Chapter VII

Summing Up

The representation of women’s reality and day-to-day lives is a fundamental feature of Marian Engel’s writing. Her novel and her notebooks repeatedly explore the challenges facing women committed to living and working on their own terms as artists and writers. Oppressive social stereotypes and family expectations, economic and emotional insecurity, and lack of recognition are recurring themes in her work. The emergence of female identity through artistic expression is an interest Engel shared with her late-twentieth-century contemporaries.

Marian Engel observed that there are marvellous things that can be done in writing, because one uses a combination of imagination and reality. Her writing records the enormous attraction of a life of intellectual pursuit and imagination while demonstrating the pull and interest of everyday reality as a woman. Her characters are constantly drawn in both directions at once as they seek to express their personal understanding and vision of the world. The imaginary exerts a powerful influence, for it moves beyond the confines of reality and rationality towards a “super-reality “and the fantastic. The world of dreams and ideas, philosophical reflection and intellectual pursuit, is exceedingly attractive to Engel’s protagonists. In it, they find an outlet for their instincts, emotions and unconventionality. At the same time there is the pull of logic reason, order, prosperity, gentility and middle-classness. Even as Engel’s protagonists lean towards the world of art, dream and the non-traditional, they are drawn towards conventional reality, logic and order. This push and pull creates a tension that is characteristic of many lives, if not all human existence. For
Marian Engel, this life-tension was not so much resolved as transformed-through writing. Writing was the means of living and working on one’s own terms and as a woman. It was the way to resist dichotomy and to survive a divided female self. This problematic evolves throughout Engel’s writing and is powerfully articulated in her works.

In *Sarah Bastard’s Notebook* Sarah aborted the child “Antonio “in her womb when she recognises that she is not treated as an equal by her ‘legendary ‘(SBN78) male lover Sandro. She also accepts the idea of her married friend Joe when he informed her that he was going to live with his wife ‘Ruth ‘. Sarah did all these so as not to disturb the family relations. None of her relationships works. Each choice she has made to depart from a conventional life as a woman has resulted in more complications and lead to her being less happy. Also the interview given to Toronto Star in which she declares herself as “Sarah Bastard “ – creates disturbance in her family. She indicates her distaste for identity boxes when she says she can leak out of whatever might contain her: ‘I ooze, booze, stink, feel human rather than feminine, live in a Welter of Kleenex and newspapers, cats, claypots, pictures of peple dust” (SBN97). So she decides to move far away from her family and to become a writer. By the end of the novel, she is alone in a city that is not home. Sarah’s anxiety emerges as the overwhelming result of the various social and historical forces that have brought her to this isolated place in her life. Her desire for freedom as a woman has not been refined, in part because she has had to bow to the pressure of societal interference that prevents her fulfillment as a woman. Sarah merely dedicates herself to continue her battle against her society, even if the price of her participation is loneliness. Marian Engel’s literary agent, D. Russell told “this
book seems to me to have a certain extra importance because it goes straight to the core of the lives of so many women right now “(Verduyn 74).

Engel was interested in women’s realities of motherhood, not men’s fiction about it. This is clear from the very beginning of *The Honeyman Festival*. In many ways, this novel replays the mother-daughter relationship. This novel is deeply interested in the bond between Minn and her mother Gertrude Williams. Everything in the novel leans towards this. At first somewhat fuzzy, the mother figure comes steadily into focus. Minn is both daughter and mother of three-nearly four children. The novel insists on her maternal state, repeatedly drawing attention to her pregnant body. She lives alone with her three children expecting the birth of the fourth child. One day haunted by the past memories she is unable to sleep at night. At about 2 o’clock she heard a knock at the door and a voice that a police constable standing at the door. Suddenly Minn replied that it was Mrs. Williams inside. As soon as she acquired the name of her mother she got the courage and faced the situation boldly. Thus her mother figures increasingly in her thoughts. It occurs to Minn that “something of Gertrude’s authority had crept into her voice (THF100) sending out the constable successfully she went to sleep peacefully. In the absence of her husband, she take care of her house as well as her children. They were the whole world to her and she remains herself lonely as a good mother and a good wife.

