Chapter I

Shifting Terriains: Genders in *As For Me And My House*
As for Me and My House published in 1941 is a realistic novel in the form of journal set in Western Canada during the Depression years. The novel has been categorized as a ‘safe’ text and ‘less rigorous’ by Lawerence Mathews (1991) in his essay, ‘Calgary, Canonization, and Class : Deciphering List B’ with a linear narrative and the story of Philip Bentley’s struggle representing the “humanist values of individual salvation---”(Davey 1994 : 125). Located within the oeuvre of Canadian works in the category of the ‘Breakup of the Old Order’ accompanied by the collapse of the old values, the novel can be categorized as realistic involvement --- accepting life as it is with all its absurdities but still retaining the capacity to struggle. The personal raison d’etre of the protagonist, presented from the view point of his wife who is the narrator, is guided by the Canadian Calvinist- Jansenist tradition. Both Canada and the United States were influenced by Puritan ethos. In Canada the Calvenist doctrine prevailed among Protestants and among French Catholics Jansenism prevailed. In Canada this philosophy coloured life in grey rather than black or white and believed in the establishment of a powerful Church with detailed codes of behaviour and a controlling system. There was very little space for self-reliant individualism. Philip Bentley is a clergyman located within this system and for many years he moves from one town to another unable to believe in theology. His artistic performances, which in the novel provides solace from ‘Horizons’ are not acts of grand passion and hence his sketches of people without faces and false store fronts of little prairie towns reflect his entrapment, within a system, which he is unable to defy. As
Roy Daniells in his essay, ‘Introduction to As For Me and My House’ has located this novel within a milieu based on middle class values:

So pervasive are our middle class ideals and ambitions that the word itself is passing out of use, for lack of a concept of upper or lower class life to give it meaning. Canadian writing inevitably displays the middle class desire for self-knowledge as a key to self development. Those authors who are in some sense classics - - - are closely concerned with self-scrutiny of a moral kind.

(Daniells 1991 : 36)

Hence there is no confrontation between the individual and the system, rather the tension has been internalized and Philip Bentley is engaged in a “painful and destructive soul-searching attempt to discover his own deficiencies”(Sutherland 1977 : 4). As the narrative progresses, Philip Bentley is more confused and more often than not suffers from guilt complex. Eventually this frustration and circumstances combine to lead him to the seduction an infatuated and equally, frustrated choir girl, Judith West. The act is not an act of grand passion expressing either affection or physical desire. And finally the final gesture of Mrs. Bentley to break the repetitive pattern by adopting Judith West’s baby and moving out of Horizon to set up a book store is an attempt to see the new world. To quote Jameela Begum A. who reads the novel as representative of prairie literature within the realistic mode, the novel is symptomatic of “prairie literature in Canada --- a confluence of the realistic and the elusive, the nightmare and the dream. It is a constant readaptation of the new land to old cultural patterns and the world --- the developing myth of the world” (Begum 1996 : 113).
The above mentioned linear reading of canonical text adheres to the practice of epistemological progress with a promised secular empirical vision located within the practice of literary realism. However the cyclical movement of the plot evolving around the estrangement and reconciliation of the principal protagonist set against the silence, located within the subjective consciousness of Mrs. Bentley defies any clear meaning and a single unifying narrative perspective. The text with stable meaning employing various signs located within various discursive context constitutes different realities and points to a sense of doubt and ambivalence within realism. Ambivalence is also reflected in the manner in which the prairie for the first time has been internalized. Laurence Ricou in the essay, ‘The Prairie Internalizes : The Fiction of Sinclair Ross’ reflects on the manner in which ‘internalization’ results in the landscape portraying the character’s mind and emotions in a subtle way which defies closure. The impact of wind, heat and dust reflect the unproductivity of the land and the people:

The landscape and the climate become internalized. They are part of Ross’s imagination, part of the community he portrays, part, especially, of his characters. The comparisons between man and his environment are no longer mechanical, restricted to facile similes. Man and environment are totally integrated so that adjectives chosen to describe the natural environment could as well apply to character, and vice-versa. Light, both indoors and out, is ‘colorless and glum’; Mrs Bentley’s furniture is ‘dull and ugly’, and the walls of her home ‘dingy’; the town is ‘barren’; and the people of Horizon ‘become worn so bare and colorless’. (Ricou 1991 : 71)
The chapter will examine the construction of the categories of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ central to the novel as a realist novel. In this context the structuralist reading offered by Robert Kroetsch is located within the binary opposition of house : horse, where house represents statis / feminine / fixed and horse is associated with motion into distance / masculine. However the construction of gender is not self-contained when other voices are allowed to emerge and gender emerges as the site of multiple signification and collapsing categories. John Moss’s essay, ‘Mrs Bentley and Bicameral Mind: A Hermeneutical Encounter with As For Me and My House’ refers to the novel as a modern novel, since the “reality in the novel results from reality and consciousness sharing a mutual boundaries” (Moss 1991 : 140). The ‘house’ far from representing statis becomes a site of multiple voices and confrontation, with the given categories of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ collapsing and indicating the slippery construction of both the categories. To quote Frank Davey, “In reading a fictional first-person narrative text such as that constituted by Mrs Bentley’s diary entries, we are in the presence of at least a triple construction – a signator, Sinclair Ross, who has constructed a text, which in turn constructs its narrator by constructing that narrator’s construction of events. Resonating throughout the text is the fact that it is a male signator who has constructed not merely a female character but a women’s intimate discourse, her diary through which her’ character’ will come into being” (Davey 128). However her character will not come into being as familiar, morally, socially categorized under predicable sign of ‘feminine’. This is evident in the opening pages
of the diary which initiates the novel and the process of locating and displacing a
gendered structures with shifting bases begin:

