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Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018**
Dr. T. Deivasigamani, Editor: Vol. II *Black Writings: A Subaltern Perspective*
Annamalai University, Tamilnadu, India
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Tracing Female Ventriloquism in Mary McCarthy's *The Group*

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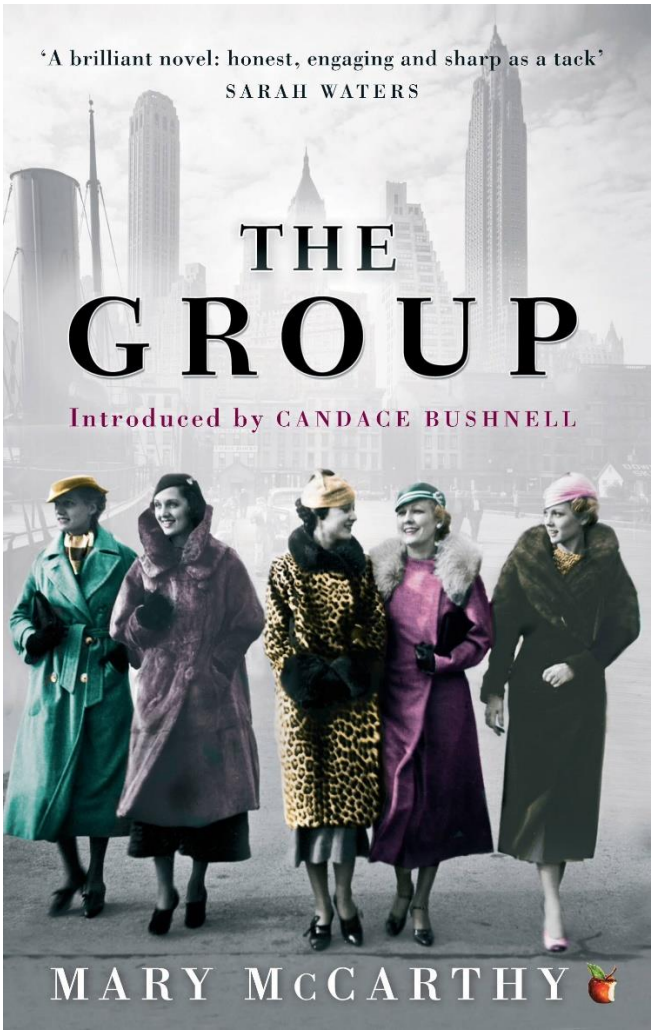

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Abstract

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The present study attempts to evaluate the novel Mary McCarthy's *Group* from the perspective of feminist study. The novel was written later, and not in the 1930s the time frame of the story, and this gave McCarthy somewhat more freedom for Feministic voice to describe her characters more truthfully, as she was not bound to the moral code of the 1930s, but rather to that of the 1960s, when the USA was already slightly more liberal. Hence, McCarthy is able to call things with their real names, and that is also why she was able to include the scene with Dottie and Dick, and show Dottie fitting her diaphragm. Some of the characters manage to fit in to the norms of the society while others are less successful. Those who are more successful usually need to put their own feelings and desires aside, as is the case with Dottie, who has a very traditional, wealthy marriage after having such a disappointment with her experiment with the life of a "modern woman." Priss likes working but becomes mother and then it is obvious that she will be staying at home with the child. Those whose socialisation is not that successful are in some ways or others perceived as somewhat strange, and described, if not as spinsters or lesbians, then as eccentrics at least.

Mary McCarthy did not start from describing matters that were normally kept silent about. One of these subjects was female sexuality. As Hilfer explains, the sexual experiences and encounters of men had already been explored in countless stories, but McCarthy was a pioneer in describing these experiences from the point of view of women: "Since the secrets McCarthy revealed [about, for example, contraception] were the kind that women had been keeping as much from themselves as others, the effect was empowering, allowing taboo subject to become available for conscious thought and response" (Hilfer 192-3; emphasis added). Martin sees particularly *The Group* as pioneering work: "In [*The Group*] McCarthy emphatically rejects Victorian norms of female passionlessness and is not afraid of her own sexuality" (165). One could, however, add that some of the women of *The Group* do withdraw back to the "Victorian norms" after their sexual encounters leave them disappointed. Still, the openness with which McCarthy writes about these matters was something new, pioneering indeed, and certainly must have been empowering for women to read.

Of course, the frank way of writing about women's sexuality was at the time of *The Group*'s publication denounced as sensational. Another matter that was at its time widely misunderstood about *The Group* was its narrative technique, the so-called ventriloquism (free indirect discourse), as it was simply seen as the typical chatty style of women's magazines. However, this "ventriloquism" brings to the novel an "authentic" feel and a better understanding of these women's mindsets; as McCarthy has said, most of the novel is in "invisible quotation marks" (Murphy, Reassessment, 84). Thus, the narrative technique is actually very important because it is the basis for understanding the characters (Murphy, Reassessment, 84).

