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‘Something other than Bored’: The Dialectics of Boredom in Modernism

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“a person . . . is searching for an object, not in order to act upon it with its instinctual instincts, but rather to be helped by it to find an instinctual aim which s/he lacks” (Otto Fenichel)

Abstract

Being born female, and for that reason marginalized, put into the services of others, and in actual fact expelled from active and public life creates an almost insurmountable hurdle to self recognition and progress in women. Even the modernist literatures are abundantly fed with women in ‘receding roles’, the question of what a female self can be – and whether it can be? – within the modern conception of the individual is to be explored, reworked and re-established. In male territory the female self is an alien, not only the traditions rule out her, but even the biological necessities that prohibit her full participation in a life of desire and possibilities. It seems demanding to delve deep into the concept of ‘female boredom as a defence mechanism’ as modernism engages boldly with the human sexuality. When boredom was read and interpreted by modernists in quite a few points of view, it seems good to understand how boredom can work with respect to a few celebrated works from prominent writers. In English, boredom reaches its literary apotheosis in the works of Samuel Beckett, whose characters wait, repeat actions, words, do nothing, and experience odd relationships to time. Boredom and the experience of emptiness that signals its curiously negative presence are implicit in modern and modernist writings. But when accepting boredom along with other ideas of identity and agency which shapes modernism it is necessary to think ‘whose boredom and whose modernism?’ “. . . to think and write what is truly new means above all to think about what has never been thought and write what has never been written: that huge, constant are of suppression- religious and cultural, individual and social, spiritual and physical.” (Adonis 100-01)

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Nora Helmer in Ibsen's *The Doll's House*, Jaya in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, Tilo in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*, Anton Chekov's dramatic characters are all defined by their boredom. Experimenting particularly with these works and characters it can be defined as a phenomenon, a feeling which bring out affective, realized social or defined personal relationships, relationships in process. By depicting individual women enduring, struggling against boredom, the writers twist it as a public feeling, giving space for the reader to forge into women's lives that are undergoing suppression and victimization. Though there can be many more aspects for the female boredom the way above mentioned works and even more dealt with boredom is thought provoking.

In a trouble-free manner Boredom can be defined as a weary feeling, unenthusiastic or dull, thus unable to find interest or meaning. We can also describe it as the feeling of emptiness or deadness, a lack, or simply passive dissatisfaction. There are even more definitions on this term from different aspects. Nevertheless, in the modernist perspective it will be of good quality to see the sights about 'boredom' from a different broader perspective where women are agitated for recognition equal to that of men. Modern women are not like women of previous eras in which she kept her 'self' as secret and suppressed, accepting a secondary status – ruptured, displaced and dehumanised. Rather painfully aware of themselves as transitional figures recognising the possibilities that was denied to her earlier. Considering it as a practice of self-reflection, boredom has the power to transform one to another. There are several modern literatures that have successfully represented the conflicts experienced by women and its commanding outcomes.

Apart from viewing boredom as tediousness and failure of the female protagonists, in a different angle it can also be featured as a woman's quest for self-realization or self-production. There are several literary representations on boredom that demonstrates the tremendous difficulty women experienced in realising and pursuing their desires, and thus in realizing themselves as 'something other than bored'. Thus as an assertion of self and strength against the given reality, there are new narrative techniques in which 'female boredom' seems subverting culturally dominant narratives as a practice of freedom.

Making an allowance for Henrik Ibsen's famous women character Nora Helmer- the epitome of modern women in *The Doll's House* is widely bored. Being exceptionally bored with her role as a doll within her house, she emerges with a new 'self' by the end of the play. Torvald, her husband describes her as "Is that my little lark twittering out there?" (Ibsen 18), which shows the relationship she shared with a husband who measured her merely as an entity devoid of self identity. The pet names Torvald uses for Nora- 'little squirrel, skylark,

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songbird'- emphasize that he does not see her equal, but her role is to enchant and engross him.

