

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Female Embodiment and Existential Transformation of Sally Hyde in the Coming Home (1978) by Hal Ashby

Sharifa Akter

Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific, Bangladesh

Bidisha Zaman

Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific, Bangladesh

Abstract:

Army, war and morality are always the key themes in the war film which are all related to masculinity. To unveil the problematic representation of masculine power and female vulnerability Hal Ashby's portrayal of Sally Hyde can be a very good example of how a female character transformed from a very margin to centre not only as a female character but also as an individual person that resists the previous female stereotyping in war movies. Especially films on Vietnam always establishes masculinity as the only right and legitimate theme. Women practically do not appear in films on Vietnam, and even if they do, they play the role that only reaffirms the masculinity. Vietnam War films overtly focus on the issue of gender, yet they celebrate, masculinity and mock femininity. This paper will show how the "mocked femininity", weak, lonely and dependent female character Sally Hyde raised as an independent character and project the manifestation of womanliness possible in a male character too.

Keywords: Existential crisis, femininity, female embodiment, stereotype, Vietnam War

A different notion of femininity has been created in Hal Ashby's war movie Coming Home (1978). The movie starts with the usual ideology of society where women were born and raised to be mothers and dutiful wives. Sally Hyde was no exception than a woman who was born bearing the shadow of the Great Depression, in the throes of WWII. Society's postulation left no other options for the women other than to believe that the long-suffering as a wife is somehow a virtue. "Women, then, were identified as 'the trouble in the text' in classic Hollywood cinema (Kuhn 1982). Constance Penley, commenting on an essay by Jacqueline Rose argues that the on-screen woman '... comes to represent both the difficulty of sexual difference and the problems of cinema as a representational form" (Feminist Theory 98)

Usually, women are never shown on the battlefield. They are always represented as part of a domestic environment, taking a traditional female role in patriarchal society.

Indifferently, Sally Hyde is seen as a loyal and traditionalist military wife of Bob Hyde. Bob Hyde is a captain in the United States Marine Corps who is about to be deployed to Vietnam. Sally accepts all the norms of military life without showing a single sign of dissatisfaction and seen under the shadow of his husband Bob. She is ever ready to change her lifestyle according to Bob's military life and position. Sally at the officer's club mentions that she will have to increase the length of her skirt if Bob gets promoted. "Singling out 'the fear of being fixed in false images or trapped in inauthentic roles' as 'the most compelling fear in women's fiction today" (Sexual/Textual Politics 71). Sally is somehow entirely shaped ideologically by her husband's opinion and options. Her inner individual self-did get the existence of its own as an identity. She performs as her husband demands her to be.

On the other hand, Bob's male prejudice has also influenced him to keep Sally under his shadow. In a conversation with Dink, Bob clearly expresses his attitude regarding Sally. When Dink asks Bob regarding Sally's reaction about his leaving for Vietnam, he says: "She's OK. I don't think she really understands it all, but she accepts it. Jean Bethke Elshain in her influential book Women and War mentioned that "war is the cultural property of peoples," a system of "collective violence" in which women participate equally with men, in which complicity is shared, and for which all citizens must ultimately bear responsibility. "Wars," she quite logically points out, "are not men's property"; "rather, wars destroy and bring into being men and women as particular identities by canalizing energy and giving permission to narrate." "Perhaps," she is led to remark, "we are not strangers to one another after all." (Quoted in Gender and the war 8) To Bob, Sally does not know anything about war. She is treated like an ignorant that is unaware of the dignified life of achievements. She is entirely disrespected, humiliated, physically and morally abused by her husband. Bob is presented as an ambitious and promising officer to demonstrate how powerful he is and his treatment to Sally shows how weak and helpless she is. War always ventures male power, aggressiveness, and ability to control and obviously not with emotion by in a very raw physical ways.

