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WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF EUDORA WELTY

Jolly Bhattacharjee

Assistant Professor (English)

DBS (PG) College, Dehradun, (Uttarakhand)

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Abstract

Eudora Alice Welty was an American short story writer and novelist who wrote about American South. Her novel, *The Optimist's Daughter* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973. Welty has availed for herself a unique position among the best contemporary fiction writers of America. Southern women writers had a 'Sheltered' existence and the roles assigned by the society in every age primarily as mother, nurse, wife, daughters or sex objects to women, but Welty's women were not lured by such social norms, but emerged transgressing the material parochial norms by their quest to know the 'self'. The matriarchal image is elevated through Welty's women characters in her novels and they possess an intense sense of responsibility and honesty towards their loved one and near ones. The women characters of Welty rejected the patriarchy and parochial thinking to explore the self, exploring the mysteries of life in their quest to know the 'self'.

Key-Words

Mysticism, Human Relationship, Autobiography, Culture, Introspection

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The Post Civil War American Fiction was reflection of the aftermath of war and revealed the damage, it had done to civilization and society. William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Robert Penn Warren, Thomas Wolfe and Caroline Gordon were the stalwarts of literature of that period. A lesser known but more profound writer Eudora Alice Welty who is self directed, quick to analyze and appreciate the feeling of others and meditative in description of human relationships as well as contemplating in her study of individual psychology, availed for herself a unique position among the best contemplating fiction writers of America.

After the First World War the south came into an existence from the narrow cultural restrictions. After the Civil War the consciousness of sadness, curiosity and defeat is seen in the southern part. The southern mind finds a way to reveal the past of the southern milieu through novels. The theme of the American novel especially the Southern Novel is to find a meaning of the self, and history became an important point as the situation before and after the World War II becomes the mark of southern novelists. In contemplating the American situation three Southern novelists placed themselves on the literary world. They are William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren and Eudora Welty.

Southern women writers have shown that a sheltered existence need not stifle one's sense of self and that....it can be very impetus for discovering that "self within the self." The three women writers, Smith, Glasgow and Welty have each shown a voice from the "women within" and have tried to define and thereby understand their own sense of vocation. (Brantley 87)

Welty's work reveals the southern sense of temperament and she sends the message through individuals who are representative of universal human talent. Welty's work can be linked with women writers of the south. All these writers of the south here share an important experience of human life and social environment. The Southern milieu imbues the women to have a sense of the situation of their stressed and confined condition, whatever they experience in real life is

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reflected and enlarges our vision and understanding of their feminine sense of vision. Lillian Smith points out to show the disparity between the idealized southern lady..... genteel, innocent, dependent, submissive, the ultimate representation of racial purity..... and the reality of the southern women's lives in the face of a Victorian ideal that took root in the North as well as the South. (Brantley 62) The world of women is reflected through Welty's short stories and fiction. She has truly shown the sensibility and consciousness through the southern women. Her area is very wide and brings in to her novels and short stories diverse range of women of different ages and social status of the southern milieu. Welty depicts the human relationship through a small unit; say a family or an individual, where she has projected the women character strongly, the togetherness and separateness of human bond. This is shown through many characters. One such character is in *The Optimist Daughter*. The protagonist Laurel McKelva accepts the meaning, which made her realize through the process of memory and analysis of the past and present incidents that her earlier difficulties were only a state of mind.

In Welty's work we discover a number of women characters from different age groups and class. She does not reduce her women character to reflect only the old ideal of the south or the modern women personified as an independent lady. There is also a blending of the old and the modern, Gloria the modern school teacher in *Losing Battles* is a character who refuses to lose her identity, where as Ellen Fairchild is shown an ideal women of the south, who is loving, caring, gentle, contemplative and humane. She does have the individuality for fulfilling the role of the devoted wife and mother. Laurel McKelva, in *The Optimist's Daughter* is a blending of the old and the new woman. She possesses all the qualities of love, care, understanding, intelligence, courage and has a quest to know the identity of the 'self'. She is independent and bold in decision making.

