

ISSN 2063-5346



VIGNETTES OF INVISIBLE WOMAN IN A SORROW BEYOND DREAMS BY PETER HANDKE

Sushila¹, Dr. Kaushal Kishore Sharma²

Article History: Received: 10.05.2023**Revised: 29.05.2023****Accepted: 09.06.2023**

Abstract

The novella *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is a plaintive work by the Austrian Nobel prize winner Peter Handke. The experimental and unconventional style of the semi-autobiographical work is both arresting and appealing at once due to the information Handke provides about the life and death (suicide) of his mother Maria in an apparently detached mode. The disinterested distanced and dejected portrayal of the mother leaves one stunned if the mother was invisible or unseen for and by the son. The seventy pages novella is a weebegone discussion on the writer's uncomfortable and unsettling memories which leaves an unforgettable impression on the psyche of the readers.

Key Words: Peter Handke, A Sorrow Beyond Dreams, Mother, Autobiographical, Maria.

¹Research Scholar, Amity University Rajasthan, India

²Asst. Prof., Amity University Rajasthan, India

DOI:10.48047/ecb/2023.12.9.65

Introduction

It is almost an impossible and painful task to write the account of the death of our own mother. Nonetheless Peter Handke has done the task well despite of the fact that his mother died an unexpected death. In fact she committed suicide. *A Sorrow beyond dreams* is Handke's woebegone account of his mother's life and death. Prosaic, terse, poetic, disturbing elliptical and self-conscious, the novella reflects the agony and grief that await those who have witnessed the cases of suicide.

Peter Handke an Austrian and Nobel winner is one the greatest, difficult, controversial, and most original writers today. *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* can be read as a memoir, or story or metafiction of a lady who lived an uneventful life with family and society that prevented her from education and independence. The relationships she had were bereft of emotions but pregnant of miseries and trauma, enough to drain her spirits

Handke discusses the story of his mother from a completely indifferent and disinterested stance. There are only few places where Handke addresses the woman as "My mother". The first instance is at the beginning of the book where he addresses the reader regarding his mother's death in the following lines.

"My mother has been dead for almost seven weeks: I had better go to work before the need to write about her, which I felt so strongly at her funeral, dies away and I fall back into the dull speechlessness with which I reacted to the nerves of her suicide."

Describing the mother's fragile self-identity and her futile efforts to attach and associate herself with anything that could give her a face Handke emphasises on her inclination for books. He demonstrates her nature in the following lines.

"She read newspapers, but preferred books with stories that she could compare with her

own life... "I'm not like that", she sometimes said, as though the author had written about her. To her, every book was an account of her own life, and in reading she came to life; for the first time, she came out of her shell; she learned to talk about herself; and with each book she had more ideas on the subject. Little by little, I learned something about her. Up until then she had got on her own nerves, her own presence had made her uncomfortable; now she lost herself in reading and conversation and emerged with a new feeling about herself. "It's making me young again." True, books to her were only stories out of the past, never dreams of the future; in them she found everything she had missed and would never make good. Early in life she had dismissed all thought of a future. Thus, her second spring was merely a transfiguration of her experience. Literature didn't teach her to start thinking of herself but showed her it was too late for that. She could have made something of herself. Now, at the most, she gave some thought to herself, and now and then after shopping she would treat herself to a cup of coffee at the tavern and worry a little less about what people might think."

Handke endorses for his book a deliberate technique based on facts and the way he gets into the different stages in her life and events may look like reading a resume of one's life. He knows the limitations while writing about one's own mother and therefore shows great restraint in not allowing the words to slip into emotions, tears sentimentality, subjectivity, and histrionics. His approach in using minimum words to narrate her dull and lifeless life drenched in drudgeries can be perceived from the passage:

"For a woman to be born into such surroundings was in itself deadly. But perhaps there was one comfort: no need to worry about the future. The fortune-tellers at our church fairs took a serious interest

only in the palms of young men -a girl's future was a joke.

No possibilities. It was all settled in advance: a bit of flirtation, a few giggles, a brief bewilderment then the alien resigned look of a woman starting to keep house again, the first children, a bit of togetherness after the Kitchen-work, from the start not listened to, and in turn listening less and less. Inner monologues, trouble with her legs, varicose veins, mute except for mumbling in her sleep, cancer of the womb, and finally, with death, destiny fulfilled. The girls in our town used to play a game based on the stations in a woman's life: Tired / Exhausted / Sick / Dying / Dead. "

Peter Handke portrays her mother in inglorious colours by providing bare minimum identity marks and ideas as well as throwing general details. He keeps her nameless in the book and rarely addresses her as "My Mother. During the course of the novella the reader discovers that She valiantly, though vainly, tries for several efforts to streamline her life. She escapes from the soundless persecution at home, pursues a career at very young age of fifteen, bears an illegitimate son (the author of the book *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* , Peter Handke) from her first love – a saving-bank clerk who disappears from her life as quickly as he e comes , marries an army sergeant, and, after World War II, they settle in Berlin, where he works as a motor mechanic, who then degenerates into a drunkard subjecting her to routine torture. She bears a second child, aborts a third and grows old before her time. In 1948, they flee the eastern sector of the city and return to Austria, to the house where she was born. There she enjoys a brief spell of normalcy, picks up reading literature which turns out to be her true solace and involves herself in politics to regain her presence in society. Finally, she falls and succumbs to nervous breakdown brought up by the accumulated pain and slow atrophy of her life and

eventually blows it out with drowsy medicines.

