Chapter 4

Gender Wars

Love itself is only a desire for possession; courtship is combat and mating is mastery.

Nietzsche (qtd. in Durant 421)

Moving on from the world of blood and gore that the State is shown to inhabit, the reader, expecting to find that at least the world of genders shall be gentler, gets a rude shock. It is as much filled with equations of power as the most political of relationships. For instance, in *The Fall* by Albert Camus, when the woman that Clamence takes out for an evening of pleasure passes disparaging comments on his masculinity, the wounded ego of Clamence feels so provoked that he takes her out once again and stops only when she cries out, begs in fact, to stop (85). Even this small episode demonstrates that matters other than sexual gratification are implicated in the relationship between man and woman. What the traditional paean to love and sexuality conveniently forget to mention are the decisive games of dominance involved in sexual relationships.
In Roy's *The God of Small Things* matters of caste inequality compromise the sexual relation of Ammu and Velutha and though there is no overt issue of dominance involved in their relationship, there is always the unasked, looming question of caste superiority trying to answer which claims the life of Velutha. However, only two of the texts of Kundera and one of Atwood are taken up for discussion in this chapter not only because they have the issue of gender relationship at the heart of their matter but also because their construction of gender politics is from contrasting perspectives.

To an observation of Philip Roth that in Kundera's fiction "the political events are governed by the same laws as private happenings," Kundera replies, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*:

> When a big power wants to deprive a small country of its national consciousness it uses the method of organized forgetting [. . .]. A nation which loses awareness of its past gradually loses its self. And so the political situation has brutally
illuminated the ordinary metaphysical problem of forgetting that we face all the time, every day, without paying any attention. **Politics unmasksthe metaphysics of private life, private life unmasksthe metaphysics of politics.**

(234-35) (Emphasis added)

The personal "forgetting" gets correlated to the erasure of collective memory which nations and governments are guilty of, thereby establishing, if not a complete identity, at least a symmetry, between the personal and the political. It is intended to argue here that a similar symmetry is discernible in the relations between the genders, and also in the courtship behaviour that is attendant on the sex act. To extend the analogy of the earlier metaphor of "forgetting," just as dominion and power are the factors responsible for the annexation of a smaller by a bigger power, the same factors are also responsible in governing the relations between the genders.

This would not appear to be such an unusual concept if it is read in the context of Kate Millett's
groundbreaking book, *Sexual Politics*, in which she says:

A disinterested examination of our system of sexual relationship must point out that the situation between the sexes now, and throughout history, is a [ ...] relationship of dominance and subordinance. What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalised nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females. Through this system a most ingenious form of "interior colonisation" has been achieved. It is one which tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring. However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of
clues to mapping the misty region called feminist politics.

The three women feeling aggrieved enough to form a sort of coalition against her is testimony that they consider her a common enemy: "They don't have much in common except the catastrophe that brought them together, if Zenia can be called a catastrophe" (31). The nature of crime which makes them band together is sexual: through sheer magnetism or biological pull or by whatever name one chooses to call it, Zenia takes from each one of the women her man: from Tony, West, from Charis, Billy and from Roz, Mitch. More than the appropriation of money (from Tony and Roz), it is the theft of their men, which rankles the hardest to them.

Is it her sexual overabundance that makes Zenia take away their men? Consoling Tony over the desertion of West, Roz gives her a sample of Zenia's promiscuity as reported by the undergraduate song: "Trouble with your penia? Try Zenia" (200). Or is it perhaps the challenge of
ensnaring men who belong to other women, a kind of kleptomania of men, for the simple thrill of taking what doesn’t belong to her? As Tony says: "Zenia likes hunting. Zenia likes hunting anything. She relishes it" (40). Or is she cocking her snook at society through her transgressions? As Zenia says to Charis, "I was totally anti-bourgeois [...]. A real bohemian fellow-traveller" (254).

