CHAPTER III
THE ART OF
ERICA JONG

Erica Jong, a Jewish American writer, poet and novelist is best known for her novel *Fear of Flying*. She has received both popular and critical recognition for her frank, satirical treatment of sexuality. Her works have been interpreted both as pioneering efforts in the movement towards an authentic and free expression of female sexuality. Some critics have noted that attention to the risque elements of Jong’s fiction has eclipsed her treatment of serious social issues in her fiction and poetry with her iconoclastic challenges to a literary establishment that had never fully assimilated the achievement of renegade precursors, Jong pushed American letters to be more open to the idea of a women writer’s aspirations to come out of the kitchen and dine at the table of literature in her own right. Her poetry, fiction and essays, as well as her much – profiled personal life, depicts a particularly robust version of ‘having it all’: bread and roses; work and love; poetry and prose; children and career; laughter and lust; fortune and fame – and fun.

Jong’s famously autobiographical fiction, jarringly honest poems, and compellingly candid memoirs have been taken to heart
by women readers around the world struggling with the age-old challenges that Jong’s mother faced and that Jong herself negotiated with such aplomb. Targeted by traditionalist critics for being too subversive, Jong has been wounded but not vanquished.

Background

Erica Jong grew up on Manhattan’s upper west side in a home in which the arts were central. Her father Seymour Mann, the child of Polish Jew, was a musician. Her mother, Eda Mirsky, the child of Russian Jews who had settled in England before moving to New York, followed the example of her own father (a successful portrait painter and commercial artist) and became a painter. The pair met in the Catskill mountains when they were teenagers. During the early years of their marriage, Jong’s mother worked as a painter and as a designer of clothing and fabrics, while her father got his first job on Broadway, performing ‘Begin the Beguine’ on stage in Cole Porter’s show *Jubilee*. But when Eda became pregnant with their first child in 1937, she persuaded her husband to give up show business for work that was more dependable and wouldn’t keep him out at night. He became a salesman of dolls and gifts. Erica was born in 1942.

She spent much of her childhood in a rambling neo-Gothic apartment that took up the top three floors of a building across the street from the Museum of Natural History in Manhattan, in which
her grandparents, as well as her parents, lived until shortly after her younger sister was born. Her grandfather’s studio occupied the top floor, and Erica often painted alongside him as a child. Eda Mirsky had been the best draftswoman and painter in her art school at the National Academy of Design, and ‘had every reason to win the top prizes- including the big traveling fellowship the Prix de Rome.’ But she was not sent to Rome.

“When she won the bronze medal and was told – quite frankly (no one was ashamed to be sexist then) – that she hadn’t won the Prix de Rome because, as a woman, she was expected to marry, bear children, and waste her gifts, she was enraged.”

Her mother sacrificed her art to domesticity and paid a constant daily price “what I remember most about my mother was that she was always angry,” Jong recalled:

My mother’s frustrations powered both my feminism and my writing. But much of the power came out of my anger and my competition : my desire to outdo her, my hatred of her capitulation to her femaleness, my desire to be different because I feared I was too much like her, I would be trapped as she was. But if I rejected her example, I would be a traitor to her love. I felt a fraud no matter which way I turned. I had to find a way to be like her and unlike her at the same time. I had to find a way to be both a girl and a boy.

From her earliest years, Jong wrote as well as painted- notebooks, stories, journals and poems. After graduating from the High School of Music and Art, she attended Barnard College, where she was the editor of the literary magazine and produced poetry
programs for the campus radio station. She received her B.A. in 1963. In 1965, two years after she graduated from Barnard, Erica earned a Master of Arts in English from Columbia University and planned to go on for a doctorate in eighteenth-century English literature, when she found herself more drawn to the creative writing that was taking her increasing amounts of time and attention. In 1966, after marriage to a fellow graduate student, Michael Werthman, ended in divorce, Erica married Allan Jong, a Chinese–American psychiatrist. The military sent him to Germany shortly after the marriage, and Erica accompanied him there, where she taught at the University of Maryland Overseas Division and pursued her writing. She had also taught English at the City University of New York in 1964-65 and at Manhattan Community college from 1969 to 1970.

Her first book of poetry, *Fruits and Vegetables* was published in 1971 to critical acclaim. Before her second book of poems *Half Lives* was published in 1973, Jong had won an award from the *American Academy of Poets*, the Bess Hokin prize from *Poetry Magazine*, a Borestone Mountain Award in poetry, the Madeline Sadin Award from the *New York Quaterly*, and the Alice Faye di Castagnolia Award from the *Poetry Section of America*. But the event that would catapult Jong from a promising young poet to a world–famous writer was the 1973 publication of her boldly
iconoclastic first novel, **Fear of Flying** a book that would become one of the top ten bestsellers of the decade and that would earn Jong a permanent niche in American literary history. Other novels continued to appear every three or four years during the next two decades: **How to Save Your Own Life** (1977), **Fanny, being the true History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout – Jones**, (1980), **Parachutes and Kisses** (1984), **Shylock’s Daughter : A Novel of Love in Venice** (formerly titled **Serenissima : A Novel of Venice**) (1987), **Any woman’s Blues** (1990), and **Inventing Memory : A Novel of Mothers and Daughters** (1977)


During this enormously productive period, Jong also divorced her second husband, Allan Jong, married and divorced her third husband, writer Jonathan Fast, with whom she had a daughter, Molly Miranda Jong - Fast and married her fourth husband, Ken Burrows, a lawyer. She was elected President of The Author’s Guild, serving
in that capacity from 1991 to 1993, and has been active member of other professional organizations (including PEN, the Authors League of America, the Dramatists Guild of America, the Writers Guild of America, the Poetry Society of America, the National writers Union, and Poets and writers.)

She was awarded the Premio International Sigmund Freud (Italy) and the United Nations Award of Excellence for literature. She also became an increasingly visible presence on television talk shows and in the feature pages of newspapers and magazines, her life often receiving the kind of media scrutiny usually reserved for elected officials, movie stars and royals.

Although in her fame, her visibility, and her achievement as a writer surely Erica Jong is exceptional in her “fears and feelings,” Jong claims to be “just like my readers.” In What Do Women Want she explains:

As a writer, I feel that the very source of my inspiration lies in my never forgetting how much I have in common with other women, how many ways in which we are similarly shackled. I do not write about superwomen who have transcended all conflict. I write about women who are torn, as most of us are torn, between the past and the future, between our mothers’ frustrations and the extravagant hopes we have for our daughters.

Major works

In her poetry, Jong presents observations on such topics as aging, love, sex feminism, and death and while her treatment of
these topics is often serious, her tone is largely life-affirming and humorous. Jong has asserted that the common theme in all of her works is “the quest for self-knowledge”, a theme that dominates her semi autobiographical trilogy of novels, Fear of Flying (1973), How to Save Your Own Life (1977) and Parachutes and Kisses (1984). These three works trace the life of Isadora wing, a writer who travels extensively and seeks spiritual, emotional and physical fulfillment in various relationships with men. In Fanny Hackbaout – Jones (1980) and Serenissima : A Novel of Venice (1987), Jong employs the settings and language of eighteenth – century Venice, respectively. Fanny is Jong’s version of an eighteenth – century pornographic work by John Cleland titled Fanny Hill, and Serenissima depicts Jessica Pruitt, a twentieth – century actress who falls ill and is transported in a dream to Elizabethan England, where she becomes romantically involved with William Shakespeare. In a departure from fiction, Jong has written the biography The Devil at Large : Erica Jong on Henry Miller (1993).

PRINCIPAL WORKS

1. Fruits and vegetables (poetry) 1971.
2. Fear of Flying (novel) 1973
4. Here Comes, and other Poems (poetry) 1975
5. Loveroot (poetry) 1975
6. The poetry of Erica Jong (poetry) 1976
7. How to Save Your Own Life (novel) 1977
8. At the Edge of the Body (poetry) 1979
11. Parachutes and Kisses (novel) 1984
12. Serenissima A Novel of Venice (novel) 1987
13. Any woman’s Blues (novel) 1990

In the present thesis on elaborate discussion will taken up on the following novels of Erica Jong :-

2. How to Save Your Own Life 1977
3. Fanny, Being the true history of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout Jones 1980
4. Parachutes and Kisses 1984
5. Serenissima : A novel of Venice 1987
Fear of Flying, published in 1973, tells the story of Isadora Wing, poet who goes to Vienna to attend a Psychoanalytic congress with her psychiatrist husband. While there she meets a British Laingian analyst, Adrian Goodlove, who seems to be the embodiment of her sexual fantasies. She accompanies him on a jaunt across Europe. In actuality, he is often impotent, and he has a prearranged date to meet his wife and children in France. The novel also recounts Isadora’s mental journey back in time as she revisits scenes from her past – her first sexual experiences, her lovers, and her marriages. Left alone in Paris, she takes stock of her life and goes back to her husband, who was then in London. The novel ends with Isadora in a bathtub in her husband’s hotel room, awaiting a reconciliation but determined not to grovel.

