

AN EXAMINATION OF INNER AND OUTER LIFE OF WOMEN IN CAROL SHIELDS' STONE DIARIES

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Abstract

The role of women in society has always been controversial. Society has crammed women to its margins where their existence has become disputed. They constantly struggle against the male chauvinism and the expectations that are inflicted upon them. The novel, The Stone Diaries, emphasizes on the fact that life is being suspended between realism and idealism. Carol Shields explores the mysteries of life, unveiling the delicate layers of human consciousness. Women have begun to understand their role among the snarl culture. She depicts how women, out of all crises, try to accept and endure the life prearranged for them. The novel depicts the search for identity, an examination of interior and exterior life, existence, familial relationships, reflection of common men and women, love, childhood, motherhood, parenthood, and nature. The character, Daisy is the reflective of many women of North America during the twentieth century. Women's persistence changes from time to time as they are forced into certain extremity that renders them no alternative. They mould their structure of life in accordance to their convictions that roughly makes them distinctive. Shields highlights on the fact that the crisis faced by women extends and covers their entire life leaving them to get lost from the view of survival. Women's identity is their recognition; their existence identifies their traits and the significance in the world. Their conflict between the interior and exterior life brings in the duality of their nature.

Keywords: Search for identity, inner and outer life, women's persistence, existence and survival.

An exploration of the mysteries of life with unusual risks and missed opportunities reflecting a person's disposition illuminates the century's and the country's livelihood. Shields' *The Stone Diaries* echoes the twentieth century's troubling misconceptions and the poignant paradigm of the characters' search for identity. The characters are bound by fate and neutralized by the 20th century's conception of adapting oneself to

the diverse circumstances. This mystifying century edifies women the ways to uplift them up from the extortion.

The novel focuses on an ordinary woman and her flight through the course of life. The protagonist, Daisy Goodwill drifts through the stages of life and attempts to find a way by narrating her life to understand her survival. The novel brings in the fact that one doesn't need a biological death to mark an end to their existence. It depicts the life of Daisy hanging between the existence and the void space. Malashri Lal, in the book *Feminist Spaces: Cultural Readings from India and Canada* says "This novel subverts the usual concepts of Western ideology of truth and reality and becomes explorations of the concepts of literary and familial relationships. It fades out the distinctions between the factual and the imaginative" (103)

The novel is considered as an autobiography of Daisy, where she represents the people whose lives are entwined in the life of Daisy. The title hints the genre of the novel where the 'stone' emphasises on the generation of the family of Mercy Stone and the stones from the quarry that is used as tombstones. Shields begin to depict only the family from Daisy's mother's side to bring out the women's afflictions. She has included a detailed family tree to give a clear picture that signifies the intertwining of the characters.

Shields openly highlights on the fact that women are encouraged to pretend their happiness, as Daisy utters "She tries, she pretends pleasure, as women are encouraged to do. . . ." (7). This forces women to live in both mental and external world; a life where their thoughts and feelings are unexpressed and constrained. Having buried their emotions, women in one way or the other are not allowed to be themselves. Their clogged depression gives way to traumatic conditions. Mercy involves herself in gardening and relives herself from the tensions. Mercy lives a life of expectation and seems to wait for some transformation to take place in her life. Daisy feels that her mother appears as if she is in anticipation of something, as she says "She seems always to be waiting for something fresh to happen, but her view of this 'something' is obscured by ignorance and the puffiness of her bodily tissue" (7). Daisy refers her mother's gloomy appearance, biological pain, and the wedding ring as poison.

Dr. Spears tells Mercy that women need the companionship of other women as it would bring a great comfort that replaces her lonesomeness. Dr. Spear's words regarding a woman's necessity of a companionship has instilled her. Mrs. Flett is her only companion. Mrs. Flett, according to Daisy, is ". . . a woman whose desires stand at the bottom of a cracked pitcher, waiting" (15). She too is imbued with longing for something which is unidentified. Daisy says, "Maybe that was all that was the matter with her, nothing but loneliness, not the unhappiness of life itself, but only a seasonal attack of loneliness. And Mercy Goodwill, the poor dear young soul, was lonely too –" (18). Daisy calls them as ". . . two solitary souls, side by side in their separate houses, locked up with the same circle of anxious hunger" (18-19).

The novel asserts on the fact that there is a correlation between the past, present and the future and the time seems to be altering the lives of the people. Mercy's orphanhood has infected her till her death and is passed on to her daughter. Daisy believes that her doom is intervened to that of her mother's, which has led her to the current status. To Daisy, people of the past are baffling than the people of the present and she did not want her readers to have a misconception of them leading an ideal life. She informs:

When we think of the past we tend to assume that people were simpler in their functions, and shaped by forces that were primary and irreducible. We take for granted that our forebears were imbued with a deeper purity of purpose than we possess nowadays, and a more singular set of mind, believing, for example, that early scientists pursued their ends with unbroken 'dedication' and that artists worked in the flame of some perpetual 'inspiration.' But none of this is true. Those who went before us were every bit as wayward and unaccountable and unsteady in their longings as people are today. The least breeze, whether it be sexual or psychological – or even a real breeze, carrying with it the refreshment of oxygen and energy – has the power to turn us from our path. (91)

Daisy steps into the world as an orphan, since her mother dies after giving birth to her. This lonely entry into the world follows her for the rest of her life. She struggles to find a connection with people whom she becomes entangled. Cuyler fails in looking after his daughter just like he failed to look after his wife. Daisy is raised by her neighbour, Mrs. Flett, who leaves her husband after adopting her. She is an expert gardener who influences Daisy. Mrs. Clarentine Flett and her son, Barker, a botanist and a professor, instil in Daisy the love of plants and flowers, which she takes for the rest of her life.

