Chapter-v

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In Dreiser's novels, we have ample evidence to prove that he advocated the liberty of women in terms of their physical pleasure. He takes sex as a powerful force. He saw it "as a kind of power which stirred an inward sense of flux that drew one to Nature." (McAleer 112) Dreiser was the American novelist who depicted the fact of female sex so boldly. He was not a hypocrite. Dreiser treats of sex as a sort of biological necessity. "Libido is the force by means of which the instinct, in this case the sexual instinct, achieves expression." (Freud 249)

He dealt with sex to show its function as the force which energizes both men and women. Sexual desire constitutes a prominent force in every man and woman.
“Sex remains an irresistible force to dominate man...” (Gerber147) No doubt, when it comes to the question of the right to women’s physical pleasure, it is hardly accepted by society. Sanctions are imposed on women in the name of so called moral code of conduct. Catherine Macaulay “attacked the sexual double standard insisting that a single sexual experience does not transform a virgin into a wanton.” (Walters 30)

In Dreiser’s novels the depiction of sex is very common. He insists on the right of the woman to enjoy sex. He does not depict women as goddesses but as human beings. “He feels a holy mission to slay the American literary superstition that men and women are not sensual beings.” (Bourne 93) He does not avoid the depiction of sex because he is a realist. “You can’t write novel of
In *The Financier*, Aileen aspires for sexual fulfillment. Though Cowperwood is married, she does not mind enjoying sex with him because she feels that she has a right to sexual pleasure. Dreiser finds nothing wrong in Aileen’s desire for mating. “*Aileen in his [Cowperwood’s] arms, unmarried, but loved by him, and he by her, was as good and pure as any living woman – a great deal purer than most.*” (*The Financier* 268) But Aileen’s father moves heaven and earth to separate his daughter from Cowperwood. He represents the traditional American society. Dreiser led the way in the field of depiction of sex, particularly the depiction of female sexuality. “*Ironically modern writers have exercised with such liberality the freedom Dreiser procured for them that his transgression*
now seem puny." (McAleer 01) In *The Financier*, Dreiser presents a realistic picture of woman’s sexuality through Aileen. For him woman is as sexually potent as man. "Dreiser's battle, always the important battle, was over the right to portray honestly the social realities of sex relationship." (Fuller 91)

It is quite evident that Dreiser’s novels bear testimony to the fact that Dreiser was a realist. His depiction of woman is realistic because he also presents them as normal human beings with a desire for sexual fulfillment. In Dreiser’s opinion all young men and women are full of sexual desire. Dreiser does not idealize men and women in his novels. He thinks that "to conceive of grown up people is to conceive of the shining reciprocal fact, sex, without which adults are still children." (Dudley 6) Dreiser fights
for the right of the women for sexual pleasure, and that is why he has been considered as a feminist.

At the time when Dreiser started his career as a novelist, he had not only witnessed double standard of society but also faced the problem in case of his own two sisters. Being a born opponent of these sanctions and injustice against women, he openly wrote in favour of women and strongly supported women’s liberation from the traditional codes of morality. The women like Etta, Carrie Meeber, Jennie Gerhardt and Roberta are women, who are characterized to fight for their right for physical pleasure.

In *The Bulwark*, Etta grows restless to enjoy love and sex. She had once seen a boy kissing a girl and was given to think “that there must be an extension of such a
minor relationship as she had witnessed into eventual physical fulfillment.” (*The Bulwark* 198).

Etta wanted to escape from “the atmosphere of repression” (*Ibid* 203) at her home. She falls in love with an artist. Once when she visited his studio, she found him stand near her portrait. “She turned to look at him and meeting his eyes, sensed that resistance was futile. Slowly, as if impelled by a force over which she had no control, she moved closer to him. He put his arms around her and held her close.” (*The Bulwark* 233).

Etta’s ways of her life is a kind of revolt against the moral traditional code of the then American society which hardly approved of the above activities of a girl. It is to be noted here that sex was a taboo during Dreiser’s time. In practical life, people could not discuss sex freely. But his description of sex and sexual desire of the leading
characters such as Roberta, Jennie Gerhardt & Etta only highlights the sex-psychology of the American women. Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* presents the heroine as a woman who uses her sex as a passport to success. She enjoys sexual pleasure and “matures herself through her relationship with the other sex from fleshy drummer to Amens.” (Sukrita Pal 32) She does not mind to be seduced by them nor does she suffer emotionally on this account.

