Female Initiation in a Modern Cinderella Story: Gloria Whelan's *Homeless Bird**

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Homeless Bird is a 2000 National Book Award novel for young adults by Gloria Whelan. By employing the fairy tale Cinderella as an archetype, Gloria Whelan successfully blends fantasy with realism, building an image of new Cinderella, who is independent, courageous, and full of rebelling spirits in a patriarchal society, thus presenting young readers a more familiar and more acceptable access to the harsh reality. With the theme of female initiation, Koly's initiation journey is allegorical which needs to be read as an extended metaphor to exhibit the power of courage and hope in people who determine to take the fate in their own hands.

Keywords: *Homeless Bird*, female initiation, growth predicament, patriarchal society, allegory

Introduction

As a National Book Award Winner, Gloria Whelan's *Homeless Bird* is a story about a poor girl's struggle to survive in a male-dominated society. Only 13, Koly has to leave home and enter into an arranged marriage in a distant village with her in-laws and husband, none of whom she has met. The truth is even worse than she could have imagined: The groom, Hari, is a sickly child, and his parents have wanted only a dowry, not a wife for him, in order to pay for a trip to Benares so Hari might bathe in the holy waters of the Ganges. After Koly is widowed, her cruel mother-in-law takes Koly's widow's pension for her daughter's dowry, mistreats Koly, and eventually abandons her in the city of widows.

Since its publication in 2000, *Homeless Bird* has received much praise from both critics and young readers, who love Whelan's lyrical writing, evocative images, and vividly woven story, especially the memorable life experience of the heroine, Koly in the novel. *School Library Journal* (2000) once commented that "Whelan embroiders details and traditions into an artful contemporary novel that is as textured and seamless as her heroine's needlework" (p. 9). *Publishers Weekly* (2000) also claimed that "Kids will likely enjoy [the] dramatic view of an endangered adolescence and cheer Koly's hard-won victories" (p. 11). While despite the positive comments, there are some controversial and critical disagreements over a number of issues in this award winning novel, among them the most heated one is its clear-parallel to a "Cinderella" story with the binary of good and evil and the result of the binary. As Roderick McGillis (1997) points out, "binaries insist on otherness, one term reflecting the familiar and accepted, the other the unfamiliar and unaccepted" (p. 222). In "Beyond Borders: Reading 'other' in Children's Literature", Susan Louise Stewart (2008) also states that:

I suggest that the binary creates unfavorable associations with India. ... In short, we see in *Homeless Bird*, a set of

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unfavorable characteristics associated with an unlikeable individual (the mother-in-law) and favorable characteristics associated with a likeable character (Koly). This binary burdens characters with ideological baggage and offers vexed representations of India. (p. 100)

The author of the present paper argues that the binary of good and evil is a universal motif exists in almost every literary work which is not necessary leads to social biases. In *Homeless Bird*, Gloria Whelan builds an image of new Cinderella, who is independent, courageous, and full of rebelling spirits. Besides, by employing the fairy tale Cinderella as an archetype, Gloria Whelan successfully blends fantasy with realism, presenting young readers a more familiar and acceptable access to the harsh reality. The “fairy tale ending” of living “happily ever after” does not undermine the artistic value of the novel, but rather endows the novel with an optimistic message about the female initiation in a misfortunate environment. With the theme of female initiation, Koly’s initiation journey is allegorical which needs to be read as an extended metaphor to exhibit the power of courage and hope in people who determine to take the fate in their own hands.

As a Modern Cinderella Story

After reading Gloria Whelan’s *Homeless Bird*, many readers undoubtedly associate its plotting and characterization with traditional fairy tale Cinderella. *Homeless Bird* reminds readers of the Cinderella that it is a story about a sweet young girl, who is rescued from a dire situation by a dashing young man, and who carries her off to marry him and live happily ever after. Besides, in *Homeless Bird*, Koly’s mother-in-law represents the wicked stepmother in traditional Cinderella, who treats Koly as a servant, who abuses Koly, making her do any menial chore she can think of. While despite all these resemblances, in *Homeless Bird*, Gloria Whelan only employs traditional Cinderella as an archetype to create a rather familiar and easily enjoyed story for young readers, and has entered into an imagined world with empathy and riveting authenticity, which endows this fairy-tale-based story with much modern perspectives, providing young readers an insightful, culturally illuminating tale.

