Hemingway’s Fiction : A Feminist Interpretation

SUMMARY

The introductory chapter focuses on a detailed survey of Hemingway criticism starting from Young and Baker to the present times, thereby revealing how the role and significance of Hemingway women have been neglected or misread. The chapter also discusses the twenties, the most significant decade of the 21st century which witnessed the changing face of America and Europe. As a result of World War and its after effects the whole western history was being split in to the old and the new, separating the past from the present. There was a clear rise of a new generation disenchanted with the orthodox and conventional world and anxious experience life on their own. It was also the time in the Anglo-American history when the new woman was emerging on the social scene. The rise of new woman was a distinguishing feature of this decade and it is best reflected in Hemingway’s fiction. Hemingway’s women, the leading ones, belong to the new, young generation, distinctly different from the orthodox older generation. Through his woman characters, Hemingway has always held his ground firmly against the orthodox and conventional world and tried to understand and showcase the changing social fabric of his era.

The second chapter deals with Hemingway’s first novel, The Sun Also Rises. The American women experienced a widening of their spheres of interest and activity due to the peculiar circumstances of 1920s. The chapter discusses how the critics have neglected a bold, liberated and empowered
woman like Brett Ashley and belittled her importance by calling her bitch, femme fatale and many other derogatory terms. Critics have made charges against her to be unreal. But Hemingway presents her as a New Woman who has her own assertive personality and voice. The chapter also deals with the minor female characters present in the novel and their importance and function in bringing out the multi-dimensional personality of the main female protagonist Brett Ashley.

The third chapter discusses Hemingway’s very famous novel *A Farewell to Arms*. The novel like many of Hemingway’s works celebrates the feeling of nada—nothingness arising out of the nihilistic times of World War I. The study reveals that Catherine Barkley, the main female protagonist of the novel, has been the butt of disapproval by critics. She has been called old fashion—not a new woman, a divine lollipop. But these charges are not justified because her strong individuality, independent thinking and philosophical views emerge into bold relief, highlighting the solidity and sturdy aspects of her personality. Catherine emerges as a vibrant character, who has a strong sense of personal honor, a well developed moral sense and a distinct independent and thinking personality, which she retains up to the end. In the portrait of Catherine Barkley, Hemingway has presented a beautiful amalgamation of an emerging new woman who has an independent personality along with firm belief in her own traditional values. She lives according to the dictates of her private morality and her virtues are love and devotion. The chapter also examines the minor female characters present in the novel. Catherine’s friend Helen Ferguson plays a very significant role in highlighting the positive traits of Catherine. Juxtaposed with orthodox Ferguson, Catherine emerges to be a new
liberated woman who searches for peace and security in a war-wearied world
and whose happiness and life revolve around her love Henry Frederic. In those
times of complete commotion and chaos in social and moral values, Catherine
survives with a calm and composed mind and even creates a sense of security
for her male partner Henry Frederic.

The fourth chapter discusses the last novel of Hemingway’s famous
trilogy *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The chapter reveals how the critics have
ignored the two main female characters of the novel. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*
is Hemingway’s tribute to his love for Spain and through the characters of
Maria and Pilar, Hemingway has paid his homage to the New Woman of Spain.
The novel is a treatise on the complementary nature of the genders. Critics have
dismissed Maria as more of a dream girl than a woman, thereby neglecting the
rich substructure of the novel. She is a woman of great courage, who
overcomes a dreadful past of brutal rape, torture and her parents’ death. Maria
comes across as a sane person through out the novel who proves to be a true
companion in whom all feminine roles are merged. The other female character
is Pilar, who is the most colorful and vibrant character of the novel. Pilar is a
very strong woman, one in whom two contrary roles are merged, one of being a
strong leader in the hour of need for her band and the other, of being a
benevolent mother figure for both Maria and Jordan. Pilar knows, understands,
and helps as much as the circumstances permit. Pilar is earthy, instinctive and
sensible woman. In the course of the novel, Pilar works as an educator for both
Maria and Jordan. Hemingway has created an intriguing personality in the form
of Pilar. Hemingway presents emerging New Woman of Spain in the form of
Maria and Pilar. Hemingway highlights how woman started playing significant
and active roles outside the home territory and started participating actively in
the war and other social activities.

The last chapter sums up the findings of the study and Hemingway’s
position on the woman issue. Far from being a misogynistic writer,
Hemingway emerges as a writer who fervently celebrates the emergence of the
New Woman. In his works, he holds that it is woman alone who can provide an
alternative to the present humdrum state of affairs. The role of female
characters in Hemingway’s fiction is not marginal. Though Hemingway
nowhere commits himself in so many words on the question of emancipation of
women, the every fact that he does not assign them to a separate limited sphere
but rather makes them participants in the same questions with which men are
engaged regarding the meaning of life, such as sexual liberty and war, speaks
volumes for his support to the women’s cause. Hemingway proves himself to
be an ardent supporter of the role of women not only in the domestic sphere but
also in the wider world dominated by men which is aptly proved by his women
characters like Brett, Catherine, Pilar and Maria who are equally, if not more,
aware of the complex issues of life and world both.