

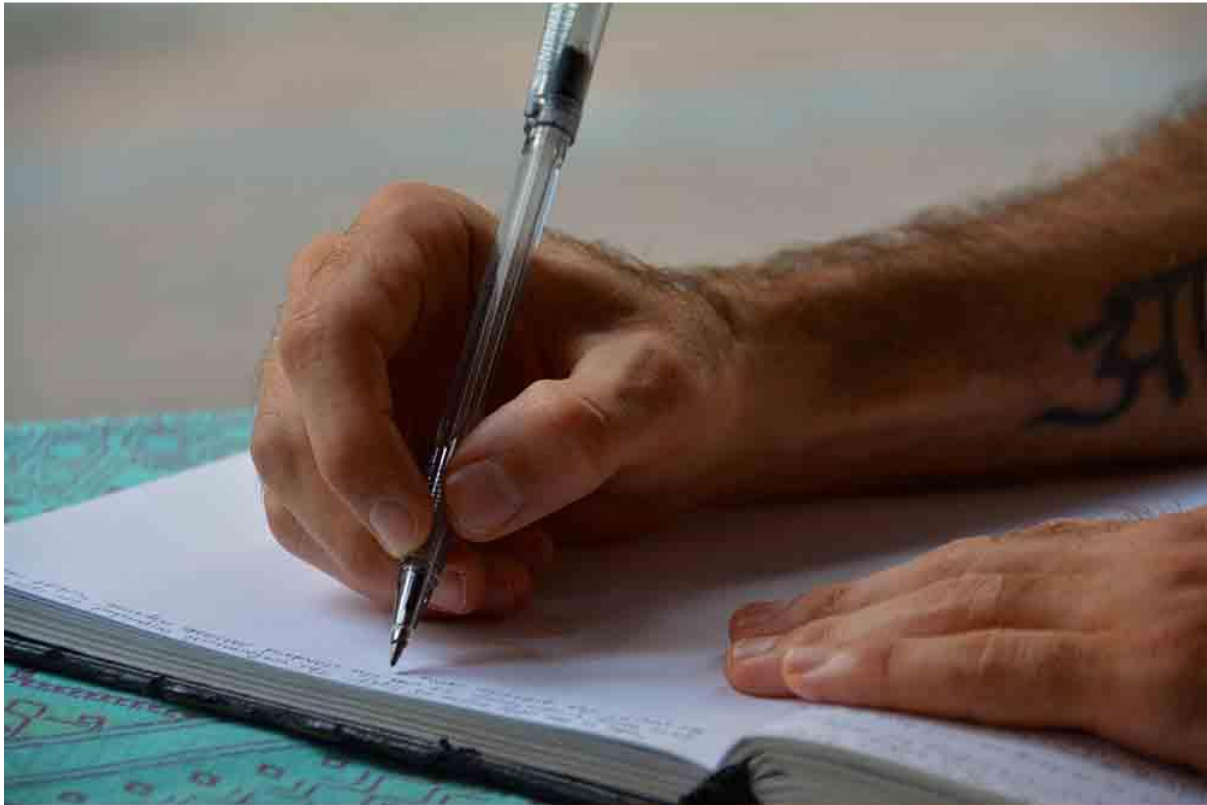
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Redefining Women's Sexuality: Isadora in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*

Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir encapsulated an argument in her classic analysis of women, *The Second Sex* that sets the tone for contemporary feminism: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (273). Feminist theory has recurrently voiced its concerns regarding women's sexuality and their subjugation on this account. Women's sexuality has always been excluded as mysterious or insignificant. Feminist writers argue that such depictions of women's sexuality, desire and fantasies have been man made. Since women and their sexuality was confounded, objectified and commercialised in a mainstream hegemonic/patriarchal set up, feminists across the globe promoted a peep into female sexuality from a female point of view. This led to a movement that demanded an autonomous right of women to own their bodies as they are. "The female body", according to Jasbir Jain "is controlled by patriarchal morality, and by the roles of wifehood and motherhood. Thus any attempt to seek selfhood or project subjectivity, or to work towards self-expression and freedom, has to work through the body" (119). With the advent of sexual revolution, women writers like Erica Jong refuted the male views about women and tried to rewrite the traditional stereotypes associated with women.

Keywords: Female Sexuality, Patriarchy, Desire, Écriture Feminine

Poet, novelist and essayist, Erica Jong is an American author best known for her debut novel *Fear of Flying*. She has written eight novels, eight collections of poems, two nonfiction works, and a mid-life memoir, titled *Fear of Fifty*. She has also written a book on Henry Miller namely *The Devil at Large*. Jong, born and brought up in New York City was born of parents who were artists themselves. Jong deals with female subjectivity in most of her novels and makes her stand clear in deconstructing the socially constructed notions of femininity.

