



RECOGNISING THE SPACE AND POWER OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN CHARLES BUKOWSKI'S POST OFFICE AND FACTOTUM: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE.

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Abstract

No other writer has depicted women characters so extensively and comprehensively in his/her writing as Charles Bukowski. It is done in his writings honestly and loyally as per the societal, cultural, political and economic change in America. During his time there was a rapid cultural change in the world more particularly in America. Especially, the second wave of feminist movement was in high pitch that too in America. The women writers and feminist thinkers were voicing against gender discrimination and demanding for equality and liberty in other sense space and power in all the spheres of human life. The novels chosen for the study are the products of that period i.e., 70s of the twentieth century. In connection to this background, the present paper makes an attempt to showcase how Bukowski tried to locate the space and power of woman in different perspective with reference to his first two novels: Post Office and Factotum. He did it with his honesty to explore the reality of American society and to spread his humanitarian light on women society.

Keywords: Charles Bukowski, gender discrimination, space and power, honesty.

Introduction

There is a penetrative and severe critique on Bukowski's writing that has been concerned more often to his portrayal and treatment of women characters. It is, more than ninety percent either from feminists or from academic circle only. His delineation of women characterisation triggers these classes to condemn and defame him without knowing the changing cultural factors in which he lived. During his time there was a rapid cultural change in the world more particularly in America. Especially, the second wave of feminist movement was in high pitch that too in America. The women writers and feminist thinkers were voicing against gender discrimination and demanding for equality and liberty in other sense space and power of women in all the spheres of human life. The novels chosen for the study were the products of that period i.e., 70s of the twentieth century. In connection to this background, the present paper makes an attempt to showcase how Bukowski tried to locate the space and power of women with reference to his first two novels: Post Office and Factotum. This paper opines that it is the fact, that it is possible only by the writers like Charles Bukowski undergone such experiences. Because, he has been from the lower strata of American society and, experienced a lot of exploitation. He tried to highlight women characters in his writings with reference to space and power. He did it with his honesty to explore the reality in American society and to spread his humanitarian light on women society. So it is not right and relevant to degrade him by calling misogynist. Of course it is his greatness and open mind naming himself as 'dirty old man.' Earlier to the feminist movements woman was sexually objectified and curbed into pieces in male dominated society. To show how Bukowski's writings provided her space and power and to teach a lesson to male dominated society in home and workplaces this paper goes on to contextualise the three different episodes with three female characters and Henry Chinaski, the protagonist of these two novels: Post Office and Factotum.

Charles Bukowski's Portrayal of Women in 70s.

The writings of Charles Bukowski in 70s of twentieth century was quiet different as far as portrayal of women characters are concerned. In reaction to Bukowski's early work, one writer wrote hyperbolically but with some justification:

Bukowski's antics with women, his thoughts about them, are one vast and sniggering cliché. He has nothing to tell us about them because, I'm convinced, he knows nothing about them (e.g., "the ladies



will always be the same.") and is determined at this point not to learn. They are a dirty joke to him, a dirty joke on him. Inside the web of his booze-bull-and-broad exploits lurks a demon sexual jingoist, erupting and irrupting in self-punishing concatenations; hostile, frustrated, pugilistic—fearful of the role into which (he thinks) one is cast by fate of genitalia. (Harrison, 1994:183)

Even though such a characterization is no longer valid in latter days, it represents an early response to the work of Bukowski. However, his portrayal of women has changed significantly and predominantly during and after the second wave of feminist movement. The 1970's was an important period for this change and this article centres on the novels written during this period of just four years between *Post Office* (1971) and *Factotum* (1975). In these novels there was an increased subtlety of characterization, related to a more nuanced treatment of women characters and less reliance on stereotypical thinking. In *Sexual Politics* Kate Millett provides a useful context for such a discussion. There, she places the women's movement in a historical context and develops categories for the analysis of male dominated society's views of women in literature. She convincingly debates that women were rarely depicted objectively by modern male authors who were the prisoners of myth and of a puritanical view of sexuality in which a woman, by virtue of her interest and enjoyment of sex was seen as perverse or defiled. She notes that the period of 1930–1970 represented a counter-revolutionary period with respect to women's equality and liberty. This is important in any discussion of Bukowski's writings. Especially these two novels, *Post Office* and *Factotum* which were written and published in the middle of the "second wave" of women's liberation movement.

