



LOVE PHOBIA IN ALEXANDER'S BRIDGE AND O PIONEERS

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Abstract : Willa Cather was a well-known American writer in the first half of the Twentieth Century. She had begun her career as a journalist and later became a writer. She was a prairie writer who beautifully portrayed the essence of nostalgia, pioneers in frontier life, especially the land in Midwest America. There are very few writers who could stand in par with her narration of the West and she is quite proclaimed for this excellent narration. Especially her novels are mainly discussed in terms of this frontier life and many do not venture to explore the other hidden factors in her novels. One can trace a pattern in the treatment of love in her novels. She treated love with so much reverence that the characters either share a platonic love that ends well or an illicit relationship that ends in tragedy. The aim of this paper is to analyze this love phobia one can trace in the novels of *Alexander's Bridge* and *O Pioneers*.

Index Terms - Platonic love, marriage, Illicit relationship, love phobia.

I. INTRODUCTION

There has been no poet who at least once proclaimed the power of love, its lustrous supremacy, and its unconquerable endurance. Love has been favored by poets and philosophers for many centuries. It is a fact that as much as human race would be living on the earth, love cannot be wiped out. In fact, this love is what makes a human more humane. There are various forms of love that we all encounter in the various levels of our life. Romantic love among the many helps a man and woman to be bonded for life and thus creating a better society. Excess of this love can also cause instability in the society. We know that Plato banished poetry from his society by thinking that it would corrupt the young minds. Trojan war was fought for ten years, killing many people, were a result of this love gone wrong. In Ramayana, Rama fought with Ravan and destroys a kingdom and many lives along with it was also due to the same. In this respect one can see that love is dangerous and can become tragic if it goes wrong.

In the selected works of Willa Cather we can see that she follows the same cynical attitude to love. She treats love with utmost reverence that any deviation from this idea seems to be horrific to the writer. Her characters either experience love on the platonic level and have a happy ending or disrespects this love by engaging in illicit relationship and ends up dead.

II. THE NARCISTIC BARTLEY ALEXANDER

Alexander's Bridge was the first novel of Willa Cather. She later considered *O Pioneers* as her first work as she was not satisfied with the way she has written the *Alexander's Bridge*. The novel is the story of an engineer who is torn between his youth and his maturity, confused whether to be loyal to his wife or get into a reckless relationship with his former lover and finally met with his tragic end in an unfinished bridge accident. Bartley Alexander is a middle-aged engineer, famous for the increasingly ambitious bridges that he has designed. Married to Winifred, a beautiful, elegant woman, whom he loves and who thoroughly adores him, he has an enviable home in Boston.

For a young man like Bartley, he has everything a person of his age hopes to have. Despite of living such a busy life dedicated to his profession, his wife never once complained of his attention being diverted to his profession. Instead, she dedicates herself for the benefit of her husband and does everything possible to make him feel at ease. This is not the case with many professionals like him. They all have a nagging wife who always seek for attention whereas Winifred is no such woman. Bartley is very lucky to have such an understanding and dedicated wife.

The love Bartley and Winifred shares is platonic. Being the dedicated husband and wife, they love each other and support each other. But this love only lasts until Bartley meets with his former love interest Hilda Burgoyne. Bartley had everything a young man could hope for at his age; a successful career, a faithful wife, powerful family to back him up, friends who would do anything to help him and so on. When he could have been content with all the fortune he had in his current life, he went in search of an uncalled adventure in Hilda.

Love is not sacred for Bartley. Even when he wants to pursue a new relationship with Hilda, despite having such a faithful and dedicated wife is not may be because he wants to rekindle his past love but because it seemed to be a new adventure to him. Bartley always loved adventures and challenges in his life. To Bartley Hilda seemed to be a very dangerous adventure that enticed and enraptured

Bartley from his perfect flowless life. "To a man who was so little given to reflection, those dreams always took the form of definite ideas, reaching into the future. There was a seductive excitement in renewing old experiences in imagination (AB p.40)."

Bartley initiates an illicit relationship with Hilda and found himself to be torn between his newfound love for his past lover and his commitment to his wife. Bartley's passion and reckless behaviour could not last beyond his trip to London. The same man who had shared a passionate moment with his past lover in London changes as an ideal husband the moment he goes back to his house. Like a perfectly happy and contented husband he congratulates and sympathize with his wife for doing so much of work in his absentia and taking care of the household. He also brings her a rare gift to show his appreciation for all her hard work.

For a period, he struggles to take a decision. When he is with Winifred he seems to love her and when he goes back to London, he could not get enough of Hilda. This is exactly where everything starts to go wrong in the life of Bartley. He is grateful to Winifred for managing everything on her own and takes care of everything in his stead. But this is a feeling of gratitude than the passion he feels for Hilda. Bartley is very much excited about the thought of Hilda that he could not even contain his eagerness while he was travelling in the ship. This excitement ignited by the passion is misunderstood by Bartley as love.

Since he established himself as a successful man both in his career and private life, there is nothing more that excites Bartley in his life. Hilda is an adventure that excites him and he is no more bored of his routineness of life. It is human psychology that a human cannot give upon anything that gives him pleasure. Bartley also wants to experience this in his life and decides to choose Hilda. Bartley fastened the last nail in his coffin when he decides to go with Hilda, leaving the poor Winifred to suffer.

