Chapter III

Inscribing the ‘Other’:

The Feminine in Beautiful Losers,

The Ledger,

Seed Catalogue and

Running in the Family
Writing in the ‘feminine’ as has been defined by Helena Cixous does not define writing in the feminine in any essential sense. Writing in the feminine is that writing which subverts the hierarchical epistemology of phallocratic thought and thus tries to transform it. Helene Cixous has described this writing “as a style, not a signature and it can be written by a man and woman” (Hekman 1990 :45). The three postmodern narratives to be studied in this chapter has tried to displace logocentric and phallocratic epistemology by interrogating the metaphysics of presence and in the process the texts align themselves with the possibility of postmodern feminism. The three texts under consideration have interrogated the construction of subjectivity, grand narratives in the form of linear history. By inscribing the ‘feminine’ the texts have tried to deconstruct phallocratic assumptions and provide an alternative to masculine truth in various ways.

I RUNNING IN THE FAMILY

Running in the Family’ can be described as a metafiction (fiction about fiction), where the reader is made aware of the process of creating order through myth and history. The novel challenges the desire for order or truth through the power of human imagination, thereby displaying postmodern features. Further conventional structures of power and order are used and abused to deconstruct ‘universals’. The paradox of postmodernism is “taking pot-shots at the culture of which [the author] knows they are unavoidly a part but that [the author] still wish to criticize” (Hutcheon 1988 : 3). This almost inevitably puts the postmodern writer into a marginal or ‘ex-centric’ position with regard to the central or dominant culture, because the paradox of underlining and
undermining cultural universals implicitly challenges any notion of centrality. However in postmodernism the centre and the periphery change places and the margin is not merely a sight of transgression rather the “periphery is also the frontier, the place of possibility” (Hutcheon 3). Hence the novel which is a “communal act” (Ondaatje 1983 : 205) is about Ondaatje’s family and about Ceylon; the “pendant --- became a mirror” (Ondaatje 64) which reflected “each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities” (Ondaatje 64). As the untutored narrative unfolds a “complex discursive situation of literature” (Hutcheon 16) emerges and a situation arises where in the writer, the reader, and the text meet within an entire historical, social, political and literary context to create a new archaeology. The new archaeology is not grand one, but a fragmentary one, creating the ‘Postmodern Condition’ which is marked by a distrust of ‘meta’ or ‘master’ narratives that once made sense of things. In the novel the “possibility of a ‘total history’ begins to disappear, and we witness the emergence of ‘general history’” (Foucault 1972:9).

The novel creates ‘general history’ by challenging the boundaries of ‘total history’ by using devices like collection of fragmented memories, research, poems and photographs, oral histories to reconstruct a more immediate and personal history – the writer’s own familial past in what was then called Ceylon. The boundaries between real life and art is blurred and we witness “historiographic and fictionalizing impulses at work” (Hutcheon 84) and what emerges, to borrow Barthes’s terminology is ‘biographemes’ or units of biography and history. This postmodern novel is an attempt by the author after twenty-five years to reconnect with his Sri Lankan past, the island
of his birth and try to connect satisfyingly with his past and hence Ondaatje returns physically to the living rooms and gardens of his surviving aunts, cousins and stepsisters in Sri Lanka. “I would be traveling back to the family I had grown from”, he writes at the outset of his journey. “I wanted to touch them in words” (Ondaatje 22). Ondaatje wants to move away from grand narratives but the novel is also an attempt to construct his father and thereby inscribe himself in the Law of the father. This postmodern performance while challenging the taxonomic categories central to generic distinctions is however compromised. According to Linda Hutcheon his work is “both historical and performative” (Hutcheon 83):

In other words, it indeed does seek to represent a reality outside literature, and one of the major connections between life and art is the performing narrator, whose act of searching and ordering forms part of the narrative itself.

(Hutcheon 83)

Hence Ondaatje is not only the recorder, collector, organizer and narrator of the past and but also the subject of the narrative and the writer who will deconstruct his own history. The novel is made of many surreal stories about his father and each story becomes a site of construction of masculinity and femininity. The stories are located within the larger paradigm of emigrant literature embodying some kind of alternative vision. Ondaatje, the son of a privileged family in Sri Lanka has been educated in colonial school which inculcated at an early age the European values. And every story embodying the code of masculinity and femininity is also negotiating with the Orientalist discourse. This exposure is important because within Orientalism, Western
Culture has long maintained its masculine nature by positioning the colonies as the feminine.

Sri Lanka emerges as the ‘imagined community’, a space, where to quote Hannah Arendt, “is that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance and two realms flow unceasingly and uncertainly into each other ---- ‘’ (Bhabha 1990 :2). In the process what “emerges as an effect of such incomplete signification is a turning of boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meaning of cultural and political economy are negotiated” (Bhabha 4). The in-between spaces defines the topography of the autobiography where the various binaries like masculine – feminine, public – private, east – west, oral – written collapses and the ‘feminine’ is inscribed denoting the “ambivalent margin” (Bhabha 4).

In the prefatory section the third-person point of view has been employed and from then on, the first-person narrative form ‘I’ has been employed. We are in the constant presence of ‘I’ who is ‘running’. We are made aware of his physical presence as the writes:

The air reaches me unevenly with its gusts against my arms, face and this paper.

(Ondaatje 24)

He reads and copies information about his family from stone inscriptions, Church ledgers, and old news clippings poems, anecdotes, bits of gossip, which he has gathered during two visits to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980. As a result “historical trauma” (Coleman 1998 : 105) is at the root of the narratives. And this is followed by a
move towards ‘organised multitudes’ and the realization that he had witnessed everything. In the novel there is a network of literary and historical texts where the male gaze is intercepted by the feminine view and hence the book which Ondaatje tries to write will forever remain ‘incomplete’ and in the narrative there is tension between “innovation and constraint” (Coleman 106). The novel begins with the logocentric and Eurocentric note, with the desire of wanting “to touch them into words’ (Ondaatje 22) which has been described as a “perverse and solitary” (Ondaatje 22) about Ceylon which has been constructed within the discourse of Orientalism:

Asia. The name was a gasp from a dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be whispered, would never be used as a battle cry. The word sprawled. It had none of the clipped sound of Europe, America, Canada.

(Ondaatje 22)

The novel as mentioned earlier is a historical metafiction; the collective often balancing the individual. The chapter titled ‘Honeymoon’ besides describing the honeymoon of Ondaatje’s parents discusses the conclusion of the Nuwara Eliya tennis championships, the marriage of Adela, the death of 13th President of France, Charlie Chaplin visiting Ceylon, the decrease of Pythons in Africa and the spread of upsetting rumors that ladies were going to play at Wimbledon in shorts. History is not logocentric but in loops and spirals where the reader is left to pull together the various and fragmentary points of view and the truth always eludes the reader. The chapters do not come to us with proper beginnings, middle and ending waiting to be organized
neatly against each other. They come from tags and scraps challenging the traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and constructing the past as a continuous developments. As Foucault has described in The Archaeology of Knowledge (1972) that through the interplay of transmissions, resumptions, disappearances and repetitions the conclusion is never reached. The problem is “no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundation” (Foucault 1972: 5). The chapter titled ‘Kegalle’(ii) while recording the events of 1971 at family home of Rock Hill talks about the death of his father and describes the scars which the walls bore and simultaneously describes the Insurgence. The chapter blurs the distinction between private memory and collective history:

While all this official business was going on around the front porch, the rest of the insurgents had put down their huge collection of weapons, collected from all over Kegalle, and persuaded my younger sister Susan to provide a bat and a tennis ball. Asking her to join them, they proceeded to play a game of cricket on the front lawn. They played for most of the afternoon.

(Ondaatje 101)

This network of reference is what will re-cast the unity of the book, whereby the character of the book changes from ‘work’ associated with the idea of a stable and self-contained meaning to ‘text’ and becomes associated with the absence of stable and permanent meaning and the male gaze is intercepted:
The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. And this network of references is not the same in the case of a mathematical treatise, a textual commentary, historical account, and an episode in a novel cycle; the unity of the book, even in the sense of a group of relations, cannot be regarded as identical in each case. The book is not simply the object that one holds in one’s hands; and it cannot remain within the title parallelepiped that contains it; its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity; it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse.

(Foucault 23)

The complex-field of discourse include androcentric and gynocentric voices, which will define and re-define codes of masculinity and femininity. The novel where Ondaatje returns physically to the living rooms to formulate a new understanding of his deceased father, Mervyn Ondaatje, is guided by the masculine vision to cross the Oedipal divide and his dead father is the matrix of the novel. However as Smaro Kamboureli has pointed out this endeavour is not a straight forward attempt by the son to inscribe himself in the Law of the Father. Despite the fact that it is father who inspires the writer to write, Mervyn Ondaatje is not the father figure as legislator, his is the law of scandal and as the figure head of patriarchal authority he deconstructs Logos. Mervyn Ondaatje thus “becomes a scandalous romantic hero whose self-
destruction places him beyond comprehension, amid the series of rumours and myths that eddy around him” (Coleman 126). There is an on-going process of closure and dismantling edifices. The construction of his father will be initiated simultaneously by several tongues and each story will be re-counted several times with “additions--- and a few judgements thrown in”(Ondaatje26). One of the earlier stories to be told will be by Aunt Phyllis, who embodies the ‘feminine’ along with Lalla. Aunt Phyllis was close to his father and she was the “minotaur of this long journey back”. (Ondaatje25) and her conversations are about the “original circle of love”. The courtship of the writer’s parents have been located within the larger cultural milieu of troubled gender relationship when “flaming youth and energy formed complex relationships” (Ondaatje53) and there were “stories of elopements, unrequited love, family feuds, and exhausting vendettas, which everyone was drawn into, had to be involved with. But nothing is said of the closeness between two people; how they grew in the shade of each other’s presence” (Ondaatje53–4).

However the gaze is the organizing male gaze and Ondaatje wants “to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover” (Ondaatje54) and the photographs testifies to this masculine mode. The photographs will provide the evidence which Ondaatje wanted that “they were absolutely perfect for each other” (Ondaatje162). According to Susan Sontag photos are single and static, “Cameras are the antidote and the disease --- a means of appropriating reality and a means of making them obsolete” (Hutcheon 47). Hutcheon further elaborates, “Cameras can engender in the photographer both aggression and a
passivity born of impotence” (Hutcheon 47). However the paradoxical force of photographic images cannot be ruled out:

The power of photography have in effect de-Platonized our understanding of reality, making it less and less plausible to reflect upon our experience according to the distinction between images and things, between copies and originals. It suited Plato’s derogatory attitude towards images to liken them to shadows transitory, minimally informative, immaterial, impotent co-presences of the real things which cast them. But the force of photographic images comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality for turning it into a shadow.

(Sontag 1982 : 367)

Therefore while there is instant access to the real, there is also the process of distancing and the distancing in the text creates “another terrible story”.

There is the feature of ‘dynamic statis’ prevailing throughout the novel, which will result in a kind of double or even contradictory movement. This has been reflected in the product/process tension in the novel while process is not ordered and chaotic and hence female, product is ordered and male. According to Frank Davey “the tension between the contradicting poles not only is never resolved, but can never be resolved: Male order may constitute a travesty of female chaos and its gestural language, but only a wary appropriation of that order enables a speaking of either” (Hutcheon 153). The chapters may adhere to a masculine form and hence a finished product, the content
is not ordered and reflects the process, the search and hence is female. Ondaatje “inhabits that space, and writes from the view point of one who is repeatedly seduced by the two poles he tries to embrace” (Hutcheon 163) and paradoxically there is both an inscribing and a subverting of what it inscribes. The narrative, which is both an autobiography and a biography is about the “lost history” of Ceylon and Ondaatje family. Ceylon itself has been described as a mythic place, which throughout history has “seduced all of Europe” and its name was constantly being altered to fit the language of the latest invader, just as its shape on maps grew “from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy” (Ondaatje 63).

