

03

## UNVEILING THE RESISTANCE: A RE-READING OF CAROLINE LEE HENTZ'S *THE PLANTER'S NORTHERN BRIDE*

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### **Abstract:**

*Southern society functioned on certain ideologies. A hierarchical social structure existed in the society, which was based on the religious ideology wherein it was believed that God has assigned different roles for different people. This ideology gave men the power to dominate and control the other classes. Myth of cult of true womanhood too drew a distinction between the private home and the public space. As historian Barbara Welter mentions in her article, The Cult of True Womanhood : “The attribute of True Womanhood by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society would be divided into four cardinal virtues-piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (152). This led to the development of separate spheres where men belonged to the public sphere and women were confined to the private sphere. Unlike their Northern sisters, curiously enough, Southern women were content with their positioning in the social structure. White Upper class women of southern society favored this prevailing hierarchy and embraced domesticity. Women writers of antebellum south also promoted southern ideology of separate spheres in their writings. If we trace the history of women's writing, we could find that the early writings of women always celebrated the ideal southern womanhood. With the advent of black women writings like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, which depicts the evils of slavery, there emerged a number of novels as a response to this particular novel. These writings, known as domestic fiction were an attempt to highlight the slavery system as favorable to African Americans. The five best selling domestic novelists during the antebellum period were Caroline Lee Hentz, Caroline Howard Gilman, Maria McIntosh, Mary Virginia Terhune and Augusta Jane Evans. Their works reached a wider audience. How did domestic novels gain such a momentum in the south? How did women novelists attain such popularity? Why Caroline Hentz, a northern by birth, would support these ideologies? This paper is an attempt to analyze Caroline Lee Hentz's novel, The Planter's Northern Bride in the light of the above questions.*

**Keywords:** Domestic Fiction, southern household, slavery, southern womanhood, resistance.

Southern domestic fiction chartered the transformation of weak, self-centered girls into morally and intellectually autonomous, physically energetic women capable of defending the domestic realm against pernicious northern influences -Elizabeth Moss

The above quote is from Elizabeth Moss's book, *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture*. When I got my hands on this book, what struck my attention was its title. Here I am trying to look into two parts of the title. Domestic novel is a genre that was very popular during the antebellum era. Caroline Lee Hentz, Caroline Gilman, Maria McIntosh, Mary Virginia Terhune and Augusta Jane Evans were the five best selling domestic novelists during that period. Their works reached a wider audience. How did domestic novels gain such a momentum in the south? How did women novelists attain such popularity?

This forces one to look into what a domestic novel is? Domestic novel is considered as a “popular narrative literature written by, for, and about women that flourished during the mid-nineteenth century”.

Elizabeth Moss in this particular book, *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture* has studied the five domestic novelists within the cultural context of antebellum southern society. Moss's reading underscores the importance of these women writers in upholding the southern ideologies in their works.

All these writers lived and wrote during early nineteenth century to the mid nineteenth century. Moss has highlighted how these women contributed to the maintenance of southern societal structure. No doubt, their writings were different from their northern counterparts. Their lives and experiences were also different from their northern sisters as they lived in a slave society which was based on a hierarchical structure. This structure was based on the religious ideology that God has assigned different roles for different people. According to this ideology men belonged to the public sphere and women were confined to the private sphere. As historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has pointed out that "the ideology of separate spheres insisted women's primary identity as wives and mothers under the protection and domination of their husbands" (83). But unlike their Northern sisters, curiously enough, Southern women were content with their positioning in the social structure. White Upper class women of southern society favored this prevailing hierarchy and embraced domesticity. Women writers of antebellum south also promoted southern ideology of separate spheres in their writings. Southern women were content with their positioning in the societal structure. They favored this prevailing hierarchy. At first reading one can find that these domestic novelists also promoted the southern ideology of separate spheres in their writings.

As mentioned earlier, while reading Moss's book what crossed my mind was the title. I wondered were these women writers really defenders? If so, what made them defend a culture that prescribed a limited role for women? Why were these women supporting the ideology that circumscribed them to the domestic realm? More interesting was the promotion of southern ideology by Caroline Lee Hentz, one of the important women writers who popularized domestic fiction. I pondered, why Caroline a northern by birth, would support these ideologies? Why did she defend 'the southern way of life'? Was there any agenda behind her writing? Was she actually promoting the southern ideology or was she critical of the same?

