feminism. They desire to achieve the right end through wrong means. While most women in their times struggle to find employment and support themselves financially, both April and Ayesha are capable of working without their husband's being unhappy about it. Yet, they are not able to transform their ability for employment into capacity for empowerment. And that primarily happens as both the prima donnas fail to engage themselves with the larger society. Feminism is humanism and unless they blend their own ambitions with the problems of the larger social life, they would not feel the joy of success they desire for.

### **Conclusion: April Wheeler lives on**

The above comparison of the novels shows Yates's ability to create emotions that survives the tides of time. April and Frank Wheeler periodically represent post war America but thematically they would resonate with characters of our present generation too. Yates's novel is worth reading and recreating. The revival of Yates by Mendes is a reminder of the continuing domestic tensions due to global political decisions, especially after the Cold War. The marital complicacies that April and Frank share seem to be universal. They represent the enduring human frailties that define us: anxiety, anger, expectations, pretence and the fixation with goal-oriented happiness. This is the importance of *Revolutionary Road*. Its literary impact will never die. It is a master piece among other post war American fiction. The clash between the desperation of a housewife and the insecurities lurking in a loving husband become the emotional nucleus of the novel and hence it will generate cultural and academic discourse and dialogue, time and again.

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