The construction of his father defies any ideological closure and Julia Kristeva’s concept of dividedness between the equally irresistible choices of integrative masculinity on the one hand and self-indulgent childlike regression on the other is reflected in the construction of his father’s masculinity:

the symbolic disposition is driven by an urge to master and control, through the act of defining, what is other and therefore potentially threatening to the self. On the other hand, the origins of the semiotic modality lie in the non-gendered libidinal drives of the pre-oedipal phase so that its disposition is towards meaning as a continuum with identification rather than separation from what is other.

(Schoene-Harwood 2000 : 165)

The section titled ‘The Bone’ is one of the surreal episodes, which embodies the pre-Oedipal phrase and brings out Mervyn’s dipsomania, which Ondaatje cannot come
to terms with. According to this story, Mervyn’s friend Arthur finds him walking naked in the jungle holding with superhuman strength five ropes with a black dog dangling in the end of each one. The narrative throws up new image since the episode has no humour or gentleness about it:

He is holding his arm outstretched, holding them with one arm as if he has supernatural strength. Terrible noises are coming from him and from the dogs as if there is a conversion between them that is subterranean, volcanic. All their tongues hanging out.--- He was a man who loved dogs. But this scene had no humour or gentleness in it. The dogs were too powerful to be in danger of being strangled ---. The danger was to the naked man who held them at arms length towards whom they swing like large dark magnets. He did not recognize Arthur, he would not let go of the ropes.

(Ondaatje181-2)

The narrative through this image of the father at this point breaks the “masculinist illusion of autonomy (reflected in Freud’s individualized formulations, as well in male conventions of autobiography)” (Coleman 113).

This episode does not offer the illusion of comprehensiveness and is radically anti-phallogocentric. Mervyn, representing the native elite will confront with radical alterity the discursive means “through which man objectifies the world reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else” (Schoene-Harwood 31).
There is an interrogation of certainties since the figure of the father embodies a "wilderness beyond the white man's definitional reach" (Schoene-Harwood 31). The father as a sign "incorporates a radical otherness beyond mere binarist oppositioning, an otherness that cannot be annihilated or contained---"(Schoene-Harwood 30). Mervyn Ondaatje's position of marginal masculinity leads to compromise his masculine integrity and the reconstruction constitutes the chief telos of the narration inscribing the feminine:

I am the son you have made hazardous, who still loves you. I am now part of an adult's ceremony. But I want to say I am writing this book about you at a time when I am least sure about such words ---

(Ondaatje180)

The larger colonial world of Mervyn Ondaatje during the twenties and thirties is not an ordered one and was "part of another lost world" (Ondaatje 57) where a large social gap existed between the Ceylonese community and the Europeans and English. This generation is located within the chaotic and dark other and hence they remained "wild and spoiled" (Ondaatje 53) and it was only "during the second half of my parent's generation that they suddenly turned to the real world" (Ondaatje 53).

The narrative locates masculinity within different paradigms. The chapter titled 'The Courtship' portrays his father as the native elite and when he was sent to University in England, he "seemed to have pulled himself out of that steak of bad behaviour in the tropics" (Ondaatje 31) and even took a "short trip to Ireland supposedly to fight against the Rebels when the university closed down for its
vacation” (Ondaatje32). Masculinity has been located within a generation of wasted decadent national elite. The larger milieu has been traced through people’s memories and the section titled. ‘A’ Fine Romance’ revisits the era of his grand parents, when “Philip Ondaatje was supposed to have the greatest collection of wine glasses in the Orient, my other grandfather, Willy Gratiaen, dreamt of snakes” (Ondaatje 41). There is a desire for order in the midst of the wild champagne soaked parties and moonlight tangos exemplifying the exotic Orient:

Gasanawa, was the rubber estate where Francis worked and it becomes the base for most of their parties --- People’s memories about Gasanawa even today, are mythic --- But for the most part it was the tango that was perfected on that rock at Gasawana. The parties lasted until the end of the twenties when Francis lost his job over to splendid a road --- The waste of youth. Burned purposeless.

(Ondaatje 45, 46, 47)

The narrative while trying to keep up an appearance of masculine propriety and masculine stature defined in terms of responsibility and emotional maturity crumbles and there is crisis in masculinity in an age of sexual anarchy, which has been echoed in the text. The section concludes an a note of andocentric closure:

Whatever “empire” my grand father had fought for had to all purpose disappeared.

(Ondaatje 60)
The second section titled “Don’t Talk To Me About Matisse” repeats the same pattern and begins with the Tabula Asiae and concludes with Kegalle (ii). There are many voices which are heard. The colonial masculine gaze is present along with indigenous voices:

On my brother’s wall in Toronto are the false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings glance from trading vessels the theories of sextant.

(Onaataj63)

The familiar images of the Orient are evoked:

The maps reveal rumours of topography, the routes for invasion and trade and the dark mad mind of travelers tales appears throughout Arab and Chinese and medieval records. The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English.

(Onaatajte 63-4)

The long oriental tradition wherein the four continents were represented as woman available for plunder, possession, discovery and conquest is reflected. However the stability of the ‘disciplinary’ gaze of the colonizer is destabilized by “parody of the ruling language” (Onaatajte 64) and Ondaatje turns out to be a Dutch spelling of his ancestor’s own name.

In this section Ondaatje will be simultaneously both inside and outside the narrative and he seeks to be a part of the country, where he had grown up, rather than remain alienated and embodies the colonial clinical gaze. He doesn’t want to be the
‘Karapothas’ and the image of the ‘toddy taper’ whose beverage the narrator will spend his morning drinking and literally make it a part of himself:

I witnessed everything. One morning I would wake and smell things for the whole day, it was so rich I had to select senses.

(Ondaatje 70-71)

However the persona of the white man returns and the “perfumed sea” and paradise had a “darker side”:

The island hid it knowledge. Intricate arts and customs and religious ceremonies moved inland away from the new cities.

(Ondaatje 81)

But Ondaatje will identify with Robert Knox, who had been held captive by a Kandyan king for twenty years and he had written well about the islands and had learnt its traditions:

Apart from Knox and later Leonard Woolf in his novel, A Village in the Jungle very few foreigners truly knew where they were.

(Ondaatje 83)

The construction of Ceylon is located within the discourse of Orientalism, “where a line has been drawn between Asia and Europe. Europe is powerful and articulate and Asia is defeated and distant” (Said 2001: 57). The Orient was taught, researched, administered and pronounced upon in certain ways and geography was “essentially the material under pinning for knowledge about the orient” (Said 216). Yet as Said has mentioned “geographical appetite could also take on the moral neutrality of
an epistemological impulse to find out, to settle upon and to uncover” (Said 216). This male point of view will be challenged by the feminine and hence Ceylon will tolerate “neither definitive abstraction nor conclusive narrative encapsulation” (Schoene-Harwood 28) and in “Sri Lanka a well told tie is worth a thousand facts” (Ondaatje 206). However, Ondaatje will at some point remain an alien and the angry and passionate voice of the poet, Lakdasa Wikramasinha describing the violence of the Insurgency of 1971 fails to reach him:

--- to our remote villages the painters came, and Our white-washed mud-huts were splattered with gunfire

(Ondaatje 86)

The chapter titled ‘Karapothas’ continues with the construction of East as the feminine other and Europe as the masculine self:

--- The roads are intensely picturesque. Animals, apes, porcupine hornbill required pigeons, and figurative dirt!” After all, Taormina, Ceylon Africa, America – as far as we go, they are only the negation of what we ourselves stand for and are.

(Ondaatje 78)

In this narratives however there is a curious incidence to what has been described as the ‘feminine’ within feminist discourse. The ‘feminine’ as Julia Kristeva has described is inscribed in the search for alternative discourses, which will exist outside fixed dominant discourses:
A practice can only be at odds with what already, exists so that we may say ‘that’s not it’. By ‘Woman’ I mean that which cannot be represented, what is not said, what remains above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.

(Jones 1985 :88)

Ceylon will emerge as the ‘feminine’ sign and will defeat attempts made by various colonial figures like D.H. Lawerence, Robert Knox, Leonard Woolf and Ondaatje himself to comprehend her. It was and Pablo Neruda’s vision, who “saw this landscape governed by a crowded surrealism” ( Ondaatje 80) that belies concepts of ‘fixity’ and comprehension and this vision was in sharp contrast to the masculine vision of the Europeans. The poetry of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha along with other vision will remain ‘anonymous’ and ‘secret’. These voices will not be contained within linear narrative and the signification becomes multiple opening up multiple sites. The chapter titled Monsoon Note books (ii) will talk about Ondaatje having “witnessed every thing” ( Ondaatje 70) and wake up one morning “to smell things for the whole day” ( Ondaatjee 71). However the andocentric desire to decipher, order and control is present:

Reading torn 100 year old newspaper clippings that come apart in your hands like wet sand, information tough as plastic dolls.

(Ondaatje 69)

The chapter titled ‘St. Thomas Church’ emerges as the site of writing, inscribed within the Father’s House and hence the public/private binary prevails within the
Father’s House and the sources are the ledgers of the Church stressing public performance:

We had been looking for the Reverend Jurgen Ondaatje – a translation and eventual chaplain in Colombo from 1835 until 1847 --- when Jurgen died his son Simon took his place and was the last Tamil colonial Chaplain of Ceylon.

(Ondaatje 66-7)

This section with chapters and poetry blurs generic distinctions followed by the waving of public and private memory with collective memory, and mingling of masculine with the feminine undermines the assumptions that identities, between colonizer and colonized are fixed. Rather the relationship is a multi layered one. Homi Bhabha has emphasized “upon mutualities and negotiations across the colonial divide” (Gilbert 1997 :116).The relationship is politically fraught “principally because the circulation of contradictory patterns of psychic effect in colonial relations (desire for as well as fear of the Other, for example) undermines their assumptions that the identities of colonizer and colonized exist in stable and unitary terms, which are also absolutely distinct from and necessary in conflict with each other” (Gilbert 116).

The last chapter titled Kegalle (ii) while tracing the patrilineal lineage beginning with the patriarchal figure of his grandfather mentioned earlier will also describe the last few years of his father. The discourses are very different in nature since during the last years of his father his dipsomania would recur every two months and the tragic death of his father would be caused by his “walking up to the kerosene lamp hanging
in the centre of the room at head level and raining that liquid into his mouth” (Ondaatje 60). The chapter will trace the myth of the grey cobra that came into the house after his father’s death along with pamphlet on poultry farming written by his father. There is multitude of voices with no voice being privileged. Ronald Barthes’s in his essay ‘The Death of the Author’ has argued:

--- a text consists not of line of words, releasing a single meaning --- but of a multidimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, more of them original: the text is a fabric of quotations resulting from a thousand sources of culture --- [it] consists of multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogue.

(Barthes quoted Allen 1995 :39)

This ‘Semiotic Liberation’ to borrow Julia Kristeva’s term will involve “repetitive, spasmodic separation from the dominating discourse” (Jones 1985: 88). The section titled ‘Eclipse Plumage’ embodies the semiotic discourse and the three chapters in this section represent the ‘feminine’:

--- They knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong. They lead me through their dark rooms crowded with various kinds of furniture --- their voices whispering ever tea cigarettes, distracting me from tale ---

(Ondaatje 110)

The chapter titled ‘Lunch Conversation’ heralds a non-linear movement and brings forth voices from among the dead:
Wait a minute, wait a minute! When did all this happen I am trying to get it straight ---

(Ondaatje 105)

However the masculine constraint is heard:

I would love to photographs this.

(Ondaatje 110)

Throughout the novel there is movement between masculine and the feminine. Helene Cixous in her essay ‘Sorties’ has argued:

The (political) economy of the masculine and of the feminine is organized by different requirement and constraints, which, when socialized and metaphorized produce signs, relationships of power, relationship of production and the reproduction, an entire immense system of cultural inscription readable as masculine or feminine.