The multiplicity explanations, all provisional, as to what "drives" Zenia into doing what she does instead of a single, "totalising" explanation makes her a postmodern anti-heroine transforming the fragments of her history into "herstory." And the way her "real" identity is kept elusive right up to the end makes her a slippery phenomenon to theorise. Was there someone called Zenia -- is a question that remains unanswered: "Out of such hints and portents, Zenia devised herself. As for the truth about her, it lies out of reach, because -- according to records, at any rate -- she was never born" (518). This denial of reality to Zenia, on the other hand, might stem from an unconscious desire to suppress the unbridled sexuality which men are
usually considered symbols of. Roz calls West a "pig" for crossing the floor to vote for Zenia: "Oh honey," she said; then, with a newfound knowledge, both personal and political, "Men are such pigs!" (209). The "pig" is not only a symbol of male chauvinism but also sexual uncleanness; and however deviant Zenia is in her sexual behaviour, her unreality masks her from such accusations as are usually levelled against men.

If Nietzsche considered woman a complex puzzle for which "pregnancy" is the only solution (Reader 276), Zenia seems to have eluded this male trap by undergoing hysterectomy: "They did an operation," says Zenia. "They took out -- they did a hysterectomy, I can never have babies [...]") (248-49). Escaping from the entrapment of pregnancy gives power to Zenia first in securing the sympathy of Charis and then in ensnaring Billy. In a broader configuration it gives Zenia an absolute power over men who become addicted to her endless sexual games as Billy and Mitch discover much later and much to their cost.
Zenia's power over men and women with whom she comes into contact assumes various forms ranging from subtle manipulation of their finer feelings to a naked exhibition of brute power. With Charis she puts on the disguise of a battered woman bearing visible signs of male brutality: bruised lips and blackened eyes. But the way she manipulates West into giving her utmost sexual pleasure is masterly: she becomes a "frigid" woman because of sexual abuse suffered in childhood: "Zenia was frigid," he [West] said. "She couldn't help it. She was sexually abused in childhood, by a Greek Orthodox priest. I felt sorry for her" (57). Tony receives this news with utter incredulity because she knows Zenia's appetite for sex was nearly insatiable: "It does not at all accord with certain confidences Zenia once saw fit to share with Tony on the subject of sex. Sex as a huge plum pudding, a confection of rich delights, whose pleasures she would enumerate while Tony listened, shut out, nose to the glass" (457-58). But when Zenia is angered, or thwarted in her designs, as when Tony denies re-entry to her in her home,
she exhibits a fury comparable to "the smashing of a closed fist" (466).

Zenia selects her weapon depending on the "target" in view. With Roz, who has a sense of alienation on account of her Catholic upbringing and parental hybridisation, Zenia "chooses" to be a "victim" of the Holocaust, smuggled out of Nazi Germany just as the jaws of death close on her "mischling" parents (406). Roz’s husband, Mitch, becomes so besotted with her that he leaves his wife and children to live with Zenia. His dependence on and sexual passion for Zenia are great enough to drive him to suicide when Zenia kicks him out. The magic of Zenia on men makes Roz wonder what could be the secret of it:

What is her secret? How does she do it? Where does it come from, her undeniable power over men? How does she latch hold of them, break their stride, trip them up and then so easily turn them inside out? It must be something very simple and obvious [ . . . ]." (428-29)
But what men believe to be the elixir of youth offered by Zenia turns out to be, on closer inspection, nothing but tap water, though it hardly stops them from pursuing her (429).

In a conversation with Tony, Zenia reveals her interpretation of the world as made up of rulers/ruled and in which nothing but "fear" works:

'Which would you rather have?' said Zenia. 'From other people: love, respect, or fear?'

'Respect,' said Tony. 'No. Love.'

'Not me' said Zenia. 'I'd choose fear.'

'Why?' said Tony.