His macho disposition stretches out to his married life also. In one early scene, he sings Marine Hymn when he prepares himself to have intercourse with Sally. Later in the movie, Sally discloses that she never had an orgasm with Bob. In *Second Sex*, Beauvoir comments that while both men and women are immanent and transcendent on an existentialist view, Beauvoir claims that women have been overwhelmingly associated with immanence and thus have not been encouraged to claim their own freedom. This clearly indicates that Sally is always dissatisfied and to Bob, she is nothing but a 'body'. Respectability, freedom and individuality are meant for male only. Women's existence in society and culture places her in a certain space that they have to always carry the burden of culture, national, ideological and spiritual iconification. She is never fully recognized as a human subject, she is only valuable because of her body parts that can give pleasure to men, procreate to continue the patriarchal kinship lineage. The female body on which sexual politics is constructed, Sally Hyde will challenge those boundaries and deconstruct the female embodiment and transform herself from a very vulnerable to a very strong motivating character. But to get this transformation of this female character, it is required to have a very close look on women's problematic relation to society, to culture, to the domestic sphere, to the bodies as well as to their own bodies and the dominant ideology. Since the culture is male, in this respect, in a society women are doubly repressed in their experience of sexuality "sexuality as a social construct of male power: defined by men, forced on women, and constitutive in the meaning of gender" (MacKinnon 476).

In *Coming Home*, Sally's liberated self is shown through her first orgasm with a paraplegic veteran with whom she is emotionally attached and got respect as an independent individual self. It shows that it is Bob who has always imposed his thoughts and decisions upon Sally. They were never emotionally connected.

Sally's character goes through a noticeable shift when her husband leaves for Vietnam. The loyal, naïve, conservative military wife who dreads being left alone, moves into a new apartment by the beach and buys a sports car. She starts feeling liberated and stepping into the life of her very own. This is her first step towards freedom. This freedom in a true sense gives her the wings to fly in the sky. She starts looking for her own identity. With nothing else to do, she decides to volunteer at a local veterans' hospital.

That is the place where she meets Luke, so loaded with his agony, outrage, and disappointment. She knew him vaguely before; he was the captain of the football team at her high school. He headed out to battle the war, returned home paralyzed from the waist down, and now, tied on his stomach to a table with wheels, uses sticks to push him irately down hospital corridors. Luke Martin, a popular young man, the captain of his high school football team also had a similar male upbringing like Bob. But, his recruitment to military services ultimately took away all the vibrant colours of his life. The flamboyant, full of life young officer returned from the war not only physically injured but also psychologically broken down who is even unable to walk for life. Sally, who volunteers to work in the hospital after Bob leaves for war is shocked both by the misery of these veterans and by the indifference they confront both from the general public they battled for and from the officers' spouses on the base. When Sally discovers that she knew Luke back in high school when he was the captain of the football team and her a cheerleader, she finds herself attracted to him again.

Hal Ashby makes wonderful connections between these empty souls. Both Sally and Luke are frantically searching their own existence, the meaning of their lives. Their frantic searches go side by side. The transformation that they go through during their relationship is clearly visible. Sally tries to talk to Luke, becomes acquainted with him, and welcomes him for dinner. He starts to centre his outrage far from himself and toward the war; he becomes more settled, recaptures development. The paralyzed war veteran starts getting his psychological recovery and mental stability because of Sally.

Hal Ashby has set such strong characteristics in Sally that she single-handedly makes it possible to reshape a war veteran who is so broken down after the horrendous injury of war. Sally's companionship and intimacy give Luke the mental strength to speak out his mind. There is some confession that he makes in the later part of the movie which gives a clear picture of his mental maturity and stability—"I have killed for my country, or whatever, and I don't feel good about it. Coz there's not enough reason, man, to feel a person die in your hands, or to see your best buddy get blown away"

.... "I don't feel sorry for myself. I'm a lot fucking smarter now than when I went. And I'm just telling you that there's a choice to be made here." [Being interviewed by a television news crew after chaining himself to a Marines Recruitment Facility] The reason why I'm here is that a buddy of mine who'd been in 'Nam took his own life today. This is kind of a funeral service. And I'm here because I'm trying to tell people, man, if we want to commit suicide, we have plenty of reasons to do it right here at home. We don't have to go to Vietnam to find reasons to kill ourselves. I just don't think we should be over there.