It’s been a hard day on him, putting up stovepipes and opening crates, for the
fourth time getting our old linoleum down. He hasn’t the hands for it. I could
use the pliers and hammer twice well myself, with none if his mutterings or
smashed – up fingers either, but in the personage, on calling days, it simply isn’t
done. In return for their thousand dollars a year they expect a genteel kind of
piety, a well bred Christianity that will serve as an example to the little sons and
daughters of the town.

(Ross 1989:5)

Horizon with its main streets and “little false fronted stores” located within the
diary of Mrs Bentley emerges as one of the sites of construction of gender in the novel.
Horizon and the Church while constructing gender in a monolithic mode will also be
the site of subversion. Mrs Bentley as a sign is not stable, since at one level the novel
originates with Mrs Bentley and hence subjective. But simultaneously she has been
created by Ross and should be objective. But what emerges is neither completely
subjective nor completely objective but a complex configuration:

Mrs Bentley observes and interprets the world that she lives in, occupies, often
revealing far more of it than she intends. Sometimes her observations are
objective and reliable, her commentaries fair and perceptive, while the world
revealed appears as a sham. At other times, she is unreliable indeed, and the
world appears a solid separate place. --- There are not two realities in this novel,
but a single world perceived from the same perspective, Mrs Bentley’s in two distinctly different ways.

(Moss 140)

Mrs. Bentley will at times operate within the paradigm of being the preacher’s wife, her public performance and as Mrs. Bentley, her private self. In her public performance as the preacher’s wife, Mrs. Bentley will be engaged in a process of negotiation and resistance with this category. Her public performance involves maneuvers to create the spectacle of gendered beings and highlights real – life structural coercion:

The first Sunday is always hard. Three little false-fronted towns before this one has taught me to erect, a false-front of my own, live my own life, keep myself intact; yet tonight again, for all my indifference to what the people here may chose to think of me, it was an ordeal to walk out of the vestry and take my place at the organ.

(Ross 13)

This construction will invade her private space and the house at the macrocosmic level will reflect her total surrender and obliteration with no active identity of her own and she “cannot but collide in her oppression.”(Schoene-Harwood 2000: 9). The house which is “small” and “oppressive” and around her will trap her in ideological certainties of her being the preacher’s wife with “splay footed rubbers, dowdy coat” (Ross 31) and all which she cannot escape. It is in this context that the
musician in Mrs. Bentley will die hard and the “mannish verve” will motivate her to produce “masculine”, music which will also be “young, sparkling, jubilant” (Ross 29).

However, the house as mentioned earlier is not a static sign rather the process of confrontation with patriarchal domesticity begins here:

“I hate it all every room. Some part of me is in protest, I can’t relax, can’t accept it as home. There’s something, lurking in the shadows something that doesn’t approve of me that won’t let straighten my shoulders.

(Ross 34)

Mrs. Bentley’s constant slipping in and out of her gendered role brings out the “contradictory mode in which gender identity is embraced sustained and also struggled against” (Glover and Caplan 2000: XXVII). Gender identity refuses to be a site of containment and be a “symbolic form of public action whose recurrence allows for recognition as desiring and desirable subjects” (Glover and Caplan XXVI). The novel embraces this contradiction from the very outset and to large extent Mrs. Bentley will operate within the spectrum of possible femininities. Ensconced in marriage and under male protection there is ambivalence and constant movement between women as deferential victims and defiance. She becomes a site of fractured femininity moving towards “supermanly alter ego --- [to] compensate for the self’s congenital inability to live up to its own impossible ideal” ( Scohene-Harwood 19). Throughout the novel, Mrs Bentley will not operate within the patriarchal ideology. Rather she defines herself within different femininities and brings out the construction within femininity as a monolithic construct. At the end of the novel Mrs. Bentley will consider a career
separate from Philip’s and this because she fears that if she helps him run his new book store she’ll prove “so much more practical and capable than he is that in a month or two more I’d be one of those domineering females that men abominate. Instead I’ll try to teach “(Ross 160).

