Blood Relations and Other Plays

Chapter II

*Blood Relations* and Other Plays

*Canadians have this view of themselves as nice civilized people who have never participated in historical crimes and atrocities... But that view is false. Our history is dull only because it been has dishonestly expurgated.*

(Hofsess, 1983:3)

*Walsh,* premiered at Theatre Calgary in 1973 brought Sharon Pollock national attention and *The Komagata Maru Incident,* produced in Vancouver play house in 1976, established her as a passionate playwright, who, for the first time in Canada’s history brought forth the most disturbing thoughts about Canada’s treatment of aboriginal people and about its relations with the United States. The significance of these two plays rests on her irresistible female unconscious that goes deeper into the totality of the creative output. The reverberations of these radical outbursts of resistance continue throughout in her radio and TV productions and give her a distinct Canadian identity of her own, in the modern contemporary Canadian Theatre.
Pollock herself had illuminated these unconscious layers in building up a paradigm of gender-centred dramaturgy. She uses the signifying image of a diamond to explicate the immense possibility lying embedded at the core of any event or story-line and give options of looking at it from unconventional and personalised angles of vision:

It's as if truthfulness when you're writing about life is a big multi-faceted diamond. I am standing in one place, and I am the result of a certain time and place and experience, and I have a flashlight. If I never try to expand those boundaries I can only hold my flashlight one way, shine it on one part of the diamond. By being aware of how I do see through certain eyes and in a certain way, I get to expand; I get to be able to move the light.

But I can't go all the way around that diamond. So when I tell the story of Walsh or Sitting Bull, I may be shining my flash light on a certain portion of that diamond. The First Nation Person who is beside me is in a different place, but in the same position I am. I suppose when you have many writers attacking the same story, you get the entire diamond lit up.
I think that I can write a story so long as I find a way within the structure of the story to acknowledge my angle of observation. I’m the result of my middle class, white upbringing in a conservative part of the country, in a racist country, in a colonized country, next to the largest, most powerful country in the world. I am aware of that I try to educate myself and sensitise myself to how that has formed me, so that I can understand and overcome the limitations that it’s put on me - but to believe that I could ever manage to get rid of all that is a great lie.

(Airborne, 1999:100-101)

The dramatic visions of multiple perspectives that emerge from Sharon Pollock’s observations are replete with the specific kind of feminist ideology. Every event is seen through a feminist “Flash Light” focused as if on a multi-faceted diamond. Pollock’s obsession with the past is another pointer towards her continuous search for investigative production of reality that encompasses her major works. Walsh, Generations, The Komagata Maru Incident and Blood Relations in particular are evidences of this gravitational pull within herself. Speaking of Walsh, which is Pollock’s first play drawn from history, she observes: “I read history because I love history, I began with an interest in Walsh as a character, as a rebel. Then I discovered John A. Mac Donald had written:
‘If words will not prevail with the Siox, hunger will’. I was angry at my own ignorance and that the historians hadn’t told me. I didn’t know about the Komagata Maru either, and something like it would happen now. And I might know about it.

(Lecturer, 1976: 17)

The revelation of Pollock in relation to Walsh contains the authorial conceptualisation of relegating the unacknowledged silences in Canadian History. Most of her contemporary writers had this concern for the neglected historical truths. As Malcom Page observes;

In Walsh, Pollock looks at the greatest Canadian Myths, the mounties, those glamorous red-coated heroes. She is disturbed most specifically by the treatment of Indians, which is part of her message for the present.

(Malcom Page, Fall, 1979: 104-111)

The director of the Calgary Production of Walsh, Harrold Valdrige commented:
I believe we have made our audience think about our responsibility to and our responsibility for the modern-day problems of the Plains and Woods Indians. I think that not one of us will ever be able to regard a drunken Indian on the street corner in quite the same way.