Questions are raised as to what moral judgments are presented here in connection with Carrie’s sex relationship. Donald Pizer holds men responsible for Carrie’s going astray. “He stresses the lack of responsibility of most men, including Hurstwood for their action.” (Donald Pizer 59) She strongly realizes the fact that her action is moral because it not only makes her
strong personally but her ways also “contribute to her spiritual development.” (Pizer, 59)

In *Sister Carrie*, the heroine struggles to achieve sexual fulfillment while depicting the character of Carrie, Dreiser had nothing more in mind than a title when he jotted down the words “Sister Carrie” at the top of a blank sheet of paper. He made up her story as he wrote, appropriating pieces of it from the lives of friends and family, among them his sister Emma, who had eloped with a bartender. Carrie’s spirit Dreiser deduced from his own. She is the seeker, the dreamer who yearns with an inarticulate hunger for the glamour that might lift her out of the commonplace: “She realized in a dim way how much the city held-wealth, fashion, ease-every adornment for women and she longed for dress and beauty and a whole heart.” (Conn 315).
At the same time, Carrie is a creature in an allegory of destiny, the first chapter of her story is prophetically titled, "The Magnet Attracting". A waif amid force? She becomes the mistress of two men in turn, the first a flashy sales man, the second a saloon manager named Hurtswood. Like all of Dreiser's characters, those in *Sister Carrie* obey the dictates of reality rather than literary decorum. The consequence of Carrie's immortality is not punishment or death but a well paid job on the New York stage. She enjoys all her rights to physical pleasure according to her liking and disliking.

In the other prominent novel of Dreiser, *The Titan*, we have the character of Aileen who initially wants to enjoy life to the lees. She constantly looks for sexual enjoyment as her right. When Cowperwood neglects her, she develops relationship with Polker Lynd. "Yet even now
the shadow of Cowperwood was over her, but also the desire for love and a full sex life.” (The Titan 271) Dreiser makes her character strong and bold. As a woman she does not pretend to hide her sexual desire. When Cowperwood indulges in a love-affair with Mrs. Hosmer Hand leading to a sexual adventure, his wife Aileen is totally disappointed. She threatens to pay him back in the same coin. She knows that her husband’s rude behavior opens window for her personal liberty. Therefore, referring to his illicit love-affairs, Aileen says, “I am not going to stand it. I am not so old yet. There are plenty of men who will be glad to pay me attention if you won’t. I told you once that I would not be faithful to you if you were not to me.” (The Titan 251)

Of course, she does carry out her threat. Dreiser shows through her that in spite of their modesty, women
have sex instinct as powerful as men. Moreover, it should also be taken as women's revolt against male dominated social norms and customary rules in which they are forgotten. Knowingly or unknowingly their revolt gives them a chance to exercise their personal freedom and claim their right to sexual pleasure.

Thus, this novel—*The Titan* is replete with the instances of women's freedom to full sexual enjoyment. Mrs. Hosmerhands indulges in a sexual adventure with Cowperwood. This happens when they meet in Wisconsin. Hosmerhand's enjoyment of sex has been indicated indirectly through a dash at the end of the description. In Wisconsin they indulge in "idle talk concerning people, scenery, conveniences his (Cowperwood's) direct suggestions, and then subsequently..." (*The Titan* 266).
In Dreiser’s novels, the middle class parents (particularly the lower-middle-class parents) keep their children under strict discipline. The strict code of conduct does not permit them to fulfill even their biological needs. Clyde and Roberta in *An American Tragedy* are such characters who yearn for sexual enjoyment and they succeed in getting it. Roberta in *An American Tragedy* suffers because her sex experience has not received social sanction “Society... labours with all the institutional power of enforcement at its disposal to deflect the mighty energies of the sex instinct into morally sanctioned channels.” (Glickberg 33)

Dreiser expresses his irritation in his novels against the society which hinders the free-flow of the sexual urge. We have to seek the permission of the society to fulfill our sexual desire which is just a natural instinct. If a person
challenges the society, he or she suffers Roberta’s boldness to have sexual enjoyment results in her tragedy. “Sex remains an irresistible force dominating man, submerging alone but to catastrophe.” (Garber 14).

There is also Esta, Clyde’s Sister, who feels an “urge toward meeting which lies back of all youthful thought and action.” (An American Tragedy 20) Now Esta’s desire for sexual fulfillment is as natural as thirst and hunger. But the society makes hue and cry and she has to face the music.

