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25. A Study of 'Any Woman's Blues'

Dr. Khan S. A.

Ankushrao Tope College, Jalna.

Jong's another novel, *Any Woman's Blues*, (1990) also provides her enough space and opportunities to interrogate the male hierarchies in contemporary American society and present the odyssey of a 'New' woman. This novel also deals with the protagonist's journey of self-realization, her dilemma, as well as her efforts to overcome the confusion of her life by testing and trying the available alternatives.

Leila Sand, the middle aged heroine of this novel is a successful painter. She is:

a self-described addict-of booze, drugs, and, most of all of the sexual favors of Darton Donegal III, an aspiring painter and practicing parasite who is younger than she. Leila sets out to kick her various bad habits, joining AA, and weaning herself, with pain and difficulty, from her lover, determined to stand on her own two feet, an effort in which she has precarious success by the end of the novel.¹

Like Isadora Wing, Leila Sand also manifests the challenging and interrogating spirit right from her school days. She refused to tailor out her behavior according to the men-made conventions of the society. She proves her self to be a 'New Woman' by not bothering about what the society thinks of her. She declares:

I was a bad girl in the school and even a badder in college....At Yale, years before the advent of the Guerrilla Girls, I railed against the male-dominated art world (this was in the early sixties, before feminism was chic, let alone tolerated), yet I was not at all against wooing art critics with my sex appeal if it would help my career.²

Thus, although she was rather radical according to the conventions of the time, she did not mind using her sex appeal as a weapon to achieve her goals because that was the only weapon available to her at that time. She has observed her mother's victimization by her father. This has led her to believe that women were discriminated against as a class. Hence, all was fair in love and war.

Although she was conscious of maintaining her integrity against the opposite sex, she was very much interested in full-blooded sex. This aspect of her nature made Donna Rifkin comment that:

Leila is a heroine in a Erica Jong novel, which means she can barely get through breakfast without thinking about sex 700 times.³

This is, like Isadora, her problem and her dilemma. This is the reason why she marries in graduate school the blue-eyed blond Thomas Winslow. Because he was the tallest boy she had ever dated. However, after sometime she leaves him at home, suffering from flu and coughing his guts out, to attend a party at New York where she meets Elmore. The fact that she marries Winslow when he was healthy and handsome and deserts him later to join a more mature and prosperous person clearly proves that Leila has used him as a possible alternative for the time being. As soon as a better alternative comes before her, she eagerly grabs it. Leila is drawn to the fifty-two year old artist Elmore, spends the night with him, and enjoys sex and drugs before returning to her husband early in the morning. This reminds us of the Isadora of the **Fear of Flying** who also leaves her first husband when he becomes a psychological patient. Leila too, gives priority to whatever is more convenient to her.

Thus, she leaves Thom, marries Elmore, and gives birth to twin girls Michaela and Edwina. In the beginning their marriage was heavenly. But gradually it began to erode as Leila became more popular than Elmore. She wonders:

But when one artist is a woman and the other is a man, whose work shall come first? The male ego, the rush of testosterone, and most of society's rules dictate that the man must be in control, or he will sulk. But what if, for the moment, the women's work is in the ascendancy? And what if it is she who puts the food on the table as well as the tits into the babies' mouths? Can she also pretend, for his ego's sake, that she is *not* doing these things even as she continues to do them? ⁴

Elmore moves out, leaving her with her success and the responsibility of the twins. The pain of abandonment and pressures of parenting prove too much for her to bear. She feels victimized and begins to drink much. This is the beginning of her addiction. Her criticism of the male dominated society in this regard is very touching: "I had fulfilled my destiny as an artist and a woman, and to punish me for it, Elmore left."^{AW58} These are exactly the same problems faced by even Isadora. And like Isadora she also searches the workable solutions.

After having a number of lovers, she meets Darth. Her confidence was at the lowest at that time. Darth bucked up her courage and makes love to her a lot. They start living together and for the whole year did nothing except enjoying sex and touring the world. Dart is virile and handsome. She develops an obsession for his “demonic” cock and becomes addicted to “the nectar he brews in his balls.”^{AW12} But he also proves to be a runner. He keeps fleeing without giving any address or number. She sits at home helplessly waiting for his phone. She takes care of all his needs and always buys him costly presents. It is significant to note that she considers him to be a ‘kept’ man:

It was my joy to offer all these up. What was my success worth if I could not afford a man as beautiful and death-defying as Dart? ⁵

However, what she says about his nature is also a very serious attack on men-folk:

He did not mean to be cruel. It was just his nature—like that of the scorpion who stings the horse who carries him across the stream. ⁶

She makes him a very popular model by making his sketches. Thus she creates a star out of an ordinary person like Pygmalion. But:

The Pygmalion story has been told and retold many times—but never with the woman as artist and the man as Galatea! Eliza Doolittle becomes a lie-dy, but she is still, a good girl... and she still winds up loyal to one man at the end... But what happens to Pygmalion when our creation is a woman and her creation is a man? Simple: the creation betrays the creator with as many nubile younger groupies as possible. ⁷

Darth comes after a long time. They spend a few days together indulging in sex all the time. Suddenly he prepares to leave. Leila asks him where she can find him. He refuses to inform her and rushes out insulting her. Leila is full of grief. She phones her friend Emily who consoles her and promises to come to her house. In her depression Leila drinks too much, loses her control and begins to bang her head on the floor. Benjamin DeMott thinks it to be a proper scene to criticize the women’s movement. He asks:

What happens to a female Portnoy, a supermerry, super raunchy Wife of Bath who never looks back? If she becomes Leila Sand, what happens is that she sometimes finds herself banging her frustrated head on the floor, in a pool of her

own blood, wailing in wretched loneliness, no comfort left but prayer. Hedonists attend.⁸

However, the journey of self-reliance is always through suffering. Again, it must be realized that Leila, like Isadora, is aware of the limitations of being a female 'Portnoy'. This is the reason why these women continue their search, adopting, in the meanwhile, whatever alternatives are available.

Emily helps Leila to learn to trust herself. Thus Leila begins to attend the meeting of AA, tries to paint and remain normal. The result is soon noticed when Dart comes after a few days. She becomes very happy and they enjoy sex the whole night. But in the morning she wakes up and goes to the studio to paint leaving Dart asleep. Dart is surprised and exclaims: "I still remember the time when you slept all night in my arms and nothing could tear you away."^{AW102} This is perhaps the first step towards liberation by weaning herself from the obsessions and addictions. Leila is learning to make herself the center of her life. Thus she has achieved autonomy and uses Dart only as a 'thing' and that to until another final solution appears on the scene. She also tries to understand the reason of women's inner urges for men:

Can it be the need for validation in the world in which being a woman is not in itself enough validation? and when will we learn to validate ourselves?⁹

Dart proposes to attend the AA meeting to become sober. But in the name of his new conversion makes Leila to enroll his name on the payroll of her company for 1000 dollars a month. He also gets a platinum American card from her. In spite of all this, he soon starts his old routine of disappearing at intervals. Leila refuses his proposals of marriage thinking that even after wedding his abrupt arrivals and painful departures would continue. Dart become very angry and decides to move out. After she breaks up from Dart:

Leila's efforts to win back her sanity and self-respect result in a sensual and spiritual odyssey that takes her from Alcoholics Anonymous to violent performance art in a pitch-back New York nightclub, from glittering parties with SoHo celebrities to a liaison with a millionaire antique merchant, from the parlous of Madame Dominatrix to erotic gondola rides with an irresistible Venetian Casanova. Along the way, she learns the Rules of Love, the Twelve Steps and the Key to Sanity.¹⁰