(Cixous1988: 289)

The concluding chapter ‘The Passion of Lala’ is a site of multiple signification. Lala at one level is a domesticated feminine patriarch but simultaneously she could read the thunder, an image which is pre-dominant. Her “great claim to fame was that she was the first woman in Ceylon to have a mastectomy” (Ondaatje 123). Lala, the maternal grandmother has been described as eccentric and occupies an ambiguous positioning in the text. Lala married to Wille Gratiaen a champion cricketer “on the rebound” (Ondaatje
charts an odyssey that was not marked by absolute constant and she becomes the orchestration of values symbolized through her false breast:

Gradually she began to notice the shocked faces of the passengers facing her across the aisle. At first they looked disapprovingly and soon began whispering to each other --- Then she looked down and saw that his hand had come over her left shoulders and was squeezing her breast.--- Her left breast had been removed five years earlier and he was ardently fondling the sponge beneath the gown.

(Ondaatje 42-3)

She will defy the active / passive binary structure and after her husband’s death and along with her neighbour Rene she ran a dairy farm. If gender is defined in terms of ‘public action’ whose recurrence allows for our recognition as desiring and desirable subject as Judith Butter claims, then Lalla represents the subject – in – making with no fixed subject position and brings out the fragile and provisional nature of femininity:

Lalla was loved most by people who saw her arriving from the distance like a storm. She did love children, or at least loved company of any kind – cows, adults, babies, dogs. She always had to be surrounded. But being “grabbed” or “contained” by anyone drove her mad. She would be compassionate to the character of children but tended to avoid holding them on her lap --- she was always determined to be physically selfish. Into her sixties she would still
complain of how she used to be “pinned down” to breast feed her son before she could leave for dances.

(Ondaatje 119)

The female sentence as has been defined by Virginia Woolf is of more “elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes” (Mills 1998:66). The female sentence is less a matter of style or language and more a question of content and subject matter. The ‘écriture féminine’ is inscribed in the text by reflecting upon an area of “rhythmic pulsions in active opposition to the symbolic, the stable system of language” (Mills 69). In the concluding part where the text describes the last years of Lalla, the andocentric voice evident in chapters like ‘Father Tongue’ has been replaced by the feminine and hence concepts like reason, objectivity, empiricism would be contested and realities would be reconstructed and deconstructed. The potential to create a language, a reality, a body of knowledge beyond the confines of existing structures is what the chapter tries to dwell upon:

In her last years she was searching for the great death— A whole generation grew old or died around her — During the forties she moved with the rest of the country towards independence and the 20th century — She could be silent as a snake or flower. She loved the thunders; it spoke to her like a king. Riding back on August 13, 1947 they heard the wild thunder and she knew someone was going to die. Death, however, not to be read out there. — For two days and
nights they had been oblivious to the amount of destruction outside their home. The whole country was mauled by the rain that year --- Lalla took one step off the front porch and was immediately hauled away by an arm of water, ---

(Ondaatje 125 and 127)

And finally the celebration of the ‘feminine’: 

My grand mother died in the blue arms of a jacaranda tree. She could read thunder.

(Ondaatje 113)

The text at this point partakes a feminine economy rather than masculine one. A feminine economy as has been defined by Helene Cixous is the opposite of masculine economy which seeks to appropriate at all levels and also to contain and imprison the other. The feminine economy “takes the other into the self and is taken into the other also, it is a kind of mutual knowing or fluid mingling” (Still and Worton 1993 : 27).

Lala will in the novel emerges as a site to challenge the construction of women’s sexuality and the conceptualisation of the feminine within masculine culture as ‘lack’ or negativity:

When Lalla came to Bishop’s Girls School on Parent’s Day and pissed behind bushes or when in Nuwara Eliya she simply stood with her legs apart and urinated ---

(Ondaatje 124)

At the level of representation the text has embraced contradiction and a kind of dialectical movement begins which opposes statis and linearity. This dialectical
approach will undermine the construction of a fixed subject position and allow for many discourses to be heard:

The discourse suppressed tells us as much as the discourse expressed, for omission throws the margins of the texts production into relief allowing us to see the limits and the boundaries of what is posits as the real.

(Newton and Rosenfelt 1985:XXII)

The construction of Lalla’s sexuality prompts us to locate in the same situation the forces of oppression and seeds of resistance.

The construction of masculinity through the figure of his father explores the problematics of being one dimensionally gendered being thereby simultaneously envisaging the chance of emancipating one self from patriarchal man’s monologic self confinement. His father finds symptomatic relief in following a “path unknown to his parents and wife” (Ondaatje 141) and the chapters titled ‘Travels in Ceylon’ and ‘Sir John’ talks about “a consistently drunk office in the Ceylon Light Infantry” (Ondaatje 157). The episodes describe a masculinity not as continuous triumphant celebration of the self’s prowess, independence and superiority but as a neurotic affliction effecting violence guilt and psychic self mutilation (Schoene-Harwood 131):

He stayed in the darkness of that three-quarter-mile-long tunnel for three hours stopping rail traffic going both ways. My mother, clutching a suit of civilian clothing (the Army would not allow her to advertise his military
connections), walked into that darkness findings him and talking with him for over an hour and a half. A moment only Conrad could have interpreted.

(Ondaatje 149)

The episode located within the sphere of homosocial bonding rather than affirming his manly integrity locates him within a complex web of emasculating family relationships. The chapter titled ‘Dialogues’ is a text where in the text unbounds and we encounter a network of textual relations. In this chapter there is no objective narratorial voice to guide us through the vast array of voices, interpretation, world of views, opinions and response presented in the novel. Michael Ondaatje, the novel’s first person, narrator is clearly only another subjective voice. Even the third person narrators, who might appear to some as acting in the position of objective narrator, have “idiosyncratic opinions, gets angry, sides with some issues and reject others, uses distinct image and terms of phrase”(Allen 2000:24). The narrative oscillates between a desensitized and intellectually debilitated self on account of excess drinking and the self trying to regain his masculine space:

Patriarchal man is portrayed as permanently engaged in a pathetic wrangle with his own inadequacies and insecurities in securities, eliciting a quandary --- in itself.

(Schoene-Harwood 130)

The narrative presents no controlling omnipotent voice and the chapter becomes polyphonic in the Bakhtian sense. The chapter describes the episode when he was driving the Ford and fell asleep, to the terrible trip when he had lost his job and his
mother kept comforting him, to the various impressions collected by Ondaatje about his father. As mentioned earlier the father figure is at the epicenter of the narrative and there is a movement towards “elimination of chaos” (Ondaatje 179) and write histories from a distance. The desire to identify himself with the “movement in the play where Edgar revels himself to Gloucester” (Ondaatje 180) which never happens in King Lear is the movement when the text desires closure but that does not happen:

--- but I want to say I am writing this book about you at a time when I am least sure about such words.

(Ondaatje 180)

In the chapter titled ‘Final Days/ Father Tongue’ the masculine has been inscribed and there is a return to the norm of masculinity as heroism. The representation of masculinity is within the wider patriarchal framework and hence it is conservative rather than subversive. The narrative is driven by the fantasy to create an “all-powerful super manly alter-ego which will compensate for the self’s congenital inability to live up to its own impossible ideal” (Schoene Harwood 18):

He was a founder of the Cactus and Succulents Society ---. He lived in another world I think. He was not interested in politics--- He, would swing wildly in those last years – not so much from sobriety to drink but from calmness to depression --- And he was also the Visiting Agent for the region inspecting estates and writing up reports on how they were run --- I, think he was one of the first Ceylonese to become a V.A. ---

(Ondaatje 192,194 and 198)
The novel being a postmodern text will defy any monolithic construction and the construction of his father defies “the process and means of traditional phallocentric coherency” (Schoene-Harwood 24) and “he is still one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut” (Ondaatje 200) and the “book again is incomplete” (Ondaatje 201). The novel traces the enmeshed life of his father which is a mixture of contradictions and inconsistencies spread across different sections; we sense the impossibility of a pure free and indivisible essence of true masculine being. And hence the literary enterprise of writing a novel about his father has been described as a “communal act” (Ondaatje 205).

The temporary blurring of identities open up spaces within the novel, where the male embraces the female and paves the way to conceive of écriture masculine. The closing of the novel does not envisage a perfect accession to Law of the Father and hence the text belies the mimetic notion of being a reflection of the larger reality and remains a “gesture” and masculine patriarchy constructs a masculinity which “remains an essentially self-contradictory, even schizophrenic phenomenon, both heroic and monstrous compelling and compulsive, free and conscripted” (Schoene-Harwood 18). In this context the very notion of history as ‘monolgoism’ associated with ‘System’ gives way to history as network of prior text” (Kriesteva 1980 :88):

History exists as a vast web of subjective texts, the new historical account being one more author’s struggle to negotiate a way through an intertextual network of previous forms and representation.

(Allen 192)
Therefore private memory will mingle with public archives and multiple histories are created in the process:

Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in. In this way history is organized.

(Ondaatje 26)

As mentioned earlier, the novel has been described as a ‘communal act’ by the novelist and the novel becomes a polyphonic novel that ‘fights against any view of the world which would valorize one ‘official’ point of view, one ideological position and thus one discourse, above all others’ (Allen 24). However it is important to note that novel presents a dialogic world not only in terms of offering many discourses but dialogism is also central feature of every character and every character’s own individual discourse. As Bakhtin states “dialogic relationship can permeate inside the utterance, even inside the individual word as long as two voices collide within it dialogically” (Allen 25). The father figure in the novel embraces the feminine as mentioned earlier and this in turn causes rupture in the movement from signifier to signified undermining the “apparent centrality and transparency of meaning of the major signs which are meant to stabilize the discursive system in question” (Allen 33). In this context the major is the Law of the Father which is challenged and the postmodern feature of ‘doubling’ is at play, where by in this biographical and autobiographical mode of writing the authorial ‘I’ is different from the third person narrator, who performs the act of representation – symbolized in the novel through split
subject. The narrator as mentioned earlier is both inside and outside the narrative. He is a part of the world which is observing recording and also re-inventing through language. The model of split – subject brings out the tension between a “socialized, symbolic discourse and an unassimilable, anti-rational and anti-social semiotic language of instinctual sexual drives ---. The language of logic and clear communication is disrupted rather the semiotic is located within the symbolic” (Allen 49) However, as mentioned earlier, the text completely embraces the semiotic, but the semiotic is located within the symbolic represented in the search of the father figure.

The novel emerging from a male signator in a confessional mode is both inside and outside the Masculine Order. The movement far from being linear is a circular one and both the masculine and the feminine have been inscribed in the body of the text as the chapter has analysed. The narrative in many sections will reflect the colonial male gaze and simultaneously there is the feminine presence. It is at such moments that the male signator is not opposed to all ‘Other’ and does not exist outside ‘Other’ and not against the ‘Other’ but the male self exists with ‘Other’ in an interdependent existence. The weaving of various voices in the search of the ‘Father’ deconstructs what Helene Cixous has described as “hierarchized oppositions” (Lodge 287) although in the text there is a desire to find meanings within the Symbolic Order. Therefore the ‘feminine’ which Lalla embodies is “defined as a lack, chaos, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, darkness and therefore she dwells in the borderline of the symbolic order” (Moi 1989: 248). ‘Feminine’ as Julia Kristeva has defined is a
position which has been marginalized by the patriarchal Symbolic Order and men can also be constructed as marginal to the Symbolic Order. This definition of femininity implies that what is perceived as margin depends on the position that one occupies at a given moment. In the novel Ondaatje occupies masculine as well as the feminine position simultaneously.

