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SINCLAIR ROSS' "AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE": CLINICAL DEPRESSION IN MRS. BENTLEY

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Abstract

Medical Dictionary defines "Clinical depression" as mental disorder characterized by sustained depression of mood, anhedonia, sleep and appetite disturbances, and feelings of worthlessness, guilt, and hopelessness. Diagnostic criteria for a major depressive episode include a depressed mood, a marked reduction of interest or pleasure in virtually all activities or both, lasting for atleast two weeks. In addition, three or more of the following must be present: Gain or loss of weight, increased or decreased sleep, increased or decreased level of psychomotor activity, fatigue, feeling of guilt or worthlessness, diminished ability to concentrate, and recurring thoughts of death or suicide. Clinical findings of "Clinical depression" reveal feelings of guilt, hopelessness, all-encompassing low mood accompanied by low self-esteem, persistent thoughts of death or suicide - difficulties in concentration, memory and decision - making capacity - changes in sleep patterns, appetite and weight - persistent symptoms of headaches or digestive disorders that do not respond to treatment. Disabling episodic major depression can occur several times in a life time.

Keywords: *Clinical depression, anhedonia, appetite disturbances, hopelessness, self-esteem, digestive disorders*

Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House is certainly one of the finest novels ever written in Canada. In fact it is Ross's first novel. It centres round Mrs. Bentley, the heroine of the novel. She keeps a diary which gives a self – portrait which is a central fascination in the larger story of the Canadian imagination. The novel narrates the troubles and turmoil's of the barren woman, Mrs. Bentley. Her barrenness lands her in a sense of guilt and inner conflict. She feels that she is worthless and her feeling of worthlessness brings her mental agony.

Her husband Philip Bentley is a vicar and his whims and fancies are recorded as diary entries by his wife, Mrs. Bentley.

The Priest is essentially a painter, an artist and the theme of the novel is the struggle of a frustrated artist who, caught in a long spell of creative stupor, struggles hard to find aesthetics and is unable to come to terms with it due to some inert weakness. (Paramesvery 195)

The Vicar preaches but he shows less interest in preaching. Nor is he capable of expressing his love for his wife. Consequently, he develops a liking for a twelve year old boy, by name Steve, a Catholic orphan. As a submissive, wife, unmindful of their protestant congregation's principle, Mrs. Bentley stands "firmly in his (her husband's) side" (As70) and immediately decides to adopt the boy.

Steve is stubborn and capricious by nature. Mr.Bentley encourages him in his stubbornness and caprice and spends most of his time, money and energy liberally on Steve. His doting on the boy prevents him from attending to household duties for which he already

has an innate aversion. He frequently takes the boy for outing leaving his wife in a lonely and miserable state. But Mrs. Bentley never raises any question by way of objecting to his indifference towards her. She contents to herself thinking that it will be useless to appeal to him for his kindness towards her. His whole self is for Steve. He has never turned towards her even for once. Therefore ``I am wrong if I feel l've lost him. He was never really mine" (85). He is hypocritic in his teaching of the significance of love. He has never bothered to apply his own teaching of love at home. He is not sincere in his love towards his wife. Being a male chauvinist he enjoys all the services of his wife done to him but pays her back in the form of contempt.

Mr. Bentley leaves no stone unturned to keep the patriarchal tradition alive. He is quite indulgent in rearing Steve: "there is a strange arrogance in his devotion to Steve, with an unconscious determination to mould him in his own image" (148). Even when Steve grows unsophisticated and brutal, Mr.Bentley pats him on his back. The Church priest does not utter even a single word of protest against him when he quarrels with the boys around, cheats and steals. Mrs. Bentley showers motherly affection on him but he proves to be thankless towards her and Mr.Bentley remains very casual about it and makes a typical patriarchal approach towards the domestic slavery of a woman by saying, " One can be grateful without telling the world about it" (168). He wants Steve all to himself. However, Steve remains emotionally unattached, and ironically is taken away from both by Roman Catholic priests soon after their return to Horizon.

When Mrs.Bentley falls ill and bedridden, Judith, the choir girl, helps her. Mr.Bentley is attracted by Judith's strange white face and wild singing voice. Mrs. Bentley finds her husband moving from his resigned state, caused by the loss of Steve, to the state of recklessness. Even when she has a solid proof of his illegal relationship with Judith, she remains silent and pretends as though she does not know anything about it. She struggles inwardly and behaves as if she is the one who is guilty. Mr. Bentley, inspite of being immoral, taunts his wife about her friendship with Paul Kirby. But she tries to remain calm, thinking,

Guilty himself, is his impulse to find me guilty too? Does he think that he has been unfaithful rankle? Is he trying to bring us to a level where we must face each other as two of a kind? .... His own verdit of guilty stands between us, not mine. (135)

Her greatness lies in the fact that with all her suspicions, pretence and isolation, she is prepared to adopt Judith's child because she feels that it is as much her husband's baby too, and would bring her husband back to her. She sends her husband to Judith and he brings her the news of Judith's miserable condition and her willingness to allow them to adopt the baby. Soon Judth dies peacefully with the satisfaction that the welfare of her baby is assured.

However the arrival of Judith in their life brings into Mrs. Bentley a frantic desire to possess Mr.Bentley because she is dependent on him out and out. "I' m a fungus or parasite whose life depends on his. He throws me off and I dry and wither. My pride is gone" (199)

Being very ill and suffering, Mrs. Bentley gets a nightmare wherein her hands are tied and someone is stealing hay from the stable.

