



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Feminist Prototype - Dogmatism and Pragmatism: A Study of Valerie Miner's *Murder in the English Department*

Mr. Anindya Sundar Polley

Researcher, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Guru Ghasidas
Viswavidyalaya Central University, Bilaspur, Chattisgarh, India.

Abstract

With the turn of centuries, the world has witnessed a lot of progressive movements, among which feminist movement deserves a special mention. Since the late 19th century, it has gained a steady momentum and besides the physical protest, it has adopted the medium of literature to convey its message to the patriarchal oppressors. Eminent feminist novelist Valerie Miner's novel *Murder in the English Department* is a significant example of such literature. Miner not only creates the life crisis of a semi successful middle aged woman in a male chauvinistic society, but also through the character of the semi-autobiographical protagonist, she creates a feminist prototype, thus exhibits essential features and the model for subsequent forms. Miner's credentials in this process, however, is not confined in the dogmatic sphere, she displays the extreme form of exercising feminist ideology and the pragmatic exercise glorifies the potential severity and ruthlessness of the oppressed in the point of no return, and thus provides a clear threat to the patriarchy set social constructionism. The research

paper, through the analysis of the select novel, explores the traditional feminist models and that of Miner and tries to find out the inevitable linkage of dogmatism and pragmatism. The paper also scrutinizes the action of homicide in the novel and also tries to detect whether it is a mere reflex action or it is a sudden outburst of the latent feminist ideology in Adams who kills her professor.

Keywords

Feminist Criticism; Dogmatism; Pragmatism; Resistance; Murder; Valerie Miner; *Murder in the English Department*.

Feminism is a movement against social constructionism, where the rules of identities are constructed by the male members to subdue the efforts of the 'second sex' economically, politically, socially, and psychologically. Patriarchal ideology always distinguishes only two identities a woman can have, depending upon how they relate to the patriarchal system. If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal systems, she is "good"; if she does not, she is "bad." Traditional patriarchy defines both the roles, which are projections of male desire: to safeguard men's sexuality, the vulnerability of women sexuality is created; and to gain the financial upper hand, the women are pushed to the periphery of the social system etc.

Hence, the ultimate goal of all feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, is to promote women's equality. In order to strike back against the system from psychological standpoint, the best possible option is to create a feminist wave in literature.

Valerie Miner, being a hardcore feminist advocates that the very idea of feminist writing is a kind of political war in the field of literature against the male chauvinism and the movement is a never-ending process. She herself articulates her personal struggle in her fiction and argues in an interview:

I think that fiction probably is autobiographical in the sense that it taps into a certain part of you, a consciousness that you have about

the world. For instance, in a number of the pieces in *Movement* as well as in my latest book, *Murder in the English Department*, I wrote things that became true 5 years later.

Nan Weaver, the protagonist of *Murder in the English Department*, is the alter ego of the novelist Valerie Miner. Through this semi-autobiographical character, who is a struggling university professor striving for her definite existence in a man-dominated work place and who comes to the campus limelight only for 'wrong' reasons, like her involvement in the 'movements against sexual assault' inside the campus, Miner has strongly established her standpoint against gender discrimination and consolidates women's stance in male strongholds. "She was helping to create a counter culture, a freedom of the highest order: Academic Freedom, Political Freedom and Sexual Freedom" (29). Being a victim of sexual assault during her student life by her academic idol, professor Eastman, and after experiencing a disastrous and futile married life, which, according to her mom, "...was strained by her independent streak" (29), Weaver develops a strong antipathy against her male counterparts both in her private and professional life and strongly believes "... marginal characters have got to stick together (for survival)" (15). This is why perhaps a metaphorical creation of Miner, Weaver's best friend, Matt, is a gay, another sexually discriminated person from the society, who hides his sexual orientation from others.

Miner justifies her cause of writing *Murder in the English Department*, through Weaver's character. The third person narrative constantly supports Weaver's stance in the sexual harassment campaign and raises a question or two, indicating the structural flaws of the American Education system, a representation of the global scenario. Scenarios like, "...this year two students came to her (Weaver) after they were raped" and unanswered questions like, "...where else could they have gone? How could she have refused to sponsor the Feminist Caucus?" (33) ignite her feminist ideologies and she believes, "...women students needed a forum to coordinate political action, a community in which to

share personal problems” (33). Weaver hence does not hesitate to be the ‘feminist prototype’ who indulges her entire life for the cause.