The novel sets the theme of identity in a narcissistic frame of reference. Minn’s sole act of rebellion, a hysterical attack on policeman, is an a typical response to bourgeois mores; it springs from her immature need to rebel rather than from a thoughtful rejection of established social values; it is “an attempt to infuse drama, vision of a final victory over respectability “(THF148).
*Monodromos* represents Engel’s attempt to dispassionately examine the Mediterranean setting free from the romantic stereotypes which previously surrounded it. In the novel, the protagonist Audrey Moore’s quest is for an escape from personality to “know both the city and the island like an encyclopedia“(MD38). She came to the island in search of a dog-headed-saint ikon for the sake of her lover poet Max Magill. The ‘I’of Engel’s first two novels is thus whittled down in her third novel an ‘Eye ‘. Thus in the beginning stage itself she is dominated by a male ( her lover ). Without knowing anything about the island she came to the island. Very soon she realized the limitation for women in that island. She is imprisoned within the culture of that island.

In the novel, her search for the meaning of the island is equated to her search for the “ikon of the dog-headed-saint”. Ultimately, the dog-headed-saint turns out to be only a small ikon, not matching Audrey’s herculean efforts. As the people of the island did not give much respect to women they ignore the ikon which was considered as important and great by Audrey’s lover. Audrey comes to realize that her quest for the meaning of the island has not been successful: “I am one of those opaque lady travellers after all, who sees, but does not understand “(MD237).

Towards the end of the novel, “the symbolic meanings converge in the image of a young dancing boy. Engel comes very close to articulate the ineffable identity of Cyprus through the beautiful image of the dancing boy and a related musical analogy. The face of this dancing boy recalls the ikon of the dog-headed-saint. This is an epiphanic moment for her. She feels illuminated. Audrey comes to a new understanding. She refuses to search for what lies beyond and remains content within the walls of private experience out of fearfulness and because she is
walled within the confines of gender in a society that has never tolerated female independence. Thus her failure to ‘know ‘Cyprus is double-edged: she is self-OPpressed and oppressed by the male/female polarization of the society.

In *Bear*, Marian Engel’s focus of vision allows her for the first time, to get behind the subjective pre-occupations of the early novels and to grasp directly the relationship between personal identity and the social order. Bear develops a far more positive and compelling vision of life that the preceding novels: its heroine seeks a rapprochement with the natural environment and ultimately, with the realities of social experience in her search for a more clear-sighted engagement with life.

Lou the protagonist of this novel got an opportunity to catalogue Colnel Cary’s Library in the Pennarth estate. Lou readily accepts the offer as she longs for the romantic bond with the natural world and she wants to move away from the busy city life for some time. In that estate there lives a ‘Bear ‘and Lou gradually comes close with it, and senses that she is entering a process of psychic rebirth: “I have an old sense, of being reborn“(B 9). The relation between Lou and Bear crosses the limit. They loved one another deeply and it is not like the love-making by her director who have sex once in a week on her table desk. Lou get satisfaction by the love of the Bear. She did not feel guilty for her act of bestiality. She breaks the taboo by having sexual relation with the Bear. The Romantic longing for a new bond with the natural world is similar to Lou’s own obsessive need for “some connection “with the wilderness that will release the erotic impulse buried beneath the moribund forms of contemporary civilization. She abandons “civilization “and immerses herself in nature.
One evening when Lou and the Bear are very close to one another, the bear’s paw reaches out and its claw rip her skin wide open. Pitched into a fever by the gash on her back. Lou sinks into a symbolic state of a semi consciousness. When she regains consciousness, she sees a “long red, congealing weal “(B115) marking her from shoulder to buttock. It is not ’the mark of Cain (B 115) she feels no guilt. The mark she bears is from a “claw that had healed guilt “(B121) Lou has stepped beyond social sanctions on female desire and sexual identity. Her body is a pictograph, its scar an external expression of the internal psychic pain she has endured. It is not guilt that she feels but renewal.

The novelist fully capable of distinguishing between life and death, holds the moral evaluation in a tight ironic perspective. The reader is not being invited to approve of Lou’s action as a victory of female selfhood: on the contrary, it is an act conceived in extreme desperation, a measure of her tragic alienation from a human (e) community.

