

JOYCE CAROL OATES – A NOVELIST WITH A MISSION

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Contemporary criticism is so vocal in orchestrating the story of American fiction than it has journeyed beyond the wasteland of institution – dissolved, fragmented and dislocated. Since 1950, the world of fiction has been recreated, reinterpreted and most often transcended. The writers of the contemporary fiction have often dismissed the reality, as banal and incredible. To write a critical study of any living writer is, inevitably risky though exhilarating. Misjudgement is too easy and claims of distinction of merit or stature are to be supported with great caution. To articulate a contemporary writer's achievement amidst all odds appears to be a challenging and yet a delightful task.

Joyce Carol Oates lives in an era, which insists on the dominance of fiction over all the other forms of literature. A unique creative genius, she blends reality and vision with great comprehension trying to locate the fundamental maladies tormenting the times.

Philip Roth voices his predicament when he says “The American writer in the middle of the XX century, has his hands full in trying to understand and then describe and then to make credible, much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.”

Oates is an artist of incomparable power of expression. She is concerned about America and its problems. She intelligently interprets the American loneliness in the multiple planes of their living, decisively touching, the American dream and its passion. G.F. Waller observes: “To live by obsession totally is to go mad, but – at least as Oates articulates it...- except through facing and through fiction, reliving our obsessions, we will hardly be able to face the possibility of transcendence that those obsessions yearn for. It may be that it is to the source of this transcendence that she will turn in... fiction”. Oates remarks: “In the novels I have written, I have tried to give shape to certain

obsession of mid-century America's confusion of love and money, categories of public and private experience, of a demonic urge, I sense all around me, an urge to self-annihilation, suicide- the ultimate experience and the ultimate surrender.”

If Oates can be taken seriously when she writes about writing, then one can conclude that she finds writing a means of transcendence. A writer in one of her short stories explains, “I could let it depress me, but actually, writing about something is a means of transcending it... The writer puts everything in his writing, all the bewilderment and convulsions and despair but he leaves out the vision of himself writing.” (Marriages and Infidelities, P.119).

Oates, while describing this mysterious age, endeavours to create it. G.F. Waller remarks: “Oates’ work reveals her to be among the most sensitive recorders of the intellectual, social and most important of all – the emotional dynamics of our times.” Since 1963, Oates has penned innumerable novels, short stories, plays, anthologies of poetry and literary criticisms all of which reveal her deep involvement in the work. “I have laughably a Balzackian ambition to get the whole world into a book,” Oates announced in 1972. In 1978, she explained her role as a writer, “A writer’s job ideally, is to art the conscience of his race... I would not be honest as a writer if I ignored the actual conditions around me.”

Joyce Carol Oates further adds: “the aim of a serious, respectful act is to externalize personal, private, shapeless phantasies into structures that are recognizable to over people.” Explaining her deep interest in works of literature and passionately remembering the limitations of the body, spirit and the human condition, Oates remarks: “I feel my own place is to dramatise the nightmares of my times and to show how some individuals find a way out – awake, come alive, on the future.”

While examining James Dickey’s work, Oates writes: “A mysterious unfathomable revolution seems to be taking place in our civilization. It is only through

the artist, that we can base personal history. As representative of the crisis of society, can this spirit of revolution be, “knowable” or “Governable.”

Calvin Bedient rightly estimates her as “one of the most formidable talents of the era” Oates was born in Lockport in Niagra country, a small place near Buffalo, on an eerie bridge canal. Her father Fredrick James Oates was a tool and dye designer in a local automobile factory in Detroit. She experienced life’s sordid realities even in her young age. Oates has learnt to considr economic realities, superceding all necessities of life. She had her early education in a one-room school and later moved to Syracus University on a New York State Regent Scholarship. She took courses in English and Philosophy, learning that there is a definite relationship between the two. While as a postgraduate student of the Wisconsin University, she met Raymond Joseph Smith, a doctoral scholar and they were married six months later. One of her earlier short stories was sighted in the honour role in Martha Roley’s “Best American Short Stories.” This encouraged her to switch from research and to embark on writing as a career. For a long time she worked in Canada a the University of Windsor teaching English literature along with her husband. At the same time she concentrated on Creative writing. The couple then moved to Princeton University, New Jersey on Oates’ accepting the position of Writer-in-residence. A contender for national book award for **A Garden of Earthly Delights** (1968), Oates won the award for **Them** (1970). Recipient of innumerable awards and prizes, she writes with great zest and zeal. Her works provides a fascination towards the personality that creates and inspires it. She affirms, “the greatest works of literature deals with the human soul caught in a stampede of time, unable to gauge the profundity of what passes over it. A teetotaler with every little time for small talk, Oates appears quite unostentatious to her interviewers. She hides behind her social girl image a good deal of mental treasure, so vocal in her fiction. She is so passionately creative that she seems to seek comfort from Mozart’s symphony, playing in the background. To her interviewers, she presents a unique blend of emotion and intellect greatly reflected in her literary composition.