It is the private performance of Mrs. Bentley, which emerge as a contested site in the narrative. To begin with she herself is a “textual construction by a male author living in a particular and time-bound regional Canadian culture, and that this construction is part of the semiotic field the novel presents for reader’s interpretation”( Davey 128). The diary entries, which help us read the sign the category of the feminine (Mrs Bentley) are not discourses produced by a free standing agent and the diary – “a woman’s intimate discourse”( Davey 128) emerges as a ‘double voiced discourse’ that “embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritage, of both the muted and the dominant”( Showalter 1988 : 348). The diary of Mrs. Bentley is both inside and outside the male tradition and challenge the hegemonic construction of masculinity and femininity. Different versions of femininities emerge – sexual, inferior, weak, transgressive, threatening and dependent. The entries is a site of interface of different femininities riddled with contradictions. The diary is a labyrinth, which is “bicameral”(Moss 140). The entries are at times dominated by masculine mode of linearity, logic and progression, where Mrs Bentley tries to construct her husband as “existential hero: a man who turns inwards to himself alone, each time he enters the study” (Moss 141-2) and also as an artist. Simultaneously, there is the feminine side, which will deconstruct the masculine myth. The novel begins with Mrs Bentley
allowing him to “be the man about the house” (Ross 5) and shortly she suggests that there are times “when I think he has never quite forgiven me for being a woman” (Ross 31). As has been pointed out earlier the first entry initiates the dialectical process of shifting terrain. However a resolution is arrived at with Mrs. Bentley re-casting herself within the institutional regime of Horizon:

I ran my fingers through his hair, then stopped and kissed him. Lightly for that in of all things what I mustn’t do, let him ever suspect me of being sorry. He’s a very adult, self-sufficient man ----

(Ross 6)

Judith West in the novel will be an extension of Mrs Bentley and offer a critique of ‘feminine’ as it expressed in Horizon and the narrative is marked by an “anxiety produced by masculine identification” (Glover and Kaplan 46):

They encourage her in the choir because she needs a steadying influence. In summer she’s been heard singing off by herself up the railroad tracks as late as ten ‘o’ clock at night. Naturally people talk.

(Ross 16)

Mrs. Bentley however will “warily” seek the friendship of Judith West, since she cannot identify completely with her gender roles, nor can she completely identify with her masculine self. This ambiguity is present throughout the novel. Mrs Bentley’s struggle to make the garden yield flowers, and not food is parallel to Philip Bentley’s struggle to be an artist. She will work against the proprieties of gender to water, weed and care for her garden. However the garden simultaneously has associations with the
child she had lost earlier and with maternity. Therefore when the garden withers she interprets it as her failure to live up to the feminine role.

While Mrs. Bentley’s entries records her feeling of superiority towards her husband and over other women, it rarely dissociates itself from dominant categories of man and woman and that there’s a man’s way and a woman’s way:

   It’s man’s way, I suppose and a woman’s. Before I met him I had ambitions too.

   The only thing that really mattered for me was the piano .... But he came and the piano took second place… Submitting to him that way, yielding my identity – it seemed what life was intended for.

   (Ross 22)

Mrs. Bentley will also enact role of the reliable patriarchal helpmate. The representation of patriarchy is conservative rather than subversive:

   Instead of practice in my spare lime it was books now. Books that he had read or might be going to read – so that I could reach up to his intellect, be a good companion, sometimes while he talked nod comprehendingly.

   (Ross 22)

The dairy entries located within the ideology of traditional femininity and order reflected in the silences about Mrs. Bentley’s birth, childhood serves to foster the ‘narcissistic economy of the Masculine Universal’, to borrow Shoshana Felman’s terms. The narcissistic economy of Masculine Universal governs the constitution of femininity in patriarchal culture, which demands that a woman must adjust and accept the behavioral roles of her sex.
Since patriarchal femininity requires women in the role of mother, Mrs. Bentley is ravaged by her inability to give Philip Bentley a “boy of his own” and the narrative partakes her anxiety to live up to the incarnation of such idealized femininity:

It was some memory perhaps, evoked by what Paul had said about the boy, some vague, half-wishful thought for the boy of his own I haven’t given him.

(Ross 49)

Her negotiation with motherhood begins with the adoption of Steve: culminates with the adoption of Judith West’s son who will be named Philip. However her decision to adopt Steve inspite the “town’s attitude” and the fact that he’s a Roman Catholic and that Philip was a Protestant minister in a bigoted Protestant town cannot be read merely as an act of identification with ‘desiring femininity’. Steve’s adoption provides Mrs. Bentley an opportunity to take on the masculine status since according to her Steve would enable Philip Bentley “to do the things he tried to do and failed” (Ross 70) and thereby enable him to arrive at his destination:

....It’s something. Even though he doesn’t last himself, Steve may help Philip back where he belongs. Initiative, belief in himself—that’s all he needs. There’s a lot left still for a man at thirty-six. We may be packing our trunks and taking Leave and Horizon sooner than we think.

(Ross 71)

However it will be Mrs. Bentley, who will initiate the movement from Horizon to small University town, a movement from one patriarchal space to another.
Motherhood does not emerge as the site of containment for Mrs. Bentley and the narrative oscillates between approval and confusion:

I like Steve, and at the same time I resent him. I grudge every minute he and Philip are alone together.