The Glassy Sea simply offers a different technical orchestration of familiar themes. Like Lou, Rita Heber the protagonist of The Glassy Sea is a victim of the “battle of the sexes “, who has no anchorage in reality: her striving for certainty and a “kind of cleanliness “(TGL160) leads her into high Anglican monasticism. The Eglantine order in which she spends the “happiest and most innocent “(TGS67) ten years of her life, and to which she returns as sister superior at the novel’s close, is a setting analogous to the northern Ontario island to which Lou temporarily withdraws for her idiosyncratic redemption. Once more we witness the heroine’s remorseless sifting through appearances towards some surer comprehension of “the here-and-now “(TGL140) of wholeness of being not divorced from the life of society.
While illustrating the overall coherency of Engel’s work, *The Glassy Sea* also introduces new elements. Most significantly, the novel injects the mediating factor of society in women’s struggle with the forces of dichotomy. The author broaches the issue of the “social “, examining it from the perspective of women. Rita Heber Bowen/Sister Mary Pelagio discovers the extent to which women’s experiences are shaped by the social values underlying structures and organisations such as the church and family. *The Glassy Sea* marks a significant transition between *Bear* and Engel’s final novel, *Lunatic Villas*. In *Bear*, women’s social integration is left up in the air with the stars. *Lunatic Villas* on the other hand, is the fullest embrace of the social in Engel’s work. *The Glassy Sea* is situated between these two works, alternating social integration and isolation as the protagonist rejects and then revises the values which her family and society have taught her. In addition The Glassy Sea shifts attention from sexuality to spirituality.

Afraid of her womanhood, Rita Heber, against the wish of her mother, wishes to become Mary instead of Martha. The Eglantine House accepts Rita and give her a new name as Sister Mary Pelagia. The House offers “a kind of aesthetic romance “(TGL 30) that Rita longs for. But after ten years as the Eglantine House closes Rita enters into the social life and marries Asher Bowen. The marriage life does not exist long. The difference of opinion of begetting child between the couple make them to live separately in the same house. Against the wish of her husband, Rita gives birth to a child but the child dies very soon. Rita becomes deeply depressed and drinks to overcome her sorrow. Rita’s drinking annoys Asher who makes an arrangement whereby she must move and stay out of province. Rita ends up living alone.
Rita struggles a lot to touch the ground again and resolves to see things as they are. Asher had destroyed their marriage and Rita now rejects such symbolism. “I am to myself, myself and that only, “she affirms (TGL158). Interested only in what is, not what might have been “(TGL143) she asserts that the field stretching out in front of her seaside retreat is a field and nothing more. But Rita’s neat and tidy summation of life and herself sentence as crazy lady by sea are disturbed when Anthony Stone lands on her door step. Brother Anthony Stone is a messenger from the Bishop of Huron to whom Rita wrote a long letter about her past life. Brother Anthony gives a letter to Rita which contains the matter of re-opening of Eglantine House with Rita as Sister Superior. At first Rita rejects the idea and argued with Brother Anthony that she is not the suitable person for the post. But Brother Anthony Stone convinces her. Finally, caught between the proverbial rock and hard place, Rita faces the fact and accepts to enter again into the Eglantine House as Sister Superior. Re-establishing Eglantine House might provide women with other possibilities in life and the House will be a place where women come “Not to serve but to belong “(TGL161).

Planning Eglantine House, Rita discovers a sense of self and certainty that has eluded her all her life. “Now I know who I am and what I want “, she is able to say, “I am certain of this as I am of very few things “(TGL161) Rita’s newly acquired sense of self acknowledges the “bloody – minded Martha “in her. This recognition is more reconciliation than a prescription for being a “Mary”.

Engel’s *Lunatic Villas*, exhibits a number of her distinctive narrative fingerprints. The dominant themes of the novel are clearly recognizable; the intersection of tradition and change and its disorienting impact on personality; the
vexed pursuit of female identity in the midst of fractured domesticity and culture; and the protagonist’s striving for a place in a wider, more generous community that might supply what was lost in the collapse of marriage and conventional morality.

The central character, Harriet Ross, shares defining personality traits with those earlier, sturdy and scrappy survivors of the inter-sex warns, Sara Porlock, Minn Burge and Rita Heber. As in Sarah Bastard's Notebook, The Honeyman Festival and The Glassy Sea, Toronto figures both as a setting and a symbolic locale; more specifically, Rathbone Place, the street on which the main action transpires, functions for all practical purposes as an “Island “which is in some respects conceptually reminiscent of the islands that figure in Sara Bastard’s Notebook, Monodromos, Bear and The Glassy Sea.

