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**Portrayal of Gender, Sexuality, Psychological Trauma and Suppression of Women's Desire in Patriarchal Society through George Egerton's short story "A Cross Line"**

**Abstract :**

Mary Chavelita Dunne ( George Egerton), a writer of New Woman literature depicted the utter psychological condition of women in Victorian Society in his collection of short stories *Keynotes* (1893). The first story of *Keynotes* , "A Cross Line" chiefly portrays the instances of gender discrimination, sexuality, psychological trauma and the suppression of women's desire. By keeping the protagonist anonymous Egerton aspires to project the psyche of all woman in general, irrespective of race, class and social status. She pioneers an elliptical style of fiction which becomes so famous among letter feminist writers. The woman suppresses her desires of being wild and carefree because of the patriarchal society and 'hegemonic masculinity' compelled her to abandon her desires. She is in love with a person, the fishing stranger or the grey-eyed man, whom she thinks can give her mental peace at least more than her husband. But an extra-marital relationship for a woman in Victorian Society is quite offensive. Like Candida in G.B. Shaw's *Candida* she has to abandon her relationship and her becoming pregnant is the compelling thing which insists her to do so. Why motherhood leads her to take this decision is

needed to inspect. She has some impending desires in her heart which she cannot express and suffers from psychological trauma. The disillusionment of her marriage life causes her pangs and that's why she finds peace in another man. But that relationship had to have end because of the pressure of society which compel her to live a life women have very limited rights. Unlike Nora in *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, she cannot abandon her home or husband, she has to accept the patriarchal norms which perhaps cause psychological disorder and mental disbalance. Her husband gives her all luxury and comfort and tries to make her 'a doll-wife' but her mind wants something else which causes her hysterical. In the male-dominated phallogocentric society she is mere an object of male-desire. She has sexual desire which makes her fancy many things which are irrelevant and absurd, which is actually symbolic and significant. The gender discrimination is evident in everywhere of the narrative, she is not satisfied with her life and prefers a life filled with excitement, thrills and courageous situations like Hedda Gabler in Ibsen's drama, *Hedda Gabler*. The patriarchal norms suppress her desire, sexuality and causes trauma. The only named woman in the story Lizzie is also an oppressed woman who had an illegitimate child but the child died, which is symbolic of signifying the attitude of Victorian Society. So in my paper I would look on these things with textual evidence and critical comments and try to bring how Egerton portrays the theme of gender and sexuality and unlocks women's psychology and psychological trauma caused by the pressures of Victorian Society. I would also throw light on how the position of woman in a male-dominated society causes a woman abandon her desire, feeling and happiness.

**Introduction:**

Mary Chavelita Dunne Brighton is known as George Egerton, is a 19<sup>th</sup> century feminist writer who is also associated with Suffrage Movement, is a movement to achieve the right to vote for

women in USA (Wikipedia). Egerton basically writes stories about the psychological state of oppressed women and women's right for freedom and equality. Her one of the famous short story collections is *Keynotes* (1893), which is published towards the end of Victorian Society. The book is dedicated to Knut Hamsun who is her inspiration and it is also heard that she had a relationship with him earlier (Wikipedia). The first story of this collection "A Cross Line" is perhaps the most complicated and enigmatic writing. Egerton portrays the deep psychological condition of all women in Victorian Society through the protagonist. Though she associates her story with 'New Woman' writing but there is no element of female emancipation and liberation, rather we can see that she suppresses her desires and chooses to be a typical victorian woman. Throughout the story the woman fancies many things which are irrelevant and sometimes traumatic, is it because she wants to escape from reality? If so, then why has she chosen to come back to reality, her mundane life, abandoning her lover who is his sole pleasure? The woman sometimes accuses the society, the patriarchal attitude towards women which discriminates them, she is also sexually oppressed that is why fancies to meet Antony by crossing water . The woman becomes pregnant, is it only motherhood or pregnancy which compels her to abandon her desire ? Why motherhood compels her to suppress her desire . Is it a tool to suppress and oppress woman to confine them to home only? In these discussions bell hooks' argument on motherhood is very relevant and important, also Pramod K. Nayar's theory on feminism helped me build up my arguments of how they are sexually oppressed . Ignatius Nsaisedze's journal article on Victorian period's feminism is also greatly effective, very helpful in building up arguments and gaining new insights. Other than these, there are many minor books and articles which are also very helpful and I'm indebted to them.