The modernity in *Homeless Bird* comes from the characterization of the heroine, Koly. In the traditional Cinderella, beautiful women like Cinderella must bear patiently their suffering and accept that they are victims of the circumstances of life. If they accept their lot in life, they will, in time, be rewarded, as Tyson (2006) points out,

Feminists have long been aware that the role of Cinderella, which patriarchy imposes on the imagination of young girls, is a destructive role because it equates femininity with submission, encouraging women to tolerate familiar abuse, wait patiently to be secured by a man, and view marriage as the only desirable reward for “right” conduct. (p. 88)

Different from the negative role of traditional Cinderella, Koly in *Homeless Bird* represents an independent, courageous, and compassionate female who tries to grasp every opportunity to fight against the adversity and determines to take the fate in her own hands.

Throughout the novel, Koly always seeks access to education, which is the essential step for female independence in a male-dominated society. She turns over the pages of her brother’s book even when her brother frightens her “when a girl learns to read, her hair falls out, her eyes cross, and no man will look at her” (Whelan, 2001, p. 3). She stubbornly refuses to take off her silver earrings and gives them to her mother-in-law for safekeeping even she knows that “if I defied her now, we would be enemies, but I didn’t care” (Whelan, 2001, p. 20). When knowing that her mother-in-law secretly takes her widow’s pension, she bravely goes to the

government office to claim her right of getting the pension. After her mother-in-law abandons her in a city of window, she struggles to make a living by herself and resists the temptations of the evils to maintain the human virtues, as Koly expresses her feelings when one of her friends' theft is exposed: "I was angry with Mala and disgusted with her stealing. Yet a part of me was sorry for her. All her beauty and cleverness were wasted. What had happened to her was like the breaking of a fine vase" (Whelan, 2001, p. 176).

The different characterization of Koly from the traditional Cinderella resonates with contemporary young readers and makes the story more familiar for them to accept. Koly mirrors their desires and attitudes. She fulfills their aspiration. Koly's story of overcoming numerous obstacles and constraints by determination and hard work sets a positive role model for them to follow.

Predicaments of Female Initiation

The story of *Homeless Bird* centers on 13-year-old heroine Koly's personal development and the process of maturity through many difficulties; her falling from the innocent world into the miserable and corrupt adult world, and her struggle for freedom, independence, and identity, thus female initiation is the main theme of the novel. Studying the predicaments faced by female initiation helps the readers to deeply understand the profound social significance of the novel. The predicaments of female initiation in *Homeless Bird* mainly derive from the oppression from patriarchal ideology and the prejudice brought by hierarchy society.

First, women in *Homeless Bird* are subject to patriarchal oppression. Patriarchy by definition is sexist,

which means it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. ...The belief that men are superior to women has been used to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power. That is, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced. (Tyson, 2006, pp. 85-86)

Patriarchal ideology permeates almost every aspect of life in *Homeless Bird* and is deeply rooted in people's mind. When Koly's brothers learned that her Maa and Baap are looking for a husband for her, they begin to tease her by saying: "Koly, when you have a husband, you will have to do as he tells you. You won't sit and daydream as you do now" (Whelan, 2001, p. 2). Koly's two brothers go to the boy's school in the village. Though there is a school for girls, Koly does not go there, since her Maa says school is a waste for girls. "It will be of no use to you after are married. The money for books and school fees is better put toward your dowry, so that we may find you a suitable husband" (Whelan, 2001, p. 3). Koly's fatally sick husband, even though is still a boy of less than 16-year-old, when in accompany with Koly, what he says to Koly is "You have to do what I tell you because you are my wife" (Whelan, 2001, p. 25) and "You must obey me" (Whelan, 2001, p. 31).

Besides, the patriarchal ideology exerts forces that undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness, and then most women are not to see the ways in which women are oppressed by traditional gender roles and are naturally submissive to male-dominated society. Koly's sister-in-law Chandra is a good example. When Koly tells Chandra that her Baap is going to teach her to read and invites Chandra to learn as well, Chandra shakes her head and says: "I have no need. My parents are looking for a husband for me" (Whelan, 2001, p. 57).