She is said to write the way Mozart wrote down his compositions – straight from his head. With unique working habits, she writes incessantly even while waiting for her

luggage on trips and often between takes of a magazine cover photo session. She encourages her students to waste time in all kinds of moods. She earnestly believes that exhaustion and depression might promote a mystical imagination.

Oates has blossomed into a writer at a tender age, “I was bowled over by Faulkner...Kafka...later Freud, Nietzsche, Mann- they are almost real personalities in my life.” Dostoevsky and Melville fascinate her. She is indebted to a legion of writers – for her concern in psychological states, for her reach of lyrical heights and attainment of keen sensibilities. She reveals streak of Theodore Dreiser in extending the American naturalism in her fiction. She herself has written often on Flannery O’Connor in ways which reflect a sense of kinship with Connor. “O’ Connor’s real concern”, she maintains, “is the revelation of a transcendental world of absolute values beyond the cheap, flashy, wasteland of modern America. This revelation, however, proffers no answer, no glib solutions to the mystery of modern life. Her writings are “celebrations of the fact of mystery, that is all” She invokes Flannery O’Connor in projecting the conflicting issue of religion, sexuality and violence. In depicting the American middle class notions- the sexual turmoil, she walks in the footsteps of John Updike. She shares James Agee’s reverence for the terror and priority of childhood. The intimation of Steinbeck in her subject matter and its oppressive air are so vocal. She reveals Tolstoy’s sense of history, drowning the individual and his passion for fatalism. She emulates Styron and Malamud in revealing a keen interest in the common place. She is dynamic in representing the age and is deeply indebted to her peers in the field and devoutly honours the tradition. She humbly mentions: “I could not exist without them. I don’t have much of autonomous existence, nor does anyone? We are interconnected – it seems, we are individual and separate – whereas, in fact, we are not.”

Oates informs an interviewer that she has written stories, taking off from Chekov, Joyce and even Thoreau. She considers Thomas Mann’s “Dr. Faustus, a worthy accomplishment. I am always reading Mann, in utter admiration, in love, Ah, to be able to write like Thomas Mann... or even to write a novel, Mann might approve, even mildly”.

G.F. Waller states: “Her fiction is built ... upon what I hope termed “obsession” and its goal is akin to mystic transcendence, once we have grasped this, then we can see how her fiction is experimental in the most radical way – by entrusting the enactment of its meaning to the readers responsiveness.”

Oates’ vision of places like Detroit, similarly arises from her concern with the city as symbol. She is obsessed not merely by the social profusion of America, but by the ways eddying, brooding, currents of feelings tie our society together and her fiction evokes the city as a revelation of psychological rather than social realism. The sense of victimization, the rootless bewilderment and paucity of relationships are all rooted in the psyche; and they emerge in our involuntary, movements or cryptic, frustrated ejaculations of command or insult. Likewise, the autonomy or transcendence that may liberate us in the city is possible only from within our inner lives.

Oates, as an artist, reveals the shared emotions through her dreams, evoking plot, character, setting theme and style from her own artistic impulse. She is a versatile writer, who has left no form of literature untouched. She seems to give a Midas touch to anything she creates. Her prolific amazes the readers the readers and critics alike. Oates always endeavours to stress the idea of transcendence in her poetry, asserting that “the intensity of experience” is possible even in the mist of “triviality”. Peter Stevens comments; “The form of poetry enables Oates to intensify her vision of human possibility, by freeing herself from the demands of narratives and realistic plausibilities. This practise is an expression in poetic terms of what she herself calls, “the sense of the mystery and sanctity of the human predicament.”

The Edge of Impossibility: Tragic Forms in Literature (1972) and New Heaven and New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature (1974), her two published critical treatises, while providing a better and balanced assessment of the artist’s endeavour, also seek to penetrate, the aspects of reality in human experience. Oates elaborates her concern for reality in each of her nine formally constructed critical essays in The Edge of