In Dreiser’s novels, the fact of wealth and social position is something taken for granted, something to start with, and carrying with it the notion of a certain degree of refinement, and ordered social status and a fixed standard of personal conduct. And all that remains is to plan out the social comedies and sentimental dramas suitable for
production on this narrow stage. But Dreiser was born into a world in which none of these things was established. He was born into it and was himself a part of it, as he so candidly and eloquently lets us know in his autobiographical writings, such as "A Book About Myself" and "Dawn". And what he saw on every side of him, what he knew with the practical and intimate knowledge of personal participation, was a world more like the jungle than like the world of Edith Wharton and Hugh Walpole.

Dreiser strongly believed that the world was made of men and women starting poor, vulgar, ignorant, emotionally starved, but so far as they were strong, determined to win for themselves wealth, luxury, culture, social estimation and the gratification of love. They were not snobs—that was not at all the way they appealed to
Theodore Dreiser—they were simply vital forces pushing forward irrepressibly to take place in the sun. The methods were the age-old methods of competitive business, never before perhaps displayed on so grand a scale as in the America of Dreiser’s time: tireless work, organization, and speculation, co-operative with those who can aid you, abandonment of those who cannot serve you, political graft and intimidation. The mental equipment was imagination, feline cunning, the gambling instinct and indomitable courage. For those who won, the rewards were unlimited power, grand houses, picture galleries and a choice of women, demanded by insatiable craving to gratify the ego. The race was to the strong.

Dreiser witnessed and understood the pain of weak and destitute who were striving, in their own ineffectual way, for much the same prizes—gifted with less
imagination and pursued with less perseverence and ruthlessness. Most were doomed to be caught in the toils of the law on to ignominious defeat and death. Generally speaking the women were condemned to checkmate in the game of hearts. Angela in The Genius, Roberta in An American Tragedy and innumerable women in The Titan receive their sexual filfilment. The woman, with her disposition to loyalty, her more absolute adherence to the conventional standards governing the married state, her relative weakness economically and biologically, would mostly get the worst of it in this clash of egoism.

But Dreiser did not satisfy himself merely as a watchdog to these changes and patterns of life. His women characters emerge strongly despite their poor and downtrodden background. Though their predicament was very much in the hands of society but their struggle for
identity never ends. "Carrie herself achieves great success, as success for an attractive woman goes in our America." (Wagenknecht; 286)

Dreiser wants to prove that whatever our moral code may be, a woman also needs sexual pleasure and she has a right to enjoy it. Of course, Dreiser, nowhere, justifies Carrie's way. As Dreiser did not follow the genteel tradition, Sister Carrie is not punished. She ends up by becoming a stage star.

The American society of Dreiser's time did not expect women to express their sexual desire openly. As regards Carrie, there is nothing of pilgrim about her; all she ever asked of life was a fair degree of comfort and a place of modest security in this world. She seemed to have nothing for her so long as she remained a decent girl but
her rise to theatrical eminence seems to be romantic in the bad sense which makes this novel a faulty one.

The plight of a woman who seeks physical pleasure can be seen in Jennie Gerhardt. Jennie is a kept woman, but of a different sort. Lester is attracted towards her because she has about her a warm womanhood, and an innocent expression of countenance which have nothing to do with her brutal immortality. It is unfortunate that Jennie is Lester’s wife in all respects except social recognition and name. Her nature is vastly worth loving and worth marrying but she suffers under the stiff social norms. She is punished because she tried to enjoy sexual pleasure.

It is striking to note that this nature of woman has made her a commodity in consumer’s market. In a well-known passage from Sister Carrie, the heroine Carrie
Meeber, "an apt student in fortune's ways", learns a lesson from her lover in the art of feminine public appearance. Carrie, a young woman from the country side recently arrived in Chicago, walks with her lover, Drouet, and picks up from him the trick of attractively watching women who pass along street.

Drouet had a habit of looking after stylishly dressed or pretty women on the street and remarking upon them. He had just enough of the feminine love of dress to be a good judge not of intellect but of clothes. He saw how they set their little fat, how they carried their chins, with what grace and sensuality they swayed their bodies. A dainty, self-conscious swaying of the hips by a woman was to him quite charming. He would turn and follow the disappearing vision with his eyes.
Social status, material possessions and personal liberty were no doubt driving forces of the women characters of Dreiser's novels. Their quest for physical pleasure is restricted to the above attainments. Sexual satisfaction is an integral part of their activities. Carrie Meeber, Aileen, Angela and Roberta - all leading woman characters in the novels of Theodore Dreiser- feel passion for their sexual satisfaction. Aileen in *The Titan*, after being neglected by Cowperwood, develops relations with Polker Lynd. She does not pretend to hide her sexual desire. Angela in *The Genius* feels the sexual urge frequently and she remains eager for its fulfillment. "For a' ll her fears, once having 'tasted of the forbidden fruit' it was sweet and inviting." (*The Genius* 181)

