

MARILYN FRENCH'S MAJOR FEMALE CHARACTERS IN
THE WOMEN'S ROOM AND THE BLEEDING
HEART

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Marilyn French, an American novelist, critic and short story writer, is an author of controversial and emotional works. In 1960's she was in Harvard and in her works she mainly writes about her own experiences of motherhood, divorce and political activism in order to describe the concerns of women who eventually rebel against domesticity, sexual submission, and discrimination. The flourishing awareness and themes about women which began in the 1970's is evident in her best - selling novel *The Women's Room* (1977), which describes the emerging feminist consciousness of a group of middle class women in the 1960's and also in *The Bleeding Heart* (1980) which is about the struggle of American women for self - realization in a patriarchal society which regards them as an inferior sex in 1970's. In short the writer wants to reveal the "unspoken problem" of the American women. As Betty Friedan explains in *The Feminine Mystique*:

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The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured cub scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night - she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question "Is this all?" (1983 : 15)

In the first novel, French's protagonist Mira is presented as a rebellious character as she refuses to act according to the expectations of her family. Her mother's expectations from her were typical - she wanted her to have a good education in the future and to find a wealthy husband. She also wanted her to act in a feminine way - for example: she wanted her not to cross her legs at the knee, not to climb the trees with the boys etc. She had no friends as she preferred spending her time reading, drawing and day dreaming. Her attitude towards the opposite sex was also different from the others, as she did not let the boys lick her lips, pinch her cheeks. When she was nineteen she realized that she was also interested in sex but she could never forget her mother's advice - i.e. sex would lead to pregnancy and pregnancy to marriage which means poverty, resentment and immediate baby. Mira felt that all her previous values changed when a group of boy friends attempted to rape her as she suffered due to the feeling of defeat.

When she met Norm - the son of one of the friends of the family who seemed gentle and intelligent, she accepted his marriage offer which seemed to be the only solution for her at that age. Neither did she hesitate to quit the school and find a

job to make life easier for her husband who was a student of medicine then. In their marriage the main problem they had was about sex as Norm did not satisfy her. Her unexpected pregnancy which was the result Norm's carelessness made her more desperate as now she lost control over events. She had to take care of her two sons- Normie and Clark on her own because her husband was interested in nothing but his education.

In 1955, when they bought a new house in Meyersville, life became easier for her as the children grew up and she had new couples as friends - Bliss and Paul, Adele and Eric, Natalie and Hamp, Marina and George, Samantha and Hugh who found happiness by exchanging mates. When Norm unexpectedly announced that he wanted a divorce, Mira realized that all her efforts to be a good wife and a good mother were in vain. This was such a painful experience for her that she even tried to commit suicide but it also had a positive result as she decided to return to university - which was a turning point in her life. She moved to Harvard where she started a new way of life with the help of her friends - Kyla, Isolde, Clarissa and Val who were all unmarried post - graduate students. Among them Mira admired Val more than the others as although they were of the same age, Val seemed to have experience and knowledge Mira lacked and also she made Mira "aware" of the difficulties of being a woman in the American society. Val advised women to be independent and to struggle against the injustices. Val's hatred for men increased when she learnt that her daughter Chris was raped by a negro boy. The girl was so shocked that she was unable to resist so the attorney claimed that they were friends and she got enjoyment from being raped.

Another rebellious figure who contributed to Mira's intellectual awakening was Iso. She was a character who had seen different places of the world: Vietnam, Africa, Mexico, India etc. She also hated mankind because she was raped by her fiancé when she

was drunk, but her way of protest was different - she became a lesbian as this relationship gave more satisfaction to her than a heterosexual relationship.

Apart from her female friends, another character who added to her intellectual awakening was Ben, whom she met at one of the political meetings of Val. The moment she saw him she found him interesting, attractive and decent. He was different from Norm as he was a political scientist, sociologist and anthropologist. Not only his qualifications but also his personality made Mira admire him. When she made love, for the first time in her life Mira learnt to get pleasure which was an experience she never had with her husband. She comments:

Ben's lovemaking was the discovery of a new dimension. He loved her body. Her pleasure in this alone was so extreme that it felt like discovery of a new ocean, mountain, continent 1

Unlike Norm who was interested in nothing but his profession, Ben and Mira spent most of their time together. They walked, talked, argued about anything poetry, politics, psychological theory. When Ben was offered an advisory post by the president of Lianu, he accepted it assuming that Mira would follow him. Mira's protest is seen in the following lines:

You wanted to go, and it would hurt you to go without me, and so you simply assumed I would go with you because that was the simplest solution to the problem. And you never, never once, she rose "never thought about me" about my needs, my life, my desires. (French: 617)

With Ben's decision, Mira realized the importance of her profession in her life and also the fact that she was mistaken by thinking that Ben was different than Norm. After Ben's departure she learnt that Ben became a very successful expert on Lianu,

got married, and had two babies. Meanwhile Mira had finished her dissertation and began working as an instructor in one of the universities. Although she finally succeeded in getting what she wanted from life, the following words show that she is depressed because she is deprived of the love which is the most important need of all the human beings. Yet she knew that this was the price she had to pay for her choice:

Some days I feel dead, I feel like a robot, treading out time. Some days I feel alive, with hair like and knife in my hand. Once in a while my mind slips and I think I am back in my dream and that I have shut the door, the one without a handle on the inside. I imagine that tomorrow I will be pounding and screaming, to be let out, but no one will hear, no one will come (French: 636).

Marilyn French's next commentary on gender relations is seen in her second novel *The Bleeding Heart* where she focuses on the love affair between Dolores, a divorced feminist seeking an egalitarian relationship with Victor, a married executive with traditional values.