Interrogation of gender construction in a postmodern novel is investigating varied masculinities reproducing its own ‘Otherness’. Therefore the gender of the text becomes more important than the gender of the author and the text refuses to be encapsulated in any fixed ideological structure, reflecting the ambiguity which in-turn create in-between spaces welcoming difference.
II  BEAUTIFUL LOSERS

George Bowering in his essay titled ‘A Great Northward Darkness: The Attack on History in Recent Canadian Fiction’ has described Beautiful Losers (1986) as a “novel that scandalized nineteenth century Canada” (Bowering 1988:4). The novel which heralds the beginning of postmodernism in Canadian literature is characterized by “metafictional self-consciousness about genre and the conventions of realism” (Hutcheon 1988:213). The novel invites readers to participate in the action of the novel and the novel presents a new role for readers. The readers “are not simply to identify with characters, but to acknowledge [their] own role in co-creating the text being read” (Hutcheon 27). Eli Mandel in his essay, ‘Leonard Cohen’ has described the novel “with its scatological imagination, its mixture of pop culture, apocalyptic yearning, religiosity, and a kind of insane sociology” (Mandel 1980: 209) as located within the postmodern culture. The novel has been divided into three parts and the first and the longest part titled ‘The History of Them All’, is where the historian writes in the first person. The narrative is spread over short numbered passages, suggesting that the narrator is recording his daily observations, which are subjective and confessional in nature. The historian is trying to write the history of an extinct Indian tribe called the A-s. And then begins a never ending imaginative encounter among the historian, his friend F., who is a member of Parliament and the two female figures: the historian’s wife Edith and the verifiable historical Iroquois saint, Catherine Tekakwitha.
The narrative personae are “deliberately self-deprecating, extravagantly obscene, and by turns bombastic and despairing: this is a rhetoric that compels us to push back, resist, and question the values presented” (Deer 1994: 47-8).

History as the historian informs the reader is written by winners and they are often ugly ones, whereas the narrator tries to re-create a history which is characterized by “incessant defeat” (Cohen 1986:5) and as the narrator confesses “my interest in this pack of failures betrays my character” (Cohen 5). The narrator fails to reconstruct history in a linear manner and simultaneously he cannot get rid of “constipation”:

Cohen suggests that the historian’s ideals and methodology are the reason for his painful problem in health, both physical and psychological. The historian means to bring order to chaos, to ascertain facts and to arrange them into an incontrovertible theory, to change story into system.

(Bowering 5)

This disjunction results in a narrative which “resembles fireworks in a night sky more than a highway of meaning alongside the St. Lawrence” (Cohen 5). F’s injunction to “connect nothing” foregrounds an epistemology which steers clear of any mimetic reference to the world outside and cannot be consumed:

We are part of a necklace of incomparable beauty and unmeaning. Connect nothing --- place, things side by side on your arborite table, if you must, but connect nothing.

(Cohen 12)
It is an ambitious command that challenges the historian’s vision and his need to document the past for present consideration. In this mission, the folklorist seeks to rescue Catherine Takakwitha from the Jesuits and from her body being commodified and reproduced in plastic mould on the dashboard of every Montreal taxi.

The Enlightenment notion of history representing a singular, universal truth gives way to crowded and fragmented facts and the folklorist tries to understand F.’s vision of living in the present:

"Listen, my friend, listen to the present, the right now, its all around us, painted like a target, red, white, and blue --- empty your memory and listen to the fire around you."

(Cohen 12)

The historian tries to live in this perspective and escape the tyranny of meaning. The historian represents the North American version of the “underground man”, the alienated underground man who can form allegiances with no one and who speaks in the “accents of a romanticism gone sour” (Deer 48). This figure is found in the works of JeanGenet, William Burroughs, and Henry Miller. This accent is heard in twentieth century writing, where the novels experiment with a “decadent radicalism, a kind of directionless revolt against the truisms of political, social, and economic repression”(Deer 48). Hence in the novel there is no beginning, middle and no end. All the major plot elements are announced right in the beginning of the novel: the suicide of the historian’s wife Edith, the tragic death of F, the sexual relationship of F. and Edith. The novels defies all paradigms of conventional modes of understanding:
The plot elements are returned to and expanded rather than extended. They open and spread like Saint Katherine Tekakwitha’s spilled wine at the Christian feast. Characters, or rather figures, do not have to be restricted conventionally to what they know. Any going back and forth is done in the text, not in referential time and Reader is made to be constantly present. Only when we try ourselves to be historians of that text are we thwarted, as when we try to get the chronology straight. Reality, we should be persuaded, does not lie in the connecting of facts, but in the imagination’s pouring itself into the world, there to surround facts.

(Bowering 7)

The novel defies the search for a universal signifier:

A saint does not dissolve the chaos, if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself,---

(Cohen 101)

The novel frustrates the notion of a fixed subject of enunciation and is against any kind of “Universal acceptance” (Cohen 8):

I wanted to smile at dogma, yet ruin my ego against it. I wanted to confront the machines of Broadway.

(Cohen 21)

However the construction of saint Catherine Tekakwitha by the historian ridicules F.’s philosophy and emerges as a fixed sign:
Catherine – Saint Catherine --- is the substance to which much of the other character’s meaninglessness is related; she is the enduring presence in their insubstantiality; the reality in their shadow – like existence. She is the matter of history! they merely of uncertain existence, mere ‘chronicle’. Lacking in every type of advantage and sophistication, she nevertheless endures and influences; from her slender resources eternal realities were fashioned. She is the one loser who wins, the ugly who discovers real beauty; the physical invested with the spiritual.

(Dorman and Rawlins 1990 :142)

The mission of the folklorist is to rescue Catherine Tekakwitha from those who have beautified her, and in the process, the peculiarity of the ‘Koan’ is manifested. Leonard Cohen was influenced by Jewish scriptures and his family’s experiences in Eastern Europe and Zen Buddhism. The concept of ‘Koan’ is the manifestation of true sainthood via sexual fulfillment, i.e. knowing her, spiritually by knowing her physically:

In it both Zen Buddhism and Jewish theology converge to overthrow the centuries old claim that asexual life is less than holy; that virginity is a degree of human excellence beyond the ordinary.

(Dorman and Rawlins 144)

However, it is important to note that a “Koan would not be Koan unless it contradicted logical reasoning, disengaged the mind from its habits, jolted the consciousness into a new mode of awareness and pitched the senses through pain and
the shock of pain” (Dorman and Rawlins 147) In the writing of history ‘Koan’ is evident and hence the history written reflects a clash between “sacred and secular, holy and profane, Saint and Sinner, mystic and politician” (Dorman and Rawlins 147).

An alternative mode which will challenge the metaphysics of presence is sought and hence the confession, “Hysteria is my classroom” (Cohen 59). The historian will find his training inadequate and he will not “want to write this History” (Cohen 61) where he has to submit himself to dominant ideologies. The historian’s search for another history signs his defeat in his search for linear narrative, thereby emphasizing the loser’s status within the book. The historian describes himself as a “dusty mind full of junk of may be five thousand books” (Cohen 4). He could not sleep at night and had forgotten most of what he had read and “it never seems very important to me or to the world” (Cohen 4). The historian’s endeavour to find the real “woman” and thereby rescue the saint is an attempt in the text to resurrect the ‘feminine’:

--- he aims to rescue the Virgin from those who would have her beatified. He seeks to do so by rescuing her full womanhood. Church authorities, wishes to promote her saintliness by highlighting her virginity (even though she lost it in her youth); he wishes to restore to her to a truer position by allowing the flower to blossom. They called the loss a deflowering, he asserts the opposites, it is a true burgeoning. They promote her interests by sterilizing her womanhood – ‘sublimating’ it would be their preferred expression; he by causing it to reach its
full and natural potential. He wishes to liberate her from the bondage of artificiality, to the ordained fulfillment of all ‘real’ women.

(Dorman and Rawlins 144)

The act of re-defining the history of the saint is also connected with the history of the three protagonists and involves re-inserting “the subject into the framework of its parole and its signifying activities (both conscious and unconscious) within an historical and social context … [and] to begin a force a redefinition not only of the subject but of history as well” (Hutcheon 159). In the novel both the male subject and history are simultaneously decentred and hence despite the presence of a single, insistent, controlling narrator – the main/male centre of the novel is constantly displaced and dispersed and hence the “search for unity (Narrative, historical, subjective) is constantly frustrated” (Hutcheon 162).

While writing the history in his position as the leading Canadian authority on the A-s tribe, what he offers is sublimation instead of satisfaction and instead of History, he offers histories. The histories of the indigenes, the French and the English and their complex relations with patriarchy and imperialism. At the heart of the winter of 1680, when Catherine was cold and dying, she was the best hope for all the converted Indians, since the French were murdering their brethren in the forest, but “this dying girl would some how certify the difficult choices they had made” (Cohen 221). By producing histories there is subversion of what is traditionally perceived as “patriarchal History” (Hutcheon 163). and the historian is forced to challenge the methodologies which creates the continuous and linear historical narratives. And the
Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of
the subject : the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored
to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a
reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject- in the form of
historical consciousness - will once again be able to appropriate to bring back
under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find
in them what might be called his abode. Making historical analysis the
discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original
subject of all historical development and all action are two sides of the same
system of thought.

(Foucault quoted in Hutcheon 158)

The novel which is discontinuous and self-reflexive offer histories of the
protagonists besides that of Catherine Tekakwitha and their histories have been
constituted by the piecemeal recollection of the historian as he “plunges in his
cuckolded misery from one episode to another, his mind rolling forwards and
backwards in agitation over his aspirations and losses – of profession and cause,
marriage and friendship” (Dorman and Rawlins 145). In the process he is painfully
aware of his entrapment which has been poignant on account of his disbelief in the
teachings of his faith and dislike of his own crudity accompanied by his desire to unify
the world of his experience, overcome his guilt over the homosexual practices of his
youth. This decentering of the male narrator challenges the construction of people as fixed subjects in the Althusserian sense. Althusser’s use of the term “subject’ borrowed from law, … is not only a grammatical subject, a centre of initiative, author of and responsible for its actions, but also a subjected being who submits to the authority of the social formation represented in the ideology as the Absolute Subject (God the King, the boss, Man, conscience)” (Belsey 1985 :49). The formation of the subject position requires that an individual must enter the symbolic order which signals entry into language. The subject is constructed in language, which as Saussure has defined as a system of differences and in discourse, which in turn is closely related to ideology. It is in this sense that ideology has the effect of constituting individuals as subjects, and it is also in this sense that their subjectivity appears ‘obvious’.

As mentioned earlier entry into language marks the entry of the subject into the Symbolic Order, the set of signifying systems of culture of which the supreme example is language. The unconscious is constructed with the entry of the subject in the symbolic order and the unconscious is the repository of “repressed and pre-linguistics signifiers” (Belsey 50-1) representing the ‘feminine’ in feminist criticism which can disrupt the Symbolic Order. The subject thus becomes a contested site full of contradictions:

But at the same time a division within the self is constructed. In offering --- the possibility of formulating its desires the Symbolic Order also betrays them, since it cannot by definition formulate those elements of desire which remain unconscious --- The subject is thus the site of contradictions, and is
consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact the ‘subject is a process’, lies the possibility of transformation --- This does not imply the reinstatement of individual subject as the agents of change and changing knowledge. On the contrary, it insists on the concept of a dialectical relationship between concrete individuals and the language in which their subjectivity is constructed. In consequence, it also supports the concept of subjectivity as in process.

(Belsey 50-1)

In the novel the historian represents the concept of ‘subjectivity in process’, since as an authority on the A—s. tribe he has been inscribed within the liberal, humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality which represents the symbolic order, but the history he seeks to write will challenge the masculine order. The masculine order will be challenged by trying to resurrect the ‘feminine’ as mentioned earlier and will call into question the particular complex relationship between individual and the real conditions of their existence and in the process move away from obviousness of shared truths. The internal monologue of the historian in Section 25 brings out the play of the ‘unconscious’ and results in “emotional extravagance“ (Cohen 49) which he longs for:

I am tired of facts, I’m tired of speculation, I want to be consumed by unreason.
I want to be swept along.

(Cohen 49)
And finally the question which haunts the historian also begins to haunt the reader:

I have been writing these true happenings for some time now. Am I any closer to Kateri Tekakwitha?

(Cohen 101)

The historian is obsessed with the boundaries and paradoxical entanglements of two impulses which are heard in the text:

material gratification and spiritual longing for transcendence of the material world

(Deer 48).