Impossibility: Tragic forms in Literature. The philosophical and principally existential stance existed in this critical work showed her scholarship in Kafka, Kierkegaard, Kant, and Jaspers and especially in Nietzsche. Her interest in the philosophical treatment of reality in literature grew from a belief that, “Art was rationale at bottom that it could be seen to make sense that it had a definite relationship with philosophical doubt.” Oates contrasts “the existential” and “essential” attitudes in these essays. Contrasting the essentialists, viewpoints of Yeats and Mann with Melville, Oates’ criticism proceeds to identify and clarify the worldviews and the possible limits of man’s position in the world. Oates writes “the greatness of a work of art, usually blinds us to there fact that it is a hypothetical statement about reality – a kind of massive, joyful experiment, done with words and submitted to one’s peers for judgment.” The preoccupations with the questions of reality, through philosophical and psychological enquiry led Oates into metaphysical realms. In, *New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature*, Oates studies, in these volumes the writers who have cultivates, “a mystical and intuitive perception of unity and harmony in the fictional setting. In her opinion they made the furthest reaches of the dreaming mind”, easily accessible even to ordinary readers. Oates writes in the *Writer*, “if art has any general evolutionary functions, it must be to enhance the race to work somehow towards an essential unity; harmony, survival and growth, and perhaps an integration of the human world with the natural world.” She typically argues: “fiction should give ‘coherence to jumbled experience’ or should bring its readers to ‘a sense of the mystery and the sanctity of the human predicament’, or should show us how to get through and transcend pain.”

After recognizing the greatness of Plath, Mailer and Dickey for articulating “the very worst...the most perverse and terrifying possibilities of the epoch”, she establishes a rapport with Lawrence and Kafka, based upon their rejection of the isolated ego and their affirmation. She ultimately opts for the self-actualizing visions of Lawrence and Kafka. “But it is ... the emphasis on the apocalypse beyond and through corruption or in Oates’ own terms, the transcendence achieved” through obsession that she shares fundamentally with Lawrence. So Oates conscientiously shapes her fiction, according to the principles

she spontaneously expresses in these two critical volumes on literary practice and philosophy.

This study while attempting to suggest in brief the philosophy of Oates, so deliciously nurtured proceeds to investigate her unique and energetic practice, of achieving transcendence of the obsessions. The scrutiny of her prolific creativity in general and the narrative in particular clearly suggests that Oates returns to the stock themes of love, death and anxiety. While representing these three significant human passions in her work, she only varies the form. Oates is a critically acclaimed writer today, particularly for her brilliantly crafted short stories, *The Wheel of Love*, which is much anthologized and acclaimed by critics as one of her representative collections. As the present study is limited in scope, the endeavour here will be to focus the spotlight on this volume of short stories *The Wheel of Love*.

The theme of love, death and anxiety are explicated by most post modern fiction writers in America. Leslie A. Fiedler's classic, *Love and Death in American Novel*, has illustrated that these themes are the only constituents of the American fictional world. *The Wheel of Love*, obsessively maps out these three themes, echoing Oates' penchant for the sordid, leading to transcendence.

Ernest Reichl's jacket designed for *The Wheel of Love*, published by the Vanguard Press, provides a real insight into Oates' collection of short fiction. Reichl super imposes the author's name and the title, on a photograph of a linear construction by Navum Gabo. It refers to a wheel like frame, which is distorted from pure circularity by the tension of hundreds of taut, spokes converging and diverging, within the frame. The shape is something between a circle and a diamond, the sweeping curves of the spokes – amore appropriate illustration can be scarcely imagined for Oates' twenty stories of people, striving with the complications of various love relationships. It is as if the lines of the lives intersect and withdraw from one another, stretching tightly on a frame, distorted by their own inevitable tensions.

The representation of the wheel appears to be a symbol associated with literary connotations. The instrument can be, “The Wheel of Torture”, which makes the individual ride high for a short while before the spin of the wheel, courses the individual on the downward journey. G.F. Waller perceives Oates’ conception of love, poignantly: “presenting, merely another form of suffering attachment to the perishable by grasping at unrealities.”

The second symbolic association of the Wheel is that of punishment. It reminds the love afflicted persons, being broken on the wheel shaped torture instrument, of the mediaeval times. Almost all stories and characters in this collection illustrate this aspect. The familiar concept of the wheel as the cycle of experience is illustrated in the story “Four Summers.”

The most romantic association of the wheel with love is a sense of never ending quality noticed in a circle. But this condition, according to Oates looks as a “threat” rather than a “promise.” Protagonists of several stories in the collection claim undying love, which is reminiscent of the nineteenth century romantic novels.

This condition of eternal allegiance of love to each other makes the characters more sentenced than pledged.

The stories in this collection are heavily overlaid with sexuality and violence. Oates believes that people in love always cause psychic violence to themselves. Sheer horror underlines each of stories in layers of varying depth. Oates is often compared to Poe and Melville for her forte to create horror. The *Virginal Quarterly Review* records that Oates offers in *The Wheel of Love*, a theme of love-a love more familiar to Ophelia than Juliet. Each story has either suicide, a breakdown, and adultery or some such horror as its pervading element.

