

## LABYRINTH OF INNER TURMOIL IN SONIA FALEIRO'S THE GIRL

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A new voice on the horizon of Indo-Anglian literature is that of Sonia Faleiro. A talented and promising writer among the new breed of writers, Sonia is a journalist and fiction writer based in Mumbai. In her maiden novel *The Girl* (2006), she has portrayed the torment and anguish of a lost soul yearning for love and security.

*The Girl* is a sensitive story of a young girl in search of life's essential bonds that are missing in her life. Lonely and alienated, she is inclined towards inwardness, which further distances her from the life around her.

The identity of the protagonist *The Girl* is not disclosed; throughout the novel an aura of mystery surrounds her. She is any girl who has faced much misfortune and loss in life. The effect that such pain has on her psyche is also dealt with in great detail by the author. Influenced to a great extent by the author's personal preferences, *The Girl* is a novel revealing Faleiro's own feelings of loss and pain when living in Edinburgh away from her family. The use of the macabre and gruesome like the sadistic tendencies of the *Girl* also reveal the author's love of Japanese horror movies and the works of Agatha Christie. She herself accepts this fact, "I think one always puts a little bit of oneself in one's books, just like a fingerprint."<sup>2</sup>

*The Girl* is a labyrinth of the inner turmoils of the *Girl*. Being a woman herself Faleiro has very vividly and sensitively revealed the inner workings of the *Girl*, her insecurities, her pain, and her feelings of loss and betrayal. The novel is in fact a rude reminder to our pre-occupied senses regarding the breakdown of relationships and the familial structure as an aftermath of modernization. The Indian society and psyche which has always thrived on the sound base structure of family and relationships is slowly crumbling down, giving rise to such modern ailments as alienation which was hitherto heard of in our society. Erich Fromm considered the concept of alienation as "a mode of experience in which a person experiences himself as an alien."<sup>3</sup> And the worst affected are the WOMEN.

The novel which starts with the burial scene of the *Girl* moves forward mainly in the narrative of Luke, Luke and Simon, the two main characters apart from the *Girl* were an important part of her life, one her lover, and the other her admirer and friend. Her sudden decision to end her life leaves both of them shocked and searching for answers. Through their narrative they sketch the life of the *Girl* in flashback technique from the moment the *Girl* arrived in Azul. Later the recovery of the *Girl*'s journal by Simon throws a better and clear perspective on the *Girl*, her life and thoughts. A collective narrative by the characters which forms the basis of the novel provides a panoramic view of life in a remote village in Goa, its local colour, laid-back attitude and rustic fatalism.

"An off-shoot of the religious outlook is fatalism which appears to have given Indians the ego strength to maintain equanimity even in the face of unpleasant happenings." Death looms large throughout the novel, enhancing its melancholic mood. The *Girl*'s life takes a turn towards loneliness and pain after her mother dies in an accident. Alone and without any company she also loses her home when her grandmother dies. Having no other option she comes to Azul referred to as the 'village of the dead'. Death overshadows life in the coastal village of Azul. "There is not one in Azul who has not been denied a beloved too young, too soon." It is a part of their lives, which they take with an attitude of non-challenge. Death is pre-eminent yet its presence is ignored, but not here in Azul for death is not an end but also a chance of a fresh threshold to start anew. "In Goa, so much is left to the Lord that living thus is an easy task. Homage to death is as routine an experience as an afternoon meal. "The *Girl* embraces death as a means to get release from her painful life, from fate, from dreariness, but re-assures Simon in her journal, "It is not the end for me or you. It is the beginning." As W.B. Yeats has pointed out in *Byzantium*: "I Call it death-in-life and life-in-death."

The *Girl* embracing death resembles Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* who because of the fierce turmoil ranging in her subconscious welcomes the storm with pleasure and feels in it the source of both the agony and the ecstasy. Along with a sense of pain and dissolution, there hangs a feeling of intense insecurity,

the insecurity of finding completion in oneself. Women in traditional societies like India have always identified themselves with the roles they play in society as complementary to man. The 'self' is always associated with the 'others', the family, the relations, and the man. It is a crutch we all hang on to desperately, and when this crutch, this support breaks down we become totally lost and terrified.

Now, Maria, Rosy, Daisy and Petunia feel like guests in their own home, unsure of the kitchen entrance or the exit door. They sit uneasily in their garden, sewing, drinking tea, weeping soundless tears to fill the empty space left behind by a beloved husband and father.

Death, tragedy, pain betrayal and loss are the main themes that run throughout the novel. Yet the author's control of her art, her excellent craftsmanship in telling a tale saves the story from plunging to the depths of dark gloominess. The deep insight of the author into the troubled and tortured soul of the Girl, her anguished psyche is presented in such a delicate manner that it touches a raw nerve in the heart.