Caroline Lee Hentz, born in Massachusetts, travelled to South with her husband in the year 1827 and continued her stay in the south for thirty years. After her marriage to Nicholas Marcellus Hentz, she moved to the south. Her first short story *The Sacrifice* was published in the year 1832. Her writing career began as a playwright. She published a five act tragedy, *De Lara, or, The Moorish Bride* in 1843. Her two collections of short stories are *Aunt Patty's Scrap Bag* (1848) and *The Mob Cap appeared* (1849). Her prominent novels are: *Linda; or, The Young Pilot of the Belle Creole* (1850), *Rena; or The Snow Bird* (1851) *Eoline; or, Magnolia Vale* (1852) and *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854). She was known for her novel *The Planter's Northern Bride*. Hentz kept moving from one city to other during her stay in southern America and her Biography states that she was immersed in rural southern life during her stay in Florence. Jamie Stanesa points out in her article, *Caroline Lee Whiting Hentz (1800-1856)* that:

Caroline Hentz's immersion in rural Southern life during this period also deepened her intellectual and emotional attachment to her adopted region and irrevocably shaped her fictional style and authorial perspective. As her first extended exposure to Southern plantation society and culture, Hentz's residence in Florence provided the background as well as the intellectual fodder for her later domestic novel (132).

Keeping all the above questions in my mind I started re-reading Caroline Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride*. *The Planter's Northern Bride* begins with a preface, where Caroline Lee Hentz glorifies the slavery system and states how cheerful and content are the slaves of the plantation. The plot revolves around Moreland, a plantation master. It is through this male character the defense of the institution of slavery is carried out. As the title suggests Moreland's bride is from North and it is her shift from her northern home to southern plantation household that is used to point out the differences between the two regions. Southern household were distinct as they were tinged with the aspect of slaves and huge households. With the

presence of slaves to carry out the domestic chores the life of Southern women differed from Northern women. Moreland's household included many slave women who carried out all the domestic activities:

The washerwomen who had nothing to do but wash and iron and scrub floors; Aunt Kizzie, the nurse and plain seamstress- that is she cut and made the other negroes clothes, hemmed tea-towels, sheets, &; Netty, the chambermaid and fine seamstress, the maker of her master's shirts and Effie's wardrobe... (Hentz, 231)

The novel brings in the whole idea of southern household; the authoritative master, submissive wife and obedient slaves. Eulalia's journey to south changes her preconceived notion about the south and its people. Plantation household is seen as ordered and slaves are seen as happy and content. Taking this as a marker, the author highlights the stability of southern society. Throughout the novel Hentz nurtures the idea of southern womanhood, the structural hierarchy of the society, and the slavery system as an important element for the perseverance of the southern culture. Moreland, the plantation master is depicted as the protector of the slaves and other members of the household. He controlled the household and the plantation. His position is clearly drawn in the novel. In one of the scenes, when Moreland becomes aware of the raising insurrection in his plantation, he returns to the plantation, summons the Negroes and reminds them of their role and position in the society. When all the blacks were ready to kneel and ask for his forgiveness, one of them refuses. Moreland then makes a clear statement, which in fact was a warning to all who disobey him. He exclaimed "There is but one master here. Submit to his authority, or tremble for the consequences!" (Hentz, 506) His authoritarian power as a master is clearly brought out here. Southern societal structure is based on this submission and protection principles. Men are the protector and the duty of women and slaves is obedience and subjection. Any kind of denial disturbs the hierarchy on which the society is built.

On the other hand, Eulalia is described as an 'angel' throughout the novel. She is portrayed as possessing all the qualities of an ideal southern womanhood. "There was about her a pure, sweet, fresh womanliness, a virgin delicacy, a strong but guarded sensibility, a deep, genuine, but unobtrusive piety" (Hentz, 101). Purity, piety, sweetness were the yardsticks against which true womanhood was measured during nineteenth century. Throughout the novel these qualities of Eulalia has been stressed. Words like purity, guilelessness, truth, simplicity were used to describe Eulalia.