The women characters in Welty's fiction are presented in various shades. Taking family as a small unit Welty conveys the message of humanity through her protagonist. Her fiction surrounds the women's world. Ms Julia Mortimer, a school teacher of the rural areas in *Losing Battles* tries to change the whole community through her teaching as she was in the profession since a long time and has taught the whole generation. In *June Recital*, Virgie Rainey frees herself from old links and opposes her piano teacher Ms Exkhart's effort to develop her musical talents and ventures out for her own individual space. All thought it appears that they lost their battles, but they were winners. In the novel, *The Optimist's Daughter* Laurel McKelva, comes to a better understanding with introspection of the 'self' to the 'other', the pain of her mother introspecting her parent's life, she understands her own brief marriage with Phil. Death of her father leads Laurel to introspect the past and come to a better understanding of life and relationship. In the novel *Delta Wedding*, Ellen Fairchild helps Robbie Reid to understand the meaning of family relationship, her deeper understanding is inculcated by the thoughtful and caring attitude. The fabric of Welty's work is represented through women and their interaction with other characters in the stories.

In the Novel, *The Optimist's Daughter* there is a portrayal of character like Becky & Laurel's grandmother who are portrayed as dedicated housewives and thoughtful in searching the meaning of self in relation to the other. Turner observes, "Becky's parable could be suggesting, on one hand, that one personal past, like the strawberries, is irresistibly precious. As such it must not be exposed to the common view nor brought into the present. The one who would taste its nectar must find the

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fruit and partake of where it dwells. To remove the past from its settling and subject it to the present is to destroy it. Becky could also be saying that human beings, like the wild white strawberries are very delicate beings into intimate association can also damage them irreparably. (Turner 246). Welty's novel encompasses women's lines around the house, the family and domestic sphere. The female characters are gravely concerned with the basic question of family's future and longevity. They try to preserve their identity fulfilling their domestic roles yet their existence in the family scenario conveys a philosophical and social importance. Welty's family as a unit is ultimately like the strongly projected characters of *The Optimist Daughter*. Laurel McKelva, Edna Earle Ponder (*The Ponder Heart*), Ellen Fairchild, (*Delta Wedding*), Aunt Cleo (*The Losing Battle*) and Miss Eckhart (*June Recital*). Although Welty doesn't identify herself as a feminist, she dives into issues like women's suppressions of conflict, lack of the search of self identity. She focuses the manipulation created by a patriarchal order and treatment of women as objects. Welty uses the distortion forms to penetrate the hierarchal order and tries it make the character survive wholly with self-esteem and self-understanding on their own.

In the novels of Welty we find the protagonist initially find it difficult to adjust to the modern world leaving their traditional codes as well as the modern codes. Laurel McKelva in *The Optimist's Daughter* survives with the understanding of the past and its tradition, which persuades her to live in the present and future. All the protagonists in the *Delta Wedding*, *The Optimist's Daughter*, *Losing Battles*, *The Robber Bridegroom*, undergo similar experiences except Edna Earle in *The Ponder Heart*. Not all Welty's women characters undergo change – some remain static and undynamic. Welty's female protagonists who progress towards change cross the darker journey of life alone and gain wisdom with their self-introspection and trial. They do not stop progressing however difficult the path might be and their growth never ceases mentally or psychologically.

The Southern white women faced the problems of self – identification. This placed a heavy burden on Southern white women, but it also gave them special strengths. The social and political reality, which stood behind it, was tangled and morally questionable. The position of the southern lady is in many ways as especially long lived version of the Victorian situation of women in England and Europe, with all its attendant ironies. Unique complications existed in the Southern situation, however, because of the South's peculiar racial institution. As the region grew defensive in response to natural pressures, the white females representative of Christian virtues landed in public to divert attention from problems of slavery and racism. She was forced to represent a racial purity, which was required by her men for the maintenance of their caste, but which many of them regularly transgressed in their own sexual adventures with black women. Welty's portrayal of the situation of women characters and the world progresses her entrance into the school of southern women writers. Welty strongly represents women in her novels endowed with qualities of knowledge, care and love. She made it possible for the women to make them recognizable and efficient in this world. Welty's novel paved a way for this view to be reflected through her female characters. There are different categories of women shown in the novels of Welty. There are house wives, mothers, daughters, rivals aunt, great grandmothers, strangers, sisters and friends. *The Delta Weddings* depicts the high class women, *The Optimist's Daughter* depicts the middle class women and the *Losing Battles*, depicts the lower class, but respectable women. The fiction of Welty reflects variations in relationship and explores the psychological depth that lies beneath any relationship.

