Chapter Six

Conclusion

This study, sailing through Oates's gigantic fictional ocean, whose spatial and temporal extensions transgress limits and boundaries, has attempted to bring forth one of the missing links in the critical literature on her fiction and to explore her different uses of that "link." No longer is it possible to confine the whole of Oates's unabated and unfailing energy to contain the whole world in a book as it is impossible to ignore her persistent recourse to history and politics which frequently alerts us to the tenacious presence of more crucial aspects of her fiction than those critically prescribed set of "stereotypes" discussed in most earlier criticism of her fiction. What lurks behind such a critical relegation might be one or more of the following causes. It is maybe the critics' possible failure to admit that Oates's texts lend themselves to a wider variety of interpretations than those critically prescribed views. Or it is possible that many critics have contended themselves either with perpetuating or taking earlier critical views for granted and, as such there is no need to go beyond them.¹ Or, and this is a more plausible cause, more critics fall in Oates's "trap" of thematic repetition and get more preoccupied with some of the most recurrent themes than to attend to some other crucial aspects such as history and politics in her work.² All these critical views aside, Oates's use of quite a long list of different historical and political allusions has been one of the major insatiable curiosities that have set this study in motion. Furthermore, such allusions have incited a few lingering questions about Oates's texts.
A minimal prerequisite, then, has been to read Oates’s texts in such a way as to penetrate her old obsessions to focus on one of the missing links in the criticisms of Oates, which those obsessions might have blurred a lucid vision of. To bear this view out, the New Historicist approach is selected as it provides different reading practices that can best be utilized in reading the questions of history, politics, power relations and the Jewish presence in Oates’s texts. Besides, it is applied to reading Oates’s different techniques of fashioning the individual and the state. For these issues make up the bulk of Oates’s major concerns.

A chapter-wise arrangement of this study aims at taking the reader in a kind of step-by-step journey into Oates’s fictional world which extends in both spatial and temporal dimensions. Chapters One and Two lay down some of the basics in both Oates’s critical literature and the suggested alternative in reading her fiction this study argues for. Chapters Three and Four sail into the ocean of Oates’s domestic scenes. In treating these issues, I could not escape Oates’s trap of thematic repetition where, like older critics, I have to deal with the same litany of critical “rubrics” like prolificacy, violence and the self. However, the aim here is to substantiate the potentials of Oates’s texts, of their linking between art and society and between past and present, of their representation of different power relations and of their eradication of interdisciplinary boundaries. Similarly, Chapter Five takes these potentials one step further where Oates’s texts transgress the local boundaries and probe into the international stage. For this stage to be comprehensive, Oates adds the Jewish question to her fictional map. This, in turn, necessitates a brief discussion of a few corollaries. Among these are the controversial
confusion between Zionism and Judaism and the Israeli-Arab conflict both of which appear in more than one text of Oates.

The New historicist reading of the Domestic Scenes (Chapters Three and Four) shows how literature, history, politics, struggles, and power relations have become some of the major preoccupations in most of Oates's later texts. Besides, issues of gender struggles in Oates's fiction, for instance, should not be analyzed in isolation from the long history of patriarchal domination and the misogynist acculturation of early twentieth-century America. Juxtaposing Oates's representation of this issue with pertinent historical materials shows that Oates's art is quintessentially one of the constituent parts of American history and not a mere reflection of it. Chapters Three and Four are a part of Oates's wider interest in the domestic affairs of her culture. Her map of domestic interests knows no limits and no boundaries: gender, rape, incest, harassment, divorce, violence, boxing, law, medicine, teaching, painting, labor, wage discrimination, capital punishment, racism, academia, history, politics and this long list is endless. A connecting thread in most of these themes is Oates's representation of history as a story of struggle and power relations and the different means of fashioning the individual and the state. More to the point is to observe that Oates's texts highlight this process of fashioning as a cultural product that subdues the individual will to the collective will and embraces the "I" in the "we."

Oates's texts dramatize the earlier decades of the twentieth century as stories of individuals' struggles against communal wills. Social conformity, untamed environment, and different kinds of financial hardships are part of the overall picture of those early
decades of twentieth-century America. Oates dramatizes the fifties as the decade which, despite its gender-based wage discrimination and lesser options in females' jobs, gave hope for women's wider involvement in the labor market. The sixties was the decade to shape American life for many decades to come. It was in this decade that all forms of external or traditional authorities were rejected by greater number of Americans, particularly the youth. The seventies and eighties are decades of the rise of American religious extremism, more particularly with the rise of the Republican conservatism and their domination of the political stage. It is worth noting here that during the mid-seventies, according to William Beckley who cites George Gallup's poll, Princeton University was considered as "the most liberal" in "student attitudes" (4). As if an extension to and a consequence of such conservatism, Oates's texts in the 1990s till the present time have been shaped by the larger cultural issues of America's power politics. On top of those issues is, of course, war and its senselessness.