The boredom which Nora felt from the demeaning nature of her husband makes her breaks the hollowness of hospitality. Nora's conflict, the boredom is something other than, or something more than women's. At the beginning of the play Nora is pampered and patronized by her husband. As the drama unfolds, Nora realises that she is a "silly girl" for her husband. By and by Nora's responsiveness of her 'self', her need for rebellion escalates. She breaks her boring life and walks out on her husband and children to find independence.

As literary critic Bryony Randall explains, Boredom is a mode of attention that opens the "self onto itself, demonstrating to the subject its own subjectivity formed through the absolute duration of human consciousness" (Randall 42). This happens in the case of Nora. Though being dominated and endured by a bored droning life looking after her husband and children with much trouble, the self-consciousness makes her break the line of boredom in order to discover a rejuvenated identity.

The boredom of intelligent, educated female who become wife and mothers is a continual trope the literature of this era. Though women in this era are born with complete awareness of her rights, liberty to express her ideas, freedom to enjoy finance, and the chance to stand for a cause, at the core she remains bored, unable to find her 'self'.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* was brought up as an "individual", someone special, making her feel different from others by pulling her ruthlessly out of the safe circle in which the other girls stood, thus making her aware of the rights in society and family irrespective of gender. But even this upbringing takes Jaya to a state of jeopardy and chaos in front of a society that is hesitant and prejudiced in accepting woman as an individual.

Out of the boredom that engulfs her in her married life with Mohan, by the end of the novel, exasperated of lacking individuality, Jaya breaks her shell of boredom and fear rejecting the age old images and realizing the fact that- there is only one life, no chance of a reprieve, no second chances. She then discovers the child in her- wearing a dress with pockets for the first time, thrusting her hands in them, feeling heady with the excitement of finding unexpected resources within herself (Deshpande 187).

It is again made clear that boredom- the sign of lack of meaninglessness makes these characters protest against the already made world. Here boredom in the modern perspective emphasizes on an individual exploring his or her own meaning- the politics of boredom in modernism. Modern and modernist boredom arises as a way of establishing value, or its lack, and defining a new way of interpreting human experience resulting in individual productivity. It also acts as a bridge between what is outside and what is inside. "...modernity requires not only freedom of thought, but physical freedom as well. It is an explosion, a liberation of what has been suppressed." (Adonis 100)

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Myriad of variegated experience undergone by Dimple of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* explores the reaction that comes out of boredom, where she also walks out of her mind-numbing life. Dimple fights against the bonded and enchained life of boredom. Though she awaits for marriage at the beginning, assuming that it is an agency for 'freedom', imbibed in her psyche, gets aggravated when she become conscious that her husband is taking her for granted.

Dimple is doomed into a world of boredom, hiding her yearnings from her husband. She has nightmares of violence, of suicide and of death and the forced identity on her causes a wrecked self. Thus suppressing her feelings out of the boredom results in a conflict where she kills Amith, her husband. "Her act in killing Amith is more relinquishing of her 'self' says Vandana Singh (Singh 69). The long drawn subjugation factor in Dimple's life is now banished because instead of finishing herself, she in order to resurrect herself, has finished the distress in her life.

Similarly Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* gives up several personal pleasures. She herself chooses a life of isolation, bound to the secret oath of her art and tied down to a body not her own. Tilo asks, "Who am I? I could not say" (Mukerjee 33). It is clear that Tilo is stripped of her youth and constrained to the four walls of spice shop, her 'self' is not destructed but only suppressed. "This disguise falling like old snakeskin around her feet, and I rising red and new and wet-gleaming" (49).