Initial critical reaction to Fear of Flying sold the book but did little to establish its considerable literary value. Quite literally this novel is the tale of Erica Jong’s thinly disguised autobiographical heroine, Isadora Wing, on her journey from immaturity to maturity. After a series of initiating experiences, at least two love affairs, and a number of moral encounters, the character rearranges her values and pursues a career in earnest, leaving adolescence behind:

Women cannot possibly do both, she said, you have got to choose. Either be an artist or have children. (Fear of Flying P. No. 44)
Isadora’s mother told her the above lines. That Isadora wing is a sensitive character is made abundantly clear in her relationships and in her engagement with literature. Her parents, especially Isadora’s mother, are portrayed as understanding and curiously disapproving as they encourage and discourage their gifted daughter. Fascinated by her desire to write and simultaneously hostile because she, unlike her sisters, rejects the role of motherhood, her family becomes increasingly antagonistic. Consequently, she leaves the repressive atmosphere of home by many routes, marriage, trips to Europe analysis by six different psychiatrists, and ultimately, by an affair with Adrian. When she does at last come of age, she returns “home” to her husband, Bennett on her own terms, convinced of the ‘wisdom of her choice’ of housewife as artist.

Isadora Wing a character who is lost both literally and psychologically throughout most of the novel, finds herself on its final page. The circuitous routes always lead back. Familiar landmarks of the past – hotels, cafes, and trains – orient to her present. The loss of contact with actual times frees her to listen to an inner rhythm, a resolute private timing which encompasses the twenty – eight day time sequence of the novel. She finally comes to know where she is and what time it is as she resolves her fears – of flying, of driving, of “the man under the bed,” of submitting her work to a publisher – and she comes of age. “I was determined to
take my fate in my own hands. I meant that I was going to stop being a schoolgirl,” she says at the end of the novel. And one can assume she speaks with the authority of the author’s voice. The imagery of *Fear of Flying* supports the various stages of heroine’s coming of age and reveals the author’s growing confidence in her own fictional voice. Isadora in keen on her womanhood. But the idea of bearing ‘his’, her husband’s baby angers her on this she says:

> Somehow the idea of bearing his baby angers me. Let him bear his own baby! If I have a baby I want it to be all mine. A girl like me, but better. A girl who will also be able to have her own babies. It is not having babies in itself which seems unfair, but having babies for men. Babies who get their names. Babies who lock you by means of love to a man you have to please and serve on pain of abandonment. And love, after all, is the strongest lock. The one that chafes hardest and wears longest. And then I would be trapped for good. The hostage of my own feelings and my own child. (Fear of Flying P. No. 52)

Although Jong concentrates on woman’s body, its hungers, its drives, more centrally the novels are the story of a dying marriage and a woman’s odyssey to love. This novel pose the question: what it is to be a woman? Where lies salvation? The sense of crisis is communicated by a quaking, picaresque Isadora who finally leaves her uncommunicative, joyless, psychiatrist husband for a Laingian psychologist, Adrian Good love. Adrian offers her the promise of sensual love and the promise of a life which he calls twentieth-century existentialism. This he explains mean making no plans for the future, seizing the day, and felling no guilt. As it turns out,
neither promise has substance. Adrian is sensual in public where consummation is impossible and impotent in private. He makes all the rules for the relationship while pretending there are none, and he does have plans of his own, which include going back to his wife and children and leaving Isadora. In one of the many good one-liner observations in the book, Isadora concludes that her fling with Adrian has been desperation masquerading as freedom.

Neither husband nor lover provides Isadora with a sense of her own identity or gives her any security. Ultimately, she has to, as all women must, try and fashion her own sense of destiny. In the course of her quest, we get good insights into how difficult this is for women in our society maybe Western, American or Indian.

In the late nineteenth-century novel and throughout twentieth-century novels, marriage is often the death of love. Isadora’s first husband Brian is a good friend and lover until marriage. Then he turns into a man so completely devoted to work that he eventually breaks down. It must be said that it is difficult to be sympathetic to Isadora’s early point about Brian’s lack of virility, because of work pressures. After all, he is the one who works hard while she has time to pursue her studies and putter around the small apartment. But her confusion and unhappiness, stemming from Brian’s growing madness until he is committed, are understandable. So is the story of her second marriage to a dour Chinese psychiatrist.
whose own life is one vast analysis, as Isadora puts it. She discovers that he punishes her with long silences which precipitate her into still greater isolation. Obstinately, despite the fact that Bennett, the husband, is no companion and insists on her dependence on him and his independence of her, Isadora clings to the idea that even a bad marriage is better than none. She demonstrates that although western woman’s feet were never bound like the Chinese woman’s, making the latter dependent on man for food, shelter, clothing etc. her woman’s mind has been crippled into accepting so called inherent limitations. The author makes it clear that family, school, society have conditioned Isadora in her thinking. She is, for a while, a woman who conforms to the rigid and restraining role imposed on her, and defers to her husband’s view of reality.

But despite the brainwashing, Isadora’s mind persists in nagging her with questions. How can an intelligent woman fuse the physical and intellectual parts of her being into one healthy whole? How to achieve integration, exhorts Isadora? How to resolve the conflict between the creative woman and the wife? How to be feminine? What is being feminine? Is it more feminine to be a wife and mother than to be a writer?

In between there are comments on the problems of being Jewish and having a Jewish mother:

But like it or not, it was the only, religion I had. We aren’t really Jewish; we were pagans and pantheists, we believed
in reincarnation, the souls of tomatoes, even (way back in 1940s) in ecology. And yet with all this, I began to feel intensely Jewish and intensely paranoid (are they perhaps the same?) the moment I set foot in Germany. (Fear of Flying P. No. 61)

Isadora recalled her conversation with her mother which took place long back in her childhood while going to Paris.

Isak Dinesen once remarked that what the modern novel needs is humor, and *Fear of Flying* has that much needed ingredient. There is the funny bit about Isadora’s fear on the plane: if the plane should fall how would she face God after stamping her religion Unitarian.¹⁴

The novel shuttles backward and forward for 311 pages, giving us a woman in Isadora Wing who is part little girl, part female rogue, part troubled artist wife/daughter and more specifically, a woman who gets all kinds of advice from family and the men in her life. The family wants her ‘to settle down’ and Bennett warns her that if she leaves him, she will mess up her life. Adrian counsels her that if she is going to have something interesting to write about, she must have experience with him.

This is woman that we meet in *Fear of Flying* and who tells us: she never wants to age; wants a blazing sensual love and a blazing career; wants freedom and security – that this woman will find some solution to conflicting desires. To put it another way, Isadora Wing appears like some modern Persephone, who will
continue to move out of the gloom of her marriage into the sunshine of a better relationship and mature as woman and artist.

**In How to Save Your Own Life (1977)** Isadora Wing, now the author of a best selling novel goes to Hollywood to write the screenplay for a movie of the novel and to negotiate the movie rights with a producer, one of several Hollywood types who are the subjects of satiric portraits. In the meantime, she had found out that her husband had an affair with one of their friends. This knowledge boosts her dying marriage. She shuttles back and forth between New York and Hollywood, seeking consolation and distraction – including a lesbian affair - from friends and lovers, and eventually meets, in Hollywood a man younger than she, with whom she falls in love.

This sequel to *Fear of Flying* begins with “I left my husband on Thanksgiving Day.” A few pages later Isadora confides that she had saved the thought of leaving her husband “like a sweet before bedtime, like a piece of bubble gum put on the childhood bedpost ……” Some 300 pages later, the reader learns that the heroine is now leaving apartment and husband. The plot is just like that of *Fear of Flying* the only new ingredient of plot is Isadora’s discovery of her husband’s infidelity, and her jealousy and anger that he has played the role of saint while casting her in the role of villain.
Granted this, there is nothing in the characterization of Isadora. She knows how to seek help from friends, analysts, lovers and how to compensate for any failure of feminine nerve with a range of consolations that include masturbation, sniffing cocaine, smoking joints, making love with a woman, drinking six gin and tonics plus wine at one sitting, participating in a sex orgy, reading mail in nude, and taking pot shots at critics who write nasty reviews about her work. Nor is her jealousy of Penny, with whom Bennett has had a love affair, entirely credible since she, herself, looks upon infidelity as a diversion in an unhappy marriage. Bennett and Penny made love in Isadora’s study room while she was away for conducting evening lectures in the university. Isadora’s early references to Penny as goyish, dumb are ethnic slurs. Along with certain other disclosures of malice, they detract from the picture of Isadora as a warm, Jewish girl filled with gregarious good humor, animated by kind instincts, and in love with most people and the whole universe, despite her jealousy and other problems.