Distinction between northern laborer and southern slave also is drawn too often in the novel to foreground the stability of the southern societal structure. Moreland's meeting with Nancy is an example of this. The condition of laborers in the north is brought out through the words of Nancy, a northern laborer. "I can't work anymore; I ain't strong enough to do a single chore now; and Mr. Grimby says he hadn't got any room for me to lay by in. My wages stopped three weeks ago. He says there's no use in my hanging on any longer, for I'll never be good for anything anymore" (Hentz, 24).

Here, Moreland is seen recalling how Negroes are taken care of by their masters when they fall sick. Time and again, an instance as this is brought out in the novel. Kizzie's mother, Old Dicey is portrayed as having given a kind treatment by Moreland. She is given a nice cabin and Eulalia wonders: "if anyone could find any poor, old, infirm woman at the North, happier than Dicey, more kindly treated, more amply provided for, and living in a more nicely furnished cabin and more comfortably clothed..." (Hentz, 233). Many illustrations such as this can be seen in the novel. The image of kind masters and mistresses also pop up quite often in the novel. The southern ideology that all men are not equal is stressed at many occasions in the novel. During one of the conversations between Eulalia and Moreland, he boasts on how well he regards the Negroes and also exhibits his unconditional love and care for them but he also asserts that he can never look upon the Negro as his equal, he says:

God has not made all men equal, though men wiser than God would have it so. Inequality is one of Nature's laws. The mountains and the valleys proclaim it. It is written on the firmament of heaven. It is felt in the social system, and always will be felt, in spite of the

dreams of the enthusiast or the efforts of the reformer (Hentz, 305).

It is on this ideology the whole structure of southern society is built. This contrasting statement can be seen as a deliberate attempt by the author to criticize the South's rigid conservatism and slavery practices. Eulalia, daughter of an abolitionist heard her father say that the Negroes are equal in mind, body and soul, except the color. But at the plantation, when Eulalia looked at her husband standing amidst the Negroes, she felt that "freedom, in its broadest latitude, education, with its most exalted privileges, could never make them equal to him" (Hentz, 333).

Trained from childhood to embrace domesticity, southern women were relegated to the private sphere of home. Women's aim "is to love the male, to marry him, and to bear and nurture his children" (Kelley, 40). Given a separate education, they were forced to believe that they were inferior to men, intellectually and physically, thus they must be involved only in domestic chores. From the beginning, young women were earmarked as passive and subservient. They knew that their future would be confined to domesticity.

Hentz brings out all these in *The Planter's Northern Bride*. On her journey to southern home, her husband Moreland tells Eulalia to illuminate his home by her love. "Let us talk about the home that is to be gladdened by your presence and illumined by your love." Eulalia upon reaching the southern home is also asked to train Effie, Moreland's daughter who was considered as cultureless like her mother. Eulalia takes up the duty and succeeds in her attempt. But as Effie was taken away by her mother, Claudia, Moreland's first wife for a while she forgets all the values taught by Eulalia. After Claudia's death when Effie was brought back Eulalia realizes that "she had to begin anew her labours of love. New tares were to be uprooted, new thorns extracted, and choking stones removed, before the lately neglected plant could receive, in blessing, the sunshine and the dew of culture" (Hentz, 479).

This statement highlights the duty of women of the nineteenth century. This was the only duty women were asked to do - to love and transfuse culture to the hearts of others. Education of mind was never regarded as a necessity for women, because women were conditioned for domestic duties. During Eulalia's stay in the inn, in the middle of her journey to Moreland's plantation, they met a farmer who reveals the importance of Eddication female. "Dedication is a beautiful thing in a women; it don't matter so much in a man, 'cause he's got more maternal smartness; but it does set a woman off mightily" (Hentz, 326). The tone, however, is an indirect attack on the gender based education system that prevailed during the time period which barred women from gaining intellectual education.

Eulalia can also be seen as Hentz herself who was transplanted from north to south and was forced to adopt southern culture and ideologies. Hentz's was an attempt to give voice to the concerns of all southern women. By clearly portraying the positioning of women in the antebellum south, was she criticizing the ideology? The juxtaposing of Claudia, Moreland's first wife, against Eulalia does carry an underlying tone. Claudia is depicted as an evil character in the novel. Claudia's words during her encounter with Eulalia can be seen as an indirect message to her women readers about the tyrannical nature of men in the south. "I thought I married a lover! He turned into my master, my tyrant! He wanted me to cringe to his will, like the slaves in the kitchen, and I spurned his authority! I defied his power! He expected me to obey him...he refused me the liberty of choosing my own friends" (Hentz, 366).