Dolores like Mira is disappointed in her marriage with her husband Anthony, who like Norm, thinks that the children are making their life difficult. His way of treating the children is different than Norm's as he used to punish them severely. However Dolores has the courage to show her anger by her actions - like breaking some dishes, throwing pies at her husband's face.

Unlike the non - caring attitude of Norm, Anthony was abusing Dolores verbally. Dolores' protest to this situation was either leaving the house or asking for divorce. While talking with Victor she expresses her feelings as follows: "Oh, you know, I was such a fool. I accepted his cruelty, his craziness, thinking I

could cure it, by love and fidelity and acceptance ' (French: 182). Anthony continued disturbing her and the children after their separation by coming to dinner every night. Even the way he commits suicide is violent as he gets in to the car in the garage and let her daughter Elspeth find his corpse in order to take revenge from Dolores. This action not only distorted Dolores' but also Elspeth's life as she killed herself in the like manner.

When Dolores' relationship with her lover Victor is compared with Mira's many similarities can be observed. To start with like Ben, Victor was ready to spend most of his time with Dolores but as he was married Dolores has doubts about the future of their relationship although she does not want to be his wife.

Like Ben, Victor is not selfish either and tries not to hurt Dolores at all. He has the courage to tell his daughter Vickie who comes to visit her father during Christmas time, that Dolores is his lover. However Victor has no chance to end his marriage as his wife is crippled after an attempt to kill herself when she learns about his affair with another woman. Like Ben who decides for Mira to go to Lianu, Victor decides to leave his wife as (he) thinks, he is a symbol to her, and she could manage without him. (397) This decision angers Dolores who says "Doesn't ask me, he tells me. Just announces his decision, sure I accede to it. Is that a portent?" (397) In fact Dolores does not want him to stay with a woman who is paralyzed and silent but she wants him to leave his wife for himself, as she does not want the responsibility and guilt of his action.

Another female character who suffers like Dolores is Mary who has married to a doctor and is beaten by him. Her husband Mr. Jenkins was a well - known doctor and eventhough she bled to death after a quarrel, at the court she was accused of deserting her children and she was allowed to see them only twice a week. Her experience seems similar to Val's daughter Chris' ex-

perience at court in *The Women's Room*. Both of them were found guilty as the members of the court were all male and they did not wish to admit that a member of their sex is guilty of any crime. Mary's suffering, influences Dolores to such an extent that remembering her experiences she explains her feelings to Victor as follows:

..... Are you sick?

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"It's my heart She went to the table and sat beside (it clumping her glassdown).

He sat opposite her. He took her hand. "You're sick in your heart?"

"Yes, It bleeds. There's no cure for it. And it won't go away, even when I ignore it." (French: 116)

These words show that she suffers deeply not only for her own tragic experience but also for the experiences of the other women who are in the same state.

Her heart also bleeds for Victor's daughter Vickie who is victimized by her married professor at the university. Vickie thinks that the professor was also in love with her but realizes that he doesn't take her seriously as he leaves her after learning that she is pregnant. Vickie's feelings are expressed as follows.

He said it was my responsibility to take care of things like that and to teach me leasson, he wasn't even going to help me pay for an abortion. And I cringed, I apologized, I insisted I wasn't asking for money, if he'd only go with me. But he wouldn't. I got the money together, that wasn't a problem, but I had to go alone, and that felt awful.

.....

He was annoyed with me and I was terrified of losing him. (French: 157)

Both in *The Bleeding Heart* and *The Women's Room*, Marilyn French points out; as Paul Robinson states in *The Contemporary Literary Criticism* (60) 'Only a fundamental moral revolution (French) writes can provide what is needed for a real change in human institutions and behavior" (Matus 1990 : 39). The writer thinks that patriarchy is a mode of life which denies the body and its needs and she is a radical feminist in the sense that she sees the oppression of women by men as the basis for all forms of oppression. M Ferre and B Hess in *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement*, assert that women must build their own culture and institutions to make it possible to live on equal basis with the males in the female world:

Radical feminists, more than others, are concerned with understanding these social constraints explaining their oppressive force to other women, and finding ways of living outside the boundaries of "acceptable female behavior" The individual liberation provided by radical feminism carries admitted social costs. Women who live without the protection of man may be considered "fair game" for sexual attack, and without a male income the risk of poverty is substantial. Radical feminist sare also ridiculed and attacked for defying patriarchal convention by refusing to "dress nicely" and "talk softly" (1985 : 160)

Marilyn French, through various characters, illustrates the psychological and physical abuses inflicted on women and also recreates consciousness raising dialogues inviting women to political activism. In *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (10) Ann Tyler states that "Marilyn French has written a collective biography of a large group of American citizens, expectant in the 40's, submissive in the 50's enraged in the 60's, they have arrived in the 70's independent but somehow unstrung, not yet fully composed after all they have been through." (Bryfonski 1979 : 9) She wants to destroy the false image of women that is accepted by many women concerning their marriages, their loves, their lives.

Although *The Women's Room*, and *The Bleeding Heart* were considered as popular novels they are in fact the most influential pioneer novels in the modern feminist movement. As revealed in her novels Marilyn French who is committed to the ideal of equality sees no future for co existence between men and women. Her brilliant fiction forces confrontations on the reader by making them "aware" of their own dilemma. Consequently, those who do not want to be victimized by the patriarchal values of the society should learn to stand up and fight for equality and individual existence as Mira and Dolores, eventhough this decision might lead to pain eventually.

NOTES

1 All further references to this edition will be given within the text and will be shown by the page number

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