'It works better,' said Zenia. 'It is the only thing that works.' (445)

If Zenia's power over the three women is external, like the authority of the boss over his subordinates, some forms or means of resistance could be formulated. Indeed the women form an alliance whose very formation is the joint recognition of Zenia's threat to them. But this
threat is not merely the externalised variety but a power internalised, like that of a virus incubating in the host. In a love/hate relationship this kinship with Zenia is stoked and kept alive. In other words, all of them recognise that Zenia is their “other,” whom they love, or at any rate admire, but also feel a need to suppress. It is this ambivalence that gives Zenia much of her power. And the fact that Zenia has sexual relationship with all the three men (West, Billy and Mitch) on whom the women make uncertain claims not only provides an interesting sexual triangle but also serves to point out the complementarity that Zenia provides. She is the “other” that the three women lack, evoking, simultaneously, admiration and fear.

Tony, who has always fantasized about her “unborn twin,” sees Zenia filling that space:

Now Zenia is back, and hungry for blood.
Not for West’s blood: West is an instrument merely. The blood Zenia wants to drink is Tony’s, because she hates Tony and always has. Tony could
see that hatred in her eyes today, at the Toxique. There is no rational explanation for such hatred, but it doesn’t surprise Tony. She seems to have been familiar with it for a long time. *It is the rage of her unborn twin [ . . . ].* (214-15) (Emphasis added)

This is where she comes closest to identifying with Zenia but this identification is not on the scales of unproblematic empathy but one that contains mixed seeds of love/hatred, admiration/fear and attraction/repulsion.

Charis was Karen before she changed her name. Her Uncle Vern’s repeated sexual assaults and the resultant self-disgust she felt compel her to change everything about her, beginning with her name. The Karen whom she thinks she has banished from her life forever resurfaces as Zenia: "Karen is coming back, Charis can’t keep her away anymore [. . .]. *She no longer looks like Karen.* *She looks like Zenia*" (299) (Emphasis added).
Roz, unlike two of her introverted friends, is a genial, successful businesswoman. But Zenia’s aura is so strong, her histrionic talent for deception so great, that even Roz feels moments of identification with her: “She would like to be someone else. But not just anyone. Sometimes -- for a day at least, or even for an hour, or if nothing else was available then five minutes would do -- sometimes she would like to be Zenia” (443) (Emphasis added). This desperate craving for Zenia, in each one of the women, signals a lack which only donning the Zenia-like mask would adequately recompense.

If Zenia evokes a paradoxical mix of envy/fear in the women, envy because she represents a femininity they themselves lack and fear because of the threat of dispossession of the men they love, what sort of power does Zenia have over the men? Or, rather, what sort of consequence does this power entail? Just as it is possible to speculate on the identity of the felon from the nature of felony committed, what Zenia does with her male
conquests may offer clues to the nature of power she desires and exerts.

In each one of these cases the power she wields, initially, is enticing and obsessive but in the final run proves to be damaging to the man and his male ego. It is the extent of the damage that differs from man to man. When Tony finally manages to ask the reason for West's desertion of her, he is candid enough to admit Zenia's low estimation of him which must have certainly hurt his self-esteem: "Well, to be honest, she kicked me out. She said she found me boring [. . .]" (458). In this context, it is worth pointing out Zenia's own estimation of men in general which she voices in a conversation with Tony: "Listen to me, Antonia," says Zenia seriously. "All men are warped. This is something you must never forget [. . .]" (150). It seems that Zenia's fury against men gathers intensity as she graduates from one conquest to the other. With Billy, the American draft-dodger and lover of Charis, her seduction smoothly turns into betrayal: Billy first betrays his mates and Zenia in turn betrays him. The greater the man's
desire for her, the bigger seems to be his fall. Commenting on the nature of theft that Zenia has perpetrated on her husband, Roz says: "Zenia has stolen something from him, the one thing he always kept safe before, from all women, even from Roz. Call it his soul" (428). The casual way Zenia tosses him out of her life is a physical and psychological blow to Mitch and it is "come-uppance" (450) for all the philandering he had done earlier. He seems to physically shrink in size and it is this kind of emasculation that is in store for men falling into the trap so carefully, casually laid out by Zenia. Tony imagines that Zenia "probably has a row of men's dicks nailed to her wall, like stuffed animal heads" (317).

