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## **Unholy Loves: A Feminist Study**

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In *Unholy Loves* (1979) we are confronted with nervous, unhappy and suicidal women. The legendary old English poet, St. Denis, visits America. In the party of the Dean of the Woodslee University, he is introduced to Brigit Stott who reminds him of his cousin Agnes. Denis recalls that:

he had always feared that Agnes might kill herself....she had died, however, just the same: dead at the age of thirty-two in a bombing raid in London. The poor girl! She had wanted so much to live, had wanted so passionately to live—and it had not worked out for her, love has failed, loves had failed, she had been bitter and disillusioned while in her twenties.<sup>1</sup>

Like Agnes, Brigit also looks nervously restrained and almost angry. Being a successful writer and lecturer in the English department, she is an envious person for others. But in reality she is suffering mentally. The Woodslee parties are her only solace, her only hope. No one can guess at her loneliness. In fact, it is much more than loneliness. It is a raging ravenous despair, a sort of philosophic despair:

Brigit peering into the blank lightless unstable abyss outside the human sphere, found nothing benign there, and certainly nothing brotherly or comforting. ... Marriage. The deterioration of love. Separation . Reunion. Separation. Divorce. Certain consequences of divorce, unforeseen. No one in Woodslee can guess the degree of Brigit's exhaustion. She has felt, at times, with a remorseless logic, that it might be a good idea for either her or her former husband to die: simply to cease to exist.<sup>2</sup>

Her life has been very strenuous, exhausting, and lonely. This is the reason why she envies the life of Byrne, the wife of the dean. She envies Byrne her attractive husband, and her settled position in life. She thinks how relaxing it would be not to be fired by a



compulsion to “create”. How wonderful it would be simply to live, to consume, to decorate rooms and plan dinned parties.

During the party the Dean asks her whether she intends to go to her native place, Norfolk, for the Christmas. She doesn't intend to go because of the experience of the last year. She is estranged from her family. The relatives seemed to have no other business than to drop in and ask about Stanly (her separated husband) who appeared to be very courteous and gentlemanly to them:

Look at Janet, Brigit's mother winces, she made a success of her marriage without even trying. Brigit's was the first divorce in the family since someone's great uncle back in 1923 sued his runaway wife for desertion....She had died of food poisoning before the divorce have even been settled. So the Norfolk Stott eyed Brigit, seeing not the thirty-eight-years-old university professor and novelist, seeing in fact, not the thirty-eight-year-old woman at all, but just Brigit, Hennalee's older daughter, the “strange” one, the “bookish” one Janet was the “popular.”<sup>3</sup>

She left her home ahead of schedule and it seemed to her that no one had seriously tried to prevent her leaving. Brigit realizes that people, who were divorced, considered themselves librated and enjoyed the freedom in the mid-seventies. But after some years it did not feel quite good. New combinations and couples began to form again. This is a strategy, on the part of women, to return to the available alternatives and solutions. However, Brigit does not want to remarry. She loathes the idea. Again her divorce is not yet final. There is still a vestige of a union. She is not a woman who is fascinated by the physical appearances. Hence:

she does not want to marry again, not in any conventional way, ... yes , but: but perhaps in another way. She does not want to marry again, she has said so, frequently and passionately; and yet some sort of alliance with a man like Denis.... He would be one of her holy loves. Thus the quest of the woman continues. As she is not satisfied with her earlier experiences, she goes on trying different relations and lovers, both holy and unholy. “She has had holy loves, and unholy loves. And then, quite inexplicably, certain of the former evolved into the latter.”<sup>4</sup>



Brigit has always been frank, out-spoken, natural, and spontaneous. She notices Alexis Kessler of the music department in the party whom she had once unthinkingly reminded of his dirty hand in a party. Alexis had smiled and said "If you think my hands are dirty, lady, you should see the rest of me."<sup>5</sup> The reply, though witty, clearly betrays the sexual bias of men towards women. The novel brilliantly explains at many places how a talented but unconventional and single woman is victimized by the society by creating rumors about her. Creating rumors about such a woman is a strategy of the patriarchal society to control her by defaming and demoralizing her:

The rumors of her promiscuity! Her desperation! Her drinking! The mess of her apartment, where she lives with five or six cats—the ugly tales that circulate freely about her behavior during her marriage—her cruelty to students and to friends—her habit of forgetting people entirely, simply erasing them from her consideration. A vicious woman, Alexis has heard. supremely self-contained, egotistical. Eccentric. Doesn't she carry a revolver in her purse, or at least a knife--?<sup>6</sup>