In other words, it serves as a way of getting "inside the heads" of these women. As Murphy notes, for the group, "talk substitutes for both thought and perception" (Reassessment, 84). The women of the group do not really need to think or perceive (because men do that), so they simply talk. In a way events appear to "flow through" them: everything is a part of an endless conversation or gossip. Here are two examples of this, the first one shown from Helena's point of view when she is at a party, hosted by Kay:

> Helena, who was Class Correspondent, took a few terse mental notes. "At Kay Strong Petersen's," she foresaw herself inditing for the next issue of the Alumnae Magazine, "I saw Dottie Renfrew, who is going to marry Brook Latham and live in Arizona. 'The Woman Who Rode Away' – how about it, Dottie? Brook is a widower – see the Class Prophecy. […] Norine Schmittlapp's husband […] has started an independent fund-raising organization for labor and left-wing causes. Volunteer workers take note. […] Polly Andrews reports that Sis Farnsworth and Lely Baker have started a business called 'Dog Walk.' […]" Helena puckered her little forehead. Had she mastered (mistressed?) the idiom of the Alumnae Magazine Class Notes? (McCarthy 110)

The second example of everything being a part of an endless conversation or gossip concerns Libby. The following passage shows how she is fired from her job but soon manages to find a new one, thanks to some unlikely events:

> [Libby's boss] grabbed up Libby's coat and held it for her; […] Libby's head was reeling with the shock and confusion. She took a step backward and, girls, can you imagine it, she fainted kerplunk into Mr LeRoy's arms!

It must have been the overheated office. Mr LeRoy's secretary told her afterward that she had turned quite green and the cold sweat had been standing out on her forehead. Just like the summer day her aunt was with her when she passed out cold in the Uffizi in front of "The Birth of Venus." But Gus LeRoy (short for Augustus) was convinced that it was because she was hungry […]. He insisted on giving her $10 out of his own pocket and a dollar for a taxi besides. Then the next morning he rang her up and told her to go to see this literary agent who needed an assistant. So that now, lo and behold, she had this snazzy job at $25 a week, reading manuscripts and writing to authors and having lunch with editors. (McCarthy 231)

Then again, even if they did think more deeply, they would not have the power to turn their thoughts into real actions, so why should they bother? At the same time, as noted earlier, conversation is a device to maintain a certain subjective reality: perhaps, then, if they ceased the talk for a moment, they would be able to find new ways of functioning. This, however, does not happen. Yet a certain sense of discontent can be detected in the novel; there is an uneasy feeling in the characters that their lives are not progressing the way they had hoped. A good example of this is when Polly talks about her life after she has married Jim Ridgeley, and especially how she sees the other women of the group. Now that she is married, she often has to attend parties thrown by her classmates:

These parties, at which everyone was half a couple and lived in an elevator building, gave Polly a vast sense of distance. All the husbands, it went without saying, were "doing awfully well" in fire insurance or banking or magazine work, and her classmates, except for a few rebels, who were not necessarily the same rebels as in college, were "taking their place in society." Yet there were nights when Polly felt, watching them and listening, that she must be the only girl in the Class of '33 who was happy.

Within the group itself, only Libby had made her mark. Kay, once so vital, had ceased to be a pace setter. Last year rumor had had it that she, who had been the first of the class to be married, would be the first to be divorced – quite a record. But she was still toiling at Macy's as a junior executive in personnel, and Harald was still writing plays that were as yet unproduced. From time to time, he had a job as a stage manager or a director of a summer theatre, and Kay's family was helping them in their hours of need. Opinion at the fork suppers was divided as to whether Kay was a drag on Harald or vice versa. (McCarthy 354-5)

However, the characters do not seriously come to grips with the unhappiness with their lives. As Robbins expresses the problem, "knowing there is a problem, and yet feeling that to act would be wrong – [...] social context would, in any case, prevent her from acting on any judgement of her own" (29; emphasis original). Nevertheless, social circumstances are the causes of psychic discomfort for these women. As Robbins explains, this comes up, for example, in Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963) and to some extent, it explains the group's behaviour, too. In addition, showing the situation in the novel makes the readers aware of the problem, even if it remains unnamed.

Though McCarthy, writing before the revival of feminism, never introduces a specifically feminist political voice in her novel, the absence is a felt one. The novel cries for a perspective transcending the limitations of the massive false consciousness it so brilliantly exposes, thus expressing not only the 1930s but its own moment as well: the need in the 1950s and 1960s for an as yet unformulated critique of the prevailing episteme. What later feminist critiques argue is what McCarthy implicitly but clearly enough shows in *The Group.*

In a similar way, Wyatt sees a connection between Mary McCarthy and Betty Friedan – both women recognised "the problem with no name," the invisible chains that bind women (203); meaning the cultural limitations which came (and perhaps still come) along gender roles. Thus, the goal of their texts, consciously known or not, was to get women freed from this invisible oppression. One way of doing that was/is consciousness raising (Wyatt 203): indirectly saying to the reader, "you are not the only one who feels like this." And this indeed seems to be the core feminist idea in *The Group*: it promotes consciousness-raising in a subtle manner, by showing the situation of these women as it is. Here are some examples about the situation of the women in *The Group*. The first scene takes place when Kay has been locked up in a mental hospital by her husband, and she tells Polly what happened:

Tears came into her eyes […]. "Harald betrayed me. He put me in here and left me. He pretended it was the regular hospital." […] "He beat me when he'd been drinking. […] It seems so long ago, but it must have been yesterday morning. […]" "He was drinking in the morning?" "He'd been out all night. When he came in at seven in the morning, I accused him of being with a woman. I know it was silly of me, to accuse him when he'd been drinking. I ought to have waited till he was sober." […] "But I was bit hysterical, I guess[.]" […] "It was silly, but I hit him back. Then he knocked me down and kicked me in the stomach. What should I have done, Polly? Picked myself up and waited for him to be sorry the next day? I know that's the right technique, but I haven't got the patience." (McCarthy 357-9)

In this excerpt it is interesting to see how Kay is well aware of how she was expected to behave in a situation such as this: she should have submitted to violence without any resistance, especially since she "provoked" it by accusing Harald when he was still drunk. However, since there is some "resister" in her, she cannot let it go, and instinctively fights back. This leads to a situation where Kay threatens Harald with a bread knife, and Harald shuts her in a dressing room. Eventually, when the situation calms down, Harald takes Kay to the hospital "to rest." In the end, he always seems to have the upper hand.

The second example about these women's situation is slightly more mundane, but still disturbing. It shows Priss with her son and husband:

> As the wife of a pediatrician, [Priss] was bitterly ashamed that Stephen, at the age of two and a half, was not able to control his bowels. […] Sloan, even though he was a doctor, was extremely annoyed whenever Stephen did it in public, but he would never help Priss clean Stephen up or do anything to relieve her embarrassment. […] Yet it was the only sphere where he could say she had failed with Stephen. He did not wet his bed any more; he ate his vegetables and junkets; he was obedient; he hardly ever cried now, and at night he went to sleep at his appointed time, surrounded by his stuffed animals. She could not see where she had erred in training him. […] Sloan's belief was that Priss's nervousness was to blame, just as it had been with her nursing (McCarthy 391-3).

All the blame of Stephen's toilet problems seems to be automatically on Priss – even though Sloan is a pediatrician. The difficulties with Stephen do not touch Sloan, the father, at all. He is simply the authority who can point out, or accuse, even, where Priss has failed as a parent. In other words, his position as a children's doctor (and a man) grants him authority, and at the same time frees him from helping his wife, since raising children is "women's work," and thus, beneath him. Priss, being "compliant," does not really question the situation but rather takes it as it is, simply worrying that she cannot see where she has gone wrong in raising Stephen.

Martin sums up the general situation of McCarthy's women as follows: Although the women in McCarthy's novels, essays, and political and personal narratives are often sexually liberated, they also are often bound by Victorian norms of passivity and dependence. Sometimes they are constrained by realistic fears of exploitation or loss of reputation. Lack of adequate economic independence in an age of few opportunities for financial self-sufficiency prevents these women from discarding the dream of the gallant knight who will rescue his princess from life's rigors. Without traditions of female assertion and self-reliance, McCarthy's women founder in confusion (167).

Indeed, most of the women in *The Group* become "ordinary" wives and mothers, even though at the beginning of the novel it seemed as the worst fate to become like their own parents:

> The worst fate, they utterly agreed, would be to become like Mother and Dad, stuffy and frightened. Not one of them, if she could help it, was going to marry a broker or a banker or a cold-fish corporation lawyer, like so many of Mother's generation. They would rather be wildly poor and live on salmon wiggle than be forced to marry one of those dull purplish young men of their own set[.] […] It would be better, yes, they were not afraid to say it, though Mother gently laughed, to marry a Jew if you loved him. (McCarthy 11)

This shows the reader their true attitude towards, for example, the Jews, even though they themselves probably do not notice it. And in reality, none of them is in fact ready to give up their status in the way they talk about above. The need to keep up the appearances is too strong, as this is how they have been socialised to behave. In addition, as they realise later, the choices they make in life are not only up to them: husbands, parents, and employers have for some reason more authority over their lives than they themselves. As Martin suggests, there are no role models of independent, strong-minded women (167), and thus, the women of *The Group* do not know how to transfer these hopes of being different into reality. Instead, at least some of them become exactly what they were hoping to avoid: "stuffy and frightened" (McCarthy 11).

To sum up, the central feminist technique in *The Group* is consciousness-raising, which means the ways in which McCarthy subtly shows her readers the real situation of her female characters. The characters have a feeling that they are not living their lives the way they want to, but yet, in the absence of strong female role models, they are unable to do anything about it. Other important feminist points in *The Group* are, first, the empowering way in which McCarthy writes about taboo subjects, most importantly female sexuality, and secondly, the narrative technique, which in its time was diminished as similar to the style of "women's magazines," but is in fact an important tack of allowing the readers to access the minds of the women of *The Group*.

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