Daisy, through her sickness learns how much her existence is recognized in the eyes of the people in the world. Being shut behind the doors to take bed rest has made her pathetic. None has remembered to open the curtains to provide light in her room. It is said that ". . . the period of Daisy Goodwill's secondary illness was also spent in darkness" (74). The sickness has shunned her from the outside world, restricting her from the pleasures of the world. She says "How can so much time hold so little, how can it be taken from us? Months, weeks, days, hours misplaced- and the most precious time of our life, too, when our bodies are at their greatest strength, and open, as they never will be again, to the onslaught of sensation" (27-28). She develops a sense of emptiness and being aware of it, Shields says that she lacks the ability to register and reflect the world. The room plays a prominent role in Daisy's life, as it stands as a basis for her gradual disappearance.

Gorgon E. Slethaug, in his review "'The Coded Dots of Life': Carol Shields's Diaries and Stones" says "In her dying moments—or her imagined projection of them—she consciously recognised this affinity, equating herself with her mother and the stone effigies. The tragedy of isolation, orphanhood, and worthlessness that Daisy sometimes

felt was somewhat dispelled and dissipated when she saw herself as a stone resembling her mother" (74). The 'stone' represents the afterlife. Daisy's craving for her mother pushes her to an extent of thinking of joining her after death. She feels that only her mother could bring her out of this longanimity.

Daisy points out the unfortunates of a woman named Bessie Perfect Trumble, who is killed the previous night, just a mile from Transcona, Manitoba. Her reason for being at a deserted place is mysterious. Her arm and leg has completely been cut off. This represents the ruthless condition of a woman. It is interpreted that life of a woman is endangered. Her being a woman could be the reason of her death. This issue of Bessie, having been laid as a victim of the atrocities for the anonymous motive, has been neglected. Her existence has become merely a history and elapsed. Daisy says "She will always be 'that woman who jumped or fell'. . . ." (123). She opines that "The unfairness of this – that a single dramatic episode can shave the fine thistles from a woman's life" (123). This draws to a statement that Daisy, conscious of this incident, develops a fear thinking that her existence will eventually become like Bessie or her mother where there will be none to keep her alive even in memory. This lurking fear has ceased her from the willingness to love the individuals around her.

Shields strongly highlight the society's ascriptions of women. It is comprehended that just because Daisy is a woman, she has confronted various struggles, continuing from her birth till death. The twentieth century women travel amidst the path of solitude and face the cruelty of the world more than men. The novel depicts Daisy's own theory so as to deliver her own thoughts over the matter. Daisy finds hard to give her theory as her mind is emptied out. Her mind is crammed with wrath and disappointment. She calls herself a mess and a nut case. It shows that Daisy is aware of her sickness. Shields draw sympathy towards her character. Her hurt seems to subside during the day time whereas at night she hears an inner voice calling her. She calls it as ". . . the sound of her own soul thrashing" (262). She decides to live outside the events of her life as she has no choice. She seems to have an energy that keeps her going. She says that she is not scared of death inspite of having all conflicts before her.

Daisy lives a life like other women, carried by the inertia of daily life, taking little to claim for themselves. Daisy moves to Florida to spend her last years. She begins to reconstruct her life at the age of seventy-two by adorning herself with make-up. She recovers back from the depression that has struck her down for some years. She keeps herself occupied through various means so as to deviate herself from having the sensation of being isolated. Gordon E. Slethaug, in his article "'The Coded Dots of Life': Carol Shields's *Dairies and Stones*" accentuates "Daisy's void and the imaginative act of affirmation, her sense of isolation and the multitude of inquisitive and even comforting voices which surround her in these diaries—these give a sense of life being simultaneously lonely and companionable, empty and full, disconnected and connected, symmetrical and asymmetrical" (69).

The novel also explores the character's life in the patriarchal society. Mercy Stone's life after the marriage is condemned to the house she lives in. She realises that her world is enclosed under the roof of her husband. Though Mercy's suppression in the patriarchal society is not explicitly shown, it is understood through the words of Daisy that her life after the marriage has distressed her and calls the wedding ring as poison. The intoxication of the wedding ring attributes to the toxication of the life. She feels that she's been profoundly buried within the patriarchal wall. It is understood that her longing for "something" (7) is nothing but the longing for her precedence and warmth from her husband.

The novel examines on the intricacy of being a Canadian woman. Women have become victims to the incessant uncertainties and obsessions that have grown from the hostile surroundings. Their altered life has become poignant. Shields has also accentuated on the thought of how women have made a drastic growth from the entity of being a subordinate to an individualistic and a despondent person. The novel also symbolises on the turmoil of women where they eventually pace in discovering the authenticity of life and themselves by revolting against the society and men to imprint their sustenance.

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