Rathbone Place consisted of a dozen houses facing each other in two rows. At this centre is single mother Harriet Ross and her six, sometimes seven children including the elderly English woman Mrs.Saxe ( of several fathers, and not all of whom are even Harriet’s progeny). Others include: Vinnie, Harriet’s Thursday night lover and his disabled, bird-breeding wife Sylvia; a political activist and single father Roger; Marshallene, sex activist and divorced writer.

The novel’s true emotional heartland is located, not on the street of Toronto, but in the protagonist’s torturing memories of her early life as the abused daughter of a prematurely widowed, angry father. Whenever she struggled to control the anger of her black tempered son Mick, she clutches her stomach, by hearing the angry words of her son. Both Mr.Mickle her father and Mick her son shares not only the name but they share a violent behavior too.
Harriet’s second husband Michale Littlemore married another woman—a well-to-do social worker Susan Forbush. They filed a case against Harriet to get back the twins Peter and Patsy of Michael Littlemore. Harriet obeys the judgement of the court that the twins must spend a summer with Michael and Susan and if they wish to stay with them throughout their life they may live. Otherwise they may return to Harriet itself. In this depressed state Harriet has contracted parrot fever through contact with Vinnie, an amusing if nasty side-effect of their terminated relationship. The disease is highly contagious and Harriet is kept in isolation.

Suspended between consciousness and unconsciousness, Harriet views the live telecast of fantastical trans-Canada bicycle race in which Mick and Mrs. Saxe are contestants. Harriet has dreams of hope, “was it hope or grace, “she wonders “the last virtue in the chest that connected us to God?”(LV) The youngest and the eldest participants came first and second in the race. Harriet laughs and cries and finds no slogan and no great philosophical conclusions about living.

As mother and sole income earner for seven children, the protagonist Harriet Rose is very much anchored in everyday reality and confronts the concrete world on a daily basis. Even in her work as a writer, she deals with the grim facts of real life—the “things about all of us that nobody wants to know, she thinks. More and more she is haunted by these things; the existence of warts, moles, pimps, debt-collectors, cancer, socially unacceptable lovers, repressive welfare workers, permissive welfare workers, networks of missing never. . . .”(LV 70). But in her life and writing alike, Harriet experiences moments of magic and instances of irrationality which allow the world of the imagination to exist for her. When Mick and Mrs. Saxe break through
the finish line, Harriet seems to break through the airlock that has held her writing in a grip and be released into the possibilities of fiction. With *Lunatic Villas* Engel pursued her lifelong interest representing women’s experience of reality. At the same time *Lunatic Villas* is a book about surreality, as the author stated the space of imagination and writing.

As seen throughout this study, Marian Engel persistently wrote about women and for women. The amount of psychic pain expressed in Marian Engel’s writing is easily eclipsed by other features of her work: the exoticism of a woman’s sexual relations with a bear, the humour of a trek up a mountain on a donkey trained to travel down mountains; the portrait of a woman with parrot’s disease; the aesthetic pleasure of stylistic virtuosity and literary expression. But psychic pain is ever-present: Minn Burge, a grown woman awaiting the imminent birth of her fourth child, talking to her paper dolls in the middle of another night alone; Audrey Moore retching at the sound of love making; Lou living like a mole; Rita fighting for her sanity on a lonely shore or Canada’s east coast; Harriet, visited by memories of childhood abuse as she rages at her own son. These are all tattooed women, scarred by life and their efforts to be somebody; an Artist, a Wise woman. Every woman, the tattooed woman is any woman.

In her writing, Marian Engel explored the ordinary and the extraordinary, the “real “and the “surreal “. She began with ordinary everyday life. Her particulars focus was women’s experiences of daily reality, and many considered Engel’s greatest gift to be her observation of reality. Another distinguishing feature of a Marian Engel’s writing is the mother figure which occupies a key position in her
works. Engel’s repeated exploration of the mother-daughter relationship was one of her strongest ties to a tradition of women’s writing and “feminist revision”.

There is ample scope to do further research on Marian Engel’s works. Engel’s writings could be compared with many other Western writings with feminist themes. Also, Engel’s novels could be favourably compared with the popular-critically acclaimed works featuring feminist themes, of Indian novelists Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Anita Nair and Shobha De.