Until then Bartley is a successful engineer. The moment he decides to choose Hilda, he receives the news about a problem in the bridge. He goes to Canada to enquire about the situation thinking that he could solve the problem. Even while he is travelling to Canada, he had to be satisfied with a second-class train journey and we see a man who is not as sophisticated as the young Bartley narrated in the beginning of the novel. All these indicates to the tragedy that is about to be fallen on him. The one wrong move he takes ends him in his death.

III. CHASTE ALEXANDRA AND PROMISCUOUS EMIL

The second novel and one among the most celebrated work of Willa Cather is *O Pioneers*. It mainly revolves around the life of Alexandra Bergson and the people in her life. Alexandra is a fierce woman who fights the odd and adamant about winning the race on her own. She is a very strong woman unlike other woman characters and almost exhibits the characteristics of a man. Sharon O Brian in her essay *The Road Home: O Pioneers!* considers Alexandra as "One of Cather's romantic heroes in female garb (SB 429)".

She shares her fears and sentiments to Carl Linstrum, her neighbor and friend. The relationship between Carl and Alexandra begins as neighbors who fight off the same untameable land, grows as friends who could even understand the meaning in each other's silence and ends in marriage even though they are beyond the age for it. Unlike celebrated love stories like Romeo and Juliet, love at first sight, one could not see the flowering of romance between Alexandra and Carl and in fact they themselves are unaware of this strange feeling until they had to be separated from each other.

Alexandra had the huge responsibility to take care of her family entrusted to her by her father and Carl had no choice but to go away with his family in search of new fortune as they could not make one on the Divide. They both were practical in their life rather than blinded by some passion. It took them a while to realize what they were to each other as they both did not have time to think about themselves. When they realize their love for each other they hold on to it like two mature people. Alexandra has already established her whereas Carl has yet to prove his worth. She is ready to wait for him to return to her as she respects him and understands him though she does not need him to go out to make his own fortune. They are not in a hurry to consummate their love despite their late age because their love is stemmed out of passion but commitment. The platonic love of Alexandra and Carl ends with a positive note in the novel.

Emil, youngest brother of Alexandra dotes on a married woman Marie Sabatha. He is a young, handsome fellow who attends university and has considerable riches in his name. It is not necessary for Emil to go behind a married woman as there are many eligible young women of his age like to get married to him. And yet he falls into love with a married woman despite knowing it is not acceptable. It is common that men get attracted to woman despite of their marital status. But a moral man would never pursue a married woman as it is not an acceptable social behavior.

Despite of all these Emil pursues his love for Marie Sabatha. She tries to discourage him from committing such immoral thing and yet he could not get over Marie. Like Bartley Alexander from the novel *Alexander's Bridge*, Emil is also portrayed as a young, handsome fellow with a positive environment when he first introduced in the novel. Later as his love for Marie is explored, one can see that his life is going through difficulties. The same pattern in Bartley's life can be seen in the case of Emil as well.

Over a period, Marie is also convinced that she also loves Emil and is ready to accept his feelings. Marie is already married to Frank Sabatha and leading a very miserable life. She tries to cheer up and endures through everything. She is not sure what she feels for Frank is love or just a guilt feeling. At a point she finds this miserable life unbearable and ready to give into the love of Emil. Until then Marie's life seems to be going fine. But the moment she decides to accept Emil's life all the hell broke and they met with a very tragic end. Frank Sabatha finds Marie and Emil in a compromising posture and shoot them both to their death.

IV. CONCLUSION

Alexander's Bridge and *O Pioneers* explores two types of love. One is a committed love and another is driven by passion. When we look into the pattern followed in these two novels, we can see that Cather is almost afraid of the love driven by passion and makes sure it ends up in tragedy. In *Alexander's Bridge*, the reader sees a successful and happy engineer in the beginning of the novel and as the plot grows the success become unstable and the protagonist became miserable since he decides to pursue his passion than his committed love to his wife. Cather mercilessly kills the immoral love as it is showing no reverence to love. Every bad thing happens in the life of Bartley is redirected to the moment he decides to disrespect the sacredness of love. He loses everything including his life in the process.

In *O Pioneers*, even though Emil is not an established man like Bartley, he still possesses a good position in the society. He is portrayed as a desirable, amicable, cheerful gentleman in the beginning of the novel. This cheerful candour of Emil is no more to be seen when he starts to develop feelings for Marie. He had to hide and lie and is compelled to do things to conceal and forget his feelings for Marie. The difference between Emil and Alexander is that, Emil always knew what he wanted and never thought of its moral implications.

Despite Bartley meeting with a tragic death at the end of the novel, his name was still not spoiled as no one around him wanted to expose him of his illicit relationship. So Bartley saved his face and still continued to have a respectable position in the society after

his death. But in the second novel Cather is not very merciful in the treatment of Emil's character. This may be because Emil desires something he should not have and knew all along that he is at fault for falling in love with a married woman. Thus in *O Pioneers* Emil is shot death and left to be discovered by the people to be talked about his disgraced death. There is no dignity left to him unlike the case of Alexander and also Emil was murdered unlike a natural death experienced by Alexander. In both the cases we can see that Cather is afraid of tainting the purity of love and made sure to punish the ones who deviates from it.

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