Thus Hentz, through the character of Claudia, tried to tell her female readers to rebel against the male authority which denies them freedom. As Mary Kelley has pointed out in her book, *Private Women, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in the Nineteenth Century America*, "my subjects traversed the familial boundaries separating the private and the public in their lives and their fiction" (Kelley, 7) I too agree that these writers has crossed the demarcation and have set the stage for their readers to transcend the limits of domesticity. In her earlier works, *Eoline* and *Linda*, too we can see such defiance from the heroines. Though the novel ends in marriage, there is a resistance in the initial stage. Hentz, like other domestic novelists, always maintained a balance between opposition and acceptance. The plot takes a different turn



when a man named Brainard visits Moreland. A preacher from North, who wins the heart of Moreland and others through his excellent preaching gradually rises an insurrection. Moreland gets the news and puts an end to it.

Like her other novels peace and stability is restored at the end of this novel too ensuring everyone especially Eulalia's father that slavery protects slaves and if every masters exhibited kindness, wisdom and regulations 'the spirit of abolitionism would die away'. Hentz closes the novel by stating that southerners has been misrepresented so far and expresses her love to both North and South and states that the "The North and South are branches of the same parent tree, and the lightning bolt that shivers the one , must scorch and wither the other"(Hentz,579).

Hence, being totally aware of her destiny as a woman writer, Hentz's writings promoted cultural and moral values. The presence of moral values in the writings increased the popularity of her works. Without any deviation from the cultural norms of the century, she wrote. Yet the sufferings, the limitations, the yearnings, the ambitions of her lot found a voice in all her works. All the domestic novelists including Hentz have experienced the crisis of domesticity. Their works spoke for them. In it they built their dream homes, an ideal home with an ideal man where women were projected as powerful. Their fiction attempted to provide a place for women that had been denied to them in actuality. The domestic crisis of their own life were given expression in the pages of their works, but was veiled with the moral messages and domestic blissfulness. Through the exaltation of the home in their works they were in fact registering their opposition against the confined realm.

All these manifest that Hentz in the light of defending the ideology was undoubtedly assaulting the societal structure of the south. Then what is it that makes Hentz conceal her attack? Was it the fear to speak against the conservative society on which she laid a foundation of her literary career? Was she scared of losing the wide popularity and material gains? Or was it as Mary Kelley pointed out in her work *Private Women, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in the Nineteenth Century America*, "anxiety about the transgression of cultural norms".

Evidences gathered from different sources such as letters and journals suggest that Hentz wrote to support her family. During 1849 her husband's health deteriorated and Hentz was forced to write seriously. "Hentz wanted and needed to sell books- and lots of them- to support her family" (Stanessa, 133). She was widely acclaimed as a writer and had a large audience at her disposal. She was well aware that if she makes any statement against the region, her literary career would be at stake.

Thus if we look into any of the works of domestic novelists Caroline Howard Gilman's *Recollections of a Southern Matron*; Augusta Evans Wilson's *Beulah*, E.D.E.N Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*, Maria McIntosh's *Women in America*, Mary Virginia Terhune's *Eve's Daughters* etc. we can find that their works do engage with the elements of resistance. They chose their domestic sphere itself as the site for resistance. Without moving out of their destined sphere they revealed how women were ensnared by web of domesticity. They were domestic women conditioned to fit into the structural hierarchy of the south. However, they spoke, yet feared of being heard. This fear made them conceal their opposition in the words of promotion. But they accomplished more than what were expected of them. They crossed the boundaries of female sphere through their literary outputs which led to the blooming of domestic novels in the nineteenth century. Through their writings they entered the political realm which was considered as men's sphere. Entering into the realm of public sphere through their works, in the pretext of promoting sectional conciliation, they tried to reach their female readers. Thus the close analysis of *The Planter's Northern Bride* reveals that while upholding the ideologies of south this novel was in fact trying to correct the south.

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