

Women and Private Fears in Audrey Thomas' Short Fiction

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“I’m afraid,” said Isobel to the shrink, “I’m afraid all the time. Of everything.”

(*Blown Figures* 20)

Sometimes I wake up frightened in the middle of my mind. (*Mrs. Blood* 193)

Audrey Thomas is one of the leading short fiction writers of Canadian literature. The impact of her literary studies manifests itself in her feminist writing. As George Bowering rightly states if anything may be said to be Audrey Thomas' consistent theme, it is private fear (Snow 28). Audrey Thomas' women are usually bewildered, afraid of not being loved, unable to cope and dependent on men, though resentful of them. For Audrey Thomas it is in this context that events happen to the women protagonists. Her women are usually trapped alone in the self, resentful or fearful of failing at their roles somewhere in the society, an identity thrust at them out of the dark. They find themselves ineffective and terrified of their old age, coupled with their inability to cope with life.

“Tear Here” is the story of an old woman who has a strange habit of collecting plastic bags. She goes to the Super-Valu at least three times a week and tears off an inordinate number of plastic bags quietly and furtively. She would have gone more often but “some residual instinct” warns her not to make herself too conspicuous (Ladies & Escorts 108). She finds her own obsession with plastic bags queer. Although the bags are free and no limits are imposed on the number of bags a customer can have, and the bags are kept there only for the customers to use, she is still frightened that she might get into trouble.

She does not seem to have any friends, or even acquaintance. So, she experiences a sense of insecurity. She does not discuss her reasons for collecting the plastic bags with anybody. All that is known of the old woman is that she is not very well off; she wears the same coat, the same shoes and the same stockings, day in and day out. Only a bit of an old silk dress of dark and nondescript print is seen hanging down at one place below the hem of her coat. The fact that she is very old is known only because she does nothing to hide the grey in her hair or the cross-hatch of wrinkles on her cheeks or the liver spots on the back of her thin hands.

The narrator of the story wonders why the old woman has to make so many attempts to collect the plastic bags when she could have easily taken a whole roll in one attempt on an afternoon when the produce manager and the water boy goes to have a quick cup of coffee. She'd have saved all that anxiety about being caught. Although at her age it might be risky to face the five minutes of tachycardia, she still could have had enough plastic bags to last a year.

After successfully collecting 144 dozen plastic bags, the old woman slips one over her head and fastens a rope of dull green twisters around her skinny neck. All the 144 dozen bags are later found to be used and neatly refolded in the bureau drawers. She has been practicing this for 144 dozen days before taking the final step. The harmless pastime of collecting plastic bags has ended up in the self-annihilation of the old woman who is not courageous enough to face life all alone in her old age. Although she succeeds in overcoming her fear by committing suicide after 144 dozen attempts, she has disastrously failed in encountering her fear of life stirred up by her loneliness and old age. Thomas' talent is for writing about states of mind that are tragically bleak.

Contrary to the old women in "Tear Here" who fail miserably in overcoming her fear, "Miss Foote" is the story of an elderly British traveler who has the courage to face, quite literally, her nightmare. She is a spunky world-travelling spinster who finds death in the form of a young punk barring her intrepid path and overcomes her fear by facing it bravely. Miss Foote is a very daring woman who faces the challenges audaciously irrespective of her old age. Though she is alone, she never succumbs to loneliness or to the fear caused by it. Not only is she bold but also a very adventurous woman who loves to travel a lot, especially travelling alone so that there will be no one to consult or complain if she wants to "pop down one more narrow passage in the bazaar or to get up at dawn to see the sun rise over the Ganges" (Goodbye Harold Good Luck 27). There is nothing that she likes better than being in a strange city and with a map in her hand, sorting things out for herself. She has also practiced saying a few common things in eleven different languages which may come handy in a foreign land like, "'Where is?' 'how much?' 'too much,' 'please' and 'thank you,'" in addition to "That man is following me everywhere" (28).

That Miss Foote is a very brave lady is manifested in one of her encounters with a strange man in Athens. The man, in a ragged coat, steps from behind a bush and exposes himself. Miss Foote is not a person who can be easily threatened. Bold as she is, she raises her walking stick against the stranger and the man flees in fear. The walking stick, which once belonged to her father, has the image of dragons elaborately carved, with their mouths wide open and ready to breathe fire. Miss Foote is also a dauntless lady who faces the threats in her life just like the dragon in the walking stick.

Although she is little bit frightened of her by now weak heart, she does not allow her condition to bind her free spirit. Regardless of her doctor's suggestion to take rest and unmindful of the warning of the man in newsagents that the footpath is only for experienced hikers, she sets out on her journey to Cornwall. She calls a small hotel inn and makes prior arrangement for her stay and starts packing her bags with the walking stick strapped to the outside of her suitcase. Singing songs,

she walks down the street to the bus-stop. She does not care for what people think or say of her. She wears a ‘Women For Peace’ button in her lapel and tramps along the Cornish coast path.

Miss Foote has a strange dream. It is Sunday morning and she has started up the path which will lead on to the cliffs. It is about 9:45 and the recorded church bells are ringing. Miss Foote finds it very strange that the church uses a tape of church bells instead of a real bell. The tape gives out a ridiculous and mechanical sound which is more like a silly racket. Then, as she stops to rest a minute and take a picture of the little fishing boats in the harbor down below, the bells stop and a recorded hymn begins. Hearing the hymn, Miss Foote stands puzzled as it is a hymn which is usually sung only on Easter Sunday.