From the moment my father saw me in the hospital and asked my mother, do we have to take it home? .... My life had been a constant struggle to get attention, not to be ignored, to be the favored child, the brightest, the best the most precocious, the most outrageous, the most adored. And now I had it – not from my parents or my husband, maybe, but from the rest of the world. And now it all seemed, like some sort of nightmare. (How to Save Your Own Life P. No. 8)
Isadora comments on her dying marriage. The central emphasis in the novel keeps shifting to Bennett. He comes close to being the villain in this domestic drama. Isadora rationalizes that he slept with Penny in order to get back at her for her writing, while at the same time he played the role of the forgiving husband. The accusation is legitimate, for even at the end, when a childish Isadora seeks sexual revenge against Bennett by embellishing on the number of lovers she has had, he keeps intoning piously that he is prepared to forgive her. The most valuable thing to come out of this exchange, for the heroine and the reader, is Isadora’s realization that during the entire marriage she has been made to feel grateful to Bennett for letting her write. Not once has she asked herself if it were all right for Bennett to practice his vocation of psychology. After all, that was his job. Her writing, he made her see, was a self-indulgence, toward which he was prepared to be generous:

Let it be Float. When you are ready to leave you will leave. Don’t punish yourself.” She knows me as she knows herself. All that Jewish guilt. That constant appeasing of the evil eye. If something good happens, something bad is right around the corner. If you have pleasure, watch out for pain. If sex is good, you are going to get clap or pregnant or caught. (How to Save Your Own Life P. No. 63)

Love is love, but marriage is an investment. (How to Save Your Own Life P. No. 63)

Isadora’s friend Hope consoles her when she feels guilty about leaving Bennett. She is twenty two years older than Isadora,
advises her to get rid of Jewish guilt, and helps her with the publishing of her poems.

While continuing to unravel a marriage already reduced to a limp, the novel retains in crumpled form many of the themes, from creativity and femininity to the hunger for love, with which the author worked in the first novel. It also contains telling observations on the drawbacks of fame; Hollywood, which is filled with divorced men with hair transplants; bachelors who give Jacuzzi parties; the loving camaraderie between intelligent, talented women; the way other women, in the scramble for success imitate the worst of men’s vices; the pressures by husband and society for a woman to use her husband’s name. About the latter, Isadora is not only chagrined but feels cheated and betrayed at giving her husband—neither a reader (except for his psychology books) nor a writer—immortality by placing his name on her books:

Does anyone ask men to change their identities when they get married? Would you like to be Bennett White?’ More nervous coughs and more silence. Bennett stalks out of the room leaving me feeling guilty. Perhaps he is right, I think. Perhaps I should show my commitment to the marriage by taking his name. And yet, it seems so illogical. My maiden name feels right: an old shoe. It is my identity. To give it up seems like an amputation. I am not Chinese, after all. Although White may be fake, it is my own father’s fake. (How to Save Your Own Life P. No. 127)

This is a legitimate complaint. Names are important to men. Why women writers, or any woman should, is deprived of her name,
Isadora asks? Why indeed? In the case of Isadora, she is honest enough to confess that the fault lies not so much with society as with herself. She is so hungry for Bennett’s approval that she gives him her work – and makes him famous.

If the heroine is chilled by the lack of affection and care of her husband particularly when she needs him she is warmed by her many friendship with women. This sequel emphasizes the value of women friendship. The short description of Isadora with Jeannie contains warmth and tenderness. It is Jeannie, a poet who gives Isadora the push to break with husband. There is also Gretchen, who points out that Bennett has treated Isadora badly until fame made her for him the goose which laid the golden egg. Then there is Holly, a plant lover, who offers her studio, herbal tea, and sympathy. Not least among this cast of women characters is Rosanna Howard, who provides a chauffeured Rolls Royce, champagne, caviar and her musk – scented body. Isadora, her head filled with images of Missy and Colette, Violet and Vita, Gertrude and Alice, and her blood fired by expensive wines, reels off to bed with Rosanna.

There are male friends too, but these are predominantly sexual, except for the one with eighty-seven – year old Kurt, who is generally accompanied by his male nurse or two former Japanese wives. He gave Isadora tips for saving one’s own life which she writes in the notebook which Jeannie had given to her.
1. Renounce useless guilt.
2. Don’t make a cult of suffering
3. Live in the Now (or at least the soon)
4. Always do the things you fear the most; courage is an acquired taste, like caviar
5. Trust all joy.
6. If the evil eye fixes you in its gaze, look elsewhere.
7. Get ready to be eighty – seven. (to be continued)

(How to Save Your Own Life P. No. 191)

But before this Jeannie had also given her a message through the notebook she gifted to Isadora about saving one’s own life and it was;

How do I save my own life? The poet asked. By being a fool, God said. (How to Save Your Own Life P. No. 184)

Isadora talks and makes love with two men, both conveniently named Jeffrey. These pleasure sessions take place in the afternoon and Isadora is able to explain her absences to Bennett as ‘shopping in Bloomingdale’s’.

Any successful novel, as we have been told repeatedly must deal with love in one form or another. Love must be the pervasive thread which binds the whole together in some form of tapestry. Isadora’s Hollywood trip not only serves the purpose of tracing her increasing disillusionment with the unscrupulous woman producer
Britt and her unhappy realization that no writer can control the quality of the movie made out of her / his work; it also brings love into her life – Josh. There is no question that describing Josh with his furry, warm, likeable face always guiles Isadora’s pleasure. Despite the age difference of six years, which troubles Isadora only briefly, she decides to take her friend Jeannie’s advice, be a fool, and give herself up to her passion for Josh:

Jong confuses liberation with sexual liberation and confuses sexual liberation with the freedom to act and talk like a man, but the bold language that so impressed readers masks a conventionality, a failure to imagine otherwise. Isadora is right – she does “talk a good game” – and the novel does not, finally, challenge “the old story” at the level of plot, language, or meaning when Isadora is falling for Adrian, she senses the presence of a ‘hackneyed plot.’ Thus the ending of How to Save Your Own Life comes as no surprise.\(^5\)

The sexual freedom that Isadora enjoys seems neither liberating nor degrading. It is largely irrelevant. Adultery is no solution, it is only a diversion. Many diversions in fact are all leading to true love. How to Save Your Own Life is not, merely confessional; it is a novel with message, and this also is something it shares with the great tradition of romantic fiction. The success of her novel Candida Confesses makes Isadora realize that for all her own feelings of guilt and inadequacy, the heroine of her novel has become a model, an inspiration, for countless women…. When a close friend and a fellow poet commits suicide, leaving behind her a
blank notebook and the suggested title ‘How to Save Your Own Life.’ Isadora is determined to conquer her fear of flying. The message is: be happy, be joyful, reject cynicism, seek for true love – ‘Fly and live to tell the tale!’ The moment when Isadora decides on this turning point of *How to Save Your Own Life*; it is the main theme of the love poems addressed to Josh which are appended to the novel, and it recurs in the new volume of Erica Jong’s poems *Loveroot*.

Here, and in *Loveroot*, every activity takes second place to sexual love: The advice is, cast off cynicism and experience joy, but to often this comes over as find your man and all will be well. It is not is simply a matter of words being colder when the writer is not in heat! Erica Jong became the target of much criticism for her use of autobiographical material. Many reviewers suggest that they are able to read *How to Save Your Own Life* only as autobiography. The New York Times reviewer, Christopher Lehmann – Haupt certainly indicates that his view of the novel is affected by his knowledge of what he considers that real life protagonist and some of the other characters. He views the autobiographical elements as a ‘powerful incentive’ to read the book ‘as gossip rather than fiction,’ a temptation he could hardly resist, he says, given the presence of so many ‘characters with keys sticking out of their backs’
His evaluation is influenced by another factor also: he finds the slang terms used to describe lovemaking offensive. Such terms may be used in emotional states of anger, fear, and so on, but ‘not love.’ For Lehmann – Haupt a work that employs what he considers obscene terms cannot be art. Other reviewers share his view and often comment specifically on Jong’s use of what are considered obscene terms for female genitalia. These words are unmentionable for many.