The dream is highly symbolic, as she wakes up only to find her husband locked in a room with Judith. Her hands are now really tied for she is helpless and unable to question her propriety of the situation wherein her husband, her hay, has been unjustly stolen from her at a time when she is very sick and put on sedative. Her illness not so much physical as psychosomatic is the external symptom of her inner fear of Judith, fear resulting from her painful awareness that Judith might take her husband away. (Parameswari 97-98)

The real tragedy of As For the Me and My House, the aspect of which creates such intense loneliness and suffering for Mrs. Bentley, is her dependency on her husband and her belief that it is somehow her fault that Mr. Bentley does not desire her. She hopes that her husband would somehow change and would desire her, but when he does not, she takes the blame on herself:

I've comforted myself too, trying to be a good wife, seeing religiously that his socks were always darned, his books in order, his dinner hot. But it was all wrong comfort and routine were the last things he needed. Instead, he ought to have been out mingling with his own kind. He ought to have whetted himself against them, then gone off to fight it out alone. He ought to have had the opportunity to live, to be reckless, spendthrift, bawdy, anything but what he is, what I've made him. (108)

This passage reveals that Mrs. Bentley is not sure of what Mr.Bentley is, what his own-kind is indeed. She feels that she is personally responsible for Mr.Bentley's unhappiness and his unsatisfied married life. Therefore she tries her best to be his best wife with the hope that her efforts will make Mr.Bentley realize his worth.

The first and foremost thing that Mrs. Bentley does to prove her worth as a good companion and suitable wife is to sacrifice her career as an artist. She did it because every dutiful wife is expected to do so in a male dominated society. Both Mr. and Mrs. Bentley met and got engaged at a concert and thus art became the "Key stone" (Godard 55). Mrs.Bentley knows well that Mr.Bentley dreams of a happy married life by encouraging her husband's talent as an artist, first by getting him oils and urging him to paint and then by saving money to move out of the small town, Horizon, Saskatchewan.

Becoming the guardian of Mr.Bentley's artistry is another attempt by which Mrs.Bentley tries to ascertain her place in Mr.Bentley's life. At times she is resigned to the reality that Mr.Bentley would never love her with the same intensity as she loves him. She believes that if she makes herself useful, he will, at the very least grow to appreciate her more.

After recovering from her illness Mrs.Bentley begins to ponder over the meaning of the term "growth" as it prevails in the world of male prerogatives. When a man is grown up, the woman means nothing to him but when the woman is grown up she clings more and more to him. In this sense a woman is never really grown up. Mrs. Bentley questions herself. "Am I the one who is never grown up? Who can`t see life for illusions (164) Her life

is certainly an illusion because she has all along taken the hypocrite of a man for her husband and served him slavishly. This line of reasoning is however, momentary with Mrs. Bentley. She soon decides that she would neither accuse Mr.Bentley, nor let him know what she saw, that is Judih and Mr. Bentley getting locked together in his room. She is extremely cautious in executing this plan of hers. She blames only Judith for her love offair with Mr.Bentley because she knows that "to pity her would have been to condemn him "(193)," who is her partner in the sin which she can never do.

Mrs. Bentley knows that he will never forgive her for having forgiven him, and they can never face each other again without fear, distrust and antagonism. Now that he is going to have a son through Judith, without knowing that she knows it, there might be a total change in him with his fatherhood, as he anticipates: "for his son's sake he will be worthy of himself" (203), she hopes. Then she has her usual consolation: her husband is not an ordinary man to be judged by commonplace standards, he is an artrist racked with passion… for seeking, creating, adventuring"(166) which accommodates his love for Judith. If Judith was not there " another time somebody else will be there"(171).

Mrs. Bentley is very much concerned about her husband. She is thoughtful of him. But her indifferent husband shows her his next fold of treachery. He is guilty, no doubt but tries to equalize her with him by pointing out that she too is guilty. When she makes a casual reference to Paul Kirbly, their family friend, he wantonly misinterprets and contemptuously tells her "Why not get your mind off Paul and remember you're a married woman "(176) "He suspects her of gallivanting about in the company of Paul when she had been to Mrs. Wilson" (Parameswari 198). When she innocently asks him why Paul has not visited them for long he sarcastically replies: "I'd say that's the one for you to answer" (174)

The climatic point of his infidelity is the scene when she plays the piano in the midst of the play given by the Ladies Aid of the Church. As she rehearses the piano he distances himself. Her excellent performance, after long days of strenuous practice is her symbolic gesture to win back his love "to come a little closure, make him stop and look at me again" (185), the desparate attempt of a weak and submissive woman to strengthen the basic structure of her dilapidated home. Mr.Bentley's response, however, freezes her. With his characteristic cynicism he tells her, "you must be satisfied now. " He stings her venomously once more saying "the poor fool (he means Paul) was going to prostrate himself" (190), an exaggerated version of a jealous and guilty male. The fragile woman frantically explains that she played only for him, her husband, and not for Paul. However the aggressive and dominating male once again stings her with words and accuses her of infidelity: she at last pounces on him with her knowledge of his secret: "Your baby…your's, she shrieks. In response the man coolly asks her " you were with her then – and she told you – "(214). She steals herself away, afraid of admitting what she had done.

Indeed the entire novel is permeated with Mrs.Bentley's aching sarrow in trying to win her husband's attention and love. She undergoes a world of suffering silently in the

hands of her husband, for being a woman. In Adrienne Rich's, Of Woman Born and in Susan Griffith's Woman and Nature it is the silence of the women that is so shattering. "The women know that it is a dreadful proposition to give up one's life for the sake of one's family and one's mate and thus lose oneself in the process of caring for and tending the others" (qtd.in Shange and Tate 112) Mrs. Bentley is certainly the case of a woman losing her identity in the process of her faithfull and dutriful service to her husband. And certainly the fears and frustrations of Mrs. Bentley are the result of her "clinical depressions" as pointed out by critics and referred to by Mitchell in Ross 1987, 266.

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