The exercise of feminist ideologies is, however, not restricted to the protagonist alone. Weaver’s niece Lisa also suffers from, what Miner has wittily calls, ‘the feminist disease’, just like her aunt. She herself shares it to her aunt: “Well, you know, any time I don’t want to do housework or I ask one of the boys to share chores, Mom says, ‘Oh, oh, you’ve caught the Feminist Disease”” (20). She perfectly inherits her aunt’s legacy of fighting the gender discrimination and grows a strong individual voice since her childhood unlike her mother and sisters-in-law. Her role in the later development of the novel, when she takes part in the defense committee of Marjorie Adams, thus becomes a feminist propagandist and conducts road shows justifying Adams’ act of murder as an act of self-defense, also offers ample opportunities to grow her rebel spirit, just like her aunt. Weaver’s close friend, Amy, the independent and self-confident lawyer, also represents the ‘feminist group’, just like her friend.

The presentation of the characters like Angus Murchie, in the novel, takes Miner’s struggles to a different level as Murchie remains as a perfect foil to Weaver. Weaver’s charismatic yet womanizer colleague Murchie, not only outruns her talents in the professional level despite of the former’s sincere efforts, her stance against the gender discrimination also receives harsh criticism from him. He not only opposes Weaver’s view from a personal level through the sarcastic comment: “...who am I but mortal man to disturb the womb of feminist criticism” (36) but also influences young students like Marjorie Adams not to take part in the ‘Sexual Harassment Campaign’ inside the university campus. In the novel Murchie is described as “the most sexist professor in the Department” (24); he has been “more reckless in attempting to bed down his female students” and has made sexual advances to as many as twenty-two women (25). He does not spare even his colleagues from his sexually chauvinistic mischief. In Weaver’s opinion, “Murchie was the biggest leech west of the Rockies” who “had sent three of his advisees to Student Psychiatric last quarter” (41) and he “had

been a constant irritant" and "an annoying fly" (46). From Weaver's feministic perspective, in short, Murchie is the evil personified, just like her brother-in-law Joe, who was equally lustful in his actions like "grope(ing) along Weaver's back to determine if she were wearing a bra. An old trick of his" (24).

Interestingly, the character, which shares the spotlight in the novel along with Professor Weaver, is Marjorie Adams, Nan Weaver's courageous and self-confident young research scholar. She is so frank, outspoken and intelligent that "Nan always felt more like Adams's student than her thesis adviser" (4), and in her narrative Weaver has describes Adams as almost perfect human being, who is fashionably adorable, academically self-confident, and socially vibrant. From the opinion perspective, Adams is a radical, and believes in the conventional norms set by the society and its "old-fashioned integrity" (20) and hence even though she is interested in women welfare activities, she does not want to achieve it by organizing movement against their male counterparts. She openly disapproves of the feminist ideology and the Sexual Harassment Campaign of Weaver and being a party animal, does not hesitate to mingle with the male professors of the University without any inhibition. Her gender ideology carries the radical characteristic of gender equality and it is palpable from her well argumentative nature for it.

However, the novel offers the most extraordinary metamorphosis in terms of the feminist ideological stance in the character of Marjorie Adams which exposes the fact that, despite her overt disapproval of Nan Weaver's feminist ideology, Adams herself is an unprofessed feminist at heart. The unavoidable situation of Professor Angus Murchie's rape attempt on Adams inside the former's University office on New Year Eve, in the name of discussing about research topic digs out her feminist gender ideology, which is dormant in her. She kills him with his own paper knife in order to safeguard herself from Murchie's lust and malignant chauvinism.