Although Jong is not characterized as a feminist in these kind of reviews as often as she is seen as a silly woman, the response to this novel appears nonetheless related to cultural perceptions of feminism. Jong may be seen as part of a long line of women writers, who were popular successful and consequently resented. Her previous novel had received critical acclaim, had been touted as a feminist novel and had sold millions to women readers, appeared to be leading a movement that threatened the brokering function and thus the status of the high culture reviewers. We should also remember that this was happening in 1977 when the feminist movement, was at its height. What made Jong’s success so annoying – and very much influenced the evaluation of her second novel – was the fact that it evoked fears about a threat to the cultural authority of the reviewing establishment.
Erica Jong abandoned the Isadora character and published *Fanny: Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout – Jones* (1980) set in the eighteenth century. Fanny, who tells her own story in the first person narrative says she is the same character as John Cleland’s *Fanny* and is going to tell her true story, not told by Cleland in *Fanny Hill*. An imitation of the eighteenth – century picaresque based on extensive research on eighteenth – century life, the novel is often referred to by its admirers as a novel of ideas to many eighteenth – century figures from literature and philosophy – Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Shaftesbury, John Locke – and includes some of them as characters in the novel. Second, it espouses a feminist ideology and is indebted, in particular to Margaret Murray’s theories about witchcraft which suggests that far from being a satanic cult, witches preserved ancient worship of a Mother Goddess.

In the novel, Jong tells the story of Fanny Hackabout – Jones, a beautiful young orphan who dresses in her foster brother’s clothing and rides off on her horse after being raped by her foster father, Lord Bellars, to whom she develops an erotic attraction when he reappears in the story. The consequence of the rape is a daughter for whom she writes the memoir that is the novel. She is initiated into a coven of witches, joins an outlaw band, works in a London brothel – where she meet Theophilus Cibber, Jonathan Swift, William
Hogarth, and John Cleland – turns pirate to recapture her stolen child, and writes a best-seller. She falls in love with the outlaw Lancelot, converts him to heterosexuality, and returns to her Wiltshire birthplace where she finds that she has been bequeathed the estate by Lord Bellars, who is actually her biological father.

**Fanny** is a book that Jong, who wrote her master’s thesis on Alexander Pope’s “Epistle from Eloisa to Abelard” and began work on a dissertation in the field of eighteenth-century literature, had long wished to write. As she remarks in the afterword to **Fanny**, “But even as I wrote books like **Fear of Flying** and **How to Save Your Own Life**, and my first four books of poetry, I dreamed of writing a mock-eighteenth-century novel someday. Still I wanted to wait until I was both free of the graduate student within me to do it lightheartedly, and yet calm enough in my own life to devote myself to the massive research I knew it would require” (Fanny P. NO. 532)

Like Jong’s previous fiction, **Fanny** focuses on a woman’s quest for independence and self-knowledge. A picaresque setting, **Fanny** chronicles the heroines’ growth from virgin to whore, mistress to mother, and pirate to writer. Jong has rewritten several male-authored eighteenth-century novels, most specifically **Tom Jones**, from the perspective of a twentieth-century feminist. Angry with the phallocentrism of such early writers as Samuel Richardson,
Daniel Defoe and John Cleland, Jong offers a sustained critique of these authors’ works while imbuing her own ‘mock eighteenth century novel’ with feminist values. She accomplishes this by first creating in Fanny Hackabout – Jones a protagonist whose character and actions stand in sharp contrast to the typical eighteenth century heroine. Secondly, Jong radically rewrites literary tradition by reconceptualizing the eighteenth century female novel of development and by recasting the picaresque novel in female terms. At the same time, she also reimagines the cultural history of the Augustan period by bringing a woman – centered view of the past to her novel. This literary and historical approach ultimately allows Jong to make amends for the misrepresentation of women in the eighteenth – century novel, while enabling the novelist to engage in a revisionist rereading of the canon. Finally, by presenting a novel whose format elements match with the eighteenth century, whose female consciousness is decidedly contemporary, Fanny reveals the persistent nature of women’s literary and cultural struggles.

As Fanny repeatedly makes clear, Jong has borrowed from the eighteenth – century whatever has suited her intentions. For example, the novel’s sub- title, title page, chapter headings, list of dramatis personae, and opening advertisement summarizing the protagonist’s adventures, all echo eighteenth- century novelistic conventions. Its heroine shares the same Christian name as Cleland’s
Fanny Hill while her hyphenated surname combines those of William Hogarth’s Moll Hackabout and Fielding’s Tom Jones. Although it appropriates elements from such eighteenth century works as *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Rasselas*, *Humphry Clinker*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Candide*, Fanny is most deeply indebted to Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. As Jong told John L. Kern in a 1981 interview:

The idea for the novel really started with the simple question, what if Tom Jones had been a woman?

Fanny Hackabout – Jones certainly has much in common with Fielding’s Knave – hero. Both, for example, are foundlings whose true paternity remains the novel’s central mystery. Naïve, trustful, and passionate, each must flee the safety and relative happiness of a country estate and set forth on the dangerous road to London.

In terms of literary form, both *Tom Jones* and *Fanny* follow the bildungsroman as each protagonist attains self-awareness only after being tested by a series of adventures. In the case of Fanny, however this process of maturation has a sexual dimension missing in Fielding’s tale. To being with, it is Lord Bellar’s molestation of Fanny that forces her flight from the only home she has known. Moreover, as she soon discovers, a young woman traveling along is in a highly vulnerable position. Indeed, before a week has passed,
Fanny is captured by highwaymen, stripped, and used as decoy for passing coaches. Although Fielding’s hero also undergoes abuse at the hands of highwaymen, Fanny’s susceptibility to rape makes her travels more inherently hazardous than Tom’s. Furthermore, while Tom’s status as an able-bodied male affords him certain sexual liberties, Fanny’s sexual behavior is strictly bound by prevailing social norms. For instance, as she reflects upon her unexpected flight from Lymeworth, Fanny comes to the realization that,

A man might vent his passion unafraid, but a woman did so at her Peril – particularly before marriage. (Fanny P. No. 30)

Thus, while both Tom Jones and Fanny depict the steady maturation of their protagonists, Jong’s heroine undergoes certain hardships that are peculiar to her being a woman. Jong’s claim that Fanny answers that question, ‘What if Tom Jones had been a woman?’, while clearly true, is less indicative of her narrative intentions than one might initially suspect. That is, although it revises aspects of Tom Jones from the perspective of a female protagonist, Fanny does not radically critique Fielding’s novel. Although Jong’s novel resembles Pamela in its epistolary form, confessional tone, and penchant lengthy moralizing Fanny takes direct issue with key features of Richardson’s work. Most dramatically Jong’s heroine refutes the tacit rationale behind
Richardson’s sexual politics by refusing to barter her virginity for respectability. As Fanny remarks:

But unlike why Pamela Andrews, I was an Honest whore and no Hypocrite! I hold my Body freely, but not my mind! (Fanny P. No. 233)

Pamela may use her ‘Virtue’ as a bargaining ploy for marriage to Mr. B., but Fanny Hackabout – Jones lacks the hypocrisy of Richardson’s heroine. Furthermore, whereas Pamela mostly accepts the sexual stereotypes of her age, Fanny rises against them. For example, despite a mutinous response, Fanny demands that her fellow crew members aboard the *Hopewell* insert a feminist clause into their pirate oath. As she adamantly insists, if these men wish for true quality, they must accord women:

A place in both your Hearts and your sacred articles! (Fanny P. No. 436)

With its depiction of an independent heroine and concern for women’s issues, *Fanny* has strong ties to *Moll Flanders*. Like Defoe’s novel, Fanny provides a gritty portrait of London life as it recounts the adventures of a cunning, capable woman who lives in a patriarchal society that exploits her sexuality. Yet, although Moll Flanders and Fanny are both whores within a structured social setting, they differ significantly in that Fanny, unlike Moll, chooses not to marry the man in her life. In her willingness to forge the
socially sanctioned rite of marriage, Jong’s heroine adamantly ignores societal pressures and sets her own terms.

While *Fanny* rewrites aspects of *Pamela* and *Moll Flanders*, singles out John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* as its primary literary target. Fanny is writing this tale for her daughter Belinda so that she will not be deceived by other ‘Cleland’ by telling a distorted account of Fanny’s life. Her own cautionary memoir, Fanny tells Belinda will address issues that the author of *Fanny Hill* misrepresent or failed to write about.

In her revision of Cleland’s account, Jong follows his story of a country girl’s “education” in a London brothel and his explicit depiction of sadism and bondage. In Jong’s version, however, Fanny Hackabout – Jones endures sexual debasement only as means of saving herself and her daughter. Such a response stands in sharp contrast to *Fanny Hill* (pornographic work). The protagonist of *Fanny Hill* often relishes the erotic degradation she undergoes. Once, after being bound, gagged and whipped so hard that blood is drawn Cleland’s heroine, seeing the arousing effect these actions have on her punisher, finds herself sexually excited and eager to please. Despite her humiliation and anger, nothing can deter Fanny Hill from fulfilling her role as a contented sex object of men.