(Ross 69)

And soon her construction of Steve as the Muse for Philip will be questioned:

So instead of resenting Steve I ought really to be sorry for him. When their ride’s over and they’re back on earth he’ll get scant pasturage from Philip. After a while the pity and imagination are going to run out; and there’s going to be left just an ordinary, uninspiring boy.

(Ross 70)

While putting up a “false front” enlarged to put up with Horizon’s gender ideology, Mrs. Bentley femininity lacking a fixed centre is simultaneously deconstructed and reconstituted under a different sign of “femininity’s disappearing act” (Glover and Kaplan 43). An simulated masculinity has often been preferred to the impossible feminine. Late eighteenth century feminism had framed its distaste for femininity as an excess of desire for femininity. ‘Women’ or ‘the sex’ was the negative site of gender in the eighteenth century: femininity often measured the distance or decline from the human ideal. This turn towards masculinity as a refuge from an embattled and under valued femininity seems, at one level perfectly rational, but at another it only intensifies the ‘puzzle’ about the nature of femininity. Mrs. Bentley’s supposedly masculine activities cannot be seen as cross-gender performances, but her
femininity-womanliness them becomes a masquerade and one that women adopt as a defense against extreme anxiety produced by masculine identification. Gender structures are displaced as has been brought out earlier and the binary opposition representing the essential nature of masculinity and femininity is deconstructed.

Such acts of masculinity which causes rupture in a realist text, is accompanied by ideological closure and a reminder that Mrs. Bentley is a creation of a male author and the text reflects the tension. The episode in the text when Bentley's will clash with Horizon regarding the upbringing of Steve, there is reversal of roles to reflect this tension to be followed by swift retribution:

His voice was shaking out hardening I could see a little flash that came and went with every breath. His voice was shaking out hardening. I could feel the hot throb of all the years he has curbed and hidden and choked himself - feel it gather break, the sudden reckless stumble for release- and before it was too late, before he could do what he should have done twelve years ago. I interrupted. I took my place beside him, and as a groped for words began explaining the situation as it really was.

I was cool and logical enough. I succeeded in making a good case for Steve— I’m thinking what a fool I was. If I had only kept still we might be starting in to worry no about the future.

(Ross 96)

The tension is also at times resolved with the debasement of Mrs. Bentley as she continues to be the doormat of the house and the predicament in the novel resulting
in Mrs Bentley being pathetically dependent on the “non-love of a stolid, unlikeable man who bitterly resents her, tries to replace her with Steve, commits adultery with Judith, and shuts her out of his life whenever he can. Why does she debase herself time and again, and furthermore, not only stick by her misogynist husband in the end but offer happily to take in his bastard infant” (Fraser 1997: 55). Keith Fraser in his book As For Me and My Body (1997) has argued that what Mrs Bentley calls “dramatically right” to justify her feminine existence is related to Ross not admitting Philip’s homosexuality in the novel and thereby Ross comprised the “credibility of his main heterosexual relationship” (Fraser 54). Philip Bentley is flawed, not “in the acceptable literary sense of a character’s flaw out of which the story flows; but in the sense of an artistic flaw out of which the story fails to flow but ought to” (Fraser 53). Ross the male signator exonerates his weakness in terms of the “ironic ambiguity of Mrs Bentley’s supposedly unlikeable character” (Fraser 56).

The diary entries constitute a ‘double -voiced discourse’, where at times the text endorses and delights in women’s personal ambitions and transgressive desires and thereby aligns itself with the pro-feminist agenda, simultaneously there is the return of the social and communal feminine self. At such points both the feminine and the feminist voices are present. The diary endorsing conventional resolutions of marriage and motherhood aligns itself with early feminist writing where women writers emerged not as “vanguard of self-referential and selfish materialism” but “resistant minority voices” (Glover and Kaplan 20).
Don’t dare admit it. I must still keep on reaching out, trying to possess him, trying to make myself matter...I haven’t been like him. I’ve reserved no retreat, no world of my own.

(Ross 99)

There are sites of alternative femininities within the diary. Judith West emerges as one such site and Mrs. Bentley desires identification with her. She foreshadows Mrs. Bentley in more than one way. Her singing like Mrs. Bentley is ‘masculine’ and is a powerful illustration of the novel’s semiotic complexity. She has been introduced to the readers by Mrs. Bentley through Mrs. Finley. At the very outset she refuses to be appropriated by Horizon and the narrative is marked by anxiety and she needs “steadying influences” (Ross 16). Judith West’s progression is parallel to Bentleys and Paul Kirby, who journey from a small town to the city in search of a more satisfying life only to return back to the town. Her solitary singing is connected in the text to Philip Bentley’s solitary painting and Mrs. Bentley’s solitary piano playing. Her having worked “like a man” is similar to Mrs. Bentley’s repairing stovepipes or digging her garden and will invite disapproval from Horizon. Judith’s employment as secretary and kitchen help places her in subservient roles familiar to women in Western culture and is equal to Mrs. Bentley’s association with ‘ladies aid’ and her categorization as the ‘preacher’s wife’. Judith West will try to transgress gender and class roles and look for “something more” than what she has inherited.