Jong's revolutionary novel *Fear of Flying* celebrates female sexuality for its power and supposed capacity to escape the structures of dominance and subordination. Luce Irigaray, French feminist initiated various responses within the realm of feminist discourse. In her work, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, she asserts that psychoanalysis conceptualises female sexuality from a masculine point of view and thus reproduces the norms of patriarchy in a phallus centered discourse. According to Irigaray, enhancing and re-evaluating the female body and female sexuality makes it a site of liberation. In "Feminism, Marxism and the State: An Agenda for Theory", Catherine Mackinnon maintains that gender is a socio-political concept and hence the definition of female and male within this framework results in gender inequality. She further argues that sexuality is the basis of male domination. For her, sexuality "is a form of power". She writes,

Gender, as socially constructed embodies it, ... Women and men are divided by gender, made into sexes we know them, by the social requirements of heterosexuality, which institutionalises male sexual dominance and female sexual submission". If this is true, sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality. (Kendall and Martino 13)

Patriarchy plays an important role in the construction of female sexuality. The patriarchal society is the prime impediment to women's development as it propagates the entrenched notion of gender polarisation, that is, male sexuality is active and female sexuality passive. Patriarchy thus confines women by putting the reins on their sexuality. It thus becomes inevitable that women strike back by writing on tabooed subjects like sexuality and gain a break through. Helene Cixous in her essay "The Laugh of Medusa" established an entirely new concept called *écriture féminine*. The objective was to raise female voice against the commodification of female body. She asserts women writers to write their body and bodily experiences and thereby celebrate womanhood. Frustrated with the conformist and stereotyped depiction of female sexuality, female authors including Jong followed the method advocated by Cixous and in full swing started defining female sexuality in their own terms.

The women's liberation movement and sexual revolution of the 1970s initiated discussions on women and their sexuality. Conversations about the carnal desires of women and discussions on female sexuality from a female point of view started appearing in discourses. Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* was one of the most significant theoretical reassessments of the female body. Greer in her polemical work maintains that women must recognize and accept their body. She maintained that only a woman can explain how her body works, what she feels and thinks.

Ann Koedt in her essay "The Myth of Vaginal Orgasm" contends that women must rewrite their body and sexuality by eliminating the ideas formed for the benefits of androcentric world. Erica Jong's novel adheres to all these views as she charts herself into the conflicts and rebellions of the late 1960s while expressing herself through Isadora. Women writers are often slandered by associating their characters to their own life. Their gendered identity often becomes a stumbling block to self-realisation. This happens both in the case of Erica Jong and her spokesperson Isadora.

Fear of Flying, published in 1973, detonated American sexual consciousness by presenting Isadora Zelda White Stollerman Wing and her uninhibited sexuality/sexual liberation. Erica Jong in her semi-autobiographical saga ventures into describing the desire of Isadora to fly free in quest of joy and her own true self. Isadora, the narrator protagonist of the novel is a 29 year old poet, who has published two books of erotic poetry and is struggling to find her own voice and identity in a patriarchal set up. Jong uses her brazen protagonist Isadora's adventures in and outside marriage with shocking depiction of sexual acts, obscene words and protruding female gaze at male bodies to debunk the stereotypical construction of women's sexuality. Isadora's quest for emancipation and autonomy is meant "to discover and nurture her authentic self through lived experience for self-realization" (Beauvoir 295). By invoking imaginations of faceless/bodiless lovers and discovering the term "zipless fuck", Isadora explored alternate ways of life, in which a woman can embrace the identity of a wife, mother, student, and a lover. She imagined and glorified a life in which sexual craving could be directed towards different people.

The novel begins on an aircraft, where Isadora along with her husband Bennet Wing is headed to Vienna. On reaching Vienna, Isadora happens to meet an English psychoanalyst Dr. Adrian Goodlove and decides to get into an adulteress relationship with him. Her voyages with Adrian across West Europe and other places make her have self-revelation of her purpose, her sexuality and her creative faculty. She started reviewing and redefining her attitudes regarding the societal norms in a patriarchal society that are detrimental to a woman. The quote that opens the first chapter sets the tone for the entire novel: "Bigamy is having one husband too many. Monogamy is the same" (Jong 5). The quote by an anonymous author outwardly expresses Isadora's nonchalant views on her own problems. As Isadora puts it "there were 117 psychoanalysts on the Pan Am flight to Vienna and I'd been treated by at least six of them. And married a seventh" (5). Isadora's inner monologue presents her literal

and symbolic fear of flying and her lifelong struggle with them. As the novel progresses, we find Isadora in the midst of her own conflicts as a writer and as a woman. As Erica Jong remarks, “Patriarchy in this country stunts women and their ambitions. Women are kept down in this society. It's her acceptance of her secondary status that keeps her there...” (Gutman, Interview). Isadora wishes to transcend the conventional situations and experience liberation of her own on one hand, but on the other she is bothered about the societal norms.