This difference in presentation points to one of Jong’s principal intentions in *Fanny* to expose the false eroticism of
Cleland’s sexual fantasies and the insidious ways in which he idealizes prostitution. As Fanny angrily remarks Cleland’s portrait of Fanny Hill:

Leaves the world to think that the whore’s life is naught but a Bed of Roses. Of clap, consumption, the Evils of Drink, Death in childbed...... he hath naught to say. (Fanny P. No. 241)

Throughout Fanny Jong counters Cleland’s tendency to fetishize women by offering the first-hand exploits of a woman who is intellectually as well as sexually sophisticated. Unlike Fanny Hill, who merely recounts her various sexual encounters without reflection. Fanny Hackabout – Jones is able to learn from her exploits and apply that knowledge to her life.

In seeking to dispel the feminine ideal presented by Richardson, Defoe and Cleland, Jong creates a protagonist whose actions run counter to societal expectations. Unlike the typical eighteenth – century heroine, Fanny defiantly asserts her individuality in a society which impedes female initiative. A woman of action, she is able to overcome the enormous disadvantage of being poor, orphaned, and female by using her physical and intellectual gifts as instruments of power. Jong has stated that her heroines are:

Always looking for wholeness and integration in a society where women are not allowed to be bodies and brains both.⁸
In Fanny, we see her creating a figure who successfully unites the two. Indeed, it is the capacity to be ‘bodies and brains both’ that sets Fanny apart from her female predecessors and allows her to refute the eighteenth century myth of women as passive and naive. The power of Jong’s Fanny lies with the protagonist because she makes her tell her own story. In contrast to Defoe’s novel, in which the heroine’s text is revised by an authorial figure, and unlike the novels of Richardson and Cleland, where the heroine’s voice is filtered through a male authorial consciousness. The discourse of Fanny is doubly feminocentric a feminist author creating a proto – feminist narrator heroine. Furthermore, by inscribing herself as the ‘true’ heroine of her own life’s story Fanny bestows upon herself a dignity and credibility denied her by Cleland’s highly idealized Fanny Hill.

In the case of Fanny, the male line, represented by Richardson, Defoe, and Cleland, is a visible, prominent presence and in her novel Jong confronts these authors, either by directly attacking their sexism or by implicitly exposing their false feminocentrism. Jong’s response to her matrilineal line, however is subtler and less antagonistic. It remains equally revisionary, though, as Jong goes back in time to retrieve and reconceptualize the eighteenth – century female novel of development. She accomplishes this in three principal ways:
a) by introducing female sexuality to the form,
b) by championing the importance of the mother-daughter relationship,
c) and by taking the form out of its traditional literary setting.

In writing a book concerning a young woman’s coming of age, Jong places her novel within a firmly established genre for eighteenth century female novelist. It depicts the importance of physical appearance to a woman moving in patriarchal world and the difficulties often encountered by intelligent women. Not only does Jong directly address the traditionally taboo subject of female sexual appetite, but she also creates a heroine who is unafraid to express her desires. By offering a healthy view of her heroine’s sexuality, Jong counters the negative coding of female desire found in the works of authors such as Richardson, Defoe and Cleland. That is, although these and other eighteenth-century novelists were fascinated by female desire, it was female desire as reinterpreted and reinscribed by the male gaze women as seen and constituted by men. In addition, the literary stance of these male authors toward female sexuality was largely one of fear and ambivalence. Fanny abounds in lengthy description of the emotional aspects of maternity. Indeed, in many respects Fanny is a tribute to the unique bond between mother and daughter. Fanny lase the way for her own daughter’s initiation into adulthood Motherhood is thus depicted as a joyous cycle in which, as Fanny puts it:
To be a mother is but half of our Fate; to bear one is the other. (Fanny P. No. 441)

Jong breaks the traditional pattern of female novel by having her heroine leave Lymeworth and venture forth into the world. Although she does eventually return home, Fanny first tests herself through a wide-ranging series of adventures. By appropriating conventional elements from the eighteenth-century picaresque novel, Jong fundamentally reshapes this form by bringing a female viewpoint to a genre historically encoded as masculine. For instance, while her novel adopts the picaresque penchant for emphasizing violence and cruelty, for Jong’s protagonist these cruelties focus specifically on dangers to women, including as they do rape, domestic abuse, and the dangers of childbirth. Furthermore, in Jong’s rewriting of picaresque tradition women are not passive beauties or the willing pawns of men; instead they are healers, bandits, pirates and writers.

Because her heroines ‘true history’ seeks to correct past misrepresentations, Jong is neither nostalgic nor sentimental in her treatment of either literature or history. To conflate historical record and literary embellishment as she repeatedly does is perfectly acceptable to Jong because, as she herself reveals in the afterword in speaking about Fanny:

I hope this novel is true to the spirit, if not the letter, of the eighteenth century, for I am well aware that I have often
stretched (though not I hope shattered) historical truth in order to make a more amusing tale (Fanny P. No. 534)

Like Isadora Wing, the modern heroine in *Fear of Flying*, Fanny’s quest for self – realization involves resolving the tensions between love and lust, art and motherhood and finding a lover who will accept her as an intellectual and sexual equal. Moreover, the cultural critique *Fanny* engages in – taking as its targets the trio of sexism, gender stereotyping and male dominance – remains relevant today. What Jong does in *Fanny*, then, is to set her novel in the eighteenth – century as an anachronistic means of demonstrating how little the plight of woman has changed in two hundred and fifty years. As she explained to Kern:

> After all, the real purpose of the historical novel is to satirize current society through the lens of the past.⁹

By creating work whose form is of eighteenth century yet whose consciousness looks forward to the present day, Jong is able to reveal dramatically the persistent nature of women’s literary and cultural struggles. This novel offers a woman- centered pedagogic tale that radically challenges literary tradition while revealing the truth about the living conditions of women during the Augustan period. Finally, by endowing a eighteenth century literary form with a contemporary consciousness, Jong provides ‘mock – eighteenth – century novel’ with resonance for a late twentieth – century audience.
Jong’s success in both art and life in the early eighties was short lived. By late 1984, the time of publication of her fourth novel Parachutes and Kisses (1984), successful marriage, happy family life, and literary accolades were replaced with divorce, single parenthood and bad reviews. The good reviews that Jong was getting for art and life ended after 1982, when Jong’s divorce became the most news worthy item in her life and she published another Isadora novel, Parachutes and Kisses – about modern woman whose life outwardly mirrors her own.

A New York Times feature story in October of 1984 points out that divorce had figured prominently in three books Jong had published in the previous year. These included – in addition to Parachutes and Kisses – Ordinary Miracles, Jong’s fifth book of poetry and Megan’s Book of Divorce, a children’s book with the subtitle A Kid’s Book for Adults as Told to Erica Jong. The Times story deals with the emotional difficulties Jong experienced after the divorce and quotes Jong on the problems of a woman whose career is a high priority in finding a man who will provide emotional support.

Jong’s problems had also made the New York times on March 8, 1984 in a story about a four million – dollar lawsuit Jong filed against her estranged husband, charging him with interfering with publication of the children’s book by sending a letter to her
publisher stating that Jong’s use of her daughter’s name in the book was in violation of the divorce decree. (“Erica Jong suit Accuses Ex – Husband on Book”) (Jong subsequently changed the name to Megan). The story was taken up by popular magazines with *People Weekly* running the headline ‘*Mommy and Daddy Are fighting Again*’ since Erica used her daughter’s name in a children’s Guide to Divorce.

In many ways the situation in 1984 was similar to that in 1977, when *How to Save Your Own Life* got such a negative reception. In both instances Jong was going through a divorce, had been the subject of extensive media coverage, and then published novels about Isadora, a woman whose experiences had parallels to her own. *Parachutes and Kisses* arrived on the scene in what has come to be called as post feminist age. According to Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey:

> Post – feminism demarcates an emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates reviews and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by Second Wave Feminism.11

It implies the death of the activist phase of feminist movement and the end of the need for a feminist politics. In the postfeminist climate, *Parachutes and Kisses* attracted less attention than Jong’s previous novels. It features the Isadora character, which had been considered a feminist mouthpiece in 1973. Isadora, a sexually active
woman, a writer – and in this novel also a single parent – struggles to find fulfillment in various areas of her life. A frenzy of sexual affairs follows the separation from her husband, and in subsequent months Isadora tries to juggle motherhood, lovers and writing. Other events intervene such as tax problems and a trip to Russia to search for her roots. Her story finds a resolution when she meets a young actor, Bean, and falls in Love.