In their college days, when Zenia ran out of money (which was all too frequent) she had sought Tony's help, sometimes threatening her with exposure for writing her term-paper. On one such occasion, she complained of the impecunious condition of West (with whom she was living), and, more specifically of his "lute": "If I told him how much we owe he'd go out and sell his lute, no
question; I mean what else does he have?” (195).
Significantly, it is this same lute that she pawns before she leaves West to his fate. Again, in a significant move, it is Tony who recovers possession of the lute and, also, the flutist (197).
If the lute were a phallic symbol, Zenia’s theft of it is a revealing act, because she knows how much the lute means to West, a scholar in music.

Zenia’s power over the women operates in material and psychological formulations. Some more instances of the material manifestation of this power can be cited. The card she deals shows her clear assessment of the situation so as to make her, every time she plays, come up trumps, because, as Roz says, all the games of Zenia are "rigged" (429).

When Tony “helps” Zenia by writing a term paper for her, the least she expects is blackmail but Zenia has the knack of doing the unexpected. Even years after the incident Zenia darkly hints at the possibility of exposure stirring fears of academic scandal (466). Charis is protecting a
draft-dodger, keeping him from "the long arm of the law" but Zenia senses her vulnerability and uses it to separate Billy from her. As for Roz, it is her son that Zenia threatens, not only with seduction but also with the threat of arrest for possessing heroin. Though these threats turn out to be hollow (the son is gay, it is Zenia who has the contraband), they sound ominous enough to make Roz accede to the terms of her blackmail.

What does the death of Zenia signify? Or, to rephrase the question, why does the author consider that Zenia's death is necessary? What purpose does it serve and what it does not? Most certainly Zenia does not "represent" the feminism of the naïve variety, which believes in an unproblematic assertion of woman's right in the world of patriarchy. Ann Hulbert endorses this viewpoint in her essay on the Web titled "Seduction and Betrayal-The Robber Bride:"

Atwood has long been tempted by an alternative, more heretical view, one that suddenly has cachet in the '90s: maybe the unsisterly woman is simply
ambitious, avid for power and pleasure and ready to plow down more supine females -- and males -- in her path. A creature with that kind of defiant drive shakes up an important feminist stereotype: women as collective victims.

She often treats men as well as women with arrogance and deception blurring whatever little distinction is left between her values and the values of patriarchy. For instance, the way she runs the women’s magazine *WiseWomanWorld* is noted approvingly by the board of directors, who are mostly men: “She has *schlep*, she has -- the men in the board are fond of saying -- balls” (415). In other words Zenia succeeds by adopting the values of “phallogocentrism” (Klages), which not only privileges the male but also his writings. The changes she introduces in the magazine, beginning with its name (she changes it to *Woman*) reveal her shrewd analysis of such a magazine’s marketability, besides her own value preferences. She removes the intellectual heavy dosage, introduces cosmetics and fashion, and, of course,
sex. The early feminist issues like gender discrimination are skipped and what the magazine loses in character, it makes up in sale. Aren't these the same values that Zenia has been living for and re-presenting? Indeed they are but Zenia is always more than the sum of her parts. Where she exceeds these values is in her "knowingness," her awareness of reducing woman to the stereotype of male fantasy but with a clever clause inserted in small print that miraculously converts not the woman, but the man, into an "accessory." Zenia and Roz confront each other in the boardroom over the changes Zenia has introduced in the magazine:

'I'm not talking intellectuals,' says Zenia. 'I'm talking about the average magazine-buying woman. According to our demographics, they want to read about how to look. Oh, and sex, of course. Sex with the right accessories.'