The New Historicist reading of Oates's representation of the International Scenes (Chapter Five) shows Oates's persistent linking of literature and culture, fusing the former in the latter and reading both as ceaselessly interpreted texts. Oates invests the 2000's public antiwar sentiments in reconstructing the history of war in the United States. A close look at where war is located in Oates's fictional map shows how Oates herself is constructed by the power politics in the end-of-century America. War in Oates's fiction is dispersed through different parts of the following texts: Black Water (1992), The Mulvaneys (1996), Blonde (2001), Middle Age (2002), Rape: A Love Story (2003), I'll Take You There (2003), The Tattooed Girl (2004), and The Falls (2005). Thus, Oates's texts, though may not reducibly be described as political, have been fashioned by the very
power politics that started much earlier in American history but has become vocal and catastrophic in the last few decades. The United States of America is recently exporting what Sarat, at the domestic level, calls the increasing use of “killing” (3). Its “symbolization of political power,” (3) to use Sarat’s phrase, has been a source of agonies and atrocities in the international arena. The ceaseless violence in Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq are sufficient to illustrate this point.3 These unstable, and terribly violent areas, are corollaries of the extreme use of power politics in America’s foreign policy. Oates’s texts, at varying degrees of clearness and persuasiveness, enlist the Foucauldian “violent state strategies” that enable the state to circumvent a number of constitutional rights of “privacy” and “freedom.” Violations of American citizens’ rights of privacy and large scale violations of human rights and international laws have been carried out under the claims of what is known as “war on terror.” This is more likely why “Communism” has to make its way into Oates’s world of political discourse. For like “terrorism,” it has been a foe that has facilitated American military supremacy and arrogance. After the collapse of Communism in the late eighties—the last of the “evils” America “helped” the world to get rid of—America has to have an enemy to pursue its “divine” errand of ridding the world of evils. The differences between these wars are differences in scale and tight control of publicity and are aptly caught in Oates’s reconstructions of those wars (Chapter Five). By the same token, and in the face of some trenchant critiques by some intellectual Americans for the Jewish supremacists and their domination in American life in the last few years and the indifference to such a question by many other Americans, Oates historicizes such a social issue. In her representation of the Jewish question, Oates raises more questions than answers lingering ones. Why does Oates choose Otto Ose, the
sex-crazed, piggish and capitalist predator to raise these questions? Why not the
Playwright, who, like Otto Ose, is defined in terms of the Holocaust? Does such a
contradiction of views make both narratives of the same issue mere historicizing? These
questions aside, how do all these questions relate to Oates’s 2004’s *The Tattooed Girl*
where the issue of the “Holocaust” is cast in shades of skeptical, argumentative and
controversial lights? Oates is apparently on the borderline between the two camps of the
Jewish and anti-Jewish presence and domination of American life. Ambiguity and
uncertainty loom large on the horizon when Oates’s texts tackle the Jewish question and
the degree to which the so-called American anti-Semitism spreads in the communal life.
And this arouses volatile suspicions about Oates’s stance: Is she afraid of being perceived
as an anti-Semitic or is she just an anti-Zionist?

It might be seen that a claim can be made against any discussant who does not
accept the broader critical assumptions that associates Oates’s fiction with violence,
prolificacy, and such similar “stereotypical” critical categories. However, all those
categories are part and not the whole of the picture. The New Historicist reading of
Oates’s selected texts shows Oates’s persistent linking of literature and culture, fusing the
former in the latter and reading both as ceaselessly interpretable texts. It also
demonstrates Oates’s unfailing interest in the kinds of struggles and power relations that
have characterized much of twentieth-century American life and have shaped her
protagonists in different degrees. Moreover, drawing on the discussions in Chapters
Three, Four and Five, it is obvious that no trenchant critique of Oates’s fiction is capable
either of precisely placing or of excluding her from any critical school. This is so because
her fictional map has excluded nothing: romantic, gothic, political, social and historical
novels and a countless number of short stories. This being so, the Bloomian belief that Oates is not a "political writer," even if it partially fits Oates's earlier texts, is an unfair "labeling" of her fiction writing. Furthermore, it misguides other critics as it blurs any possible political reading into Oates's earlier texts. The emphasis in this dissertation has been more on Oates's post 1990's texts. If this emphasis has tried, through reading Oates's representation of history and politics in those texts, to bring to the fore one of the missing links in Oates's critical literature, it is more likely that a similar reading of Oates's earlier texts (or other texts excluded in this study for that matter) may prove equally fruitful in casting more light on politics in Oates's fiction.