Oates’ records admirably the dominant terrors of the modern civilization, highlighting the excess of madness, fear and emptiness. *The Wheel of Love* forms a

lense through which Oates examines the tortures of love. Pearl K. Bell observes that: “Oates projects with conviction, love as a disease, an affliction and an uncontrollable psychic rash. In her hands, love becomes a universal form of self-ordained depravity, often obsessive and pervasive. An involuntary act of enslaving self condemnation.”

Oates depicts the deprived and the sufferers of love with great imagination. She captures the transitory and incandescent moments, dissects them deftly and records in all sincerity the results of a thorough surgery. Without permitting any relationship, to escape a close scrutiny, Oates keeps the wheel spinning. In the fabulous piece *An Anthology of Poetry*, she expresses that “by love as by roots in the soil, we will be connected to one another.”

Oates’ choice of John Donne’s lines “We can die by it, if not live by love,” from “the canonization,” for epigraph to *The Wheel of Love*, is an apt exercise in the process of spiritualization of love. The concept of love as applied in the stories shows that Oates is deliberately driving her characters to intense moments of suffocation and obsession. Such love relationship alone, according to Oates, brings the ‘Epiphany’, within the reach, and the road to transcendence is illumined and made easy of access. Developing these and modulating these stories, like the movements of the symphony, Oates deftly touches the notes of ecstasy in the terrors of love. She appears to suggest vehemently that it is the terrors and not the ecstasies that are the core of her stories of love. It is our endeavour now to study the twenty stories, in this collection minutely.

The next three chapters study three themes, love, death and anxiety in that order. This study’s ultimate aim is to project the author’s craving for these obsessive moments, achieving a sense of transcendence on a wider canvas. Like the fiction writers practicing the stream of consciousness technique, Oates ventures in these short stories to emulate her mentor, William Faulkner, in studying ‘Epiphany’. This attempt of analytically represent the obsessive familial relationships in the twenty short stories, will help to formulate Oates’ unique tragic vision, and will prove her characters achieving transcendence.

End Notes:-

1. Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction", *Commentary*, 31 (March, 1961), p.224.
2. G.F. Waller, "Dreaming America": Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979) p.2.
3. Remarks by Joyce Carol Oates accepting the National Book Award for, them, Press Release, (Vanguard Press, March 4, 1970), p.1.
4. G.F. Waller, "Dreaming America,": Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979) p.2.
5. Quoted in "Author Joyce Carol Oates on Adolescent America." U.S. News and World Report, (May 15, 1978) p.60.
6. Jackhicks ed. *Cutting Edges Young American Fiction for the 70's* (New York: Hold, Richard & Winston Inc., 1972), p.543.
7. Joyce Carol Oates, "New Heaven, New Earth", *Saturday Review*, (November 4, 1972), p.51.
8. Joyce Carol Oates, "New Heaven, New Earth", *The Visionary Experience in Literature*, p.246.
9. Calvin Bedient, "Review of Do with Me What You Will" by Joyce Carol Oates, "New York Times Book Review, (Oct.14 1973), p.18.
10. *The New Heaven, New Earth*, p.41.
11. Joyce Carol Oates, "Ritual and Violence in Flannery O'Connor," *thought*, 41, (Winter, 1966), p.57.
12. Walter Clemons, *News Week*, (Dec.11, 1972), pp. 73-74.
13. Joe David Bellamy, "The Dark Lady of American Letters": An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates' *Atlantic Monthly* (Feb, 1972), pp.66-67.
14. G.F. Waller, "Dreaming America", *Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979) pp. 68-69.
15. G.F. Waller, *Dreaming America*, pp.75-76.

16. Peter Stevans, "The Poetry of Joyce Carol Oates", in Lynda, W. Wagner, ed. Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates, (G.K. hall & Co., Boston, 1979) p. 146.
17. Joyce Carol Oates, "An American Tragedy," New York Times Book Review, (Jan.24, 1971) p.2.
18. Joyce Carol Oates, "The Short Story", Southern Humanities Review, 5, 1971, p. 213.
19. Joyce Carol Oates, "The Myth of the Isolated Artist", Psychology Today (May, 1973), p.74.
20. Joyce Carol Oates, "The Unique Universal in Fiction", The Writer, 86, (Jan., 1973)pp. 10-11.
21. G.F. Wallers, "Dreaming America", pp. 65-66.
22. Ibid., p.17.
23. G.F. Waller, Dreaming America, p.187.
24. The Virginia Quaterly Review, (Winter, 1971), p.xv.
25. The New Leader, (Nov.16, 1970), p.15.