(CTR, 120)

Pollock’s multiple montage of broad panorama of the prairies in the 1870s speaks the hidden language of the history of Indians enmeshed in the historicity of the flight of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce, the death of Crazy horse, the disintegration of the Buffalo herds, the projection of Chief Sitting Bull and his Sioux into Canada and the tragic finale of the killing of Sitting Bull. The minimal settings of the scenes of the Police Fort, Walsh’s Office, a store room, Indian settlements in the open prairie are part of the multiple stage designs of the play. Representative characters of the various groups appear within the frames of historicity. Mrs Anderson, the pioneer settler; Crow Eagle and White Dog, the Canadian Indians; Louis, the Metis, Clarence, the new Mountie Recruit, also appear as distinct realities of the Canadian past. The two-dimensional conflict between Walsh and the Sitting Bull on the one hand and the turbulence within Walsh himself remains as the matrix of action of the play. Pollock dramatises the eventful four years of Sitting Bull’s life in Canada and Indian’s way of life as the backdrop. Louis, the Metis, sums up the whole process of domineering decision-making mechanism taking place in Ottawa, London
and Washington, powerfully and meticulously as if bursting forth from the interiors of the Canadian-Indian psyche:

Take All da books, da news dat da white man prints, take all that bible book, take all dose things you learn from - lay dem on da prairie - and da sun... da rain... da snow... pouf! You wanna learn, you study inside here [taps head]... and here [taps chest]... and how it is wit' you and all [indicates surroundings]. Travel 'round da Medicine Wheel. Den you know something. (27-28)

Pollock’s ‘Flash Light’ that falls on the Indians at the end of the play reveals the Mounties ambushing a train, behaving like Indians on movies.

Pollock paints *Walsh* as the most appealing figure for the presentness of the past of the play. Urjo Kareda declines to accept the common place notion of *Walsh* as ‘the victim of circumstances’ over which he has no control and instead proclaims that “the characterisation of Sitting Bull himself is a catastrophe, a portrait of the noble ravage, so noble and pious and dignified that he has no reality.” (Toronto Star, 2000: 25). Kareda emphatically rejects the notion of Sitting Bull as mystic and Shaman; he is full of humanitarian feelings while loyal and dutiful.
Walsh is rightly considered as the most powerful of Canadian historical plays. The crisis within Walsh consists of the conflict between duty and principles. Sharon Pollock’s interaction with the past resulted in involving a design of masculine identity with its multiple dilemmas of existential anguish. What matters is not just a documentation of history as such, but a resurgence of humanistic values destroyed once and forever by the dominant forces of the so-called ‘civilized’ modernities. It is specifically a female vision reminding us of the elemental mother’s lamentations over the destructions of her offspring of the past-a funeral of civilization-and thereby the play becomes a celebration of survival and resistance at man’s inhumanity against man, as well.

Sharon Pollock desires to be identified with the radical alternative rather than mainstream theatre. In an interview it becomes quite evident:

I don’t feel a part of the theatre community.
I’m glad I’m not - they have a tunnel vision.
I want community link-ups, to the Sikh Community, for example... I think I am writing for people who never go to the theatre... I see what other people see but don’t recognize, like the poor. That is my job as an artist.

(Pollock, Interview 1977:17)
Pollock's return to the fossilised and neglected Canadian pastness in *The Komagata Maru Incident* was staged at Vancouver East Cultural Centre in January 1976, on the night the ship *Komagata Maru* brought 376 East Indians to Vancouver in May 1914. Sir Richard Mc Bride, the BC Premier, proclaimed:

...to admit orientals in large numbers would mean in the end, the extinction of the white people, and we always have in mind the necessity of keeping this a white man's country.