Mrs. Bentley’s perception of Judith West in marked by admiration and anxiety. She has been introduced by Mrs. Bentley in a very different way from Mrs. Finley and
hence she is the “only voice --- a full deep contralto, untrained but sensitive, incredibly powerful for such a white faced slip of a girl” (Ross 15). She will be “sweet and innocent” (Ross 144) but is “nevertheless another woman” (Ross 144) and finally Mrs. Bentley will be “afraid of her” (Ross 160). The multiplicity of narrative gaze will terminate with Judith West helping Mrs. Bentley to fulfill her feminine agenda by becoming the Muse for Philip Bentley and the dairy will translate Judith West’s sexual transgressions as a communal public act by incorporating the personal into the political realm but not for transformation of the political since as mentioned earlier in a very limited way she does provide a critique of femininity as endorsed by Horizon, but on a larger canvas the text does not provide her with any agency to critique the construction of sexuality as a patriarchal norm:

As to Judith she was there, that was all. I know I am right. The man I see in the pulpit every Sunday isn’t Philip. Not the real Philip. However staidly and prosily he lives he’s still the artist. He’s racked still with the passion of the artist for seeking, creating, adventuring. That’s why it happened. He’s restless, cramped. Horizon’s too small for him. There’s no adventure here among the little false fronts no more than there is with a woman he’s been married to twelve year.

(Ross 166)

Laura, a thorough ranch woman who has a ‘disdainful shrug for all domestic ties will emerge as another alternative site and unlike Judith West she won’ be appropriated. Laura, who was a “star attraction in rodeos” before she got married could still “break
broncos” and she was a match for any cowboy and was “slim and supple like girl”

Laura’s femininity is located outside Horizon and the ranch” has been constructed as an alternative to Horizon. Therefore Philip Bentley will find the ‘beauty’ which he is seeking and Mrs. Bentley will allow for the ‘Horizon matron’ to slip away. Like Horizon, the ‘ranch’ too has “sad little towns” with “false fronts ” but the “wilderness made her uneasy” and unlike Main Street it will defy self sufficiency and also meaning. The narrative becomes self – reflexive, the narrative will provide a critique of existing patriarchal femininity:

I’ve comforted myself too, trying to be a good wife --- But it was all wrong. He ought to have had the opportunity to live to be reckless, spend thrift , bawdy anything but what he is, what I’ve made him.

(Ross 135)

However, patriarchal order is restored, and hence the existing “ constellation of powers is not completely eradicated, rather the self is still subjected to a traumatic allocation of identity exclusively determined by gender”(Schoene-Harwood 2000 : 123).

--- All I see is the futility of it. It destroyed him it leaves me alone outside his study door. I’m not bitter, just tried, whipped. I see things clearly. The next town – the next and the next.

(Ross: 136)

The diary contains masculine and feminine visions and the text becomes ‘readerly text’ with no linear progression. The text presents irreconcilable image of woman both superior and inferior, deadly and nurturant along with the crisis of
traditional femininity accompanied by the discovery of natural stability as precarious and brittle.

On her return Mrs. Bentley decides to fight patriarchal system of Horizon and Horizon merges with the Church, representing densely woven network of behavioural norms and rules. She tries to create herself proprioceptively in opposition to the system she perceives as oppressive:

What Horizon thinks or says – none of it’s going to matter. This is to be our last year .... That’s why I must start saving, have an iron no at hand for every little wish and vanity. For these last twelve years I’ve kept him in the Church no one else. The least I can do now is help him get out again.

(Ross: 141)

And she lives up to her strenuous adopted pose by writing letters to the previous Church Boards, where Philip Bentley had served as a Church Minister. The manner in which the diary constitutes Mrs. Bentley as a subject with no reducible gender identity reflects the manner in which the subject constitutes herself in active fashion by “practices of self through which self mastery ... achieved were always conditioned and over determined by the socio-cultural context” (McNay1992:61). Larger socio-cultural context refers to changing social and economic conditions and the intersection of gender ideology with other ideological structures like economic structures and sociological institutions. In the context of the novel economic structures have an important bearing, since the novel is set against the Depression of 1930’s. To quote Frank Davey, “ The economic structures in the book appear particularly difficult for
women most of whom are presented as sharing the economic lives of their husbands. Mrs. Bentley’s relationship to Philip’s professional activities, relieving him of necessary domestic tasks so that more of his time may be available for his work is that of all the married women. If these women have ever had their own economic lives, they have given them up like Mrs. Bentley claims to have given up a musical career to “be a good companion”, to do what “it seemed … life was intended for”. Unmarried like Judith West, they have had their ambitions channeled into low – paying male-service occupations – typing and house work” (Davey 144).

Mrs. Bentley’s final act of having “fought it out with myself” (Ross 202) and her decision, to adopt Judith’s baby accounts for ideological closure in the novel and her ‘becoming’ a woman. However as Judith Butler notes that “the verb ‘become’ contains a consequential ambiguity in that gender identity is both culturally constructed and also, in some senses constructed by individuals themselves” (McNay 71). While the dominant text initiated by a male signator, Sinclair Ross embraces an identity located within the sexual economies of domestic heterosexuality, based on the superiority of masculinity, the sub-text problematises these constructions about femininity.