'What are the right accessories?' asks Roz pleasantly. She thinks she will choke.
'Men,' says Zenia. (417)

Kundera, in a brilliant metaphor of "the hammer and the worker," neatly sums up a similar situation, wherein a woman, from being merely an object, suddenly finds herself empowered.

The male glance has often been described. It is commonly said to rest coldly on a woman, measuring, weighing, evaluating, selecting her -- in other words, turning her into an object.

What is less commonly known is that a woman is not completely defenceless against that glance. If it turns her into an object, then she looks back at the man with the eyes of an object. It is as though a hammer had suddenly grown eyes and stared up at the worker pounding a nail with it. When the worker sees the evil eye of the hammer, he loses his self-assurance and slams it on his thumb. (Book 209)
Far from being the "plaything" of men, Zenia converts men into playthings of women. She might be accused of playing by the same rules that patriarchy is guilty of, but in the battle of the sexes, it is time to even the score and if Mitch (Roz’s husband) becomes a besotted victim of this deadly game, Zenia shows no mercy for him (494) because in such a predatory game, roles could be easily reversed.

The feminists assure Roz that very soon “the other woman” would be among them but Roz wonders why it hasn’t happened yet (415). If Zenia is the perpetual “other woman” (“the robber bride”), the old brand of feminism has failed to co-opt and assimilate her (likes) into a grand alliance against the male order. Zenia’s fight is more in the order of the guerrilla warfare, hitting and hurting as opportunities arose directing her fire and ire now against men, now against women but whose ultimate objective is the promotion of her own interests.
Zenia is a one-woman demolition squad and what she demolishes are not only male egos but also feminist fantasies. Neither the intellectual acumen of Tony, nor the muddled spiritualism of Charis, nor the managerial skills of Roz are adequate defence against her onslaught. If Zenia were awarded life, she would be like a postmodernist hawk among the modernist pigeons. Zenia’s identity has to be pieced together (and none of it may turn out to be “true”) because, even in the fictional world, it is not rooted to a fixity: to Charis, she is a child born of Rumanian gypsy parents, to Roz, she is the Jewish child born in the troubled times of the Holocaust and the author admits no records of her birth and death exist. Zenia’s death signals the process of containment symbolically represented by the urn that contains her ashes. But just as the urn breaks free trailing a cloud of ashes, Zenia’s containment is done but just barely, and given the slightest chance, she will return to torment them again.

Zenia is a mosaic of identities pieced together from various sources and perspectives, defying
totalising explanation, following no agenda other than her own, politicising her personal relationships to augment her power over others. Kundera's protagonists, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *Laughable Loves*, certainly seek a dominant relationship with their partners but in doing so, they seem to transmit a covert political message. In fact, in Kundera's fiction the boundary between the personal and the political always collide and coalesce yielding new permutations.

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the publication of which cost Kundera his Czech citizenship, is certainly a political novel and it has been comprehended as such in the chapter titled "The Power of Terror." But what is usually overlooked is its no less intense interrogation of personal relationships, especially between the two genders. Since Kundera sees sexuality as the "deepest region of life" he finds revealed in it "the essence of characters" (237, 236). To Kundera sexuality becomes the site where all contestations take place, like, for instance, between the absurd and the rational, between power and subordination.
Nowhere is this sexual politics more obvious than in the innocuously titled chapter "Mother" in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. Very early in their relationship, Karel and Marketa, husband and wife, decided to play the roles of unfaithful lover and injured innocent respectively. Kundera observes:

Every love relationship is based on unwritten conventions rashly agreed upon by the lovers during the first weeks of their love. On the one hand, they are living a sort of dream; on the other, without realizing it, they are drawing up the fine print of their contracts like the most hard-nosed of lawyers. O lovers! Be wary during those perilous first days! If you serve the other party breakfast in bed, you will be obliged to continue same in perpetuity or face charges of animosity and treason. (36)