This is solely Sally's contribution and motivation that has inspired Luke to break the shell and come out from a darker world to see the dream of embracing a bright future. The loyal, naïve military wife goes through such a distinct transition in Hal Ashby's *'Coming Home'*, that she takes the centre position among the three main characters of the movie. The male characters in true sense revolve around this female character. The presence of Sally in Luke's life is the only reason behind all the positive changes of his life. A war veteran who is paralyzed from the waist down regains such mental strength that not only he himself feels positive about life, but also spreads out his positivity among the people of the society. This is Sally who has made all the differences in these men's life. Sally becomes the driving force of the two men's life.

On the other hand, Bob's life starts getting shattered when he starts feeling the absence of Sally in his life. At the point when Bob gets freedom in Hong Kong, Sally travels to visit him and starts to see the devastation of the war on him. He is far off, occupied, sleeps with a weapon close by and strolls in circles, discussing the abominations his men have conferred. Bob has been broken by the war like the others; he will never be the same.

But Bob gets worse when he comes back home. When he gets to know that his wife is cheating on him, his feeling of isolation gets unbearable from him. How emasculating it must have been for him to learn she has fallen in with a man paralyzed from the waist down, how it must have affected his masculinity.

[Yelling at Sally after discovering her infidelity] What I'm saying is! I don't belong in this house, and they say I don't belong over there!

At one point he goes ballistic and turns a weapon on Sally. Luke arrives and the weapon is turned on him, however, the men talk their way through it and out of the circumstance. Be that as it may, Bob can't adapt to what has happened to him, and as Sally shops and Luke addresses a gathering of high school boys about the war, Bob swims into the ocean never to be seen again.

There are two main aspects of the problem when it comes to women in film: representation and prevalence (Smith & Cook, 2008). Representation deals with the qualities of the women in movies, who are, save few modern examples, sexualized and made to be shown as weaker than their male counterparts (Smith, 2013) Women in cinema have always been treated as "desired objects for the male gaze", The masculine visual economy of desire will only place women in a place from where her sexual beauty is desirable and enjoyable, and secondly place women in a place from where she is forever the secondary object, never the central human subject. In *Coming Home*, Sally Hyde somehow has gone through these problematic areas. She has been shown sexualized and also weaker at the beginning. Both male characters here took Sally as a desirable object and as a body. Even Luke Martine who is a paraplegic veteran confessed that he always thought about making love with Sally. Though this helped him to regain his wounded masculinity this same action led Sally's husband to feel him weaker and point to his masculinity.

Here we begin to tread on an uncomfortable territory. When talking about women's images as a currency of desire, showing feminine beauty and sensuality? In order to represent the female protagonist as a 'human being' and not a sexual object, defeminize the protagonist, strip her of her female beauty, a beauty which may in many ways overlap with the male/mainstream cinematic representation? (Meyers 8) Hal Ashby very tactfully changes the images that Sally was introduced with at the very beginning. Sally at the beginning was the subject of sexual desire or worked as a foil character to give even Luke the masculine feelings. The typical female representation was there. But somehow Ashby technically emphasizes the transformation of Sally as a female identity which surpasses the female embodiment that has been always expected to be as a suppressed and marginalized character. Somehow Sally not only is shown as a transformed character but also the centre of the characters seemed significant in the movie.

Bob never gave emphasis to any emotions and feelings of Sally as she is not a person or human being. When he was about to move for Vietnam War he did not care what Sally thought about war. Whatever he thought he expected Sally to bind to listen to it.