During the party, Denis suddenly falls sick and starts vomiting. Brigit holds him. Alexis was singing at that time. Denis, feeling obliged, requests them to accompany him back to his hotel. He feels very embarrassed and sentimental. He was sitting in between them in the back seat of the car. Suddenly, he brings Alexis's and Brigit's hands together and squeezes them on his lap. They could not resist. They become lovers. Though she has been disillusioned with her marriage and affairs and had decided not to have any more of them, she accepts Alexis as a new possibility that may complete her search. In the present situation of her life there seems to be no clear answer to her problems. And Alexis appears to be the best choice. When Alexis asks her about Stanley, she says that marriage doesn't matter now. It belongs to the past. She doesn't believe in or even remember her husband. She has become interested in Alexis and considers him now the center of her life. Although for many years after separation from her husband different men had tried to approach her. But she had kept herself away from them because:

she had felt a certain revulsion at the mere thought of men, of love, of being touched again. What had passed between Stanley and her had been a kind of love, after all, and she wanted no more of it.<sup>UL116</sup>



Hence she has become much matured as a result of her experiences. Although she is in love with Alexis, what she says to him is very significant. "But what I really love about you is the fact that I can talk to you about anything, and you don't judge." <sup>7</sup> Thus she is an independent woman.

She has sloughed off any interest in men, in love, in enduring bouts of lovemaking and submitting herself to another person's judgment. She does not care for anyone's opinion of her and does not want to care. She is thirty-eight year old, she has been married, she has lived with a man for years and now lives alone and prefers to live alone.....with one part of her mind she dismisses rudely even the proffered love of Alexis Kessler: she knows he is going to hurt her badly and she wants no new pain, not now.<sup>8</sup>

However, sometimes she also feels panicky about her loneliness. She even feels that Alexis might betray her, which he actually does. Irritated and impassioned, she empties her glass of wine on his face. After the ensuing quarrel Alexis leaves out. She starts living alone as usual. Alexis returns to Woodslee after the death of Denis. Exhausted and broken, he begs to resume the relationship. Brigit comforts and sympathize with him. She even allows him to sleep in her lap. But she refuses to carry the relationship beyond that to any serious or emotional level. She has her own future plans. She may accept a position at a small college at Norfolk. She may go back home and re-establish herself with her family. Her mother is not feeling well and her father is rapidly aging. Her sister will be happy to have her there. She has been estranged from her family. But even after long search and journey, ideal life conditions were not visible. So she decides to return to the old, conventional support systems because at present these seems to be the only available alternatives.

Apart from Brigit, Woodslee campus is also populated by many other women who are the victims of male dominated society. What Sandra feels about her husband and friend is, for example, very revealing:

For her husband she is a secretary and a housekeeper and a cook and a body that lies quietly besides his, making no demands, wishing only to be neglected; for this man, her "friend", she is a kind of physical therapist, a listener, perhaps even a Daughter.<sup>9</sup>



Husbands and friends betray, grow jealous and envious of the success of their wives, deny individuality, and expect the conventional behavior from them. The woman's husband has long conversations with Molly in the bathroom with the door locked. However, Brigit outlives all these things. She is free and optimistic at the end of the novel. She has loved and trusted Alexis more than anyone else. But it is over now. There is no need for emotions now. Alexis must decide about his own future. The novel ends with Brigit's declaration of determination and independence:

I may leave Woodslee and return to Norfolk, or I may leave Woodslee and go somewhere else, I can move in one direction or in another..... It's so difficult to explain. But whatever happens to me for the rest of my life, she says slowly, "won't be inevitable. I think that's why I feel so optimistic."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in Brigit Stott we see a woman who realizes the pressures of social conventions and male hierarchies. Although she does not reject the world altogether, she does achieve the confidence, like Isadora and Leila Sand, to live with or without men. She is conscious of the ways in which women are victimized.

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Peter Lewis also believes that "Jong takes her through the bizarre world of contemporary New York in an attempt to reconcile the warring impulses within her and to reach some form of inner harmony."<sup>11</sup> At the end of the novel Leila seems to have achieved this harmony and control to some extent. She still loves Dart and craves for his company. They even sometimes meet, eat, and weep. But Leila has decided to get rid of the obsessions and addictions of all sorts including of men. Her search for a way out of it is complete.

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