Since Karel has appropriated the role of the philanderer, Marketa is forced to be the "better"
one of the couple, which is, of course, a tiresome role to play all the time. It is Eva who becomes the third party in this uneasy alliance. She has neither the guilt of Karel nor the burden of Marketa. Finding Karel attractive, she takes the initiative to form a liaison with him. Years later she befriends Marketa too thereby creating a sexual alliance of the three. But Karel finds that making love to two women is more tiresome than exciting, not for want of technique but because of the fear of hurting delicate egos:

But it hadn't been a pleasurable evening. In fact, it had been downright gruelling - two women kissing and hugging in his presence, but never for a minute forgetting they were rivals and constantly checking up on which he paid more attention to, which one he was more tender with. He was careful to weigh every word, his every touch, and felt more like a diplomat than a lover - scrupulously attentive, considerate.
courteous and fair. (39) (Emphasis added)

The passionate sexual act is now changed into a balancing political act ("felt more like a diplomat") and the bedroom suddenly takes on the appearance of a boardroom in which a lot of tightrope manoeuvres are performed to show his attention, courtesy and fairness. It is this smooth transition from the intensely personal to the political that marks the best of Kundera's fiction. And once Karel has successfully made love to both the women, he feels like a grandmaster that has defeated not one, but two opponents on adjoining chess boards: "I'm Bobby Fischer." Then he burst out laughing and shouted it. "I'm Bobby Fischer! I'm Bobby Fischer!" (47). [Bobby Fischer is the enigmatic American chess champion who brought the Russian domination of the game to an end in the 70s].

The sense of power that Karel feels towards the women is unmistakable. When Zenia says in The Robber Bride that she prefers "fear" to all other feelings because it is the only thing that
"works" (445) she is expressing a similar desire for power. If Kundera's lovers act like calculating chess players, this may well be a pointer that the seemingly spontaneous love plays may conceal a determined bid to seek positional and strategic advantages, to establish a set of behavioural norms advantageous to themselves. Commenting on the Nietzschean concept of the agonistic character of human existence, Hollingdale says:

Life is a contest, and the agonistic character of human existence extends into fields where one would not necessarily expect to find it. That the *agon* was the model for all human activity had already suggested itself to Nietzsche during his studies of Greek culture and civilization, where it seemed to him to stand out clearly as a fact.

(78)

_Agon_, which in Greek means contest, through which a person asserts his domination of the other, may
well characterise the sexual relationships too, as evident from the fictions of Kundera and Atwood.

The objectification of woman by which man upholds his privileged position is also found in another instance, when Jan, a Kundera protagonist in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, compares a woman's face to a television screen, faithfully recording and reflecting all her feelings even as she is made love to:

> The thing he always found most interesting about a woman during intercourse was her face. The motions of her body seemed to set a large reel of film rolling, and her face was the television screen the film was projected onto. It was an exciting film full of turbulence, expectation, excitement, pain, cries, tenderness and spite. (195)

Shorn of all the vestiges of romanticism, the woman's face is reduced to a TV screen and the coldly analytical male voice, in the manner of a TV commentator, makes a catalogue of feelings
reflected: "turbulence, expectation, excitement, pain, cries, tenderness and spite." The woman's body is anatomised and there is a dichotomy between the body that experiences and the mind that registers. When Zenia says in The Robber Bride that all men are "warped" (150) and goes on to compare them to "right accessories" (415) for the sexual fulfilment of women, there is an undeniable air of old scores being settled.

In his introduction to Laughable Loves, Philip Roth says, "Erotic play and power are the subjects frequently at the centre of the stories, that Kundera calls, collectively, Laughable Loves" (xiv). Of particular concern to this study will be the first and the last in this collection titled "The Hitchhiking Game" and "Edward and God" respectively.