Similar to Tilo, Divakaruni draws several women bored of their monotonous life. It's obvious that due to economic disparities women find mini replica of their substandard stature in the patriarchal society. But Divakaruni, through her tactics conjure up all these characters from their confinement. As a war against the atrocities, women were shown different areas of work and stand on their own with their creativity and hard work and thus breaking the male geocentricism. Parallel to this, it's translucent that Tilo, decides to step out of 'lakshman rekha' that kept her in 'place'. She muses, "Today I plan to stretch my wings, to crack perhaps these shells and emerge into the infinite spaces of the outside world. It frightens me a little. I must admit this" (Divakaruni 125).

At length, out of boredom, Tilo pushes herself out of the confinements to defy all codes of conduct. Hence in order to gain both equality and to realize their potential, women must transcend their distinctive femaleness to lead the kind of life men do, in other words they must be autonomous. Simon de Beauvoir exhorts women to achieve autonomy, to discover and nurture their authentic self through lived experience for self-realisation. This argument can be applied in all the above mentioned cases, as they opposes several discourses and moves forward in a quest to know who and what 'she' is.

These female protagonists may not be feminist heroines, but their empty lives dramatize the painful consequences of the limitations imposed on women who might want to

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do more than take up the traditionally assigned role of wives and mothers. All these characters reaches their destiny in the acceptance of their own desires and dreams; the actual destiny that they were avoiding and hiding away from. To be born again they strip of the boredom which haunted them. Female boredom in the above mentioned novels negotiates about the struggle women takes to individuate and become human, and demanding a social space so as to protect themselves from the patriarchal standards. They seem 'affirming values, perceptions, or intuitions...excluded from the social and political modernity'.

Feminist modernist texts, either written by men or women, confront boredom as a problem originating out of the question of what it means to be a self in a culture shaped by masculine-defined individualism. And for the modern writers of the female *bildungsroman* dealt with boredom as a core constitute of their narratives- instead of depicting merely as a chronological term, but an irritating awareness of what women lack and an inability to envision a successful resolution to the tense drama of self-consciousness. Still in contrast to these ideas, there are a few male authors of female *bildungsroman* like H. G. Wells, D.H. Lawrence, E. M. Foster – fashioning solution to 'women's boredom' through the politics of sexual love with men. Their texts argue that fulfilled sexual desire can transform women from a state of boredom to unseen glory. Even though there arises a 'gendered perspective' in representation of 'female boredom' which has no solution in many modern texts, the feminisms' protest against the patriarchal hegemony- the hierarchical ordering seems counterintuitive.

The tide is beginning to turn, 'the 'new women' novels from the end of the nineteenth century have been seen as part of the landscape of modernism, largely engaging with the hugely distorted impact of modern institutions on individual character thus experimenting with gender and with sexual identities within the texts of modernism'. So it can be also stated that instead of concluding female boredom as the 'lack of subjectivity', modernism can depict it as a 'discomfited awareness' – the awareness of the lack of a meaningful, satisfying subjectivity.

With a powerful modernist commitment to 'making it new', though seen as a trivial, of no consequence and ephemeral emotion- boredom can also be a sturdy vehicle of self-discovery. For literary modernism, the focus on boredom as a problem for and of women creates new quest for the plots helping to shape modernism's formal anonymity, its haunting repetitions, its obsessive fascination with time, and its celebration of sexuality as a marker of vitality. Boredom, as a pivotal experience can be critical, provoking reconsideration of modernist impulses. Considering it as a defence mechanism, it can be stated that bored women experiences both presence and absence of desire, and it may be the absence that is most felt which makes her reject the constraints. This gives her power to defense against submission and the necessity of rebellion. Instead of defining women merely as bored, as that

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in Victorian novels, and in some of the modern narratives, in a different perspective it can powerfully denote women's awareness of individualism and their indomitable spirit to attain it to become- 'something other than bored'.

. . . modernity is an immersion in history, a kind of writing which subjects this history to constant questioning, and a form of self-awareness that exposes writing itself to constant scrutiny within the framework of a continues exercise to discover the powers of language and investigate the possibilities and limitations of experiment. (Adonis 100-01)

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