In *Jennie Gerhardt*, Jennie develops physical relations with Senator Brander, and does not attach any
suspicions of evil to this relationship with Brander. But at the same time her pleasure of sexual life was made up of "love, tenderness and service." (Jennie Gerhardt 144)

Dreiser's presentation of a woman's sexuality is represented by Jennie. Her capacity to enjoy sex has been depicted in true colours. Dreiser has no "hesitation in introducing the fact of feminine sensuality if that fact was appropriate to his themes." (Pizer 54) As a matter of fact, it has been rightly said that Dreiser "led the way in openly and honestly treating sex as a major force." (Gerber 174).

In The Genius, Ruby does not mind having illicit relations. Once Eugene asked her if she considered that sort of love improper and she replied that some people might think it was wrong, but that did not make it so to her. Thus, Dreiser seems to be advocating woman's right to enjoy sexual life according to her desire.
Another woman character, Carlotte, in this novel feels attracted sexually towards Eugene. Her husband has been a gambler and he is cruel towards her. Dreiser depicts female sexuality and wants to show that women can go to any extent for a sexual exploit Carlotta declares openly in this novel, “I may be vile. I did not make myself So, certainly I am not in this instance. Whatever I am, I came by it honestly.” (The Genius 354) Carlotte actually indulges in extra-marital relationship. Adultery is actually a part of western culture. Adultery as a phenomenon is an evidence in literature from the earliest times as in Homer and indeed, we must suggest that it is the unstable triangularity of adultery, rather than the static symmetry of marriage “which has been present in western literature.”(Blair 12) Even Carlotta’s mother objects to her daughter’s behaviour and differs from her in respect of ethical standards and the policy that “aligns itself with
common sense, decency, self-preservation, as against its opposite.” (The Genius 351)

Carlotta tempts Eugene under the pretence of requesting him to put pillows for her. When Eugene comes close to her, “She had thrilled with a burning, vibrating thrill throughout her frame, and when she came to him it was with the eagerness of one wild caress. She threw herself on him, kissed him sensuously scores of times, whispered her desire and her affection.” (The Genius 343).

The women characters in the novels of Theodore Dreiser are after material possessions even at the cost of moral depravity. Dreiser shows that economic consideration is often responsible for a woman’s downfall. Carrie in Sister Carrie leads an immoral life for want of money. Nice clothes constitute her particular aspiration.
“Clothes to Carrie remain direct, tangible representations of her desire....” (Gerber 64) Carrie was leading a very miserable life. So, she did not mind receiving financial help from Drouet. “Some of it she now held in her hands—two soft, green ten-dollar bills—and she felt that she was immensely better off for having them.” (Sister Carrie 48). She was extremely happy to possess this money. “Ah, money, money! What a thing it was to have, how plenty of it would clear away all these troubles.” (Sister Carrie, 51). She felt ashamed of herself in accepting that money, “but her need was so dire, she was still glad.” (Sister Carrie 48).

As Jennie had led a life of poverty during her early years, she too has particular fascination for money. She was often given to think that it was really “Fine to be rich.” (Jennie Gerhardt 248) Had her family had
sufficient resources to maintain themselves, she would not have adopted foul means. To speak the truth “Jennie, like Carrie, is victimized by poverty.” (Hoffman 49). Her desire for material possession forces her to become the mistress of the two men “because she is caught in the grip of circumstances and she sees no way out for her family than in her acceptance of the protection of these men.” (Quinn 647).

Thus, we see that Dreiser is definitely a feminist because he fights for the woman to sexual pleasure. At one time novelists took pleasure in depicting women as creatures without sex desire. Dreiser led other novelists in accepting the sexual nature of women. The American society has undergone a great change. Today it is a compliment for a woman to be called sexy. Even in developing countries people are talking about sexual urge
of a woman. In our country the social outlook is changing. The chairperson of National Commission for Women, Mamta Sharma, said at a Seminar in Jaipur, "Don’t be offended if someone says ‘sexy’, rather take it positively.” (Sunday Times 01) The changing trend of the society also influences the literature of that time.

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