Everywhere, that is, but in her bed, for in this book’s opening paragraphs we learn that during her separation she has been consoling herself with a ‘drugged – out’ disk jockey from Hartford, a ‘cuddly’ Jewish banker from New York, a blue – eyed writer from New Orleans, a ‘cute’ Swedish real estate developer with Caribbean holdings, a lapsed rabbi, an antiques dealer who drives a Rolls despite being a high school dropout, a ‘brilliant 26 – year – old medical student with access to drugs, a plastic surgeon and so many others she has practically lost count.’

It is very difficult to know what to make of this book. There are still some wonderful lines, scenes, dialogue exchanges. The Zeitgeist remains a woman’s fear of loneliness, to which now has been added learning ‘how to make demonic passion jibe with domestic responsibilities, artistic responsibilities, financial responsibilities.’ The book speaks of Isadora’s ‘quest for love’ as being what ‘linked her to other women, what stirred her vitals not
only to sex, but also to poetry; what made her – despite her oddness in being famous and affluent.’

Exactly like other women, exactly like her friends her sisters, her readers. But it is a quest centered not in her heart and mind but in her reproductive organs. There is a distressing self-serving quality to this book annoying arrogance, the giddy presumption that Isadora is speaking not only to women but for women, for all women everywhere.

Isadora thinks herself as an eighteenth century type: a sort of pyrate of the heart. She is every bit as much a survivor as Moll Flanders or Fanny Hill. She left her self – pity somewhere back in the seventies. At the age of thirty – nine, she is almost convinced that all pain one gets in life is somehow for the best, that one never gets more than one can cope with, that life is a process of tempering the spirit – so that when at last it flees the mortal body, it knows a little better which way to go than it did the first time around. She knows that her life is a journey toward self-reliance. She knows that she has always lived with her heart on her sleeves she knows she has paid the price for that but also reaped the rewards. When one follows the path with heart, one often bleeds. But what is the alternative – a cauterized core? (Parachutes and Kisses P. No. 4). After reading this paragraph the question arises that is our Isadora trying to become philosopher? The answer is probably ‘yes’, but she
is not able to forget Josh and still loves him. She is very hurt and links of her own past life, and also about world history and her parents’ generation:

The world was more morally intelligible in the forties – the decade of her birth. Now it’s a mess. Heroes and villains all mixed up. Who can tell the potter from the pot, or the dancer from the dance? Isadora often wishes she had been born in her parent’s generation – when Nazis were Nazis and good Americans were Good Americans, when the intellectuals still thought socialism could save the world. (Parachutes and Kisses P.No. 7)

It seems that Isadora is being nostalgic or she is so hurt by the separation from Josh that she becomes the times she is living in. The most beautiful thing of this relationship was Isadora became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. Maybe because of her daughter, she might be feeling that Josh should stay with her so as to have a complete family. During her pregnancy Isadora became convinced that God must be a woman. She took all dogmas – even feminist – with many grains of salt, but it does seem to her that God must certainly have a female aspect, and she, mother of an only daughter, would rather pray to Her than Him. But then being rational and secular she thinks that God has no Gender at all.

We meet a changed Isadora in Parachutes and Kisses she is a mother. She is a philosopher, a feminist and also believer in God. She weeps for Amanda, her daughter, for herself, for her mother and her grandmother, for all her sisters – three by blood and millions by
book – around the world. And she feels that it is both blessing and curse to be born female. She also knows the vanity of bringing babies into a world armed to the skies with nuclear devices, a world where presidents get shot routinely on the evening news, where nobody knows what money means, whether love lasts or how families can stay together long enough to grow up.

Isadora has finally come to the conclusion that she has never really understood men. Not that she doesn’t like them, only that they are hidden from her – as if they were all wearing iron masks. Wherever she fantasizes about what her work would be like if she had become a painter instead of a writer, she imagines a whole exhibition called simply ‘men.’ It would be a series of masked men. In each, the man would be wearing a different kind of mask. One would have an iron mask, like the hero of the same name; another a diving helmet; another a black silk mask etc.

The story of a thirty-nine year old Isadora struggling with life after her husband walks out does not provoke the flurry of enthusiastic recognitions that a younger Isadora elicited in different age. It was easier to identify with the young Isadora striking out on her own than with the struggles of the older women. Several reviews mention the picture, drawn in the novel, of the abandoned wife, left alone to deal with the iced – over drive – way and broken furnace, obliged to negotiate complicated visitation arrangements while
comforting a child who misses her father, and without a man of her own, reduces to dependence on a series of unsatisfactory lovers. Isadora’s life is in some ways the nightmare of postfeminism, she might be the woman who has set her expectations too high, as the post feminists were claiming was the case with many. She asked for too much – from her mate and from society in general and in the post feminist world, she became an eligible target of criticism by reviewers to be accused of narcissism, of being unfair to her husband, of being greedy and self – indulgent. For most reviewers the Jong heroine is constructed as a feminist of the old school, with major emphasis on sexual activities.

Anita Susan Grossman\textsuperscript{12} similarly calls Isadora a ‘feminist heroine’ and a ‘guru to her many followers.’

Jong may write about the joys and sorrows of motherhood, about the difficulties of a single mother, and even other themes, such as the search for her roots in Russia, but her reviewers identify her with the issue of sexual politics of an earlier feminism. The favorable reviews find some home truths to women, but often implicitly suggest that Jong’s ‘message’ had more value in a previous era. A number of reviewers fault Isadora for her failures in family life. They wonder tongue – in – check, why a man would leave a paragon like Isadora. Her answer is in keeping with a mood of renewed sympathy for men. “Though Isadora describes herself as
the most generous and ‘giving’ of woman, when the philanthropists role grows tiresome she lets out all the stops, sounding like a shrew, eminently leaving or leavable despite her fantastic sexual abilities, or perhaps even because of them” Maybe in the present novel, Isadora would have understood Josh properly, she would have understood all his needs. She lacked sympathy for him.

Among the reviewers of Parachutes and Kisses are some who value the novel because of experiential and ideological connections. But many reveal deep hostility to Jong, mocking her for considering herself ‘an important cultural figure’, when she ought to recognize she is just dirty – minded woman. The objection to literary references in a novel about sex has come to be quite a regular refrain. If anything, there is in the responses to the later novels, more annoyance at the literary allusions. There is also a firmer belief that a novel concerned with sexual matters is not serious literature or possibly that a woman cannot write books in which sexual reminiscence and literary allusions are joined. But I feel that Isadora is an appealing character, I like her even when she behaves foolishly, which happens often. She continues to seek the feminist way of knowledge without abandoning pleasure, intellect or honesty. Like so many women of her age, she is caught between two generations – the baby – maker generation and the baby boomer one
– on the verge of liberation. The message in *Parachutes and Kisses* is “women who have it all don’t really have it all”.

In *Fear of Flying*, Isadora described sex from a woman’s perspective. In *How to Save Your Own Life* she wanted to make a bright career as a writer and gave us tips for how to save our own life. And in the third novel of the Trilogy she understood that being woman not only means enjoying sex but motherhood is also an integral part of womanhood. A woman who is a mother understands the labour pains and the pains to be a woman. After all the next step of sexual pleasure is motherhood, which gives the woman a high status in the society. To give birth to a life is really a wonderful and great thing.

*Serenissima: A novel of Venice* (1987) reminds us of *Fanny*. Here, Jong has reconstructed a sixteenth – century Venice, superimposing it on a modern Venice, which the protagonist, a film star named Jessica Pruitt, visits for the Venice Film festival. Anticipating starring as Jessica in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, she is transported to sixteenth – century Venice, becoming Shylock’s daughter and living the role she has been obsessed with. Here, she meets and makes love with William Shakespeare, who in Jong’s imagination has traveled to Venice to avoid the plague. There ensues as zany plot of sexual adventure, fights and flights, rescue of
a babe born in a convent to a nun, Christian villagers on the rampage against Jews and finally Jessica’s return to the twentieth century.

Erica Jong has written *Serenissima* in a completely different way unlike her previous novel. It seems that through this novel she wants to celebrate her Jewishness. She wants to prove to the world that she is a woman, a feminist and a Jew. Shylock is a character in Shakespeare’s drama, *Merchant of Venice* and he is a Jew. A money lender who is cruel and demands pound of flesh to Antonio as he fails to repay his debts taken from Shylock. People who have read Shakespeare know Shylock as a heartless fellow. But in *Serenissima* Jong tries to clean his image and give us the other side of the coin by detailing about the Christians and Jews of the sixteenth – century Venice.