(Purgason, 1975:10)

The ship remained in the harbour for two months during which, racist feelings grew and various legal proceedings occurred, and eventually was forced to leave. Pollock's treatment of this incident makes a major shift towards the emotional plains of inhuman segregation than factual aesthetics as happened in *Walsh*. She has made it very clear that her theatre now "hit people with emotions" in the context of writing this play. She says: I am trying to avoid the documentary flavour, because to understand the people of the situation, mustn't be put across. (19)

The play reveals the shame of *Komagata Maru*. For Pollock, *The Komagata Maru Incident* is a dramatic metamorphosis of a historic event reflected through the illusions of the stage and the creative insights of a playwright. Freedom with time and space is taken for the purpose of
emotional insight of the audience placed in the present. And, as Pollock wrote in the programme note of the play:

...to nowhere we are going, we must know where we have been and what we have come from. Our attitudes towards the non-white peoples of the world and of Canada is one that suffers from the residual effects of centuries of oppressive policies which were given moral and ethical credence by the fable of racial superiority... The attitudes expressed by the general populace of that time, and paraphrased throughout the play, are still around today and, until we face this fact, we can never change it.

(Malcom, 1999: 19)

The nucleus of *The Komagata Maru Incident* rests on William Hopkinson, the Immigration Department Official, characterised as an undercover spy who disguises himself as an East Indian. His duty is to detect seditious. Hopkinson is Half East Indian who for the sake of white domination repudiated his past. He acts more Canadian than the 'real' Canadian. Walsh's crisis between duty and principles is relegated in Hopkinson and he is brutally murdered by a Sikh in the port house at the end of the play. The transcreation of the incident is more subtle than in the case of *Walsh*. As Malcom Page observes:
the incident with its ramifications and continuing implications is approached obliquely and master of ceremony, a greecy barker and magician with gloves, hat and cane, plays various parts, gives explanations, manipulates his characters and suggests a carnival mood.

(Malcom Page, 1979: 20)

Hopkinson, known as T.S., stands for the system. The master image of one woman, with an unseen child and characterized as dignified but pathetic remains as if in a cage at the back of the performance area, represents Pollock’s diamond metaphor on which the authorial flash light falls. She represents the broken-hearted East Indians. Pollock makes the woman re-enact the part played in racism by fear and ignorance, and flash forward the unscrupulous injustice, pushing the ship and the people away from the shores to the nightmares of the turbulent sea.

In the play, the translated historical event portrays three women among the all male casts as projections of her feminine commitment against the politics of exclusion and segregation. As Ann F. Northof critically observes:

In *Walsh* and *The Komaganta Maru Incident* political or ethical principles are
modified to serve basically acquisitive impulses, and government policy expresses the entrenched bigotry and greed of an established population, all immigrants or the descendants of immigrants.

(Northof, 2003: 81-82)

Pollock herself, for the first time in the history of Canadian Theatre, recognizes history as mythology, a master narrative consolidated by those in power to sustain and justify the power. She says in the tone of a demythologizing historiographer that "as a Canadian I feel that much of our history has been misrepresented and even hidden from us. Until we recognize our past we cannot change our future." Playwriting for Pollock becomes an ongoing process of re-making history, of making it anew; at the same time shattering the myth of Canadian moral superiority.

The play *Generations* visualizes the conflictual relationship between land, individual and family belonging to three generations of Nurlin farmers on the prairies. The play goes beyond to reach the intricate layers of socio-cultural and political life of three generations. Thus, it encompasses the multiple perspectives on family relations, changing times and value systems. Unlike *Walsh* and *The Komagata Maru Incident* there is a sudden shift in the focus on interpersonal relationships and the dilemma involved in choosing a career.
In *Generations* we witness an accentual shift in Pollock’s works; from big socio-cultural issues to the characters on whom these issues have their impact. In doing this, Pollock gains an almost Chekovian approach of letting the texture of people’s lives speak indirectly about the forces affecting them.

As exemplified by Robert C. Nunn there is a strong shift in the angles of perception compared to *Walsh* and *The Komagata Maru Incident*.

It is not at all a matter of dropping her concern with large social issues - certainly in *Generations* the impact of government policy on the survival of the family farm on the prairies is big enough.