Sally had obviously always wanted to break the rules of the community rigid rules otherwise she did not waste any time. She was unpredictable from the very beginning to hold a grip in her own world. The inner self of woman is always beyond representation. They are always striving to achieve and discover the strength that they have. They always want to become a subject. They always go through a number of transformations and transition to have the identity and embodiment that they really deserve. Society most of the cases cannot recognize these very special space of female embodiment. According to Julia Kristeva in her essay 'Woman Can Never be Defined', she says "In "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclature and ideologies" (Feminist Literary Theory 266)"

In *Coming Home*, the representation of female embodiment at the same time touches both the stereotypes and also breaks the stereotypes. He attempts to transform not only the male characters but also deployed Sally at the touchstone to transform those characters. The paralyzed war veteran starts getting his psychological recovery and mental stability. Parallel things start changing in Sally's world too. The change takes place not only in her attitude towards life but also in her appearance. The style of her hair and the color of her dresses start getting changed with her changing attitude towards life. The relationship with Luke has given her freedom. On July 4, in a big barbeque party, Sally is seen with her open and free hair. Her open hair clearly symbolizes the freedom of her life. At one point when Sally takes Luke back to the hospital and things warm up significantly, Sally wears a navy blue sweater. Sally is never seen in such dark colour before. "Color can carry a specific meaning...Color meaning and effect has to do with context as well." (Color psychology 387) The change in colour ascribes her shift in perception. In the so-called trapped, the dominated wife started the feelings of calmness, serenity and stability in her life. She starts taking responsibility and secures the confidence of leading a life of her own. She starts taking control of her very own life. Not only that the girl who was always controlled and dominated by her husband starts controlling the emotions of two male's world. In the essay 'I Am a Woman: The Personal and the Philosophical' Toril Moi quotes Simone de Beauvoir that "It is impossible to shed light on one's own life without at some point illuminating the life of others." (Quoted in *Sex, Gender and the Body* 121) Hal Ashby does this perfectly to portray Sally's transformation. She was on the margin but somehow she starts transforming and flourishing as an independent individual with a dignity that is absent in so many cinemas of wars. She is shown as the person who is illuminating the life of others with the light of her very own personality once suppressed by the social and cultural ideology of a loyal wife. Sally's open and free hair and deep navy blue sweater show her aspiration to higher ideals. Her strong trusting relationship with Luke is also related to this colour blue that gradually helps Sally to fit into her own acceptable version of reality.

The most vulnerable female character in this movie takes control over the other powerful masculine war veterans and makes them vulnerable without her. Her transformation from margin to center is well depicted when Bob, Sally's husband's emotions are feminized because of traumatic war and her wife's newly found life. Sally becomes the strength of the story where the male characters' strengths are revolving around her. The very masculine concept of war becomes secondary in the storyline because of the powerful portrayal of Sally Hyde as an independent self.

2. References

- i. Andermahr, Sonya. Lovell, Terry. Wolkowitz, Carol. A Glossary of Feminist Theory. Oxford University Press. London: 2000. Print.
- ii. Eagleton, Mary. Ed. Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader. Second edition. Blackwell Publishers 1996. Print.
- iii. Lawson, Jacquene. ed. (1989) "Gender and the War: Men, Women and Vietnam," Vietnam Generation: Vol. 1: No. 3.1989. Web 27 Feb 2018. <<http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol1/iss3/1>>
- iv. Moi, Toril. Sexual/Textual Politics. Feminist Literary Theory. 2nd edition. Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group. 2002. Print. Sex, Gender and the Body. The student edition of what is a Woman? Oxford University Press. 2005. Print.
- v. Whitfield, T. W. A., & Wiltshire, T. J. "Color psychology: A critical review". Genetic, Social and General Psychology Monographs. Volume 116 (4). PMID 2289687. ISSN: 1940-5286 Heldref Publications.1990. Web 11 March 2018.
- vi. <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/2289687>>
- vii. YouTube. "Top Searches on YouTube: February - November 2017." Online video clip. YouTube. 21 December 2012. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5SoltQL6cw>