Venice for the protagonist Jessica (Jessica is also the name of Shylock’s daughter in *Merchant of Venice*) is not only a city. While describing its greatness Jessica says at the starting of the novel:

*Brava! We also shout, for Venice is ever the fragile labyrinth at the edge of the sea and it reminds us how brief and perilous the journeys of our lives are; perhaps that is why we love it so. City of plagues and brief liaisons, city of lingering deaths and incendiary loves, city of chimeras, nightmares, pigeons, bells. You are the only city in the world whose dialect has a word for the shimmer of canal water reflected on the ceiling of a room. (Serenissima P.No. 1)*
Jessica Pruitt has come to Venice Film Festival for the presentation of her last film Women in Hell and is staying on to begin filming the next Serenissima. Like other heroines of Jong, Jessica too has a disturbed married life. She is not comfortable in the glamorous atmosphere at the festival and thinks that though she has married and married, her heart always leapt in assent. Marriage seemed to be like castling in chess – a useless move that saved neither the King’s life nor the game. Hundreds of years of feminism and that’s where we still are. Its so simple and human. Both sexes had their griefs, their pains – equally as sharp and she pitied both of them.

While Jessica was in Venice she read Shakespeare Vigorously. Maybe because of this she started thinking about the Elizabethan age, Shakespearian characters and his psyche. She thinks that more she read of Elizabethan England, the more she submerged the present into Shakespeare’s past, the more she realized that all the last four hundred years had been a falling away from the feminism that Elizabeth herself embodied. Not for her the confusion between dressing like a man and thinking like a monarch. She was a monarch, but she was also a woman. And, what was her strength above all? Never marrying. Never trying her fortunes to one man. In this particular alone, she outshone (and outlasted) her cousin
Mary who lost her head, and lost her head – the classic plight of
woman. (Serenissima P. No. 39)

Jessica is an actress, is in Venice for a purpose and is reading
Shakespeare thoroughly. Because of all these factors she feels
obsessed by the character. Jessica, Shakespeare portrayed in
Merchant of Venice. She feels that:

Being an actor is certainly a blessing – how else would we
endure the pain of life except by turning it into a play? But
of course it is also a curse because it necessitates a kind of
constant exile. If I feel the history of the Jews in my blood
(I have lately been reading about the Jews of Venice for
my part of Jessica, a part that now I may never play),
perhaps it is because the Jew is the quintessential exile,
like the artist. No wonder neuroticism was in their very
blood. They could never be right. Like poets, like actors
the world needed them – but also needed to disclaim its
need for them. (Serenessima P. No. 57-58)

From this paragraph seems that Jong is fighting with
Shakespeare for potraying Shylock as a cruel Jew and wants to
prove to the world the importance of Jews. On the other hand,
Jessica also tells us about her forefathers. Her grandfather was a rich
person and was guilty about it because he became rich chiefly by
selling poison gas to the government in World War I. And because
of this, he tried to kill himself. Because he thought that somewhere
he was responsible for the devastation caused due to World War I.

Jessica Pruitt catches fever and so is unable to attend the
award ceremony. But the morning newspapers bring her the news
that her film Women in Hell has won no awards. After the Film
Festival is over she roams around the streets of Venice and finds that she was drawn again and again to the ghetto: those curious tall, narrow buildings where the Jews of Venice lived in centuries past, pursuing their traditional occupations of old clothes dealing, alchemy, astrology, medicine, the teaching of music and dance, maritime trade. For the Jews of Venice were not all moneylenders, as Shakespeare had imagined. They pursued a wide variety of occupations even under the multitude of restrictions that the Serenissima imposed on them. As in all of Venice, gambling flourished even in the ghetto – except in times of plague, when the rabbinical warnings against it were heeded because the people suddenly feared the wrath of God. And the Jews of Venice were famous for astrology, alchemy, medicine as well as music and theater. (Serenissima P.No. 105)

After so much bombardment of Venice and Shakespeare, Jessica Pruitt identifies herself as Jessica, Shylock’s daughter and imagines that she has been transported to sixteenth-century Venice. Jessica meets Shakespeare, a young Shakespeare on the streets of Venice. He nearly collides her when she is returning from Synagogue. Jessica, though a Jew is not very religious. She visits the Synagogue for prayers because her father takes her firmly by the arm and drags off. But Shakespeare suggests her that she should perform her duties sincerely. Shakespeare is in need of money and
therefore he visits the ghetto where the Jews live to beg or borrow the money from Jessica’s father, the moneylender.

Erica Jong is trying to give the presentation of religious atmosphere of the sixteenth – century Venice she is providing us with the darker sides of both the religions, Christianity and Judaism. When Jessica goes to the Synagogue the next time she watches the rabbi condemning the Jews who watch heathen festivals like regattas and fireworks, who do not keep the faith of their fathers strictly enough and his sermon becomes repetitious and predictable.

When Shakespeare goes to Shylock for taking debt he gives him five ducats and also tells us the meaning of the name Jessica i.e. she who looks out. Then Shakespeare visits that Jewish ghetto again and again for the sake of Jessica which annoys his friend Lord S. i.e. Southampton. And he takes Shakespeare to a convent on an island. There is a nunnery and a tower on the island where some human names are inscribed. Shakespeare enquiries about those names and Lord S. tell that those were the baptized babies whose souls have gone to heaven from that tower. They were babies of nuns. And they couldn’t be kept alive because they all were bastards. Shakespeare is shattered by this information and suddenly remembers his own children, Hamnet his son and Judith and Susannah his daughters.

After a while Shakespeare sees a pregnant nun approaching towards the tower. Shakespeare asks her name. It is Giulietta and
does not dare to tell her family name. She wants to save her baby but has to kill it because it is also a bastard. She tells Shakespeare:

If only I could save this babe. If only I could send it away to lodge with strangers – if not with my own people. I would even have it baptized Jew, or sold as slave to a Mohammedon to save its budding life. (P. 140)

But Shakespeare is successful in taking her to a hermit’s place for delivering the baby secretly and after the baby is born, Giulietta breathes her last. Now there is a great question before Shakespeare as to where to keep the baby so as to save its life and he takes the help of Jessica. She takes him to a barren wife of great Italian – Jewish banker in the country who is barren; disguised herself as a boy as Portia did in the Merchant of Venice to save Antonio. Shakespeare does not disclose the identity of the child to Jessica inspite of her hard persuasion while glorifying the image of Shylock, Jong has given very beautiful utterance to him such as:

A Jew must oft have money to save his life, but what use is that life to him if he hath no family? Our ancient nation weaves a curious path twixt servility and pride, twixt saving and spending. We would hoard our gold to save our necks, knowing that any moment the Christian curs may come to us. (Serenissima P. No. 151)

The people in the village come to know about the baby, most of them are Christians and they attack the Jews. And finally Jessica returns to the twentieth – century.

In this novel Jong has constructed a different story. She has set a scene for a “more serious examination of what it means to be
an outsider in society – as a Jew, as a woman, as a poet in 16th century and in any century. She has also attacked Christianity by giving a distorted picture of the nuns. After all every religion in the world has its own greatness. Being a rational writer Jong could portray Shakespeare’s greatness and also the greatness of Judaism in a somewhat different manner.

Valentine Cunningham who wrote a review of the novel is an academic and author of several books on literature. Cunningham admired Fanny and believes that in Serenissima Jong deftly replays the hand. He is intrigued by the ‘doubleness’ the novel invokes the old Venice, the modern Venice, the Hollywood actress, the daughter of Shakespeare. According to him this novel is full of masks, actors, costumes and performances. He also praises Jong’s language, finding it one of the ‘chief pleasures’ of her work. He comments further on the effectiveness of her story of life in the Elizabethan ghetto-both ‘moving and arresting’ – and is intrigued by the subtext of the aging starlet in a ‘male – directed celluloid world.’

While commenting on Serenissima Michael Malone says “Forced back to Venie by Shalack (Shylock) Jessica ostensibly dies, floating out of her body to watch Southampton and Shakespeare kiss her in various places as they genuflect before her orifices”. Then alive in her coffin, like Pericles’ wife, she is cast into the sea, where a storm swamps her funeral gondola. She arises, reborn into the 20th
century, to discover that she has dreamed (or lived) the screenplay of 
**Serenissima**. As Ben Jonson might say, its some moldy old tale.

Erica Jong has one fictional heroine, brave, bookish, beautiful and indefatigably libidinous, whether she is *Fanny*, the 18\(^{th}\) century whore – turned – pirate – turned – writer, or Isadora the much married best – selling novelist of the Wing trilogy (a Jew from the west 70s) or the much married international star Jessica Pruitt (a WASP from the East 70s who sometimes thinks 'being a Jew would be so cozy. They seemed to have more blood more poetry, more sensuality than my people’)

By this novel Jong has proved that she can write a historical novel that both honours its tradition with affectionate parody and creates its own full fictional reality. She has perhaps written the story implied by her premise, the story untold in *The Merchant of Venice*.