Charles Bukowski in *Post Office* and *Factotum* has depicted a numerous of women characters through the relationships with Henry Chinaski. Indeed, one of the reasons that "thoughtful female readers find no chance whatsoever to positively identify with the female characters" is that women are dare and very independent in having connections with Henry Chinaski. By the time of second wave of feminist movement Bukowski came to change his depiction of women and sexual relationships gradually changed from unpolished descriptions of events and flat women characters to more rounded female characters who had lives outside the trajectory of Henry Chinaski.

Space and Power of Women in Post Office

There are major and minor female characters in the novel *Post Office*. Major female characters are Betty, Joyce, Vi, Mary Lou and Fay – all of them have relationships with Chinaski during the story. The minor female characters are a big woman, a mail receiver who grabs the letter, Mercia, etc. all these have exhibited their space and power in different perspectives. This paper intends to spread light on two events of such women characters with reference to *Post Office*. It is Bukowski's first novel, and in it, he describes two events that, due to their briefness and female power, could be compared to the most chauvinist ones in the works of Henry Miller another American writer. One episode of the novel is of big woman in the beginning of *Post Office* in which Chinaski says how she seduces him sexually and exhibits her sexual space and physical power,

I think it was my second day as a Christmas temp that this big woman came out and walked around with me as I delivered letters. What I mean by big was that her ass was big and her tits were big and that she was big in all the right places. She seemed a bit crazy but I kept looking at her body and I didn't care.

She talked and talked and talked. Then it came out. Her husband was an officer on an island far away and she got lonely, you know, and lived in this little house in back all by herself.

"What little house?" I asked.

She wrote the address on a piece of paper.

"I'm lonely too," I said, "I'll come by and we'll talk tonight."

I was shacked but the shackjob was gone half the time, off somewhere, and I was lonely all right. I was lonely for that big ass standing beside me.

"All right," she said, "see you tonight." (*Post Office*, 13-14)



As Chinaski says the woman was a good one in all respects, but after the 3rd or 4th night he began to lose interest and didn't visit again.

Here, in the opening pages of Bukowski's debut novel, the woman is objectified outwardly in the utter terms. Further she is shown as mentally troubled, the assailant on mail carrier and unfaithful to her husband. But even in such a crude and simplistic depiction, there are hints of a subtle dynamism. It also shows that her apparently unambiguous infidelity, a reason for her behaviour is suggested. Her husband is away, and ready to give back the price for the exploitation and oppression given her in the past by male dominated society. The behaviour repeated by Chinaski is that he soon stops seeing the woman. It indicates that a woman is not weak or looser of grabbing opportunity but to show how she is powerful to get space she wants and how powerful fulfil her desires. This is what Bukowski tried to convey to the readers in general and more particularly to American society. Here Charles Bukowski unravels his two purposes: direct and indirect. Direct purpose is that woman, sociologically weaker, cannot sustain any kind of discrimination and exploitation and ready to explode at any moment. Indirect is that of working class another weaker section can explode against discrimination and exploitation.

Power and Aggressiveness of Mail Receiver in Post Office

In the same novel after the above episode and a few pages further along, Chinaski was to deliver a register post to a woman who grabs a registered letter without signing for it and enters into her house. Her act was completely a violation of public rules of postal department and also damaging the personal life of mail carrier. Chinaski then attempts to retrieve the letter from her, forcing his way into the house. To quote textual evidence of the situation:

"YOU HAVE NO RIGHT IN MY HOUSE! GET OUT!"

"And you have no right to rob the mails! Either give me the letter back or sign for it. Then I'll leave."

"All right! All right! I'll sign." (Post Office, 37)

Chinaski showed her where to sign and gave her a pen. He looked at her breasts and the rest of her and he thought that as if it is crazy and shame to her. She handed back the pen and her signature—it was just scrawled. She opened the letter, began to read it as Chinaski turned to leave. Then she was in front of the door, arms spread across not to leave Chinaski. The letter was on the floor. Then she cried,

"Evil evil evil man! You came here to rape me!"

"Look lady, let me by."

"THERE IS EVIL WRITTEN ALL OVER YOUR FACE!"

"Don't you think I know that? Now let me out of here!" (Post Office, 37)

At this moment Chinaski with his one hand tried to push her aside. She clawed one side of his face it started bleeding. Then he dropped his bag, his postal cap fell off, and as he held a handkerchief to wipe and to stop the bleeding she came up again and raked the other side of his face. At this moment she powerfully triggered and provided space for Chinaski

She was right up against Chinaski. He grabbed her by the ass and got his mouth on hers. Those breasts were against him, she was all up against him. She pulled her head back, away from him- "Rapist! Rapist! Evil rapist!" Henry Chinaski extended down with his mouth, got one of her tits, then swapped to the other. She cried again, "Rape! Rape! I'm being raped!" She was right. He got her pants down, unzipped and walked her backwards to the couch. They fell down on top of it. She cooperated with him. Then she screamed "RAPE!" Chinaski finished intercourse, zipped his pants, picked up his mail bag and went out leaving her staring silently at the slab of her house.