Erica Jong through Isadora and her sexuality, marital and extramarital relationships display a constant struggle against the double standards of the society. Approaches on sexual experiences/desires/fantasies of a woman from a woman's point of view were new in the world of literature. Jong uses Isadora to advise young independent writers especially women to write about their desires and fantasies. She maintains that patriarchal power structures have always controlled women by putting the reins of women's sexuality, which is an important aspect of individual selfhood. Traveling throughout Europe with Adrian, a stranger whom she met at the conference, Isadora discovers her true self through her complete loss of security. She is able to discover her hidden potentials through her relationship with Adrian.

The title *Fear of Flying* refers to Isadora's literal fear of flying as penned in the first chapter and also to the fear of breaking the conventional norms of the society. Isadora provides insights into the social conditioning of women, especially on grounds of their sexuality in the first chapter itself. Dr. Raymond Schrift plays a pivotal role in psychologically moulding (rather misguiding) her concepts of sexuality. In an analysis session with Dr. Schrift Isadora reveals she was “starving to death in penance for having finger - fucked on her parents living room couch” (7). Dr. Schrift insisted “that the horse I was dreaming about was my father and that my periods would return only if I accept being a woman” (7). Dr. Smucker, in another psycho analytic session claims Isadora's broken leg in her dreams represents her “mutilated genital”(11). He further says “You always wanted to

have a penis and now you feel guilty that you have deliberately broken your leg so that you can have the pleasure of the cast” (11). Their views were based on Freud’s view of women as “incomplete man” and his concept of “penis envy” or “lack”. Women are frequently mediated on the assumption of their biological deficiency, that is, having penis envy and to cure this deficiency they should enter into marital relationship.

Though woman is defined in terms of her sexuality and subordinated on this account, she is never allowed to enjoy her sexuality. Isadora is not allowed to have absolute control over her sexuality. Her views on her sexuality were indoctrinated by various psychoanalysts like Dr. Schiffrin, Dr. Kohler, Dr. Harvey and others who vehemently followed Freud and treated her on various occasions. This psychological conditioning usurped from Isadora her power and control over her body. Isadora lacked proper guidance in her puberty stage. Her so called bohemian mother was incapable to clear her fears, doubts and anxieties about the female body, which experiences much change during this period. Her mother who enjoyed a liberal life in her youth opted not to talk about sex to her daughters. As she puts it:

Sex. I was terrified of the tremendous power it had over me. the energy, the excitement, the power to make me feel totally crazy!...I sensed, despite her (Judith, Isadora’s mother) bohemian talk, that she disapproved of sex, that it was basically unmentionable...I was furious with my mother for not teaching me how to be a woman, for not teaching me how to make peace between the raging hunger in my cunt and the hunger in my head. (211 - 212)

Social, Cultural and psychological outlooks have profound effects on how male and female grow up in a society. She learned about female sexuality from the works written by male authors like D.H Lawrence. However, Isadora’s desires to break free the gender stereotypes is visible when she says “ I remembered myself travelling abroad with my parents as a teenager and always trying to pretend they weren’t with me” (8). Gender stereotypes denote the

psychological traits and behaviours that are thought to take place with differential frequency in the two gender groups.

In the 'Afterword' to the novel Jong comments:

Isadora wants love, but how can she recognise love when the madness of sex is blinding her? She is wildly ambitious yet her romantic fantasies are forever getting in her way. She wants to break away from her parents, she wants to find herself - and yet she is driven by family forces she can't fully comprehend. She wants to break free of all restraints but she keeps getting caught by new versions of the same old traps. She runs away from one man's tyranny only to fall into the tyranny of another...She desperately wants to be a writer but can't sit still. (428)

Jong's Isadora and her reactions and opinions towards the socially conceived notions of female body and its reproductive functions make her a 'subject' who challenges her 'object' position. Jong, like other feminist writers of the 1970s felt their body as a secret that is never discussed. Isadora's impression that those sentiments are too private and cloistered is demolished when she is described as struggling to learn the anatomy of her body in front of a bathroom mirror, to find out as much of her hidden body. As the novel progresses, Isadora interrogates the social implication associated with the reproductive function of female body. Isadora is not prepared to conceive after experiencing the sacrifices made by her mother, an artist herself, in order to bring them up.