The construction of Philip Bentley is a class-region specific masculinity belonging to the Calvinist Jansenist tradition as has been mentioned earlier. The diary will construct and deconstruct the category of dominant masculinity, which has been constructed simultaneously in two sites namely Horizon which is equated with Church and the world of art. Philip Bentley’s construction as an artist through his paintings can
be read as an attempt by the author to experience the “consolation of form” (Godard 1981: 50) and a triumph over the void. It is within this humanist paradigm that the tradition of the “Ivory Tower” is legitimized which maintains the artist’s superiority over ordinary men and leads him to believe in the transcendental role of the artist and he will confront the familiar conflict between art and life.

Simultaneously the narrative apparently constructs masculinity by presenting Mrs. Bentley as the silent audience devotedly attentive to the narrative and the centre-stage performance of Philip Bentley. Mrs Bentley’s silence will build a myth out of masculinity and justify her own existence. However her silence will also deconstruct the myth, which forms the sub-text. As the diary unfolds, masculinity has been constructed as a closed set of behavioral characteristics all of which evolve out of a strict opposition to any kind of experimentation:

It was twelve years ago, in our first town, that I learned my lesson, one day when they caught me in the woodshed making kindling of a packing box.

“Surely this isn’t necessary; Mrs. Bentley your position in the community and Mr. Bentley such a big able bodied man…”

(Ross 5)

On account of his failure to live up to the expected masculinity translated in the narrative as his failure to belong to the Church he seeks solace in art. However the version of the artists lofty tower represented in the novel through the “monotonous bang of study door” (Godard 59) and his retiring to the study is not free of conflict and his art also suffers:
I turned over the top sheet and sure enough on the back of it there was a little Main Street sketched. It’s like all the rest, a single row of smug, false fronted stores, a loiterer or two, in the distance the prairie again. And like all the rest there’s something about it that hurts

(Ross7)

And as years glide by his paintings lost their ‘humanity’ and everything was “distorted, intensified, alive with thin, cold, bitter life” (Ross23) and all that the artist saw was “contemptible and mean”. The artist in Philip Bentley points to the predicament of individual male psyche as he seeks to fulfill the ideal of heroic masculinity. This is evident from the trajectory which the diary traces of the Minister, who was forever ‘disillusioned’ with the little Main streets and made a hero of his father from whom he had been estranged through death and illegitimacy and the “only artistic life he could make contract with was genteel and amateurish” (Ross 44). Finally the only “offering escape” (Ross 42) was the church and the ‘self-righteous part of the town “that he had pitted himself against” (Ross 43) he had to turn to.

There is a constant overlap between the two sites and the artist often emerges as an effort to present a super heroic ideal which he fails to arrive at and simultaneously his susceptibility to the impact of patriarchal imperatives. And instead of striving to break out of densely woven network of behavioral norms and rules and trying to re-create himself against the system he readily dons the “strait jacketing gender role of an essentially anti-individualistic self-annihilating masculinity”(Schoene-Harwood 69),
which the text endorses. His failure has been presented both as a loss and also as some kind of heroic achievement and hence he is always on the margin of a new beginning:

But having failed he’s not a strong or great man, just a guilty one. There are plenty of others to whom the Church means just bread and butter, who at best assert an easy untried faith, but that’s no solution for him. His guilt is that emphatically he does not believe. His disbelief amounts to an achievement.

(Ross 25)

The diary registers Philip Bentley’s participation in patriarchal masculinity about which he is critical. Mrs. Bentley portrays herself as the feminine other and hence he perceives his emotional dependence on his wife as a threat that acutely compromises his masculine autonomy and misogyny emerges:

For when he gives himself to me like that, when we come close to each other always to follow is a sudden mustering of self-sufficiency, a repudiating swing the other way. He resents his need of me. Somehow it makes him feel weak, a little unmanly. There are times when I think he has never quite forgiven me for being just a woman.

(Ross 31)

The Kirby ranch where the Bentley’s leave for their holidays has been offered in the narrative as an alternative to the gaze of Horizon and hence the orthodoxy gives way to potential discourses that survive outside conceptual boundaries of oppressive discourse. Therefore Philip Bentley who had always been so “disillusioned and unexpectant about his drawings” (Ross 137) displayed a “little pride in what he could do
and the artist in him gets the upper hand” (Ross 137) and “Reality as the rest of us know it disappears from him” (Ross 133). Here on the ranch more than ever Philip Bentley tries to flee from the familiar obligations and will not try to affirm his manly integrity and independence in the domestic realm and the diary provides space for alternative masculinity to emerge:

His grain was too fine. It doesn’t follow that the sensitive qualities that make an artist are accompanied by the unflinching, stubborn ones that make a man of action and success... Comfort and routine were the last things he needed. Instead he ought to have been out mingling with his own kind. He ought to have whetted himself against them, then gone off to fight it out alone. He ought to have had the opportunity to live to be reckless, spend thrifty bawdy, anything but what he is what I’ve made him.

