CHAPTER-II

*DELTA WEDDING:*

Family and the Southern Tradition
**Delta Wedding** takes place in September 1923 in the Yazoo–Mississippi Delta and traces the frantic preparation of Battle and Ellen Fairchild to marry off their daughter Dabney, the unpredictable belle of Shellmound Plantation. The whole tribe of Fairchild’s, including aunts and great aunts, regret Dabney’s wildness for Troy Flavin, the laconic overseer from Tishomingo country, but their dismay at this unlikely pairing remains an undertone of gibe and innuendo rather than confrontation with the deliberate hill man. The novel takes a little more than a weeks’ time and ends with the return of Dabney and Troy Flavin from their honeymoon in New Orleans. The outward focus of *Delta Wedding* upon marriage is typical of the large body of the plantation romance to which it belongs. But the inner focus of the *Delta Wedding* – its subtle expression of sensibility, its lyric way of seeing – is far removed from the sentimentality and partisanship that historically define the literary plantation. Indeed, Welty’s measurement of this distance is one of the more important ways in which the sureness of *Delta Wedding* is achieved. Not every reviewer in 1948 recognized this quality, but over the years Elizabeth Bower’s prediction has been borne out: “I
should like to think that *Delta Wedding* may, in time, come to be recognized as a classic.”²

In part at least, the formal sureness and integration of *Delta Wedding* may reflect the quite different literary situation of Eudora Welty. Indeed, as unfriendly reviews note, in 1946 Welty was writing against the grain of postwar fiction infused with resurgent realism. Perhaps, Welty’s literary situation can be fleshed out a bit more fully by recalling one of her own reviews of the period. This review discloses, without very much surprise, Welty’s deep understanding of the ways and means of lyrical narrative. This story, Welty notes, “Seems as perfect, and as functional for all is beauty, as spider webs.”³

In *Delta Wedding*, Eudora Welty traps the same within the sensuous web of the Delta itself and the Fairchild myth of bounty and happiness. In the immediate background, of course, is Welty’s own subtle narrative practice in *A Curtain of Green* (1941) and *The Wide Net* (1943). At a further remove are the conventions, and the models too, of an indirect, oblique art of modern fiction that Welty understands critically and brilliantly adapts to her own special needs. In a sense, her literary situation helps to ensure that there will be no
sound of “breaking and falling”, no sharp divides of presentation in *Delta Wedding*. The ‘truth’ of Welty’s first novel does not reach us in “an exhausted and chaotic condition” but with the severity of mature treatment.

Dabney and Troy marry at Shellmound Plantation. This is not to flout the minister, Mr. Rondo, who knows too well his modest stature in the Delta, but to clear the way for the most important moment in the book. The dancers cover “the downstairs” and then move outdoors to begin a performance of glory whose deepest effect is reserved for Ellen and her brother-in-law George Fairchild. George, the Memphis uncle, the lawyer, only recently reconciled to Robbie Reid, his runaway wife, approaches Ellen through a field of dancers. As he looked in her direction, all at once she saw into his mind as if he had come dancing out of it leaving it unlocked, laughingly inviting her to the unexpected intimacy.

Ellen possesses George in this moment in a way that grants him perfect freedom. She knows the uniqueness of his acts, “springing” as they do “from long, dark, previous, abstract thought. She knows that it was “inevitable” that George “should stand on the trestle” with his niece Maureen, not resisting his fate, and it followed too that he was
capable of the same kind of love for the “ordinary” Little Robbie Reid. As George makes his way, “smiling” through the dancers, he appears to Ellen as infinitely simple and infinitely complex. In his wide sympathy, “he had and he gave, the golden acquiescence”\(^4\) This moment has a long fuse that extends beyond Delta Wedding, but its truth, serene and unruffled, is a formal property of the novel itself, and as such reveals Welty’s superb control.