The 'intense psychic struggle' of the Girl's character forms the basis of the novel. Her character is shown to have sadistic tendencies as is evident from her childhood attempts at self-mutilation. Given to extreme mood swings and inwardness, she is a lonely child not having any friends or much social contact. The death of her mother further alienates her and from this point onwards her life becomes a saga of pain and loss. She is not able to form any relationships that could give meaning to her otherwise empty life. Sunday church and, visits to Simon's store to encourage his endeavours, are the only social contact she maintains. The void in which she lives her life is momentarily filled with love and security when she falls in love with Luke. But betrayal pushes her back deeper inside the void. When Luke first deserts her, her basic instinct of self preservation helps her to overcome the loss; for as stated earlier in the novel, "... when you have nothing left to lose you are finally freed of the terror of losing it." (16). The Girl does manage to survive only to succumb forever in the end. "What does one do when rejected not once but twice by someone who purports love with a pair of kind eyes that you know cannot tell a lie?"

The extreme effect that pain and loss has had on her psyche is evident from the fact that she is unable to see hope even in her child. The pain that she has suffered, the loneliness that has been her personal inheritance, she refuses to pass on to her child. In her death she wishes that, if her child be buried separately then it should be in:

... good company, among the rarefied of Azul, between uncles and grandparents she will never have, and beautiful babies with names like Celia Maria de Alvares-Rego, 'aged nine and a half months, beloved to her family, now returning to the grace of God.' That would be very nice.

The fear psychosis, which works inside the Girl owing largely to her loneliness, makes her a very terrified person. The sound of the sea, an unexpected knock at the door feels her with dread and fear of the unknown. Her loneliness slowly gnawing at the very core of her soul makes her paranoid.

My childhood home on the Rua de Amelia Barreto is no more. Mere wreckage of forgotten lives amidst palm trees and overripe fruit. From where I sit, staring at the emptiness of the sea, there is no one but me. It is unbearable, this utter loneliness.

Throughout the novel the Girl is unable to compromise and adjust her life to a life of loneliness. She is horrified of it, and her situation gradually becomes even more pathetic with the progress of her story. She keeps yearning for attention and love: I am waiting. Waiting to be able to move from this room to another in anticipation of finding someone who looks forward to talking to me. Who will laugh gladly when I pull their arm and distract their eyes away from their work, saying to them with petulance, with a smile: 'Listen to me!' This, in short, simple, sad tongue, is what I most wish for.

Even in her death she yearns for love and remembrance. "Like most people, I want to be found." Thomas Gray has beautifully depicted the desire of a dying man in his widely admired poem *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*:

For who, to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,  
This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,  
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,  
Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?

The love and security that her mother had meant for her, she is unable to find in her lonely life again, not even in her love with Luke or her friendship with Simon. In her death she hopes to ultimately find it again. "... she is there in her beautiful heaven and,

it does not matter what words you call me, I am going to her." The womb represents the ultimate security and to its secure warmth the lost child wants to return through her death. Even the chapter in which the Girl's last words are recorded from her journal points out this fact by its symbolical heading 'Going Home'.

The inner turmoils of the Girl's heart that has been so delicately laid bare in the novel deals with the wounds inflicted by the barbs of loneliness, depression, betrayal and loss. According to Karthik: "Behind the veneer of beautiful writing and classy production, the story The Girl tells is nothing new. One girl, two men, unrequited love."<sup>5</sup> But the way Faleiro delves deep into the heart of this tortured girl with so much sensitivity and insight, she in fact brings the character, her life and her misery alive on the pages, which affects us with its poignancy. As Rashmi Vasudeva in her review remarks : "The descriptions pull you inside The Girl's tortured mind and take you into her soul, torn asunder by betrayal, endless hope and an ethereal fear of living."<sup>6</sup>

Life is not a bed of roses, we have all heard. Happiness and sorrow are both integral to it. But when pain and sorrow completely obliterates all hope and joy from life, it becomes difficult to live. Tragedy is a part of life but yet, "... it is still too hard for most of us to bear."

How we face our demons and bring peace to our internal turmoils depends entirely on our individual preferences and capabilities. The misfortunes that the Girl faces in her life might not be anything new but how the author has dealt with her situation with such finesse is. To quote from Faleiro herself:

I think different people deal differently with loss. And 'The Girl' is really about loneliness and the extent that some of us will go to overcome it. That's the purpose for the suicide by the protagonist - the feeling that she could not overcome loss; that she could not be alone again. It's a feeling that sometimes all of us feel.<sup>7</sup>

A dark and gloomy picture of contemporary society hell bent on sucking out the very life of its people with its modern day malaises of alienation, and loss of relationships, The Girl is the story of an individual trapped in her tower of isolation and despair grasping desperately for freedom, and yearning instead for a bondage of love and relationships that secure us to our life. According to Grace Stuart:

There is Heaven when one goes out to one's neighbour and Hell when one turns back to oneself. Hell is a state of being without affectionate relationship. One may go through circle after circle of Dante's Inferno, down and down, and although there are always crowds, there is never relationship.

In this highly degenerated pluralistic society of ours bonds of human relationships, though quite fragile in their experience, are valuable and sacred.

#### **Reference:**

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6. RashmiVasudeva, "An inward looking tale" <http://www.deccanherald/mar122006/books1112532006310.asp> (16 November 2006).
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