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She tries to focus on different relations. She seeks to expose traditions by which a woman is trained to play her following role in the family. Welty has a deep instinctive insight into women's problems and dilemmas. She explores and interprets the emotional reactions and their position humane understanding. The female protagonist in her novels is in constant search for meaning and value of their life. Welty traces a women's inner journey from self sacrifice to self-realization from self denial to self assertion. A different psychological interpretation & re-interpretations of inner psyche and the attempt to discover the real 'self' in relation to the 'other'. Welty says: It is our inward journey that leads us through time forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling each of us moving, changing with respect to others. As we discover, we remember, remembering we discover and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge. *One Writer's Beginnings* 102

Though Welty claimed she is not a feminist yet the feminine consciousness is felt in all her novels. She offers us a glimpse into the lives of women who are suppressed under the longing to know the unknown. Her women refuse to sacrifice their individuality and attempt to resolve the conflicts and emerge as emancipated women with the understanding of 'Self'. In the novel *Delta Wedding*, Gloria the protagonist defends herself from the captivity of elderly aunts in the family to save her identity and opposes inherently their efforts forcefully imposed on to ruin her identity to assert her individuality as a human being. Turner observes: The aunts all married into the clan and forced to give up their identities make a final effort to gain control of Gloria. As the fight breaks up, Gloria is still resolute, I do not believe I am a Beecham....., I am standing my ground. (Turner 214)

Welty was never satisfied with feminism, she prefers to consider herself as a human creative writer. Welty belonged to the Southern Region. "Its roll marks include the critique, implicit or direct of racial and sexual oppression of the hierarchical caste and class structures that persuade cultural institutions, and of the evasive idealism that pushes reality aside and its parallels the tradition of Southern women in radical social action." (Brantley 5)

The women characters of Welty rejected the patriarchy and parochialism to explore the self identity and human wholeness and discovered the mysteries of life. This paper attempts to explain the conflicts, trauma, isolation and the ordeal fulfil the protagonist's quest for self identity amidst dilemmas in the novels of Eudora Welty. The ordeal of inner conflict helps the protagonist Laurel Mckelva in the novel, "*The Optimist Daughter*, to explore the meaning of 'Self'. Laurel is the true representative of women who are in constant conflict to explore the meaning of 'Self'. People are always in search for 'identity' the identity crisis has demonstrated its power as one of the main thematic concerns in the life of women characters of Welty. Pain, loss and hopelessness become inseparable when characters are unable to extricate themselves from the conflict between who they are and who they are supposed to be.

Throughout the novel Welty tries to depict the position of women in the family and their conflicts 'within' with the 'other' to explore the 'self'. Welty feels that a woman must be true to her own 'self' if she wants to know herself. She must step out of parochial four walls of the material framework to give full expression & her individuality and identity. In the novel *The Optimist's Daughter*, Laurel and Fay had an argument for a 'breadboard.' Laurel explains to Fay: "Memory lives not in initial possession but in the freed hands pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again in the patterns restored by dreams." (Welty 179)

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She presents her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations. They are concerned with the quest for an authentic selfhood and an understanding of the existential problems of life. She reveals remarkable insight into the women psyche by representing women in myriad forms as daughters, wife, mother and an individual who seeks her gender identity. She does not give her female protagonist a solution for their problems which arise out of their exploring mind, but develops a faith in hope so that they transform their circumstances through a route of interpretation and re-interpretation and self-searching to hope and discover themselves the unknown. Welty explores the experience of women and the possible condition of belonging (Self to the other) to discover the Universal meaning of self identity in a spiritual perspective simultaneously, psychologically and experimentally. The issue of self-identity have already been vastly explored in her novels. Laurel in the novel *The Optimist's Daughter* grows elevated in her thoughts and the bitter experience of her own life in relation to the 'other' brings a transformation in defining identity in a spiritual perspective which acknowledges her with the deeper meaning of oneness with 'Him'.

