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EMOTIONAL ACUITY IN LORRIE MOORE'S "HOW TO BE AN OTHER WOMAN" FROM *SELF-HELP*

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Abstract: Lorrie Moore is one of the famous fictionists of contemporary America. Using the first-and-second-person narratives and shuttling of narrative between past and present, she proves herself a typical postmodernist even in her first collection of short stories titled *Self-Help* published in 1985. She does not brand herself a feminist, yet woman related issues are dealt by her in almost all the stories in this collection. While focusing her attention on women issues, she relates them to the world which is overflowed with various internal and external relationships. Man-woman relationship in love, marriage and in extra-marital relationship determines woman's position in the family as well as the society. Hence with the strained relationships the women of Moore suffer from a kind of psychological imbalance and mental turmoil. The protagonist, Charlene of the short story titled "How to be an Other Woman" is obsessed with the thought, being a mistress to a married man and hence suffers from guilty consciousness.
Key words: Fictionist, mistress, internal-external relationships, psychological imbalance and mental turmoil, other-woman, and emotional acuity

Introduction:

Lorrie Moore started writing the stories for her first published collection, *Self-Help*, toward the end of her two-year sojourn in New York between graduating from St. Lawrence University and enrolling at Cornell. One of them, "Go Like This" was largely finished by the time Moore arrived in Ithaca. Inspired by a documentary about the premediated suicide of the artist Jo Raman, it describes a terminally ill woman's decision to take her own life rather than wait for cancer to kill her – in other words, to "go in a way of her choosing." (Gaffney 242-3). In tackling disease and death and in focusing on the sick woman's relationships with her daughter, husband, and friends, "Go Like This" marks out some of the main territory covered in *Self-Help*. There are nine short stories namely "How to Be an Other Woman, "What is Seized", "The Kid's Guide to Divorce", "How", "Go Like This", "How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)", "Amahl and the Night Visitor: A Guide to the Tenor of Love", "How to Become a Writer", and "To Fill" have place in *Self-Help*.

Discussion:

Four of the nine stories concern physical or mental illness, six explore the bonds and tensions between mothers and children, and all portray the strains that circumstance and character impose on sexual love. Moore, being a postmodernist tries to bring out the conceptual theory of postmodernism about life in these stories. Though life is full of absurdity, it is only human being who needs to adapt himself to the circumstance and to set aside the adversities with humor. The funny situations and the witty sentences in the stories explicate Moore's intension of giving advice to men living in the meaningless world. Moore has summarized her subject matter in these narratives as "feminine emergencies" (Gaffney 240), because underneath the irony found in the stories, there is a literal insight which deals with female crisis of a profound and painful kind. Above all, Moore does not brand herself a feminist as she has not strongly opposed male chauvinism in these stories but she tries to bring out the real-life problems associated with women:

> In these tales of loss and pleasure, lovers and family, a woman learns to conduct an affair, a child of divorce dances with her mother, and a woman with a terminal illness contemplates her

exit. Filled with the sharp humor, emotional acuity, and joyful language Moore has become famous for, these nine-glittering tales marked the introduction of an extravagantly gifted writer. (Book cover)

The title of the collection reflects the idea behind it: to adapt the prolific American self-help literature designed to coach readers in self-fulfillment and good management of careers, love affairs, marriages and family relationships. Moore's reworking of the genre is ironic and parodic, and much of the putative advice dispensed by her narrators is highly subversive, as when the narrator in "How to Talk to Your Mother" suggests a forthright response to a woman who has been discussing shopping: "Say that you believe shopping for clothes is like masturbation – everyone does it, but it isn't very interesting and therefore should be done alone, in an embarrassed fashion, and never be the topic of party conversation" (89). The comedy adds to the pleasure of reading these fictions, but it also contributes to Moore's serious artistic purposes. The purpose of humor in the texts is to mock at the frequently glib percepts in 'real' self-help manuals.

One of the most distinctive features of *Self-Help* is Moore's widespread use of second-person narration. Six of the stories use second-person address in imitation of life-coaching guidebooks, while three are narrated in the first person. "Go Like This', "What is Seized", and "To Fill". Even though the title, "Go Like This" appears to be imperative, it is written in first-person narration. Yet it seems that the instructions given in the story directed at the readers or listeners within the world of the fiction. The other two stories "What is Seized" and "To Fill" revolve around diseases of women's bodies and minds, their husbands' treachery, the agony of the children of separated parents, and the joys and sorrows involved in motherhood. There are two cancer victims, a suicide and an attempted suicide, and a woman driven to gluttony, compulsive stealing, and violent assault.