Isadora tries to prove that femininity does not depend on motherhood. Jong's writing deconstructs the patriarchal glorification of motherhood and presents a new aspect female identity. She declares that a woman can achieve satisfaction even without having children. Having children, in her opinion, should be a choice and not an accidental conception. For Isadora, it was like marrying the same husband forever. Jong portrays Isadora in sharp

contrast to her sister Randy “taking up pregnancy as it were a new art form she has invented” (205). She even thinks that once her periods stopped because she didn’t want to be a woman.

What could be the reason my periods stopped? A mystery. Because I don’t want to be a woman. Because it is too confusing. Because Shaw says you can’t be an artist and a woman. Having babies uses you up, he says. And I want to be an artist. That’s all I ever wanted. (216)

Isadora also deconstructs the passive, docile, submissive definition of female sexuality by narrating her sexual experiences with her first boyfriend, first husband Brian, her second husband Bennet, her lover Adrian and also her sexual encounters with men from different realms of the society. Her marriage with Brian, the most exciting person turned out to be the greatest disappointment of her life. Isadora gets easily frustrated with domestic housekeeping and pursuing her master thesis, when Brian spends his time at work. In addition, sex gradually vanishes from their relationship leaving Isadora dissatisfied. Isadora finds herself less seductive to get the attention of her husband. However she claims that she has become a marriage veteran by the age of twenty two instead of calling herself a victim of an unhappy marriage.

Isadora’s discovery of the “zipless fuck” and penchant for sexual relation with faceless lovers was revolutionary in approach. Isadora fantasies the zipless fuck as the most “purest” thing as it gave prime importance to freedom and equality. To her, it was an autonomous way of achieving physical and spiritual satisfaction. She went on imagining herself having spontaneous sexual relations with Professors, writers, book reviewers and others. It shows that her fantasy derives from her obsession with reading, writing and having imaginary affairs with writers and heroes from the books she read. Brian often finds himself impotent with his wife and Isadora faces problems of marital rape when Brian attempts to prove his manhood. Isadora narrates:

He wanted to show me his power. He wanted to prove he could satisfy me. He hadn't screwed men in about six weeks, but now he wouldn't stop. He fucked me like a machine, refusing to succumb to an orgasm himself but urging me to come again and again and again. After the first three times I was sore and wanted to stop but he wouldn't. He kept banging away at me like an ax murderer. (276)

Isadora throws like at women being victimised within the institution of marriage. Unlike the conventional representation of woman, Isadora does not endure this situation. Her relationship with Brian deprived her of a life of her own. She thus abandons him in order to lead a free life. She is bold enough to enough to tell Adrian "I divorced my first husband principally because he was crazy" (116).

Isadora's relationship with her second husband Bennet and her lover Adrian is also problematic due to her lack of resistance and indecisiveness. Jong breaks the socially constructed image of ideal womanhood when she describes Isadora enjoying sex with both male bodies. Isadora's sexual relationship portrays woman's sexual liberation and woman's freedom from the clutches of patriarchal power structures. Breaking the convention of male gaze on female body, Jong represents a female gaze on male body. She portrays man as a sexual object in her work. Isadora states: "the best thing about making love with a new man after all those years of marriage was rediscovering a man's body. One's husband's body was practically one's own. Everything about it was known. All the smells and tastes of it, the lines, the hairs, the birthmarks" (122). Adrian fails in making love to her as he is overshadowed by her sexual energy. She is thus abandoned by Adrian. Here Jong breaks the conventions of women's sexuality being passive by Adrian an "eternal limp prick".

Isadora, the protagonist in *Fear of Flying* articulates female desires, ambitions and a longing for personal liberation with a clear political message. Through Isadora, Erica Jong

questions the cultural role of women in 1970s. Jong defied the androcentric mainstream writing that used women's bodies in their work only to gratify a male oriented pleasure. Isadora becomes a strong voice against the conventional notions of psychoanalysis on female sexuality. Patriarchal definition of female sexuality as passive is revisited by challenging the strictly constructed hierarchical relationship between men and women. Jong and Isadora have been embraced as liberators, corrupters; teachers...have been banned and burned. Writing the female body is a mode of resistance for writers like Jong, since it is a male preserve and a tool propagating patriarchy.

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