**CONCLUSION**

To write as a woman is to write from an extreme situation for Erica Jong. Her two novels *Fear of Flying* and *How to Save Your Own Life* end with a kind of symbolic ritual baptism in celebration of the female body. In the first novel *Fear of Flying*, the heroine, Isadora Wing returns to her patient but dull husband after an unsuccessful attempt to find in Adrian Good love the perfect
combination of friend and lover. Stripping off her clothes, she climbs into the bath tub and immersing herself in water up to her neck praises her body by saying ‘A nice body’. It’s a comforting picture which leaves the reader with a sense of well – being.

At the end of the second novel, How to Save Your Own Life, Isadora, now husbandless but firmly clasped in the arms of her young lover, Josh finally experiences sexual satisfaction with him. Paradoxically, she has up to this point been automatically responsive to her husband’s mechanical embrace, but unable to achieve satisfaction with Josh’s more spontaneous and inspired love – making.

Although Jong concentrates on woman’s body, its hungers, its drives, more centrally the novels are the story of a dying marriage and a woman’s odyssey to love. Both books pose the questions: what is it to be a woman? Where lies salvation. In Fear of Flying the heroine examines what it means to be a woman, what alternatives there are to presently – accepted woman roles who is she, why she is afraid and what these questions mean to her writing. Pondering whether the split image of her mother and herself, both terrible and good, causes her to search for approval, Isadora spends her life on a quest, supposedly for the man she really wants but she admits that perhaps the search was really a kind of ritual in which the process was more important than the end. The process turns into
a query about her need for this man. Despite seeing life as contradictory, many – sided, various, funny, tragic and with moments of outrageous beauty, she sees herself as some kind of monster. Acknowledging that women are their own worst enemies, she does not release this guilt by naming it. She berates her cautious good – girl rules one moment and then contradictorily states that she is not a good woman. Having been taught the importance of being extraordinary, she longs to be ordinary until she imagines what being ordinary involves.

Neither husband nor lover provides Isadora with a sense of her own identity or gives her any security. Ultimately, she has to, as all women must, try and fashion her own sense of destiny. In the course of her quest, we get good insights into how difficult this is for women in our society. Accustomed to being dependent first on father then on husband, she is timid about losing dependency on some man. She dreads being alone. So, she marries, and finds out that her loneliness is compounded. Fear of Flying shuttles backward and forward for 311 pages, giving us a woman in Isadora Wing who is part little girl part female rogue, part troubled artist / wife / daughter and more specifically, a woman who gets all kinds of advice from family and men in her life.

How to Save Your Own Life reveals that Isadora is troubled by whether she has succeeded in finding the right words and voice.
Through Isadora, Jong asks: “how should one write about sex? She admits that she is “plagued by the confusion between natural earthiness and licentiousness, the mistaking of openness and lack of pretense for a desire to titillate and shock,” The world of Fear of Flying and its sequel How to Save Your Own Life offers us a heroine who appears to be far more intrepid and confident than any of other women novelists’ characters. Yet, ultimately, we can see that Jong’s Isadora Wing is in the common avowal that man has the power. True, Isadora’s discovery comes out of sexual need and not fear but her conclusion is basically the same, woman is helpless. Man is powerful.

In Fanny the real Fanny Hill can at last stand up (or lie down, most of the time) it turns out that her true identity is that of Fanny Hackabout Jones, a foundling brought up in one of the stately homes of Wiltshire. The most surprising thing about Fanny is that it really does concern the eighteenth – century. Sure enough the novel has strong feminist overtones, but the sexual politics make only qualified sense in contemporary terms and Fanny has more in common with the eighteenth – century blacks she encounters than with Isadora, ‘growing up female in America’ during the 1950s and 1960s. Fanny faces repression not just from cultural or socio – economic circumstances, but as a legal entity. Her mode of escape is
correspondingly violent; she is on the wrong side of so many laws that a few infractions of polite moue’s wouldn’t do much good.

But Erica Jong does not claim absolute historical accuracy, and it is something she can afford to forgo. **Fanny** is at all events a much better book than Cleland’s original *Memoirs*, with their rootless London and repetitive devices. Jong has produced a richer work, with more ideas about the human condition, more tonal unity, a larger command of narrative. For readers who think that popular fiction can be entertaining without being irredeemably silly or vapid, Erica Jong has delivered a convincing piece of positive evidence.

**Parachutes and Kisses** is the third novel of the trilogy of Isadora Wing novels. It speaks of Isadora’s ‘quest for love’ as being what “linked her to other women, what stirred her vitals not only to sex, but also to poetry, what made her – despite her oddness in being famous and affluent – exactly like other women, exactly like her friends, her sisters her readers.” But it is a quest centered not in her heart and mind but in her reproductive organs. There is a distressing self – serving quality to this book, an annoying arrogance, the giddy presumption that Isadora is speaking not only to woman but for women, for all women everywhere. In one of he chapter headings, Erica Jong quotes Muriel Rukeyser’s lines ‘what would happen if one woman were to tell the truth about her life? The world would split open,’ a perfectly permissible literary hyperbole, with its
promise of sensitivity, honesty and insights. But what are the truths of Isadora’s life? The body boom generation is middle-aged; steep driveways are hell in the snow; children get hurt when parents divorce.

Paractues and Kisses has no fire at all. Isadora tells us that ‘Life has no plot’. Certainly, Erica Jong writes tellingly of nature’s cruel paradox, which has women reaching their sexual peak just when their men are being eviscerated by midlife crises but rather than try to deal sympathetically and insightfully with that dilemma, Isadora’s solution is to avoid the problem entirely by seeking out ever younger men. Josh of the second book was six years Isadora’s junior, Bean of this book is younger than Isadora by 14 years.

After Fanny Hackabout – Jones’s willingness to kiss and tell on Pope, Hogarth and Swift in Fanny, Jessica in Serenissima is ready to have an affair with our own Shakespeare.

Whether in designer clothes or disguised as a 16th century boy, Jessica wears – like Isadora, like Fanny, her heart on her sleeve and thereby suffers: her ‘openness and trust abused,’ her lust for life misinterpreted, her hurts unappreciated. She fears as they did that she may have loved not wisely but too well. ‘Love was my addiction.’ Jessica confesses, slips into a fevered reverie of magic rings, ancient crones, mysterious potions and literary pornography.
As she proved in *Fanny* a picaresque of intelligence, buoyant invention and wonderful energy, Erica Jong can write a historical novel that both honors its tradition and affectionate parody and creates its own full fictional reality. The Renaissance has not served her as well as did the 18th century. Perhaps has she really written the story implied by her premise, the story untold in *The Merchant of Venice*, Jong would have found the plot worthy of her careful research, her rich descriptive facility and her deep love of the period.

Erica Jong has one fictional heroine, brave, bookish, beautiful and priestess of the Great Goddess, whether that heroine is Fanny, the 18th century character or Isadora the much married best selling novelist of the Wing trilogy (a Jew from the west 70s) or the much – married international star Jessica Priutt. All the heroines suffer due to their womanhood but on the other hand also extract earthly pleasures. They represent modern woman. Her plights, sorrows and also tremendous capacities. Erica Jong is always criticized for her free thoughts and writings on female sexuality. Yes, it is a dominant factor in all of her works. But that does not mean that she is a porne or cheap writer. Apart from this one factor there are many more ones on which she focuses. Quest for identity, struggle for existence, making a bright career in the age of male domination, celebration of motherhood and above all preservation of Jewishness, Jewish identity are also the elements on which she writes extensively in her
five novels which I have considered for writing the present dissertation and therefore I dare to say that Erica Jong is a Jewish American as well as a feminist writer.

While talking with Lynn Spampinato in an interview on 19th April 1994 Jong presented her views on feminism in the following manner:

I think we went through a period when we had a tremendous split in the feminist movement, between those women who believed that feminism should reach out and embrace homemakers, women with children, women who didn’t have the posture of separatists, and those feminists who were very hard line and hard core, and didn’t want to open the tent to everyone. And the split I perceived to be one of the problems of the backlash era. The next generation, the third – wave feminists, are coming along, and they are opening the net wider. I think that’s good.

So, this is all about Erica Jong’s five novels. Feminism surely is necessary in today’s world, but as far as I think feminism is a state of mind. One who believes in feminism is close to the elements which make the society sound and healthy and feminism also goes hand in hand with humanism.
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