What starts as a little game of role-playing between a young man and his beloved, suddenly assumes seriousness sabotaging their relationship in "The Hitchhiking Game" (3-25). They are on a pleasure trip in a sports car, when, almost
unconsciously, they start playing the game of a young driver picking up a hitchhiker and both play their roles to such perfection that they feel their old identities slipping away to be replaced by their assumed ones. While it gives them freedom to explore new avenues of forbidden sexuality (the young man as someone who picks up girls from the streets and the hitchhiker as a prostitute), they find getting back to their earlier terms of relationship impossible. Nietzsche, discussing how the mask one dons gradually “constructs” one’s self, says:

If someone obstinately and for a long time wants to appear something it is in the end hard for him to be anything else. The profession of almost every man, even that of the artist, begins with hypocrisy, with an imitation from without, with a copying of what is most effective. He who is always wearing the mask of friendly countenance must finally acquire a power over benevolent moods without which the impression of
friendliness cannot be obtained -- and finally these acquire power over him, he
is benevolent. (Reader 149)

A similar idea of "sex role stereotyping" is also found in Atwood's *The Robber Bride*, when Mitch, Roz's handsome husband, forces her into acceptable "sex roles:"

He had made it clear by then that there were jumpers and jumpees, kissers and kissees, and he was to be the former and she the latter.

Sex role stereotyping, thinks Roz now, having learned a thing or two in the interim. The cunning bastard. (352)

"Sex role stereotyping," which relates to the larger question of construction of one's sexual identity, is done with an eye on power and configures neatly with issues of dominance/subordinance.

"Edward and God" (205-42) in Kundera's *Laughable Loves* reinforces the concept of persona transforming itself into personality but it does it in
an oblique, convoluted manner. Edward’s attempt to seduce Alice, a believer, persuades him of the necessity to pretend belief in God. But in a Communist regime someone professing faith in God is asking for trouble, and soon Edward, a teacher, finds himself facing the school board, who would not believe that he was only “faking” belief. The whole drama takes a farcical turn when the directress, charmed by Edward’s youthfulness, tries to seduce him rather than “re-educate” him. But her ugliness puts off Edward, who, in cunning born of desperation, tells her, “Kneel” and “Pray, so that God may forgive us” (234). Even as the naked woman starts praying, the absolute power he has over her gives Edward the stirrings of tumescence and saves him from dismissal:

As she uttered the words of the prayer, she glanced up at him as if he were God Himself. He watched her with growing pleasure. In front of him was kneeling the directress, being humiliated by a subordinate; in front of him a naked revolutionary was being humiliated by
prayer; in front of him a praying lady was being humiliated by her nakedness.

This threefold image of degradation intoxicated him and something unexpected suddenly happened: his body revoked its passive resistance. Edward was excited!

As the directress said, 'And lead us not into temptation,' he quickly threw off all his clothes. When she said, 'Amen,' he violently lifted her off the floor and dragged her onto the couch. (234-35)

If the affair with the directress unexpectedly turns into a pleasurable experience for Edward, his long-awaited intercourse with Alice becomes a damp squib. Thinking that Edward has martyred himself by his refusal to give up his faith, the girl, contradicting her earlier avowal against fornication, consents to have sex with him but her easy acquiescence founded on an error disturbs Edward, and in "disgust" and "physical revulsion" (241) he gives her up. If Edward sits contemplating God in a
church in the final pages, it indicates the power of
the mask asserting itself over his earlier
scepticism.

What the three novels do is to situate the
circulation of power within the locus of gender and
sexual politics. What the earlier fictions have done,
which the postmodern fiction refuses to do, is to
sublimate this power as love as it conveniently
ignores all uncomfortable questions of power. The
empowerment of the female, which is what
feminism is all about, does not, contrary to
expectations, bring about a "better" relation
between the genders: it only conveys the message
that with the transfer of power from one gender to
the other all the excesses that possession of power
entails also get transferred.