The historian is therefore located simultaneously within the Symbolic Order and the Imaginary order (the unconscious mind) and the attempt to write history to inscribe himself within the Law of the father “seems like --- nonsense” (Cohen 102) and his “brain is ruined” in the process. He is in search of the ‘apocalyptic’ which will result in ‘semiotic liberation’ to borrow Julia Kriesteva’s term. The search for the apocalyptic embodies this scheme:

The narrator in “The History of Them All” consistently uses a discourse whose aim is to surrender the self to an external power. The narrator begins by ironically deflating the power of his own Muse, Catherine Tekakwitha. His own discourse reveals him searching for an identity: he rages against the Church, yet becomes a supplicant for divine intervention; and his extravagant sexual display reveals a lack of connection, his loneliness.--- What is common to all the
political complaints, metaphysical lamentations, and exhortations to the gods is the intensity of the pursuit of self-immolation.

(Deer 55)

The search from the historian’s marginalized position is unlikely to produce a fixed subject position within ideology, rather he is subject – in-the-making, subject on trail. The text provides a critique of classic realism, which leads to closure and the establishment of ‘hierarchy of discourses’:

Homage to the Jesuit who has done so much to conquer the frontier between the natural and the supernatural. Under countless disguises, now as a Cabinet Minister, now as a Christian priest, now as a soldier, a Brahmin, an astrologer, now as the Confessor to a monarch, now as a mathematician, now as a Mandarin – by a thousand arts, luring, persuading, compelling men to acknowledge, under the weight of recorded miracles, that the earth is a province of eternity.

(Cohen 105)

The process of constituting the subject as, Michel Foucault mentions in his book *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), is to “rediscover beyond the statements themselves the intention of the speaking subject, his conscious activity, what he meant or, again the unconscious activity that took place, despite himself, in what he said or in the almost imperceptible fracture of his actual words; in any case, we must reconstitute another discourse, rediscover the silent murmuring, the inexhaustible speech that animates from within the voice that one hears, re-establish the tiny, invisible text that
runs between and sometimes collides with them” (Foucault 27). The other discourse is not marked by “unity of the work, but the multiplicity and diversity of its possible meanings, its incompleteness, the omissions which it displays but cannot describe and above all its contradictions. In its absences, and in the collisions between its divergent meanings, the text implicitly criticizes its own ideology; it contains within itself the critique of its own values in the sense that it is available for a new process of production of meaning by the reader, and in the process it can provide a knowledge of the limits of ideological representation” (Belsey 57). The history of the saint brings out multiple discourses of patriarchy and imperialism, some which are implicit and are not heard. The historical narrative remains incomplete and the contradiction in the construction of Catherine Tekakwitha remain unresolved and the historian becomes a “pitiful hunch back” (Cohen 143). The novel allows for no coherence and no unity:

It was a dance of masks and every mask was perfect because every mask was a real face and every face was a real mask so there was no mask and there was no face for there was but one dance in which there was but one mask but one true face which was the same and which was a thing without a name which changed and changed into itself over and over.

(Cohen 140)

The first part of the novel titled ‘The History of Them All’ therefore comprises the history of the main characters and by extension Cohen’s fellow Canadians. But the tale / history provides no answer and History not only provokes the historian, but also titillates him. In the first section where the historian through his subject focus tries to
tell a story, another story-line has already been introduced through the series of F.’s observations and quotations. F. is the historian’s erstwhile friend and mentor, who died in a padded cell his brain rotted from too much dirty sex (Cohen 4). It is F. who emerges as the central figure, ardent and ambitious the typical leader because he has more urgent ideas.

The second session titled ‘A Long Letter from F.’ is a commentary on the first section and provides a detailed and personal history of Catherine Tekakwitha’s four years. History in this section will be constructed to rid the historian of a “fake universal comprehension” (Cohen 17) and the habit of the mind to seek “a comforting message” and “a beautiful knowledge of unity” (Cohen 17):

I was your mystery and you were my mystery, and we rejoiced to learn that mystery was our home.

(Cohen 164)

The totalizing power of history and the notion of a fixed subject position will be exposed as unrealistic by him:

A huge juke box played a sleepy tune. The tune was couple of thousand years old and we danced to it with our eyes closed. The tune was called history and we loved it, Nazis, Jews, everybody. We loved it because we made it up, because like Thucydides, we knew that whatever happened to us was the most important thing that ever happened in the world. History made us feel good so we played it over and over deep into the night.

(Cohen 173)
F. tries to initiate the historian to the “lust for secular gray magic” (Cohen 175) and feared the historian’s “rational mind” (Cohen 161) and therefore wants to be his ‘Oscotarach’ the Head Piercer, a mythical figure who the Iroquois’s believed removed the brain from the skull when the “spirit body will begin a long journey backward” (Cohen 121). The second part which is a commentary as has been mentioned earlier is a long letter written from the prison, but to be read posthumously, achieves its own climax through the image of the Danish Vibrator in the “latest region of fascist expression in Peronist Argentina – amid wild, sexual extravagance, an extravagance that demonstrates that a development beyond mere ‘secular pleasure’ is possible; an understanding that goes beyond one’s ‘tiny swamp machinery’ to greater heights and pleasures; experiences realizable only via the Danish Vibrator’ the DV, which has a life as well as a will of its own, and a power to fulfill it” (Dorman and Rawlins 152).

The character of F. as it develops throughout the whole story presents a mind disengaged from its habits and tries to jolt the consciousness into a new mode of awareness through pain and sexual excess and directs us to the gravitational centre of the novel, which is ‘connect nothing’:

His loss of touch with reality manifests itself in ever wilder language and action, wilderness that sucks in both his friend ---- and his innocent but curious wife Edith. It is, after all, F. who tried to get him to ‘love appearances’ more than reality; it was F. who said that a’ strong man cannot but love the church’ . It was F. who commented that he had never heard of a single female saint that he
wouldn’t have liked to take to bed; it was F. who cuckolded his friend – and grossly corrupted his wife in so doing”.

(Dorman & Rawlins 146-7)

F.’s long letter questions the historian’s observations “accentuates the ‘inner monologue’ and outer dialogue aspects” (Dorman & Rawlins 143). This in turn brings out the dialectical nature of reality, which the book seeks to portray. While writing the letter, F. tries to manipulate the readers and his friend F. and tells his friend to read the letter to know the end of the story of Catherine Tekakwitha’s death and the ensuring “documented miracles”. However the readers are cautioned against the construction of any fixed reality:

Avoid even the circumstances of Catherine Tekakwitha’s death and the ensuring documented miracles. Read it with that part of your mind which you delegate to watching out for black flies and mosquitoes.

(Cohen 200)

The letter also points to various level of reference and as Linda Hutcheon mentioned in her essay ‘Caveat Lector : The Early Postmodernism of Leonard Cohen’, there are at least two referential levels of language found, auto- referential and inter-textual:

--- an auto-referential one (in which the text refers to itself as a text or a printed page or a work of literature) and an inter-textual one (which points to the intervention of other works or artistic conventions). The result of these two
additions is frequently an increased sense of ‘literariness’ or, perhaps, a new self-consciousness ---

(Hutcheon 1988 : 29)

Inter-textuality is reflected in ‘A Long Letter From F.’ which employs the conventions of the epistolary novel and in the first part, the journal form has been employed and the journal has been written by a nameless narrator. The use of comic – book languages, advertisements and Jesuit chronicles of Iroquois saint’s life also point towards inter-textuality. This device has been employed to parody religious text, “Be it the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola or the Bible” (Hutcheon 30) and this particular transformation of the implied spiritual values brings into play what Mikhail Bakhtin has described as the ‘Carnivalesque’:

--- Mikhail Bakhtin identified this same kind of inversion of the official social and literary norms in Rabelais’s work as belonging to what he called the ‘carnivalesque’ of the medieval folk tradition --- the medieval carnival is said to exist on the borderline between art and life, making no formal distinction between actor and spectator. There are no footlights; the world is the stage. This, Bakhtin argued, creates (through an authorized transgression of the usual norms) a second, inverted world, parallel to that of the official culture.

(Hutcheon 30)

The carnivalesque is centered on “material bodily lower stratum” (Hutcheon 31). In the novel there are recurring images of drinking and various forms of sexual encounter (oral or anal). The kind of language employed, according to Bakhtin, is not
merely abusive but “a sign of irrepressible linguistic freedom and vitality” (Hutcheon 31). In the novel Cohen seeks to confront and even shock his readers in an attempt “perhaps to get back in touch with our bodies – and with the language of our body” (Hutcheon 31). In ‘carnivalesque’ the emphasis is on the “process” rather than the finished “product” and there is a sense of being incomplete which defies clearly defined perspective. Julia Kristeva in her essay “Word, Dialogue and Novel’ describes the carnivalesque structure as “residue of a cosmogony that ignored substance, causality, or identity outside of its link to the whole, which exists only in or through relationship. This carnivalesque cosmogony has persisted in the form of an antitheological --deeply popular movement. It remains present as an often misunderstood and persecuted substratum of official Western Culture throughout its entire history;--- As composed of distances, relationships, analogies and non-exclusive oppositions, it is essentially dialogical ---- Within the carnival, the subject is reduced to nothingness, while the structure of the author emerges as anonymity ---- “ (Kristeva : 76). ‘Carnivalesque cosmology’ is what the last section of the novel titled ‘An Epilogue in the Third Person’ can be described. George Bowering wonders “whether the Third Person is the Holy Ghost” (Bowering 7) since the speaker is omniscient “after the highly idiosyncratic voices of the first two persons” (Bowering 7). This in turn results in multiple narratives which are fragmented, less easily defined, with no celebration of a single, rational identity and hence embodies the ‘feminine’ as an ideological position
Rather as Linda Hutcheon has argued that the third voice of the final part is symbolically hard to locate in terms of normal narrative logic. Unlike the narrator, who in the first part is obsessed with the idea of creating and specifically a system; in the third part there is a final apocalyptic scene of transformation of the old man into the Ray Charles movie. Cohen’s novel “reflects various assumptions concerning aesthetics, politics, and human nature. In the aesthetic dimension the implied author assumes that a collage of voices, personal therapy in the form of confessional monologue, the juxtapositions of images from pop culture, and jump-cut disjunctions are adequate forms for his message, and that the pre-positioned readership will accept these techniques; that his art can sustain a paradoxical self-parodying or anti-art impulse” (Deer 59).

The closing of the novel is a “postmodern ironic reversal of optimistic utopianism” (Hutcheon 132) and hence the “revolution of the ‘second chancers’ fails, everyone just sits back and watches the Ray Charles movie, thankful that it is ‘only a movie’ and not something in life’ that would require an active response. But Cohen’s irony here could be said to be figuratively directed against the failure of the cliched notion of the passive (or even identifying) readers of realist fiction too, against their presumed failure to engage actively in a collective process that has the potential to be social (as well as culturally) revitalizing – the act of creating through reading” (Hutcheon 32 – 3).

There is no fixed subject position and re-birth seems to be resolutely denied. All the characters are orphans and all sex is biologically non-productive reflecting the cynicism which pervades the novel. There is no creativity as exemplified in the third
part. when a little boy asks an old man, “Aw, tell me one of those Indian stories that you often swear you’re going to turn into a book one day”. (Cohen 248) The old man then proceeds to list a written chart of names in Indian, French and English languages, which is a mechanical rather than a creative art.

Earlier in the novel, F.sits in the System Theatre watching not the film, but the projection beam – the process and not the products:

Like crystals rioting in a test-tube suspension, the unstable ray changed and changed in its black confinement.

(Cohen 236-7)

The postmodern writer of metafiction wants to lure the readers into the act of naming and meaning(products) only to thwart them and this results in the collage.

F. begins to be tormented by the question as to what will happen when the “newsreel escapes into the feature. The newsreel is said to be like Boulder Dam (placed strategically between ‘life’ and art); when the dam breaks later in the novel, the old man ceases to see the film, for he has become the newsreel (or it postmodern equivalent, the television news). He escapes into the feature” (Hutcheon 41-2).

The lack of communication signals the break down of the circuit of communication in the novel and thereby ironically thwart the expectations of the reader. As Fredric Jameson argues that’ narrativization’ – making experience into story is central to human comprehension. This is also one of the ways by which meanings and coherence are imposed on unrelated events:
Narrating solves ‘the problem of how to translate knowing into telling’. Such statements as these are possible only in the context of yet another attack on the empirical, positivist assumptions of ‘analytico – referential discourse’.