Dismissing her thoughts, she resumes her walk. As she nears the top of the hill she sees a young man, dressed all in black except for his white plimsolls, standing right in the middle of the path and reading a newspaper. Finding the climb a bit difficult, she does not want to stop until she reaches the top. So, she calls out cheerily to the young man but he does not move. Wondering whether he is really absorbed in his reading or he is deaf, she is annoyed at the young man’s behaviour. Now she has to go around him and step off onto the grass to proceed with her walk. So she moves to the left. Without looking up he too does the same. Already breathless from the climb and her heart pounding heavily, she is even more confused and makes her think that he might be on drugs. She moves back on to the path but he is too quick for her.

Forcing herself not to be frightened, she pleads him to let her pass. But the man ignores her pleas and without looking up, reads out a headline from the newspaper reporting of a headless corpse kept in a sauna for five months. Not giving in, Miss Foote raises her voice and takes a step forward, speaking slowly, loudly and distinctly: “Please – let – me – pass” (34). The boy lowers the newspaper and stares at her as though he has just become aware of her presence. Miss Foote observes that he has painted his face white and thinks that he matches up, in his black suit, white face and white shoes, with the black-and-white cows munching contentedly on the hill beyond. The only difference that she notices between them is that the cows are fat and the man is as thin as a rake.

Without acceding to her request, he stares at her for a long time. When Miss Foote stares back at him, he says that the pathway is closed. Genuinely indignant she says that it is a public path and that it is always open. She further adds that she has come up there for a walk and that she intends to have it. Saying this she forces her way up the hill. But the man is obstinate and continues reading his paper. Miss Foote looks behind to see whether there is anybody else coming up the path but there is no one. The man lowers his newspaper again and addresses her. He animadverts that the world is nasty and terrible and that there is no chance for a bloke like him to survive in it.

Annoyed by the young man’s behaviour, she retrieves her courage and speaks out firmly that she is not prepared to discuss the state of the world with him and that she only wish to get on with her walk. But he continues graveling her by blocking her path. The only way to get rid of him is to give up and get down the way she climbed. But even the thought of getting down that long way makes her feel dizzy. Threateningly he takes a step forward. Frightened and furious, she steps back

and decides to get down the hill. Miffed by his demeanor, she decides to jeopardize him by making a report to the authorities. But when she turns around to start back down the path, he gets down and continues to block her path. This makes her panic and her heart which is already weak, starts to beat very loudly.

On the spur of the moment, unmindful of her heart condition, she gets enraged and decides not to tolerate the insolent behaviour of him. She courageously raises her father's cane and starts beating his head incessantly, all the while screaming at him. She stops only with the loud knocking of the door by the landlady. Only then does she realize that her encounter with the young man is just a dream and that she is not on the cliff but in her bed, with her right hands still clenched as though holding tight to her walking stick. The nightmare makes her drench in sweat and her sheets are soaked.

Miss Foote realizes that her body has betrayed her and that she has wet herself in her terror of the dream. The dream has been so intense that it does not seem very much a dream but a very real event from which she has been saved only by the landlady's knock. The power of the dream combined with the humiliation of the wet bed reduces her to tears. She weeps as she hasn't wept in years. In a perplexed state, she gets out of bed and changes her dress. Not knowing what to do with the wet sheet and mattress she feels dizzy. However, she pulls herself together and decides to turn the mattress to hide the large wet stain made by her. She rinses out the bottom sheet and hides it at the back of her wardrobe. She tidies up her room and has a leisurely bath to overcome the resulted tautness.

She gets down and tries to help herself to tea at the breakfast table. But she is completely horrified when the guests at the table discuss the scandal of a millionaire who killed his wife by cutting off her head and kept the rest of the body in a sauna for five years. In her dreadful state, she makes a wreck of her piece of toast and there are torn bits and crumbs scattered all around her plate. But she does not succumb to her fears. She decides to take a brisk walk around. She sets out to Lobber Hill, where the path up to the cliffs begins. Smiling at everybody passing her, she tries to find solace in the famous lines of Robert Browning from "Pippa Passes": "God's in His Heaven . . . all's right with the world" (Goodbye Harold Good Luck 40). She strides through the narrow streets and courageously walks up the hill.

Miss Foote relives every detail of her dream. Just as in her dream, she hears the recorded church bell ringing which breaks off and is followed by the hymns. Disregarding the fear caused in her dreams, she moves bravely up the hill towards the dark figure standing right in the middle of the path, reading the Sunday paper. She successfully overcomes her fear by making up her mind to climb the hill and to face the danger that lay ahead. Not giving in to fears, she encounters the situation courageously.

Fear of old age, of incompetence, of unattractiveness, of death and of the unknown dominate Audrey Thomas' stories. They have a psychological bearing and project the difficulties faced by her characters in shedding their fear and insecurities. Although they have a difficult life trying to

overcome their fear, they eventually come to terms with their fears and encounter it courageously. Still few others, make ceaseless attempts to overcome it; they try to slough off their fear syndrome and to make advancement in their attempt to overcome their private fears.

Works Cited

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