The plot of *Delta Wedding* is not, of course, without its attempted manipulation, as the Fairchilds approach George, the ‘best loved’ uncle, with one or another of their “shimmering” designs – that he be the lover, protector, scapegoat, and conscience of the family; or at the very least that he add to its store of comic reminiscing. Welty’s plot refutes these designs without necessarily denying the underlying truth of their characterizations. It succeeds by reticence. George Fairchild is typically seen in “half-light” or “blurred profile” and is only cast in retrospective action by family memory and story-telling – principally his dalliance with fate on Dry Greek testle. Laura McRaven, the nine year old cousin visiting from Jackson, knows from immediate experience “that it was right” for George to “stand apart.”\(^5\) Welty knows this on formal grounds and agrees in effect, with Bowen that “certain characters gain in importance and magnetism by being
only seen. Bowen goes on to conclude in the superb ‘Notes’ that such reserve makes a character. George’s magnetism is essential to the plot, especially as it crests in the wedding celebration, but Ellen’s intense consciousness redirects and complicates the lines of force in Delta Wedding. Their interplay – George, portentous and vaunting: Ellen, modest, practical, rooted in the family – directs the plot to its "destination" and reveals an author who has recognized all the possibilities of her subject.

In its domestic story of a White Mississippi aristocratic Delta family, *Delta Wedding* can be considered as a novel deeply engaged with history because of its relationship with two world wars of the century. The story is woven with the preparations of marriage of Fairchild’s 17 year old daughter Dabney with Troy, who is the manager of the plantation.

Nine year old Laura Mc Raven comes to Delta country from Jackson to Shellmound, on yellow dog train, to see her dead mother’s people, the Fairchilds. She comes to the marriage of her cousin Dabney second daughter of Uncle Battle and Ellen, with Troy Flavin who is thirty-four years old. Her chief regret is that she can’t
participate in the wedding party because of her mother’s recent death, although the preparations for the marriage seem to be exciting.

The whole Fairchild family assembles for the wedding but they are not happy about Dabney’s marriage because Troy is inferior to them in social status. They do not care to disclose this to Dabney as it is her own choice to marry Troy. They feel that they would not miss her after her marriage. This makes Laura perplexed of their relationships. On the other hand Uncle Battle’s oldest daughter, Shelly, has chosen to be a nun, even though the entire Fairchild family disapproves of her decision. Uncle George, younger brother of Uncle Battle, married Robbie Ried beneath himself. Their marital life proves to be an unhappy one.

Robbie had deserted her husband because he risked his life to save his brother’s demented daughter Maureen whose leg gets caught in the trestle. George arrives alone for the wedding festivities because his wife has left him because of the trestle event. The emblematic heroic act of George is reiterated again and again in the novel because George is considered as a hero. The essentials of this incident are as follows. A group of Fairchilds find themselves on a Railway trestle when the train, the yellow dog approaches them. All but Maureen, a
child of nine who has caught her shoe in the trestle and George who is trying to free her are still on the track. But at the last moment the train stops and a great tragedy is averted. This incident finds an important place in the history of the Fairchild’s family. The Fairchilds hide this incident that they regard George as the personification of God for the entire family.

Shelly, the oldest daughter of Battle Fairchild understands that her father’s family has built a wall against the outside world. The typical southern aristocratic pride prevents them from mingling with Troy’s people who are socially beneath them. The preparations for wedding gain momentum. There is an unusual hubbub among women who have gathered for the wedding. One of the flower girls, a participant of a show at Dabney’s marriage, falls sick due to chicken-pox. Laura is substituted as a flower girl of the wedding party. Troy’s mother sends quilts for their wedding. Fairchild’s being an aristocratic family, belittle him and his poor family background. In spite of all this Dabney marries Troy.

After the marriage Dabney and Troy decide to live at Marmion, an estate owned by the Fairchild family. Dabney wishes to lead a secure life after her marriage. Robbie returns to George after realizing
her mistake. Aunt Ellen asks Laura to stay with them at Shellmound. Laura’s happiness knows no bounds. She is happy to be considered as a member of their family, though she has to go back to Jackson, to join her father. Thus the novel ends on a note of consolation with regard to Laura.