Most of the second-person stories in *Self-Help* are also antimodels, although they all promise to describe 'how' to do something as explained in "How to Be an Other Woman", "How", "How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)", "How to Become a Writer" or announce their status as guides as in "The Kid's Guide to Divorce", "Amahl and the Night Visitors: A Guide to the Tenor of Love". The narratives are constructed along lines familiar from advice columns and self-help books, employing the mock-imperative and predictive as well as the indicative tense. For example, "Meet in expensive beige raincoats" ("Other Woman" 3), "He will be a good dancer. He will have perfectly cut hair. He will laugh at your jokes" ("How" 55) and "You are great with kind. They love you" ("Writer" 120). As it tunes out, however, many of these stories describe actions and outcomes that are the antithesis of ideal.

The adversities of life that the characters experience in these stories though look a little fictitious yet they are part and parcel of human life and are the cause of painful existence of the characters. Hence the author has drawn a line between real and fiction by introducing ironic humor which fills the situations with comic air. For example, a married man's mistress is being humiliated and deceived, a woman who falls in love with her boyfriend later feels guilty for abandoning him, an unsuccessful writer who becomes lonely and depressed, and an orphaned, childless woman who looks not to the future but only to the past - are narrated in the language which carries a sense of humor but with thought-over. The use of second-person point of view in these stories is well-crafted. The 'you' voiced in these stories implies the readers who take the position of 'you' here and compare their own life experiences while reading the stories.

Moore has described her second-person stories as experiments with a different way of narrating women's experience as she was using both "the idiosyncratic voice of the first[person] and an intimate second person address to tell particular stories" (Gaffney 240). The experiment spawned many imitators, and she has accepted the credit or blame for an outpouring of second-person narrative among creative-writing students and aspiring writers. In fact, there was already a considerable body of American fiction in second person narrative before the publication of Self-Help, spanning at least the century and a half from Nathaniel Hawthorne's brief tale "The Haunted

Mind" (1835) to Jay McInerney's acclaimed novel *Bright Light, Big City* (1984). While commenting Moore's artistic use of self-help maneuvers suggested in *Self-Help* says thus:

> The current epidemic of self-improvement manuals, ostensibly nonfiction, may tell us as much about ourselves as Horatio Alger novels tell us about the prelapsarian American dream. We devour books that show us how to be our dog's best friend, how to fornicate, find a mate, divorce a mate and feel O.K. about ourselves in transit. In *Self-Help,* the collection of short stories that is her first book, Lorrie Moore examines the idea that lives can be improved like golf swings and in so doing finds a distinctive, scalpel-sharp fictional voice that probes beneath the ad hoc psychic fixit programs we devise for ourselves, the depths of our fears and yearnings. (Jay McInerney)

Literary critics and narrative theorists have analyzed the precise operation of second person narration in great detail and have advanced numerous hypotheses, in relation to various texts, concerning the exact identity of the narrative "you". The main debate is whether or to what extent the second-person pronoun should be interpreted as objective reference or address, that is, as the narrator talking about or to someone other than him or herself. Subsidiary questions concern the position of "you" inside and outside the text. The questions such as whether 'you' is a character within the story or an actual or ideal reader or whether she or he fluctuates between these positions or occupy multiple positions simultaneously generally offer answers to the readers when the purpose of the author or the narrative voice is considered. The observations of Caitlin Berve are well quoted here to have a justification of author's purpose using the second-person narrative technique:

> Many of the short stories being by dropping the "you' in the first few sentences to set the scene and draw the reader in. Then Moore slowly reveals the reader is the character…. By simply dropping the "you" she allows the sentence to imply second-person point of view without it jumping up and down, waving it arms in for of the reader. The choice to use as few pronouns as possible makes the second person more palpable because the readers feel less like they are being dictated to. Moore continues to use "you' sparingly throughout each short story to maintain this effect. (https://www.ignitedinkwriting.com)

At the centre of all the stories in *Self-Help* is an integrated conception of the links between physical, mental and emotional suffering. Psychological and psychic disorders figure out vigorously as symptoms or causes of or metaphors for the absence or inadequacy of love. All the stories are preoccupied with language. The language reveals or conceals character and emotion. People in the modern competitive world struggle to keep both the ends to meet their dreams by doing hard or manipulative work. So, they struggle in between two worlds such as the real world and dream world and that has resulted in their mental or psychological pain: "Acutely aware of her characters' obsession with their own emotional temperatures, Ms. Moore can be devastatingly funny about their self-absorption and their awareness of their self-absorption" (Michiko Kakutani)