Here once more a woman is depicted as powerful and aggressive. Although it is a more complicated situation than the above indeed, Chinaski subdues to woman. She is shown as partially complicit and when Chinaski agrees that it is rape, the readers feel he doesn't really believe it. Because of her consent Chinsaki went forward that somehow her physical aggression sanctioned for that. But he does rape her, and most of the readers would see it in that way too. Here again woman's space and power as an



output of feminist wave exemplified in Post Office. Such an intentional irony as there is in the passage is overshadowed by the protagonist's brutal actions and crude chauvinist language. Such an ironical language is especially very lucid in Post Office because Bukowski is nowhere distanced himself from Chinaski as he became in the later production of his writing. This episode is the exact reverberation of the history of feminism. Feminist theory can approximately be divided into four 'waves.' Of these four the second wave is very significant and mainly comprised of the movement of women's liberation from suppression and oppression focusing on social equality and legality against male dominated society.

Space and Power of Women in Factotum

In opposite to Post Office, where the style of writing can be depicted as both repetitious and immediate, Factotum (1975) showcases a considerable enhancement in this aspect. But although Bukowski's distance from his protagonist is more evident and the writing more skillful, the underlying dynamic remains the same. In the initial pages of the Factotum, just after coming to New Orleans, Henry Chinaski is teased and seduced by the temptress's call of "high yellow", "Hey, poor white trash!" what's more Chinaski didn't answer to such force of a woman. Some twenty pages later, during the novel's first sexually explicit encounter, he is indeed attacked by Martha, his roommate in his apartment building. After a brief chat and a strip tease, Martha attacks Chinaski:

I was sitting on the edge of the bed. She leaped on me before I could move. Her open mouth was pressed on mine... .. She sucked and bobbed. Martha had a small yellow ribbon on her short grey hair. There were warts and big brown moles on her neck and cheeks.

... .. she groaned, bit me. I screamed, grabbed her by the hair, pulled her off. I stood in the center of the room wounded and terrified... .. I felt as if I were being eaten by a pitiless animal. My pecker rose, covered with spittle and blood. The sight of it threw her into a frenzy. I felt as if I was being eaten alive.

If I come, I thought desperately, I'll never forgive myself. (Factotum, 21-22)

The last sentence of this episode is one of the humorous sentences in the novel. It is very significant to know how the woman was powerful and ready to teach any kind of lesson to a male-dominated society. That shows that man's mental and physical state has been fragmented and presented so comically. Bukowski uses a tactic and cares about women in a way that is similar to how well he uses humour in his social criticism, where he treats a subject with some sociological value in a funny way. Here Chinaski was reluctant and powerless as a result he lost control over the situation. Henry pays her five dollar to send her away. Here, Henry Chinaski has completely lost control. While the circumstance is comic, it is the comic transformation of Chinaski's crucial frightening of the power of women. He has fallen prey to a sexually devouring woman. The portrayal of an injured and scared Chinaski fundamentally negates our customary assumptions. To see the value in how drastically, we want to just attempt to envision Henry Chinaski as a protagonist. Then, it's invested in keeping the prankster in power long enough to allow this significant loss of control or to present what's really going on for them as a serious problem—in fact, the problem—as a joke.

Chinaski gives the woman cash subsequently, despite the fact that she hasn't demanded. To be sure, it appears to be that she is satisfied with the delight she has gotten from the actual demonstration. By switching jobs, the man is attempting to maintain control and escape his exploitation in this demonstration. The way this entry presents a male hero in American fiction is very strange.

Conclusion

To conclude that though Charles Bukowski was a product of a poor family and led a tough life, this paper opines that he was not hostile to women, rather it is more likely that he was really more straightforwardly hostile against academic and elite humankind in general. It is also important to remember that most of the women characters in the novels have more space and power. It is also important to understand that the critique against the chauvinist protagonist in the texts is not always



just but provides space and power to women characters. So Bukowski was not in this connection arguing in favour of the behaviour of his protagonist Hank Chinaski and of his attitudes towards women. As this paper unraveled in the above he was more likely giving a different perception towards them.

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