Laurel's mind confronts with the question of fulfillment when happened through marriage in the lives of her parents, than what could have happened that an outsider brings misery into their lives? She ponders over, is there than an end to the mysteries of the 'self & the other' ? Is it the mistake of the self who could assume the knowledge of the other or blocked the independence of the other or delay the search of the other ? A relationship can be kept free, happy and strong if a space is created between them and if one sees and accept the other as they are with a new sense of otherness. Everything is subjected to change that is the universal mystery of changing identities, the law of nature. With this understanding Laurel finally leaves her parent's house.

Welty focuses on women's natural desires and aspirations that create a deep struggle to know her own 'self' and abandons the concept of women as daughter, sister, mother or a wife. Her women are viewed as individual, a human being.

Welty's women discover the 'self' through various inner and outer journeys, the psychological interpretation and re-interpretation shifts her vision to a new perspective. Her women protagonist move, out of their narrow vision and enter into a subjective analysis to assert their individuality as human beings. In the novel *The Optimist's Daughter*, Laurel's journey teaches her the philosophy of life in a new perspective which is a cycle of highs and lows and how to learn to accepts and to begin life with a new hope.

Eudora Welty celebrates the feminine in her portrait of the mother, daughter and young girls. The inner conflicts of human beings with 'self' to the 'other' is universally conveyed by women characters in Welty's novels, like Laurel & Becky in *The Optimist's Daughter* , Miss Beulah & Jack in *Losing Battles*. Welty celebrates womankind and feminine life cycle in her works, but Lousie Westling observes – Eduora Welty has never been comfortable with feminism. Welty seems to feel that labels such as "Women writer" and "Feminism" are narrow and politically changed. She prefers to consider literary achievement as a human creative endeavor unmarked by sex. (Lousie 1)

Welty's novel *The Optimist's Daughter* portrays the feminine life cycle of the daughter, Laurel who seek an independent life to know her 'self' which was not explored by her mother; her suffering and loss gives her an insight to illumine. Laurel dives in the memory of her mother, Becky and her father Judge Mckelva's life and the complex routine surrounding her loss and the wave

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memories to which she immersed. The image of women in Literature comes out partly from the existing facts of the world and partly from the author's experience to its important issues. The roles assigned by the society to women as mothers, wife, mistress, and sex objects but Welty's women were not lured by such social norms, they emerged transgressing the material parochial norms by their quest to know the 'self.' The Matriarchal image is elevated through Welty's women characters in her novels who possess an intense sense of responsibility & honesty towards their loved and near ones. Her projection is of strong characters who break the idealized picture of the women ascribed by the patriarchal society who survived within the four walls and were labelled as a wife, a mother and completely surrendered to their husbands mentally and physically as a duty to keep them satisfied. Her women characters strongly face the complex situation and discover their true human 'self' and they venture out beyond the domestic four walls of traditional womanhood. The daughter, Laurel in *The Optimist's Daughter* recalls the past, her mother's pain and the illness and death of her father is the moment which brings her back to confront the meaning of parents lives and the intruder in their lives. Women emerge with a new thinking not lured by material parochial aspects, Laurel restricts herself to claim the 'breadboarded' and tells Fay – 'As long as it is vulnerable to the living moment, it lives with us and while it lives, and while we are able we can give it up its due. (Welty Eudora, P – 179, *The Optimist's Daughter*)

Welty's women encourage the natural independence of mind to project them into a strong thinking conscious being, devoid of all the parochial material thinking. Women are projected realistically that it projects a psychological drama transcending boundaries of its region and the women emerged with universal thoughts and action as can be found in Characters like Laurel in *The Optimist's Daughter*.

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