The short fiction, "How to be an Other Woman" is the first story appeared in *Self-Help* in which Moore has individualized a woman named Charlene. Human relationship developed between two strangers namely Charlene and her lover in the name of love and lust fades away soon when Charlene wants to individualize herself. The shallowness in understanding each other is shown by Moore satirically: "After four movies, three concerts, and two-and-a-half museums, you sleep with him. It seems the right number of cultural events" (4). For some time, Charlene does not bother about her second position in her lover's life. But later she realizes that she has lost her individuality. She becomes embarrassed to realize that she has become a 'mistress': "When you were six you thought mistress meant to put your shoes on the wrong foot. Now you are older and know it can mean many things…" (5).

The real meaning of the word, 'mistress' makes her feel unrecognized by her own 'self.' in fact, she wants to establish a good relationship with the man whom she loves but, in the attempt, she herself becomes a stranger to herself: "You walk differently. In store windows you don't recognize yourself; you are another woman…. I'm Charlene. I'm a mistress" (5). This statement explicate that she is

psychologically affected when she finds that the man is a married man. She comes to know that the man is a system analyst and his wife, Patricia is an intellectual property lawyer who helps him get the job by writing application for him. He, in fact, appreciates his wife saying that she always prepares lists for the systematic execution of everything. As he appreciates his wife and pays love and respect for her, Charlene understands that the man may not give up his life for the sake of living with her. They do not develop sense of deep attachment for each other. This is shown in the fiction through the figure of a doppelganger as observed by Kelly:

> With her stockinged feet, shoes in hand, this alter ego suggests tarnished, misused femininity, and her reappearance as a wanderer whom Charlene twice encounters at times of crisis in her own love life implies a lost and outcast future for all ex-mistresses. (30)

After love-making, the man leaves her house before dawn. This shows that the man uses Charlene only to appease his sexual hunger and there is no sense of deep-attachment to her. In the office, Karma Kola, though she is a secretary and looking for higher promotion, her contact with the man is the topic for everyone to make gossips. She losses her chance of promotion. She regrets for her relation with a married man and her position as a 'mistress.' Now she understands that her degree and employment is a waste and there is no real-sense for the word, feminism when situations like her is considered: "Unfortunately, you have lost the respect of all…send their daughters to universities so they won't have to be secretaries, and who, therefore, hold you in contempt for having a degree and being a failure anyway. It is like having a degree in failure" (6).

Therefore, Charlene opens up her heart to her close friend, Hilda in Karma Kola. From Hilda, Charlene understands that such mistress-like relationship is common to many women because she comes to know that Hilda, herself had one such relationship with a man. Then in solitude, Charlene lists out the boyfriends with whom she roamed and so she consoles herself saying that the married man may become one among her boyfriends, if she does not consider her connection with the man so genuinely. Yet, she knows that the man is the only man with whom she lied but with other boyfriends she did not have any sexual relationship. However, she realizes that her love for the man is so genuine and so she wants to carry out her relationships with him forever. Here, Moore presents the complex gamut of the feminine search for identity: "of the beauty of devotion and sacrifice, the small discontents and great joys of conjugal love, dreams of youth, the resignation of maturity" (*The second sex 397*) are transformed into void.

Charlene, hence, is confused a lot. She is in dilemma. She is mentally disturbed and psychologically pained. Emotional acuity of hers, leads her to experience the psychological imbalance. She could not concentrate or carryout her routine work in the office. She wants to make choices and to take decision as she could not brush aside the man from her life. She often thinks about the quote, "Just be glad, you have legs" (13) said by one of her teachers. To escape from loneliness and dilemma, she goes to New Jersey to celebrate Christmas with her parents. The caring smile of her father and loving hands of her mother give her a little solace. Her mother finds out that some pain is lingering in the heart of Charlene. So, she asks:

> "Who is he?"…
> "He is a system analyst".
> "Oh… they get married a lot. They're usually always married."
> "Charlene, are you having an affair with a married man?"
> … "I know, Mother, it's not something you would do." (14-15)

After Christmas and New Year celebrations, Charlene once again starts meeting the man. When he tells her about how he is going to talk about their affair to his wife, Charlene gets much humiliated and disappointed: "And I'll say, 'Dear, I think I'm falling in love with other woman, and I know I'm having sex with her…. And she'll start weeping inconsolably and then what will you do…. I'll tell… her I was just kidding" (16). Later, at home the very thought of 'mistress' disturbs Charlene heavily: "you are a mistress, part of a great hysterical you mean historical tradition" (16). Then after a few

days, the man leaves Charlene saying that he is going on a business trip. But she does not hear from him even after months. Still, she could not resist her love for him. Every day she expects for his arrival and like a psychopath she loses her mental control. She starts waiting for him: "you are risking your life for him, spread out like a ridiculous cake on the bed, waiting with the door unlocked, thinking you hear him on the stairs, but no" (17). Her relationship with the man resides in her like a sore as said by Pathak: "... sense of dispossession and exile consciousness is like a sore at the heart of human relationship" (Pathak 112).