(Ross 135)

The ‘I’ is a sign which constitutes the combination of different public and private selves controlled by different disciplinary discourses operating in the private and the public realm.

The study located within the “small squat, grayish house” (Ross 18) is the space which is opposed to the ideological apparatus of Horizon and is a site insular in nature where the artist will survive. The study will also re-define the private and “instead of conceiving of the private realm as that which contains the affective and emotional aspects of existence and as that which is necessarily excluded from the public, the private is defined as those aspects, the private is .... those aspects of individual’s lives
and activities that they have a right to exclude from” (McNay 178), and in his study he will draw ‘cold little ghosts of his dream that are stronger than their uselessness’ (Ross 45). The subterranean text point to marginalized masculinity manifested in the figure of the artist, which the central narrative may not approve.

The counter discourse produced can be read as an attempt to decenter the traditional masculine subject located in a collapsing ‘Old World Order’. As a University educated intellectual of working class origin aspiring to the elite world of art, but working with the Church professing disbelief, Philip Bentley emerges as a complex semiotic sign. Therefore neither Horizon nor the world of art will emerge as site of “systematic containment” (Schoene-Harwood 77). Marginalized masculinity has no fixed centre since at one level Philip Bentley remains essentially a man of the old order which is on the verge of collapsing, but to affirm his masculine stature he feels compelled to identify with some kind of heroic cause that would help him detach himself from the domestic. However the heroic tradition has come to an end and he cannot possibly conceive of reconstructing himself without recourse to the man making ideals endorsed and promoted by the society he cannot identify with. Though he can envisage a non-patriarchal mode of manly being that would genuinely challenge the system, the counter discourse remains unrealized. Mrs. Bentley unconditional surrender to her husband’s superiority ironically involves, “woman’s initiation to man’s corruption and utter futility. Neither … can liberate themselves from the coercive ideological structures of hegemonic gender formations, both must eventually
succumb to the oppressive spirit .... that is rigidly prohibitive of .... self fulfillment”(Schoene-Harwood 81).

The episode dealing with the adaption of Steve Kulanich who is a “Hungarian or Rumanian or Russian” and a “sensitive and high strung hot blooded, quick-fisted” boy at one level is a complex condition seeking to fulfill itself in heroic acts of self-assertion by defying authority, but simultaneously the narrative constructs Steve as a site of re-generated masculinity:

In the meantime it’s making Philip more like he used to be. His eyes tonight didn’t have such a foiled uneasy look as usual and the forthright ring in his step that I noticed last night persists. It’s something. Even though he doesn’t last himself, Steve may help Philip back where he belongs.

(Ross 71)

And Steve becomes the “Pegasus” for Philip who goes off to the clouds. There is no search for an alternative vision and Steve is taught “a kind of defense instinct to protect his self-respect and pride” (Ross 99) and tries to “mold him in his own image” (Ross 148) although its an image in which Philip Bentley finds little satisfaction. Steve brings out Philip Bentley’s conflict very sharply and his predicament:

How be more careful through when it’s either impose the Bible on Steve literally, or take him into our confidence and tell him he’s not supposed to believe everything Philip preaches but for the sake of our bread and butter just to hold his tongue and pretend the does.

(Ross 147)
And the solution offered is thousand dollars and a little store in a University
town, which is reconstituting oneself within defined paradigm. Steve will also offer a
pretext to Philip Bentley to reclaim his lost territory by writing letters to the members
of the Church board and claiming his arrears and thereby re-casting himself in the
patriarchal role:

Very cool and self – possessed this morning Philip went off to round up the
different members of the Church board and a little before noon returned with
forty dollars.

(Ross76)

However there is fluidity and this masculine self-fashioning is insecure. So the
“money shamed him a little reminded him how he earned it”(Ross 104) but
simultaneously he has to “smart a little with a feeling of incompetence when up for
measurement against the world’s yardstick of salary check and bank account”(Ross
104).

The confrontation between Horizon/Church and the Bentleys, with the Bentleys
supporting Steve’s transgression is a reflection of “subordinate
marginalization”(Schoene-Harwood 106), since the Bentleys belong to the margin in
this episode, calling for a resistance to hegemonic practices which in turn necessitates
“a psychic split expressing itself in precarious and highly conflictual assertions of the
integrity of a self, continuously embattled and destabilized by its own irrepressible
alterity”(Schoene-Harwood 106). The narrative “at such points tries to break free of
the formal constraints imposed by literary form on the project of the work in the
process of literary production” (Belsey 1985 : 56). The narrative oscillates with Philip Bentley and Mrs. Bentley simultaneously occupying diametrically opposed position of marginality on the one hand and patriarchal domination on the other.