Welty’s depiction of Delta is surprisingly striking. She presents the richness of the land, its inhabitants and their cultures picturesquely. Delta is a region rich in a sylvan pastoral setting. In the Delta most of the world seemed the very sky. The clouds were large—larger than horses or houses, larger than boats or churches; larger than anything except the fields the Fairchilds planted. Laura gets enamoured of the beautiful landscape and sunset. In the Delta the sunsets were reddest. “The sun went down lopsided and wide as a rose on a stem in the West and the West was a milk edge, like the foam of the sea.” (p.5)

In the fertile land the Fairchild family lives in Shellmound. It consists of Battle and his wife Ellen, their eight children, aunts, uncles, in turn associated with great aunts and Negro servants. In this typical Southern family, women dominate the family matters. It can be called a matriarchal family. From her earlier memories Laura
observes that they never seemed to change at all. They are gathered for Dabney’s marriage, but boys and men, girls and ladies all, the old and the young of the Delta kin “...even the dead and the living for Aunt Shannon were alike and no gap opened between them.” (p.14).

Southern women are supposed to play the role of wife and mother. Their principal duties are cooking, taking care of their kith and kin. Welty explores women’s duties in this novel. Baking a cake on occasions is the traditional duty of women in Southern society. Ellen prepares a cake for George. She says to Roxie, a servant, “we want to make, Mr. George and Miss. Robbie, a cake. They are coming tomorrow” (p.24). She can be termed as the maternal head of the Fairchild family. She creates a flurry in preparing the cake which is the traditional baked celebratory food. She behaves as any normal woman behaves in the kitchen making a mess of her cooking.

The spirit of life of Southern women is really to be appreciated. Though the landscape is recognized by violent changes of weather, bloody history and racial violence the matriarchal life of the Fairchild family prospers despite threats to stability.⁸

The very fabric of the novel is the interaction between Ellen and her daughter’s courtship, marriage and family. Ellen successfully
plays multiple role of a loving wife, mother, sister-in-law and aunt. Patience is her true asset. With this weapon in hand she keeps a large family (Fairchild) at her beck and call. She is worried about her daughter’s marriage because Dabney chooses a husband, beneath her family’s status. Welty explores the old Southern traits in women marvellously through the characters of Ellen.

Welty is at her best while giving the vivid picture of a maternally sustained family. In an interview with Brans she spoke of the reason for the dominance of women in the Delta region. In the Delta “it is it’s very much of a matriarchy especially in those years in the twenties that I was writing about and really ever since the civil war, when the men were all gone and women began to take everything. I have met families up there where women just ruled the roost, and I have made that happen in the book because I thought that’s the way it was in those days in the South.”

Robbie is a typical Southern woman who wants her husband to be all alone to herself. She is a possessive and a mean minded wife. That’s why George is not happy with her. She has seen that the family demands on George. She denies herself to be identified with the Fairchild family. She scornfully says to Troy, “I didn’t marry into
them! I married George” (p.141). When Ellen asks her about the fight between herself and George, she says, “I think when he loves me he really hates you – hates the Fairchilds that he is one of” (p.163). She humiliates the Fairchild clan before the huge wedding gathering. She says: “Mrs. Lawns! You are all a spoiled, struck up family that thinks nobody else is really in the world! But they are! You are just one plantation with a crazy girl in the family and listen at Miss. Shannon. You are not even rich! You are just the medium. Only four gates to get here, and your house needs a coat of paint! You don’t even have one of those little painted wooden niggers to hitch horses to!” (p.163).