A final remark that has to be added here is that if Oates's war fiction, however partial or small it maybe, proves something, it proves she is in no less a position to be in the league of those war fictionists such as Earnest Hemingway, Stephen Crane, and Ambrose Bierce. That is to say that she has degendered the sphere of war which has, in literary terms, long been a male province. However, Oates, I guess, is unique in that "death," "the psychology of fear," and even "macabre images" are all exploited to draw the contours of the phantasmagoria of the personality, of the individual, or of the self. For Oates's fiction is certainly a treasure trove for critical studies years ahead. Drawing from this treasure trove, this critical study of Oates's representation of history and politics emerges as an awareness of Oates's interest in her own nation's history, politics and the "distribution of power" as she once described it. And if there is a single hope that has motivated the very writing of this dissertation it is nothing but to bring forth Oates's "the self-described 'witness to history and society,' that has been most ignored by scholars" to borrow Friedman's wording ("Lavish Self-Divisions" 118). For it has been this "self," an
amalgam of literature and culture, of the aesthetic and personal, and of history and politics, that has enlightened me to choose the New Historicism approach in this study.

Oates's representation of history and politics creates an irresolvable paradox that brings together the past as both knowable and as never fully knowable. Raising the issue of violence to be the umbrella term for defining the past. Oates's "past" becomes an uncertain entity. For Oates's texts tend to focalize the violence that lumps history and politics together:

"For what is 'history' except contingency, a mess of accidents." Most of these were bloody; history was mostly war; an appealing record of mankind's cruelty; cruelty compounded by ignorance... (Oates, I'll Take You There 133)

In a much similar line of argument, in Oates's Blonde "politics" is reducibly defined as "war" (886). Oates's texts discussed in this study show that there is always a form of relation to American history, to American culture or American politics that is re instituted by these texts. It may not be an exaggeration to raise the point that such a re instituted may equally be true of many of her other texts excluded here. Johnson once remarks that literature for Oates:

Became an escape from the threatening world of her childhood and from the turbulent social reality of America, the means of creating an imaginative "counterworld" that reflected a violent society but kept the
writer safely cocooned inside the aesthetic constructs over which she exerted a godlike control (Invisible xviii-xix)

This is just a possibility. However, when one fears something one tries to forget it, and, puts it in the abyss. Oates’s art is perhaps best described as a partial construction of a long history in the making. This is, however, a different history. “Oates’s novels,” Bender once remarks, “taken together, represent an imaginative critical history of American fiction” (179).

The long voyage into Oates’s oceanic fiction, particularly to her representation of history and politics, is a voyage into the very soul of America which is always in a dire need for a “change”: a change to shift the centers of power in the interracial relations of Look, a change of social attitudes and of the parental surveillance over their children in Middle Age: A Romance, a change of the concept of “enemy” from a rival godless Superpower in Blonde and I’ll take You There to the present day enmity to Islam that is taking shape in the devastating Gulf War(s) in Rape: A Love Story.

Overwhelmingly violent, Oates’s representation of history and politics is but one of the large and complex aspects of her fiction writing that is open for multiple and endless readings. This study, like all other critical studies on Oates, can hardly exhaust the possibilities Oates’s texts provide for critical considerations. It may not be an axiom to suggest that future critical works on this prolific and versatile writer should embrace diversity rather than closure, for diversity is one of the salient characteristics of Oates’s fiction.
Footnotes

1 Examples of these views have been discussed with textual illustrations in Chapter Two. However, a close look at the titles of much of the critical literature (some of which are available in the List of Works Cited) will show how dominating those views have been.

2 To claim that Oates herself, consciously or not, has contributed to this muting of the voice of history and politics in her texts is a valid argument. The reappearance of what I have called “critical stereotypes” in this dissertation is a case in point. Though aiming to open new ground for reading Oates’s fiction, this dissertation falls prey to Oates’s trap of thematic repetition. However, such a “fall” has been a part of the attempt to show Oates’s different uses of historical and political allusions in her texts.

3 These pages are written while forces loyal to the Western-backed president Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas fighters are brutally fighting each other. This fighting, for any unbiased observer, is a predictable consequence for the unjust and severe deprivation and suffocating economic blockade against the democratically chosen government of Hamas. Israel was not, of course, happy with the widely admitted political victory of Hamas. Unfortunately, the American power has deprived the Palestinians of enjoying the “democracy” of which America claims to be a paragon. Instead of pressurizing Israel to accept the different proposals of peace, the Bush Administration has blindly supported Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. Reese succinctly sums up the prerequisites for peace in the region in this brief statement:

   All it [Israel] had to do was return to the longsuffering Palestinians what rightfully is theirs—the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem—and acknowledge the right of refugees to return or compensation. Had Israel done that, peace would have followed. (“A Vote for War” 10)