(Hutcheon 66)

The construction of history as linear, continuous development thereby implying an ‘analytico – referential’ mode of knowing has been resisted in the novel and finally a ‘feminine’ mode of viewing emerges. The process of naming which is related to the process of history writing has also been challenged. According to the nameless narrator, the process of naming implies control:

The French gave the Iroquois their name. Naming food is one thing, naming a people is another, ....

(Cohen 6)

Related to the process of imperialism in terms of naming and writing a linear history is the silencing of the ‘feminine’. The attempt results in writing a history of Catherine Tekakwitha, where she is made to experience through the narrator’s imagery, both attraction and repulsion towards the brave young man, intended to be her husband:

All at once, and for the first time, Catherine Tekakwitha knew that she lived in a body, a female body! ... She lived in a body, a woman’s body, and it worked! She sat on juices

(Cohen 53)

However the masculine order asserts itself in terms of circles of whips, thongs, fangs:
Agony! A burning circle attacked her cunt and severed it from her crotch like the top of a tin can. She lived in a woman’s body but – it did not belong to her! It was not her to offer. With a desperate slingshot thought, she hurls her cunt forever into the night.

(Cohen 54)

Christian religion as the masculine order has been presented as a closed system and potentially destructive. The historian’s search for the ‘feminine’ as mentioned earlier aligns him with those who have been excluded from bourgeois social order and those who resist ordering. The rape of Edith, where she has been equated with Catherine Tekakwitha, who had been denied her sexuality, brings out the power of ‘collective will’. The ‘Collective Will’, which in the novel will be manifested as Christianity, French and British imperialism will always try to silence the ‘maternal-feminine’, the Other who is perceived as a threat:

Perhaps the business and the religion of the town kept operating as usual but every single person is secretly obsessed with these nipple information. The Mass is undermined with nipple dream ... Get Edith! commanded the Collective Will. Get her magic nipples off Our Mind!

(Cohen 63-4)

As Moira Gatens has pointed out the reinscription of the female body necessitates addressing the other, the “thou of our social relations” (Carrierre 2002: 36). The construction of sex as a semiotic construct translated in the novel as”magic nipples” of our mind focuses the way in which the masculine/feminine dichotomy is
realized in phallocentric discourse. It also demonstrates the ‘existence of alternative non-binary discursive constructions of the continuum which phallocentrism so arbitrarily divides into two. More importantly, they are often able to show how patriarchy and the phallocentric networking signifying practices which it supports manages to elide/exclude/marginalize or silence these alternative discourses and representations which would question and unsettle its own constructions’ (Threadgold 1990 : 22). F. tells his friend, who was lost in particulars about history about a fragmented vision and the ‘feminine’ is thus heard:

   All parts of the body are erotogenic, or at least have the possibility of so becoming. If she had struck her index fingers in your ears you would have got the same results.

(Cohen 29)

Edith embodies certain ‘liberatory potentials’ in her marginalized location representing the ‘woman’ According to Julia Kriesteva ‘woman’ represents not so much sex, as an attitude, an resistance to conventional language and culture and men too can have access to this practice:

   By ‘woman’ I mean that which cannot be represented, what is not said, what remains above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. There are certain ‘men’ who are familiar with this phenomenon.

(Kriesteva quoted in Jones 1985: 88)

Edith had ‘some landscape in mind’ where she invites the historian to travel with her and his refusal reflected his inability to move out of his angst:
Come on a new journey with me, a journey only strangers can take and we can remember it when we ourselves again, and therefore never be merely ourselves again.

(Cohen 15)

At a formal level at times the text breaks free of the male tradition as has brought out in section seventeen of Book I:

Gone are the single narrator, unity of tone, precision in space and time the celebration of the individual inter-relationship of major and minor characters and the resultant hierarchical forms that shape most male writing. Gone also are all the usual kinds of linear, logical structure and binary oppositions attributed to rational ‘apollonic’ thought.

(Monique Witting quoted in Still and Worton 1993:25)

The historian’s vision is guided by masculine economy which is characterized by the “desire to appropriate on all levels to point of wishing to incorporate the other, to contain and imprison the other.”(Still and Worton 27) whereas F. tries, to bring in the feminine economy which “takes the other into the self and is taken into the other also, it is a kind of mutual knowing or fluid mingling (Still and Worton 27).

However the positions are not fixed and both the male characters have no fixed ideological positions. Therefore the historian will want to write a history that seeks to transgress all contradictions, while searching for the real ‘woman’ and F. believes that blowing the statue of Queen Victoria on the north side of Sherbrooke street will help the cause of French Canada and that the Revolution needed his blood. The
contradictions in the text are not meant for any resolution but are to be held in “ironic tension” to borrow Linda Hutcheon’s term.

The contradictory tension recur with the historian emphasizing his distance from the events in the life of the Iroquois Saint and his attempt to write an objective history. Simultaneously, there is also the writing of history of Canada, a history of slavery and servitude. In the process, this postmodern novel problematizes the nature of historical knowledge:

Postmodernism does not so much erode our “sense of history” and reference, as it erodes out old sure sense of what history and reference meant. It asks us rethink and critique our notions of both.

(Hutcheon 46)

The novel can be described as what Stanley Fish called a “dialectical literary presentation one that disturbs readers, forcing them to scrutinize their own values and beliefs, rather than pandering to or satisfying item” (Hutcheon 45). While postmodern novel provided a critique of the discourses of the past and of the “already said” (Hutcheon 44) it is always “double voiced in its attempts to historicize and contextualize the enunciative situation of its art” (Hutcheon 44). In the novel both the majority and the minority voices are heard and they are held in a “doubled suspension” and the novel turns out to be the story about slavery and defeat:

--- the ordering of one man and two women’s lives and activities by another – the owning of them ---.

(Dorman and Rawlins 142)
While the concept of fixed historical entity like fixed subject position has been contested, postmodernism uses and abuses its political and social affiliations. The notion of history as a continuous narrative is central to the novel and as mentioned earlier, there is an attempt to write both a grand history and various histories. As Linda Hutcheon explains:

Postmodern discourses asserts both autonomy and worldliness. Likewise they participate in both theory and praxis. They offer a collective, historised context for individual, action. In other words they do not deny the individual, but they do ‘situate’ her/him. And they do not deny that collectivity can be perceived as manipulation as well as activism —

(Hutcheon 46)

The title’s full contradictory force comes from challenging any fixed certitudes and has been reflected in the last section where the characters have been transformed into Charles Ray movie, but nonetheless the search for truth and beauty renders all the characters as beautiful losers. The title also brings out the project of postmodern in terms of the oppositional paradox between what Ihab Hassan has described as the “fanatic will to unmaking and the need to discover a ‘unitary’ sensibility” (Hutcheon 48). However according to Linda Hutcheon, “the paradox [is] less oppositional than provisional --- instead, as an inscribing and undercutting of both any unitary sensibility and any disruptive will to unmake; for these are equally absolutist and totalizing concepts. Postmodernism is characterized by energy derived from the rethinking of the value of multiplicity and provisionality --- “ (Hutcheon 48).
Postmodernist discourses – both theoretical and practical – need the very myths and conventions they contest and reduce: they do not necessarily come to terms with ideal order or disorder, but question both in terms of each other. Myths and conventions exist for a reason and postmodernism investigates that reason. The postmodern impulse is not to seek any total vision. It merely questions such vision and the facts that make this vision. In the novel, history as a grand narrative has been contested and in the process phallocentric modes of linear thinking have also been contested.

The chapter has tried to investigate the inscription of the ‘feminine’ in the text in terms of the related challenge to notions of authority and totalizing systems with tendencies of obliterating traces of difference:

In general, both feminism and postmodernism ‘situate’ themselves and the literature they study in historical, social and cultural (as well as literary) contexts, challenging conventions that are presumed to be literary ‘universals’, but can in fact be shown to embody the values of very particular group of people—of a certain class, race, gender and sexual orientation.

(Hutcheon 108)

As Susan Hekman in her book ‘Gender and Knowledge (1990) explains the common ground shared between feminism and postmodernism is the rejection of the hierarchical dualism of Enlightenment thought:
The attack on the dualisms of rational / irrational, subject / object and culture / nature is central to both the postmodern and feminist critiques.

(Hekman 1990: 8).

The other issue central to feminism and postmodernism is the definition of epistemology:

The Enlightenment defined “epistemology as the study of knowledge acquisition that was accompanied through the opposition of a knowing subject and a known object. This definition is problematic for both feminists and postmoderns. Feminists reject the opposition of subject and object because inherent in this opposition is the assumption that only men can be subjects, and hence, knowers. Postmoderns reject the opposition because it misrepresents the ways in which discourse constitutes what we call knowledge. Strictly speaking then, when feminists and postmoderns discuss the constitution of knowledge they are not engaged in “epistemology” as the Enlightenment defined it. They reject both the notion that knowledges is the product of the opposition of subjects and objects and there is only one way in which knowledge can be constituted --- A postmodern approach to feminist issues entails the attempt to formulate not an ‘epistemology’ in the sense of a replacement of the Enlightenment conception, but, rather an explanation of the discursive process by which human beings gain understanding of their common world--- A postmodern feminism would reject the masculinity bias of rationalism but would not attempt to replace it with a feminist bias. Rather it would take the
position that there is not one (masculine) truth but, rather, many truths, none of which is privileged along gendered lines.

(Hekman 9)

Beautiful Losers has many truths and does not try to privilege one truth over another, and provides a critique of masculine definition of rationality. The development of a “feminine writing” (écriture feminine) is the development of a subversive activity, an activity that deconstructs and destabilizes phallocentric assumptions. Beautiful Losers embodies features of ‘feminine’ text since it does not rush into a single unified meaning and challenges prevailing dualism in thought process:

Writing the feminine is writing what has been cut off by the (masculine) symbolic. The point of feminine writing is not the creation of a new theory but a displacement of the old oppositions, particularly that of the masculine/feminine. It will thus have a formlessness that is antithetical to dualistic thought.

(Hekman 45)

Hence a ‘feminine’ text is more than a subversive activity as it tries to overcome cultural repression by suggesting pluralism over statis:

It avoids dualities, essences, and the temptation to valorize the feminine over the masculine. It displaces the dualisms of masculine thought and suggests a pluralism and fluidity that transforms those dualisms.

(Hekman 46)
Robert Kroetsch in his essay titled ‘For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem’ has described the purpose of contemporary long poems as “to honour our disbelief – that is, to recognize and explore our distrust of system of grid, of monisms, of cosmologies perhaps certainly of inherited story, and at the same time write a long work that has some kind of (under erasure) unity” (Kroetsch 1989 : 118). He further adds that “the long poem, by the very length, allows the exploration of the failure of system and grid. The poem of that failure is a long poem” (Kroetsch 118). The chapter will try to interrogate the nature of ‘that failure’ in terms of androcentric paradigms of unity, linearity and closure.

Field Notes has been described by the poet as trying to “tell a blurred story because the story is blurred” (Kroetsch 129). He goes on to describe the collection of poem as “field notes kept by the archeologist, by the finding man, the finding man who is essentially lost. I can only guess the other, there might, that is, be a hidden text. Yes it is as if we spend our lives finding clues, fragment, shards, leading or misleading details, chipped tablets written over in a forgotten language. Perhaps they are a counting of cattle a measuring out of grain. Perhaps they are a praising of gods, a naming of the dead. We can’t know” (Kroetsch 129). This description heralds Field Notes as a narrative governed by an agenda, which is feminist in nature. Linda Hutcheon has described Kroetsch not a feminist written but he “shares many of the concerns of those who are : specially the need to challenge unexamined humanist notion such as centred identity, coherent subjectivity and aesthetic originality. He offers instead decentred multiplicity, split selves and double voiced parody”(Dorscht
The chapter will examine ‘The Ledger’ and ‘The Seed Catalogue’ from Completed Field Notes (1989) categorized by the poet as “the continuing poem: not the having written, but the writing”( Kroetsch 8) as gendered texts inscribing the ‘feminine’ in numerous ways. The process of writing, rather than written does away with the notion of boundary and the “tyranny of narrative” ( Kroetsch 11), as a male quest and in the process liberates the text:

EVERYTHING I WRITE

I SAY, IS A SEARCH

(is debit, is credit)

is a search for some pages remaining

(by accident)

the poet: finding the column straight
in the torn ledger the column broken

FINDING

(Kroetsch 1989 : 12-13)

The text as Ronald Barthes in his essay, ‘Theory of the Text’ has described, is not a classical sealed sign. Barthes’s notion of ‘significance’ as opposed to signification communicates this concept:

Significance is a process in the course of which the subject’ of the text escaping the logic of ego-logito and engaging other logics (that of the signifier and that of contradiction) struggles with meaning and is deconstructed (is lost).