In the novel, Miner beautifully shows Feminist 'prototype'; the original form of feminist activities, which has the essential features and is the model for

its subsequent forms, in Weaver and perhaps its 'application' of 'ultimate resistance' in Marjorie Adams and thus creates a consolidate model for all feminists. Rajavelu has rightly pointed out:

...while Nan Weaver is an idealist working for the welfare of the women through her dogmatic Sexual Harassment Campaign, Marjorie Adams is a pragmatist in executing the canon of the feminist ideology through her acts of retaliation. While Nan is a moderate, Marjorie is an un-proclaimed radical feminist, who believes in violence and murder to fight back sexual abuse. She is of the conviction that murder is the only weapon to realize her gender ideology. (71)

The consequences of Murchie's murder however offer more opportunities to Weaver to exercise her 'feminist prototype'. After killing Murchie, Adams leaves Berkeley, to escape the law and police but couldn't do the same to her adviser, as Weaver was present in her chamber, next door of the crime scene, and she knew about the murderer and her motive from the very beginning. The 'motive' of the crime, however, does not allow Weaver to expose Adams's 'murderer identity' and it is not difficult to assume the role of her own feminist ideology of safeguarding 'sexual assault victim' behind it. On the contrary, Weaver removes all the evidences of Adams including her scarf which she has mistakenly left after the homicide from Murchie's room and enjoys "a curious relief as if an unknown tumour had been removed", and experiences a "tenable pleasure" (46) and mentally appreciates Adams's courage and profound composure to hoodwink the police.

Weaver again shows her dogmatic stance in the feminist ideology of protecting Adams in the later consequences of Murchie's murder. When Mr. Johnson, the guard of the department testifies Weaver's presence in the department on the night of the homicide, in the court, she is suspected and arrested for the murder of Murchie. Weaver's intimate friend and feminist lawyer Amy Warren though understands that Weaver is trying to protect somebody, she

couldn't fetch the truth from her rigid answer till the end: "There's nothing to say, really, I didn't kill Angus Murchie and I don't know who did" (129). The drama of the novel, however, takes an abrupt turn when Adams confesses the crime before the judge, moments before the judge's verdict to brand Weaver as the murderer of Murchie.

Dogmatism is the tendency to express strongly held opinions in a way that suggests they should be accepted without question. Pragmatism, on the other hand is a straightforward practical way of thinking about things or dealing with problems, concerned with results rather than with theories and principles. Here, in this particular novel, Valerie Miner has shown both the perspective in her characters. Nan Weaver's personal life and her constant struggle to strive inside the men's stronghold and her active participation in the 'sexual harassment campaign', even almost sacrificing the safety of her 'job security'; her defense in the cause of Adams, again sacrificing the secure future- all projects the dogmatic approach of her feminist individuality. The rock solid stubbornness to safeguard her student is the misnomer of her long struggle which perhaps represents the century long struggles of the 'second sex'. Weaver indeed is a prototype here, whose character offers a model for the future canvases.

Adams's metamorphosis from the believer of equality of sex to an accidental murderer is however most fascinating and triggers a wide range of queries. It is really impossible to detect whether the action of killing Murchie at the moment of 'sexual harassment' is a mere act of self-defense on part of Adams or is it the latent feminist ideology which stimulates Adams to commit the heinous crime. Adams, at the beginning of the novel remains as a foil to the dogmatic approach of Weaver in the feminist movements inside the campus. She even openly speaks against such campaigns. But the ironical part of the situation is, as far feminist resistance is concerned, Adams has overtaken her supervisor. Her pragmatic exhibition of feminist ideology lies in the murder of professor Murchie, which can be called as late but timely blooming of the character.

It is also very difficult to call Adams's action as a prototype, as from ethical perspective a murder can never be a model, even if it happens in the process of self-defense. But, the extreme outburst of the feminist ideology, which receives the limelight in the novel, is a moral boosting episode to the feminists. From that perspective, it is a prototype. The strategy which the novelist adapts in dealing both the dogmatism and pragmatism is very adept which makes the novel very interesting and worth discussion.

Works Cited

- Miner, Valerie. *Murder in the English Department*. California: Crossing Press Woman Sleuth Series, 1982. Print.
- Miner, Valerie. Interview. "Valerie Miner on Political Fiction, Feminist Criticism and Class." By Alice Henry and Lorraine Sorrel. *Off Our Backs* 13. 1(1983): 15-17. Web. 6 May 2014.
- Rajavelu, R. "Between Ideology and Murder: Fear and Power in the Twentieth Century American Fiction- A Select Study". Diss. Pondicherry University, 2006. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

- Polley, Anindya Sundar. "Feminist Prototype - Dogmatism and Pragmatism: A Study of Valerie Miner's *Murder in the English Department*." *Literary Quest* 1.6 (2014): 153-160. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.