She knows that he loves her very much and needs her. She gradually recognizes the family’s love and adoration for him and understands his indispensability towards the Fairchild family. At last George and Robbie danced off in Dabney’s wedding. When Welty was questioned about her fiction’s reflection of feminine point of view, she answers, “I am a woman. In writing fiction, I think imagination comes ahead of sex. A writer’s got to be able to live inside all characters: male, female, old, young. To live inside any other person is the jump. Whether the other persons are male or female is subordinate.”

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Feminine sensibilities are well brought out by Miss Welty. Marriage between Dabney and Troy is the theme of the novel. Dabney Fairchild selects Troy who is inferior to the aristocratic Fairchild family in all respects as her life partner. Nobody is happy with her decision. Aunt Primrose and Jim Allen, virgin sisters of George, gave Dabney the night light as a gift, which has symbolic significance. Aunt Primrose says, “Dabney shall have it. It’s company. That’s what it is. That little light, it was company as early as I can remember when papa and mama died. It is a heirloom.” But Dabney accidentally drops the light lamp while running forward to meet Troy. Vande Kieft says, “She is symbolically shattering not only her innocence and childhood within the family, but a part of the family unity itself, its ‘coziners’ one of its legends in a concrete object – all that the two aunts would like to preserve intact, along with their own and their nieces virginity.”11 Though Dabney remains cool after the accident, later on she weeps for the breaking of her aunts’ cherished token of love. Giving gifts and presents is an important tradition practised by southern women. They not only symbolize their love but also have their own stories about them.

Welty’s presentation of the aftermath of the life of women who have lost their husbands is a moving scene. The wars have direct
impact on the Fairchild family. Set in 1923, the novel looks back at World War I and its impact on the Fairchilds’ two most cherished members, Denis and George, and beyond that at the Civil War which destroyed an entire generation of Fairchild men and their brothers-in-law. Most of the women in the Delta became widows after the war. These women have to take care of their household as well as perform other duties. Welty portrayed the dark shadows of war on Delta people through Aunt Primrose’s character. Primerose says about the death of people in war: brother Battle was killed and his brother Gordon was killed and Aunt Shannon’s husband Lucian Miles killed and Aunt Maureen’s husband Duncan Laws, and yet she hoped. Our father and the children and gave up seeing him again in life. Aunt Mashula never did but she was never the same she put her dulcimer away. You know. I remember her face. Only this night light comforted her, she said. We little children would be envious to see her burn it every dark night.” (p.45). After recovery from the effects of war, women slowly regained the power and tried to assert their identity. Welty says in the Delta the land belonged to the women – they only let the men have it, and sometimes they tried to take it back and give it to someone else. “All the men lived here on a kind of
sufferance" (p.145). Welty gives a vivid picture of the life of widowed women in this novel.

The novel ends on a note of supreme consolation of friendship and fulfillment. The Fairchilds go for a picnic after the wedding. The whole family gathers on the grounds of Marmion with the newly married couple just back from their honeymoon. Each individual of the family continues to be subservient to the whole. The picnic for Laura is a celebration of her reception as a member of family. Laura achieves a sense of belonging at last when she decides to go back to Jackson and join her father. This makes her feel that she is one among the Fairchilds. Her happiness is seen when she meets her Aunt Ellen. At last she feels overwhelmingly happy at the sight of the falling star. The ‘Star’ is “a star-singular, remote and inaccessibly, indifferent” says Edward Henely. She is like the star, though fallen once, which rejoins her family.

Welty gives a picturesque description of the Delta region which comes under the Old South. She represents this region in all its sparkling hues. Elizabeth Bowen says “I should think that Delta Wedding may, in time come to be recognized as a classic.” In one of her comments she says that this novel is a perfectly simple story, it
has drawn into itself the whole of Miss Welty’s human and visionary imagination. Welty explored matriarchal way of life splendidly in this novel. Ellen who embodies matriarchy is simply a representative character of southern traditional woman. Ellen, no doubt, is altogether superb, says Hardy.
References

5. Ibid., 75. Subsequent references are to this edition.