(Barthes 1981:38)
This concept of ‘significance’ is close to Julia Kristeva’s notion of ‘genotext’ as opposed to phenotext:

The phenotext can … come under a theory of the sign and of communication. Where as the genotext ‘sets out the grounds for the logical operations proper to the constitution of the subject of enunciation’… it is a he heterogenous domain…, it belongs to the realm of a general, multiple logic, which is no longer solely the logic of understanding

(Barthes 38)

The Ledger’s formal structure of double columns of the financial ledger contains inherited ledger, maps, newspapers, census records, and tombstone inscriptions. Shirley Ne’ man refers to the effect of this discursive practice as ‘intertext’, a term coined by Kroetsch himself to describe the process by which the text “shares the space shared by, the relations between, different poetic texts in the frame of the larger ‘Collected Poem’. The poem exists in the lacunae and intersections between the different texts it holds in its space” (Jones 1993 : 52). The text ‘unbounds’ to borrow Barthes term and the ‘readability’ is “either overflowed or overlaid by a plurality of logics other than mere predicative logic” (Barthes 40). The absence of any predicative logic does not allow the four notions on which any discourse rest namely, signification, originality, unity and creation, which also allow for any discourse to be the privileged disclosure. Foucault in his essay ‘The Order of Discourse’ defines discourse as a “violence which we do to things or in any case as a practice which we to things or in any case as a practice which we impose on them; and
it is in this practice that the events of disclosure find the principle of their regularity” (Foucault 1981:67). The poem which is made of multiple independent disclosures does not allow for the “order of succession.” Hence what we witness is not the consolidation of a fixed subject position rather there is a plurality of possible positions and functions:

Shaping the trees

into ledgers.

Raising the barn.

That they might sit down

a forest had fallen to a pitcher of

Formasa beer

Shaping the trees

Into shingles

Into scantling

Into tables and chairs

Have a seat John That they might sit down

Sit down, Henry A forest had fallen

(Kroetsch : 14)

The voice of postmodern Robert Kroetsch, is the voice of white European settlers, the voice of the official Canada Gazette merge representing the making of a colony and then the nation along with the silent erasure of eco-systems. The poem
emerges as a site of multiple disclosures with the blurring of the centre and the margin. As Foucault describes:

This kind of discontinuity strikes and invalidates the smallest units that were traditionally recognized and which are the hardest to contest: the instant and the subject. Beneath them, and independently of them, we must conceive relations between these discontinuous series which are not of the order of succession (or simultaneity) within one (or several) consciousness; we must elaborate -- outside of the philosophies of the subject and of time -- a theory of discontinuous systematicities. Finally, though it is true that these discontinuous discursive series each have, within certain limits, their regularity, it is undoubtedly no longer possible to establish links of mechanical causality or of ideal necessity between the elements which constitute them

(Foucault 69).

The inscription of the ‘feminine’ in the form of no fixed centre and no privileging of any body of knowledge results in a reading that “does not reveal the universality of a meaning, but brings to light the action of imposed scarcity, with a fundamental power of affirmation, scarcity and affirmation, ultimately, scarcity of affirmation and not the continuous generosity of meaning and not the monarchy of the signifier” (Foucault 73). There is no complete break of signification, but within certain limits. There are multiple texts operating and are being co-related to each other. Thus the disappearance of pristine forest is accompanied by arrival of capitalist economy: arrivals: the sailing ship
arrivals: the axe
arrivals: the almighty dollar
departures: the trout stream
departures: the passenger-pigeon
departures: the pristine forest
arrivals: the stump fence
arrivals: the snake fence
arrivals: the stone fence

(Kroetsch 17)

The tension between writing within certain limits and seeking to break free of generic boundaries results in the creation of a space between the two poles. Linda Hutcheon in her book *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988) describes this as:

Kroetsch is fascinated by the space between polarities, inhabits that space and writes from the viewpoint of one who is repeatedly seduced by the two poles he tries to embrace. The double seduction is never resolved in any ecstatic union of poles, however the tensions remain unresolved.

(Hutcheon 1988:163)

Therefore the documents which constitutes this postmodern poem “have been inherited, the origin of the poem has mentioned. The materials have not been discovered by chance. The poem which has no fixed centre brought out through the notion of intertext is not a collected poem, but a recollected one bringing together personal and communal memory” (Jones 53-4).
This explanation of the unresolved tension results in the dichotomy present in the text and challenges the masculine order:

There is always a postmodern tension between the implied ‘universal’ mythic story and the ‘anecdotal’ texture, narrativity of fiction. The interchange here is what deconstructs myth and allows a way out of the ‘entrapping’ tendency of myth to want to explain everything one way. For Kroetsch the response is to ‘retell it’ and retell it differently. ... There is a paradoxical design to show the temptation of the single vision as seen in mythic ‘universality’, sameness and system and yet to contest it by the allure of multiplicity parody, fragmentation, decentring.

(Hutcheon 165)

The myth is the ledger, a phallocentric sign, which the poem will demystify by converting it into a book of stories where there is no origin and no end:

the ledger survived

because it was neither human non useful

... Some pages torn out (by accident)

some pages remaining (by accident)

... the poet by accident finding in the torn ledger

(IT DOESN’T BALANCE)

(Kroestsch 11-12)
The space created allows for play of multiple voices, allowing for double-voiced discourse termed as ‘heteroglossia’ by Bakhtin:

Heteroglossia, once incorporated.... is another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings, and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they – as it were knew about each other (just as two exchanges in a dialogue know of each other and are structured in this mutual knowledge of each other); it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other. Double voiced discourse is always internally dialogized.

(Bakhtin 1981 : 324)

The poem in a form of a ledger “is a record, a document and also an invention” (Hutcheon 168). The poem is a record of a family accounts in not merely the financial sense but also a record about the making of nation. Outwardly the poem retains the form of a ledger with columns, but the act of balancing central to ledger is subverted. The notion of double voiced discourse evident in the existence of multiple archeological evidence where public and private archeological evidences challenge the notion of a authentic history, which is linear and based on the tyranny of ‘joined story’ which is a masculine concept based on the notion of a fixed centre.
History as a grand narrative with direct mimetic link to the real world has been subverted. The ledger records, the contribution of the white settlers, towards the making of Canada, but simultaneously there is the parallel history of environmental degradation as mentioned earlier:

... a specimen of the self-made men who have earlier have made Canada what it is and if which no section has brought forth more or better representatives than the country of Bruce. Mr. Miller was never an office-seeker, but devoted himself strictly and energetically to the pursuit of his private business and on his death was the owner of a very large and valuable property...

(Kroetsch 15)

The parallel history follows:

To raise a barn; Cut down a forest
To raise oats and hay; burn the soil
To raise cattle and hogs;
kill the bear
kill the mink
kill the marten
kill the lym
kill the fisher
kill the beaver
kill the moose

(Kroetsch 13)
History writing of this nature with ruptures and discontinuities does not adhere
to the masculine mode, which privileges a particular view-point. Rather the poem with
its mingling of history and fiction provides space for alterity. Michel Foucault in his
book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) has described, this history as
concerned not with “how continuities are established how a single pattern is formed
and preserved , how for so many different successive minds there is single horizon ,
what mode of action and what substructure is implied by the interplay of
transmissions, resumptions, disappearances and repetitions, how the origin may extend
its sway well beyond itself to that conclusion that is never given – the problem is no
longer one of lasting foundation, but one of transformations that serve a new
foundations, the rebuilding of foundations. What one is seeing, then, is the emergence
of a whole field of questions some of which are already familiar by which this new
form of history is to develop its own theory “(Foucault 1972: 5).

One of the many histories which emergence is the discourse of ‘eco-critical
consciousness’, which as Frank Davey mentions makes the reader aware about the
treatment of race, class and gender in historical and ecological context. He further
observes that the reader is called upon “to abandon his logical, linear, and superficial
attitudes towards experience .... History in these poems become both personal and
contemporary” (Relke 1999 : 182 – 3). “A pristine forest/A pristine forest”, the poet’s
lament is also an effort to constitute an alternative epistemology which does away with
the “identification of nature as female and culture as male and with the hierarchical and
oppositional dualism upon which those identifications depend” (Relke 173).
There are two parallel voices, parallel texts running through the poem and they never meet nor do they complement each other. The ledger at one level tells the story about credit, debits, all money transactions, records of the men, who played an important role in the public life of Canada, the mill which had been built, records the condition of the early settlers and their encounter with the natives, the 1861 census of the country of Bruce, the 1861 census of the township of Carrick, the history of people like Joe Hauck; whose arm was caught in the water-wheel, a day's expenditure of Paul Willie, the communal life, information about Theresa Tschirhart who was born in Alsace had married three times and had buried her three Bavarian husbands and she was a terror for men and had been buried in Spring Lake, Alberta. The ledger records the number of deaths in 1860 in the County of Bruce and mentions the causes, describes the climate of Canada, records the life of Lorenz Kroetsch who had died on account of lung inflammation. The ledger therefore seems to be a communal act and the poem presents history through fragmentation and parody of 'genealogy' as monumental history in the passage quoted below:

"With no effort or pretension to literary merit, the object will be rather to present a plain statement of facts of general interest which bear upon the past growth and development of this wonderfully prosperous section of the Province, in such manner as to render future comparisons more easy and offer to the rising generation an incentive to emulation in the examples of the pioneers, whose self-reliant industry and progressive enterprise have conquered the primeval forest and left in their stead, as a heritage to posterity, a country
teeming with substantial comforts and material wealth and reflecting in its every feature the indomitable spirit and true manliness of a noble race, whose lives and deeds will shine while the communities they have founded shall continue to exist.”

(Kroetsch 28).

This preface brings out the ironies of this passage since “it has been duplicated in the poem precisely with effort and pretension to literary merit” (Jones 56). The preface makes a parody of monolithic notion of history and history has been presented as a ‘carnival’ in the Bakhtinian sense through fragmentation.

The ‘feminine’ vision has been inscribed here. This has been represented in the notions of multiplicity, fragmentation, incompleteness and discontinuity. The text then becomes a site of difference and ‘feminine’ represents a resistance to conventional culture. The desire to combat ordering is evident since there is no origin of the ledger which the poet found by accident, the credit columns and the debit columns do not tally and the search for the dead continues, where pristine forest has been burned and has marked the arrival of the almighty dollar, where fragmented stories of white settlers is accompanied by silence regarding the Indians and the poem has been written with no “pretension to literary merit” (Kroetsch 28).

The inscription of the ‘feminine’ in the text is also evident in the dialectical tension that arises from the lack of a single historical Truth, historical knowledge and grand narrative. The conquering of primeval forests, the death of a pristine forest, the killing of bear, moose, beaver and the absence of Indians from the census of 1861.
points to another narrative another ledger. The text offers a decentred subjectivity and
not a static subject position. Ambivalence is the hallmark of this version and as Linda
Hutcheon describes the “refusal to pick sides, the desire to be on both sides of any
border, deriving energy from the continual crossing” (Hutcheon 162) is evident in the
poem. Parody as a textual strategy has also been employed to subvert what the text
inscribes along with ambivalence:

The effect of Kroetsch’s work has been rightly described as relying on the shock
to our sensibilities that would not work without our attachment to realist
conventions and a literary tradition implying continuity.