The second predicament faced by female initiation in the novel is the prejudice brought by hierarchy society. Koly is from a poor family, her Baap is a scribe who is at the bottom of the hierarchy society. After she is widowed, her life becomes more miserable. Her mother-in-law always uses angry words to scold her: "Your

dowry did not save Hari, and now we are burdened with one more mouth to feed” (Whelan, 2001, p. 51). Her never-ending scoldings tear Koly apart:

She screamed at me, “You are no better than the bandicoot that burrows under our house and eats our food. Go home to your miserable parents!” But she knew as well as I that I could not go back to my village. It would have been a terrible disgrace to return like a hungry dog to my parents’ home. (Whelan, 2001, p. 52)

Women are the most vulnerable group in patriarchal and hierarchy society. By vividly presenting the predicaments of female initiation in both patriarchal and hierarchy society, Gloria Whelan highlights the positive image of Koly and creates a new Cinderella through Koly, who will not allow herself to be shaped by her society and who refuses to be defined as the nonsignificant other. In *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, Charles E. Bressler (1999) asserts:

This re-created Cinderella debunks the false standards and ideas concerning women and their portrayal in both life and literature that have been carefully perpetuated by the traditional Cinderella and her society. Women, says this new Cinderella, should not mindlessly wait around for a handsome prince to come to their rescue. Women must not be like the traditional Cinderella: dependent creatures who blindly accept the commandments of their patriarchy society. Unlike the traditional Cinderella, women must not weep about their lot in life, but take an active part in creating and determining their own lives and their own futures. (p. 179)

Koly’s Initiation Journey

Koly’s initiation journey undergoes self-losing, self-seeking, and self-salvation. It begins with Koly’s arranged marriage which means loss and consequent grief: the loss of beloved family members, the loss of security, and the loss of innocence. Readers can sense her loss and grief from her first night in her husband’s family:

I self very little that night, kept awake by my longing for my home and by Hari’s coughing in the next room. As I lay there in the strange house, I felt like a newly caged animal that rushes about looking for the open door that isn’t there. I thought I might be able to endure one day in my new home and perhaps two, but I did not see how I could live there for the rest of my life. (Whelan, 2001, p. 21)

Shortly after the wedding, her husband dies and immediately Koly is widowed. Her mother-in-law takes her widow pension and finally abandons her in the city of widows. It is in the city of widows that Koly experiences her self-seeking and self-salvation.

Gloria Whelan has never been to India. In an interview she once explains how she arrives at her story:

I do a lot of writing about other times and other places and as you do your research and you begin writing the story, you get so immersed in those other places that you actually feel that you’re there. So it’s a kind of a magical way to time travel, to write these stories about distant places or other countries or other times. (“Conversation,” 2000)

With talented imagination and artistic creativity, she utilizes the mode of allegory to develop the theme of female initiation.

By allegory, the author of the present paper means that the city of widows in *Homeless Bird* reminds people of “The Vanity Fair” in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1684) where all kinds of social evils such as greed, bully, corruption, cheating, and stealing abound everywhere and people constantly struggle with their own weaknesses. Through Koly’s point of view, Gloria Whelan foregrounds the danger around Koly:

I did not see how I could run away without looking foolish. The artist, Kajal, was studing me. He had a catlike face with slanted eyes and a half smile. “I must paint you,” he said, looking as though he wished not so much to paint me as to devour me. ...There was a scene of a dark forest with tiger peering from some trees. The tiger had the same half smile as

Kajal, which made the man more frightening to me. I saw that he was no house cat to be tamed, but a malicious cat, even a dangerous one. (Whelan, 2001, p. 159)

Besides, the narrative of Koly's initiation journey is allegorical in the sense that the story is concerned primarily with female quest for independence, freedom, and acceptance despite the unfavorable social circumstances. The theme of quest is a recurring trope in allegory. By allegory, then Koly's initiation journey should be read as an extended metaphor of life as a journey. Koly then is the Christian in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, who after many adventures, with the help of several virtuous friends, finally reaches the Celestial City and enjoys eternal life in the fellowship of the blessed. At the end of the novel, Koly finds her true love and fulfills her self-salvation:

Mr. Das must have told Mrs. Devi that I was to be married. The next time she came to the store, she said to Mr. Das, "I must have the first sari Koly embroiders in her new home. You will give her a length of King's muslin to take with her." She smiled at me. "Koly, will you find something for the border in one of Tagore's poems?" Immediately I knew that it would be the homeless bird, flying at last to its home. (Whelan, 2001, p. 182)

Conclusion

As a modern Cinderella story, *Homeless Bird* presents a positive image of new Cinderella for young readers to follow who is hardworking, industrious, independent, courageous, and tenacious. The growth of Koly from self-loss, self-seeking to self-salvation in an unfavorable social circumstance is a typical example of female initiation which should be read allegorically as an extended metaphor to exhibit the power of courage and hope in people who determine to take the fate in their own hands. In this sense, *Homeless Bird* is an insightful, evocative, and educationally illuminative tale.

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