(Nunn, 2001: 7)

The set of the play text suggests a grand design within which “the omniscient presence and mythic proportions of the land”, where a farmer’s family finds itself torn down through generations, being overpowered by the challenges of changing times. Hence the land itself becomes the major protagonist of the play and the individuals within the span of three generations perceive it in differing dimensions. For the ancestral generations, land is “a monster” that man had to “wrestle and fight” with and for the Native Indians it was a woman “to be wooed and won.” But
the hidden female subtext of the play enunciates the traumatic questions on subjugation of female identities in a strikingly subtle manner. The woman’s presence is maintained as authorial resistance energy modules and an urge for radical alternatives functions as the vital aesthetics.

As specifically observed by Prof. Santhanam, a renowned Pollock scholar of India:

All the family plays of Sharon Pollock have feminist dimensions, along with the treatment of social and political issues. All her plays are full of social comment but in the foreground is a close focus on the connection between private and public life. In the Canadian context, we come across mainstream Canadian writers challenging the dominant British / American tradition, thus paving the way for establishing a true Canadian literary ethos. In the same way, women writers, too, have challenged the male power or patriarchal control in their effort to achieve a woman-centred writing. Sharon Pollock has certainly succeeded in her efforts towards furthering the process of literary, political and cultural desalinization.”

(George, 2001: 160)
The visual narrative of the play holds on to the axis of a strong bond between two farmers, Old Eddy and Davis. The inherited farmland with all its emotional underpinnings activates the tragic dimensions of three generations. The major focal point is on the two farmer brothers, David and Young Eddy. The inherited value systems enveloped by the longing for land generates the dramatic structure of the play.

The contrast between the unconditional acceptance of a fatalistic intimacy with the farmland and the incessant urge to get away from the nostalgic network of the past connected with the land enables the playwright to construct an alternative theatrical design. This deconstructive act of Pollock on the past and the present of the farmland and the innocent individuals placed as on a chessboard pulls the play towards a specifically constructed feminist perspective. The voice of Pollock “paints the background” and the character Bonnie sums up the syllables of resistance. Bonnie criticises Margaret for her willing acceptance of this subservient role she plays and also allowing her husband to take a decision concerning the entire family, Bonnie says:

I’ve never seen you once disagree... cooking and cleaning and agreeing... Don’t you get tired of doing that?... I could never...I don’t want to do that...I...marvel at you...I don’t admire you...how can you submerge yourself in all this. Be nothing
but...an extension of this...I would not want that to happen to me.

(George, 2001: 160)

Daine Bessai challenges the notion of the most dominant subtext of the feminist unconscious of the play, centered on dependence and identity. She observes:

The main theme of the play (the only naturalistic stage work to date) is the tie of the land as it affects the three generations of Nurlin farmers from old Eddie, the pioneer, to his grandson David who is expected to carry on the family traditions shows every indication of wanting to do so. The woman’s question enters through David’s girl friend Bonnie, a local school teacher who is infected with rather undefined aspirations for a different way of life. If Blood Relations deals with the condition of female oppression, then Generations refers to its prevention.

(Bessai, 2000:59)

Diane Bessai further speaks about the urge of women to liberate themselves from the oppressive system of subjugation. She projects the
character of Bonnie to represent the new woman of our times who walks away from the traditional life of the exploited and desperate farmwoman. Her visual representation of her country as one ‘that uses people up and wears them out and throws them away’. The dramatic picturisation of the prairie landscape gains an abstract and mythical dimension through the three generations. The Native Indian way of looking at the dreamy farmland as an elemental woman seeks to fulfill the authorial urge to resist masculine dismemberment of the body and soul of land and woman at the one and the same. The feminist visual ideology of macroscopic dimensions portrayed in the major plays Walsh and The Komagata Maru Incident enter another level of the stage by microscopic movement patterns linked with land, individual and family value systems.