Paul Kirby, the school teacher emerges as a site of semiotic revelation challenging Horizon as a ideological position which Philip Bentley aspires to. He is a philologist, who describes himself as a “rank boy with a little schooling” and will contest bourgeoisie masculinity by challenging the construction of language:

He has been telling his pupils that belly is a perfectly good, respectable word, to be used whenever it’s belly they’re talking about, but the town is pursing its lips against such sanction of vulgarity.

(Ross 92)

He finds affinity with Mrs. Bentley’s masculine turn of music and he becomes skeptical of his professed masculinity that a boy ought to grow up alone with a horse. He embodies the ‘feminine’ and interrogate the “traditional poses of mutually injuries masculinity and femininity” and therefore his silences which were “thoughtful masculine, self-sufficient silences,” (Ross108) in the beginning metamorphosizes to “helpless numb on of awareness, the woman’s” (Ross108). The narrative recoils back to a conservative conception of gender based on a binary frame work and an effort to consolidate a fixed subject position.

The “protagonists are product rather then perpetrators of binarist positioning which is why [Philip Bentley] fails to rethink his masculinity and [Mrs Bentley] must return to her position of domestic inferiority” (Schoene-Harwood 83). Horizon as a site
of gendered identities signals that human interaction is based on imitation and enactment of authorized roles. Refusal to abide by may result in specific predicament. Hence Philip Bentley “is an event for Horizon” and “there is a hungry, distant look that women in their humdrum forties think appearing that they don’t know of” (Ross 14). His inability to reject the system he finds oppressive results in an ambiguity to which the narrative has no resolution. “Finding the identity packages, that are available to him either outdated, too prohibitive or politically irrelevant, he ends up with the unbecoming basic blueprint of patriarachally conditioned manliness” (Schoene-Harwood 82):

There have always been Horizons – he was born and grown up in one, but once they were a challenge. Their pettiness and cramp stung him to defiance made him reach farther. Now in his attitude there’s still defiance, but it’s a sullen, hopeless kind --- And now withdrawn he seems to feel that the responsibility for what’s ahead is no longer his ---. This one, the next one, it’s only Main Street anyway.

(Ross 24)

The unity of a gendered identity is what the diary moves toward. The above analysis has tried to read the ruptures in the construction of masculinity and femininity. The chapter has tried to understand the cultural construction of gender in terms of agency or an agent. As Simon Beauvoir mentions, “a cogito, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could in principle, take on some other genders” (Butler 1997:281) An interrogation of gender construction also provides clue
about larger ideological possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations. Gender construction bring out the boundaries/limits of a discursively gendered experience, the limits of which are set within the terms “of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appears the language of universal rationality” (Butler 282). The entrapment of both the protagonist located within a realist mode of production brings out the production of “intelligible genders”. Judith Butler has defined intelligible genders as “those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity amongst sex, gender sexual practice and desire. In other words the specters of discontinuity and incoherence are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish casual or expressive lines of connection among bio-logical sex, culturally constituted genders …” (Butler 283).

Mrs. Bentley’s desire for motherhood is regulated by the institution of heterosexuality, which “requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limits of gendered possibilities within oppositional binary gender system” (Butler 284). In the text there is a constant movement to release the ‘self’ from these categories.

The novel is the diary of Mrs. Bentley, however at the level of representation the gaze is that of a male and Mrs. Bentley occupies the subject-object position. In the novel at some points Mrs. Bentley will claim centrality and significance for her experience and will be a sign of negotiation and resistance with her male signator. (Male here refers to a position) and hence the diary unfolds not her life but that of her
husband. Mrs. Bentley is not always in control of what she is speaking and remains enigmatic and removed, looking at herself, being looked at, mediating and defying. Her self-portraits simultaneously constructs her and her husband and all kinds of things which include “the images and symbols, the obsessions and ... and tangled dream world, her unconscious, the events that have scarred and marked her. the crucial relationships, the way she is located historically and culturally” (Edholm 1995: 167).

The projections of Mrs. Bentley while conforming to conventions about the representation of women as objects of male desire defy monolithic identity. Therefore her character can be seen in many ways as a commentary on and a critique of representation of the feminine gender. Furthermore the gendered representation of Mrs. Bentley as the “quintessential Woman stresses the artifice of such an identity and thus undermines the notion of woman as natural.” (Edholm 168).

Psychologically masculinity is a defense against regression to pre-Oedipal identification with the mother and hence Philip Bentley’s desire to be inscribed within the Law of the Father symbolized in the text through the image of the University town where the Bentleys will finally arrive. However there are ‘masculinities’ and hence “masculinity is not an empirical fact (as in classical psychoanalysis), still less an eternal archetype (as in Jung). It is rather the occupant of place is symbolic and social relations” (Connell 1995: 21). Philip Bentley occupies several places simultaneously within the ‘Symbolic Order’ and has to grapple with unmanageable gender contradictions. ‘Masculine protest’ Adler’s famous phrase, which motivates an exaggerated emphasis on the masculine side of things and hence over compensation in
the direction of aggression and restless striving for triumphs is a powerful conventional trait, is what defines the main text and it is the sub-text manifested in no fixed gender positions, which will embody the critique of the main text and allow for the play of other voices which the chapter has tried to read.