"Squalid misery can be described in concrete terms," Handke writes; "poverty can only be intimated in symbols." The torture of maintaining outward appearances and rituals in this 'hygienic poverty' is a deep undercurrent in the novel:

"From the first she was under pressure to keep up the forms: in country schools the subject most stressed for girls was called "the outward form and appearance of written work"; in later life this found its continuation in a woman's obligation to put on a semblance of a united family; not cheerful poverty but formally perfect squalor; and gradually, in its daily effort to up appearances, her face lost its soul."

"Christmas: necessities were packaged as presents. We surprised each other with such necessities as underwear, stockings, and handkerchiefs, and the beneficiary said he had WISHED for just that! We pretended that just about everything that was given to us, except food, was a present; I was sincerely grateful for the most indispensable school materials and spread them out beside my bed like presents."

A Sorrow Beyond Dreams is the fictional work in which Handke grips us with his unusual and unique technique of compressed narration that easily imparts emotional intensity without emotionalizing the dull grey SDFtryu] universe around her. He paints a kaleidoscope by making a collage of memories, events, identities, objects, people, and casual statements. Some Passages are pregnant with irony as well. For examples:

"In general, these memories are inhabited more by things than by people: a dancing top in a deserted street amid ruins, oat flakes in a sugar spoon, gray mucus in a tin spittoon with a Russian trademark; of people, only separated parts: hair, cheeks, knotted scars on fingers; from her childhood days my mother had a swollen

scar on her index finger; I held onto it when I walked beside her."

"Another way of listing would be equally idyllic: you're aching back; your hands scalded in the wash boiler, then frozen red while hanging up the clothes (how the frozen washing crackled as you folded it up!); an occasional nosebleed when you straightened up after hours of bending over... the eternal moaning about little aches and pains, because after all you were only a woman. Women among themselves: not "How are you feeling?" but "Are you feeling better?"

"At home, of course, she was alone with the FOUR WALLS, some of the bounces was still there; a hummed tune, a dance step while taking off the shoes, a brief desire to jump out of her skin. And then she was dragging herself around the room again; from husband to child, from child to husband, and from one thing to another.

Every paragraph or sentence in this book attracts the reader to pause, think, absorb, rethink heave a sigh and then move forward with a lump in the throat. Handke is a perfect craftsman in using syncopated sentences, pauses one-liners, emotions wrenching associations, cold enumerations, and slots of silences which over all cumulatively deepen the impact of the tragedy.

Interestingly Handke changes the mood of the novel once and raises concerns if there is any benefit of penning down the account of his mother in the way he is doing so or shall he abstain from the way of his narrative technique. He ponders

"The danger of all these abstractions and formulations is of course that they tend to become independent. When that happens, the individual that gave rise to them is forgotten – like images in a dream, phrases and sentences enter a chain reaction, and

the result is literary ritual in which individual life ceases to be anything more than a pretext. These two dangers – the danger of merely telling what happened and the danger of a human individual becoming painlessly submerged in poetic sentences – have slowed down my writing, because in every sentence I am afraid of losing my balance. This is true of every literary effort, but especially in this case, where the facts are so overwhelming and there is hardly anything to think out."

After the funeral of Maria, mother of the author, Handke contemplates and makes clean breast of: "I was beside myself with pride that she had committed suicide," as if she had finally availed herself of the only freedom remaining to her. It is an alarming line followed by two pages of breviloquent observations and his failures to divorce him from the main character, his mother in narrating her life:

"It is not true that writing has helped me. In my weeks of preoccupations with the story, the story has not ceased to preoccupy me. Writing has not, as I at first supposed, been a remembering of a concluded period in my life, but merely a constant pretence at remembering, in the form of sentences that only lay claim to detachment. Even now I sometimes wake up with a start, as though in response to some inward prodding and, breathless with horror, feel that I am literally rotting away from second to second. The air in the darkness is so still that, losing their balance, torn from their moorings, the things of my world fly soundlessly about: in another minute they will come crashing down from all directions and smother me. In these tempests of dread, I become magnetic like a decaying animal and, quite otherwise than in undirected pleasure, where all my feelings play together freely, I am attacked by an undirected, objective horror."

Conclusion

Handke's *A Sorrow beyond dreams* is a portrait of miserable grief on the canvas of irreversible catastrophes; the story of a woman whose lively spirit was crushed not once but repeatedly by the miseries of her place and time. Throughout her life she remained an invisible woman and struggled to maintain appearances, only to arrive at a terrible recognition: "I'm not human anymore." Not long after, she killed herself with an overdose of sleeping pills. Despite his attempts to finish the novella as the story of his mother he is unable to achieve completeness exactly as his mother. No wonder he ends the novel "Someday, I shall write about all this in greater detail."

Works Cited

- Handke, Peter . *A Sorrow Beyond dreams*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2019
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Sorrow_Beyond_Dreams
- https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/24482.A_Sorrow_Beyond_Dreams
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/A-Sorrow-Beyond-Dreams>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/27/archives/a-sorrow-beyond-dreams-the-lost-honor-of-katharina-blum.html>