(Hutcheon 163)

Parody helps to undo a single and universal meaning and creates space for
historiographic metafiction:

Historiographic metafiction shows fiction to be historically conditioned and
history to be discursively structured and in the process manages to broaden the
debate about the ideological implications of the Foucauldian conjunction of
power and knowledge for reader and for history itself as a discipline.

(Hutcheon 120)

The ‘Ledger’ is not merely a document or an object but is a sign, whose
signification is unlimited, is both subjective and objective and the concept of
historiographic metafiction mentioned above is represented in the poem through what
Bakthin has described as a dialogue among several writings (Jones 62). And the ledger
emerges as something more than a personal legacy. It is also the “statement of a
community’s sociolinguistic transactions: the ledger is signed and re-signed by various inhabitants of the region, a list of whom appears in the poem’s final reckoning” (Jones 64-5).

The second poem ‘Seed Catalogue’ which is Kroetsch’s response to “the material and textual history of the prairies that is usually ignored by the official historians of the east. As Kroetsch wrote in ‘The Continuing Poem,’ the seed catalogue is a shared book in our society, a book as common and important as those of the academic canon. In the poem fictionalizing meets history, personal meets the public, in ways that make ‘Seed Catalogue’ a poetic form of “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 167). Like the previous poem, this poem is also a historiographic metafiction by inscribing the margin and in the process the rewriting of history begins:

….historiographic metafiction. ........ in both a document and a creation, a record and an invention

(Hutcheon 168).

In this poem the deposits of the past in the form of archeology rather than history is what interests the poet and hence the search is not for an androcentric closure:

….archeology supplants history, an archeology that challenges the authenticity of history [as a continuous narrative] by saying that there can be no joined story, only abrupt guesswork, juxtaposition, flashes of insight.

(Hutcheon 168)
‘Seed Catalogue’ begins with how to grow cabbage of highest pedigree and the poem describes the process, which can also be read as a series of activities and the flux rather than statis is what the readers are left to deal with:

We took the storm windows
off the south side of the house
and put them on the hot bed
Then it was Spring.

(Kroetsch 32)

The narrative moves on to how to grow a garden to how to grow a prairie town. The image of the catalogue merges as a complex sign with multiple signification. While tracing the history of Alberta the catalogue can name absences and in turn provide a critique of Eurocentric epistemology:

The absence of Lord Nelson
The absence of kings and queens
The absence of both Sartre and Heidegger
The absence of lions
The absence of the Parthenon, not to mention the Cathedrale de Charters
The absence of pyramids
The absence of psychiatrists
The absence of the Seine, the rhine, the Danub, the Tiber and the Thames

(Kroestch 39)
Each absence tries to signal a loss of belief in existing discourses and points to the formation of what Stanley Fish calls a set of “discourse agreements which are in effect decisions as to what can be stipulated as a fact” (Fish quoted in Hutcheon 119). The ‘discourse agreements’ is the search for another history and another epistemology and the poet wants “to deliver real words to real people” (Kroetch 140). And hence the next question is how to grow a poet in the absence of a Muse, memory and song. The text provides an answer which makes a parody of the notion of totalizing power of the poet’s imagination and originality of his creation. Instead of installing order there is provisionality and fragmentation:

We give form to this land by running

a series of posts and three strands

of barbed wire around a quarter-section

...And the next time you want to write a poem

we’ll start the haying

...How do you grow a poet?

This is a prairie road.

This road is the shortest distance between nowhere and nowhere.

This road is a poem

... As for the poet himself

we can find no record

of his having traversed

the land/in either direction

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The narrative is self-reflexive going against the notion of a poet as the source of meaning. In the process of composing the poem, the poet has compared himself to the cartographer, who maps the writing of the poem not in terms of linear images like mapping the geographic area. The cartographer therefore turns the product into process and therefore the maps of poetry writing cannot be consummated. Hence the poem is a road from nowhere to nowhere. The catalogue does not hold the promise of a universal realization rather it foregrounds the debunking of the notion of art as mimetic and the entire literacy enterprise is manipulative and the poet can only address self-situated experiences. The catalogue which guides how to grow cabbages, has no clue about how to write a poem.

Therefore the poet has not travelled to any land, nor does the poem contain great prophetic statements, rather the poet can only produce a ‘scarred page’. The tension is between a surface plot-the poem itself which affirms to some literary conventions and the sub-text which deconstructs the literary artifact:

We silence words by writing them down

(Kroetsch 42-3)
The poet’s literary creation has been described as ‘mere black and white’, thereby challenging liberal humanist faith in language to be able to represent the ‘Truth’. There is manipulation of language, and language is shown to be a social product and hence reality and truth expressed through language can be manipulated. The poem makes a parody of language as a totalizing system:

There was no one to receive my application

I don’t give a damn if do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die do die

(Kroetsch 40)

History in the poem is not the official history of written documents deemed central to prevailing structures of power, rather the history is fragmented written about unknown citizens of Canada. The history narrated is not about victories but about Frederick Kroetsch inheriting the carpenter’s tools from his father and his uncle who could map the parklands with perfect horse barns. The history is about the cruelties of World War II exemplified in the death of his cousin, who died while bombing the city of Cologne.

While it is true that Kroetsch’s texts are male-authored, they embrace the ‘feminine’ practice of undermining binary opposition by playing on the meaning of the word ‘telling’. Through the notion of telling as Sharaf Jamal describes there is an attempt to “replace either/or logic with one which says both” (Dorscht 24). Kroetsch’s inscription of the feminine has to do with the identity of Canadian writing, when he writes, “there is, in much Canadian writing, tension between, on the one hand, the
desperate need to count, to list, to catalogue... and, on the other, the terrible modern suspicion that the counting in being done in a slightly mad dream” (Dorscht 25). In both the poems the reader has no access to tangible things, words and the texts refer to more words and texts like seed catalogues, census, ledgers and there are no closures. His writing takes place outside the ‘House of the Father’ and ecriture feminine is reflected in the “impossibility of transferring messages, whose words articulate a theory that, in its overturning of signifier and signified, male and female, self and other, excerpts and the real world, participates in that doubled practice which allows us, as subjects of our own agency, to make differences even while those differences make us” (Dorscht 50).

In both the poems there is the process of re-visiting, re-claiming, re-naming and there by undermining the metaphysics of presence within masculine economy. In the poems there is construction and reconstruction and hence there is the search for many histories. The poems emerge as a site, where there is interface between postmodernism and feminism in terms of challenges to the canon, universality and great tradition. ‘Seeing Double’, is the term coined by Linda Hutcheon to describe Kroetsch’s postmodern stance, which is based on parody and intertextuality. As Kroetsch describes:

in a very real sense we make books out of books. The paradox and the terror is always that: the need to invent out the already invented.

(Hutcheon 164)
Both the poems make a parody of a fixed centre and status in terms of constant interplay between ordering, documentation and disorderly chaos, subverting dominant notions of fixed centre and fixed structures. The poems are therefore writing, which is “playing on the edge of convention and bending rules” (Hutchon 163). The Ledger has no unified vision, rather there are sporadic insights, multiple visions with some pages lost from the ledger, some accounts which are incomplete and the ledger till the end becomes a multi-layered sign representing the history of Alberta. ‘Seed Catalogue’ offers a catalogue about how to grow a poet and then moves on to the larger canvas of nation-making. Central to both the poems is the writing of histories and both the poems emerge as sites where there has been overlapping between history and fiction with mutual influences between the two. Skepticism about writing of history in a linear mode has been challenged by Hayden White and Daminick La Capra. They have also challenged empiricist and positivist epistemologies. Challenges to historiography have mirrored in postmodern writing and the poems confront the “paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present /the past. And this confrontation is itself contradictory for it refusal to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy” (Hutcheon 106).

This mode of representation is an attempt to re-write and re-present the past anew and prevent the present from being conclusive and teleological. Both the poems employ the “documentary form of narrative, which deliberately use techniques of fiction in an overt manner and makes no pretension to objectivity of
presentation” (Hutcheon 115). As mentioned earlier the poems emerge as historiographic metafiction employing techniques of parody and inter-textuality:

Historiographic metafiction’s parody and self-reflexivity function both as markers of the literary and as challenges to its limitations. Its contradictory “contamination” of the self-consciously literary with the verifiably historical and referential challenges the borders we accept as exiting between literature and extra literary narrative discourses which surround it: history, biography, autobiography.

(Hutcheon 224)

Within the texts there is no one voice, but the text has been constructed as a “labyrinth of voices” (Dorscht 4) with no fixed subject position from where meanings emerge. Catherine Belsey in her essay ‘Constructing the subject: deconstructing the text” argues:

....the displacement of subjectivity across a range of discourses implies a range of positions from which the reader grasps itself and its relations with the real, and these positions may be incompatible or contradictory.

(Newton & Rosen felt 1985 :50)

Therefore in the absence of any stable meaning, the ‘author –function’ as Foucault describes in hi essay, ‘What is an author?’ fails to resolve the contradictions that emerge in the texts. Kroetsch as the author of the texts does not function in the narrow and limited sense to whom the production of the texts can be attributed. Rather
the function is a ‘trans-discursive’ role. As Foucault in the essay ‘What is an author?’ argues:

In a somewhat arbitrary way we shall call those who belong in this .... group [as] ‘founders of discursivity”. They are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rule for the formation of other texts. In this sense they are very different from the novelist, who is in fact, nothing more than the author of his own text.

(Foucault 1988 :206)

The poems are sites of heterogeneous meanings, which defy masculine order there by challenging what Helene Cixous in her essay ‘Sorties’ has described as the “solidarity of logo centrism and phallocentrism” (Cixous 1988 : 289) This has been achieved according to her by “bringing forth from the world of femininity reflections, hypotheses which are necessarily ruinous for the bastion which still holds the authority “ (Cixous 289).

A decent red approach accommodates multiple voices in the poems, which results in causing ruptures in the construction of history as monumental and monolithic. History as “monologic, functional with referential unity of the historical unity of the historical account” (Jones 61) will be visited and results in reading the poems as collage. The poems under consideration is both “historical and historically subversive” (Jones 61).The presence of two dimensions; the ‘historical’ and the ‘creative’ results in the tension clearly at work in the poems and hence there is no
ideological closure. In ‘Labyrinths of Voice’, a book-length interview conducted with Robert Kroetsch by Shirley Newman and Robert Wilson, Kroetsch remarks that “falling out of cosmologies” provide an “illusion of freedom” and experimentally ‘anti-story’ as a strategy will challenge temporality in terms of shared codes, words, history and will defy accepted structures. The blurring of literary genres as a postmodern strategy subverts conventions and demystifies ‘universality’ in terms of coherence and lasting meaning since the poems will take into account newspaper files, weather reports, census, tall tales, diaries, business ledgers, photographs and will “confront the inevitability of a finished product” (Hutcheon 169) and the text inscribes multiplicity of vision.

The poems are archeological sites and not authorized versions of history or which the masculine self can be constructed. In the process the text is freed from binary constructions:

The poet as archeologist is the naming “man” who is essentially unnamed and then renamed “woman” by/in writing.

(Dorscht 39)

Robert Kroetsch who grew up in Alberta among what his father called “buffalo wallows” found no representation of that history in the official version (masculine order). The poems are the field notes kept by the prairie archeologist and the notes are found pieces. As Eli Mandel has described the “field” as the “place” of writing /of having been written:
Where (how) it grows, where it dies, where it takes place: ground, open field, field games, the placed defined in its telling. The double place of self and other, body and spirit, man and woman. The double voice of that comic spiller of tales or speller of kells or teller of spills. The antiphonal end- less story of love and death, truth and lies. Each story, in other words (and there are always other words), tells another story. The poem is continuing because it cannot end,

(Mandel quoted in Dorscht 40)

Writing in the feminine as reflected in the three texts under consideration has tried to argue how cultural notions of the feminine inscribed in literary texts challenges fixed genre boundaries, fixed eternal universal Truth, establishing and subverting power structures thereby creating space for fragmentation and parody.