Hilda who could not bear the suffering that Charlene undergoes, arranges for a meeting of Charlene with her cousin, Mark, a banker. She even wants to engage Charlene with Mark. Though the company of Mark gives a kind of solace and comfort to Charlene, yet she understands that Mark may not become her life partner. She strongly believes that "I suffer indignities at your hands" (20), if she marries him. Later, Mark reveals Charlene that Patricia is not the wife of the man with whom Charlene has affair. Actually, Carrie is the name of the man's wife from whom he has separated years before. And "Patricia is the woman he lives with" (21). Knowing the truth, now Charlene understands that the man whom she loves is a cheat and he has treated her "just another one of the fucking gang" (21). So, Charlene is very much upset and she feels as if she has become sick suddenly. But Mark consoles her saying "what I've always admired about you, right from when I first met you, is your strength, your independence" (21).

The love affair has taken away the spirit of Charlene and she has turned into a ghastly creature. Like a haunted house, she feels she is empty: "Love drains from you, takes with it much of your blood sugar and water weight. You are like a house slowly losing its electricity, the fans slowing, the lights dimming and flickering; the clocks stop and go and stop" (21). However, life has to be carried on. She cherishes the days which she has spent with the married man as sweet memories and carries out her daily routine in Karma Kola as usual. Though she slams the door "like Bette Davis" to Mark, yet she sends birthday cards to him and says, "Fine" (22) to the occasional phone calls of the married man with whom she had wonderful moments. Her existential peril can be explained in the words of Macquarrie:"Her desire is not simply the termination of life, not just an event that comes along at the end of the story, but itself enters very much into the story" (196).

With Charlene's increasing consciousness of standing second in her lover's affections and not knowing whether or how to extricate herself comes a diminishing sense of her own identity. The narrative voice in mock-imperative mode colludes in this crisis, instructing her, after her lover has left her alone in bed, to "wonder who you are" (8). Using a technique that becomes one of her trademarks, Moore increase the sense of Charlene's confused identity through the figure of a doppelgänger: a bare-foot "blonde woman in barrettes" (3) who first appears in the opening scene, getting off the bus that Charlene, with her future lover is getting on. With her stockinged feet, shoes in hand, this alter ego suggests tarnished, misused femininity, and her reappearance as a wanderer whom Charlene twice encounters at times of crisis in her own love life implies a lost and outcast future state for all ex-mistresses.

While trying to establish her individuality, Charlene complicates the relationship with others. In she needs to make number of compromises, for being a 'mistress' to the married man. At any society extra-marital or illegal relationship is a restrained one and the persons who are involved in such relationship are considered socially neglected or outcast. However, the society looks at it in a different way, if a woman involves in such relationship, she is treated as a whore or unclean woman, but it allows man to go free without any sense of guilt. Kate Millet strongly believes that women are subjected to male's domination due to her sexuality:

> The concept of Romantic Love affords a means of emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit, since love is the only circumstance in which the female is (ideologically) pardoned for sexual activity. And convictions of romantic love are convenient to both parties since it is often the only condition in which the female can overcome the far more powerful

conditioning she has received towards sexual inhibitions. Romantic love also observes the realities of female status and burden of economic dependency. (92-93)

Conclusion: The psychological imbalance and mental tension are seen from the attitudes of Charlene. Charlene is connected to the estranging and disorientating figure which effects on her of becoming the man's mistress – an impact represented by Moore with the reference to shop windows in Manhattan: "In store windows you don't recognize yourself; you are another woman, some crazy interior display lady in glasses stumbling frantic and preoccupied through the mannequins" (5). From Charlene's point of view there is also another woman, "other woman" – Patricia, her lover's supposed wife. On the street of Manhattan, Charlene imagines she sees Patricia everywhere: "Every woman is her" (12). She becomes obsessed with 'other woman', looking furtively at them and then "quickly away, like a woman, some other woman, who is losing her mind" (12). This image reiterates Charlene's position as "other woman" and shows that, with insecurity and sexual jealousy putting pressure even on her sanity, she is no longer really "herself".

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