I will divide my paper into three parts, each part will carry a subheading, in the first part the discussion will be on the role and function of gender and sexuality in a patriarchal society and how the female gender is suppressed in everywhere, how it demoralized or even dehumanized women and how women suffer sexual oppression through the protagonist of “A Cross Line”. In the second part I will discuss how Egerton portrays the attitude of patriarchal society which causes women psychological trauma which leads woman to live in a world of imagination or fancy and how women try to escape from the real world but actually cannot be successful in their attempt. In the final part of the paper I will be focusing on the suppression of women’s desire in Victorian Society where women had to follow hard and fast rules, though the protagonist tried to defy it but actually couldn’t. I will also discuss why she had to abandon her relationship and how much pregnancy or motherhood is responsible for it.

### **Gender and Sexuality:**

Gender discrimination is the most common and evident fact at *fin de siecle* , women were sexually oppressed, could not convey their feelings, could not get chances of equal education, freedom or even food in household. Citing Judith Butler Pramod K. Nayar states “ Butler (1990) argued that far from being a set of fixed and stable values and roles assigned/imposed by society, gender was a performance or role enacted the individuals. This performance of gender is, of course, social in the sense it enacted, validated and accepted by the society. But what is important is that the role is open to negotiation and alteration, to conflict and contest” (K. Nayar 91), he further states that gender is an unfixed thing which depends upon the social and cultural background (91). The Victorian Society or the so called “ Victorian Morality” restricts women and privileges male genders and they hold utmost position in everywhere of society. In the male-dominated society the intellect of the woman is also questioned, “ Tell you what , old chappie ,

we may talk about superior intellect; but if a woman wasn't handicapped by her affection or need of it, the cleverest chap in Christendom would be just a bit of putty in her hands" (Egerton 12). The women were continuously discriminated for their sexuality and gender, they were taken for granted by the males. The patriarchal society thinks the women nothing but objects of their desire:

The woman's body, argue feminist, has been represented as mother, seductive, material, sexual and procreative. Patriarchal society attributes Particular values to woman's body, the woman assimilates these values (K. Nayar 99).

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the same mentality is evident, when Nora does a wrong "step" while dancing Helmer scolds her by saying "I couldn't have believed it. You have positively forgotten all I taught you" (82). He further scolds her when she is excited, "come, come, don't let's have this wild excitement! Be my own little lark again" (84). By calling her a little lark he dehumanizes her, like the husband of protagonist in "A Cross Line", patronizes the woman, treats her as if she is a "doll-wife", she doesn't have her own will and she has to accept all her husband's terms and conditions. The woman is described as "her skin looks duskily foreign by contrast" (15) which means she doesn't want to identify herself with the white feminists, as bell hooks pointed out that white women are already more privileged than black, so the author here portrays the lowly and comparatively more discriminated females. Iveta Jusovà argues in her article on the short story:

Represented as brown or, even more deliberately as "decidedly brown" (p. 6). When Egerton describes the hands of her attractive protagonist in "A Cross Line" as being "of perfect shape" but 'decidedly brown' while the woman herself is assessed as "decidedly", she deliberately distances her character from the feminine ideal

whiteness so popular with other Victorian writers ( Jusovà 44).

‘I realized that in literature, everything had been better done by man than woman could hope that emulate. There was only small plot left for her to tell : the terra incognita of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine’ (Egerton 58). The masculine character just imposes at what the women’s mind says, the husband of “A Cross Line” asks for whiskey but the woman didn’t reply, the husband then imposes his will on her : “He strides off without waiting for a reply and comes back with it and a biscuit” (Egerton 16). He like Helmer in *A Doll’s House* calls his wife, “poor little woman” repeatedly. The patriarchal impositions even restrict her voice, “ she is about to say something, when a fresh qualm attacks her and she does not” (Egerton 17). It is noteworthy that most of the Victorian women did not have money source and that is one of the main reasons behind their dependency, they could not keep their fortune even. The protagonist Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) says mournfully “ I have no money at all, everything I had belongs to him... that is English law” .

How women are discriminated severely in case of getting child’s custody in that contemporary society, is described very illustratedly in Shanta Dutta’s research article, “ ‘Soldiers in Petticoats’: The Fight for Gender Equality in Britain”:

Caroline Norton (1808-1877) fought hard to secure the custody of her three children but she was denied both divorce access to her children . To add insult to injury, her separated husband even laid claim to her earnings as a fairly successful author! Her passionate campaign to secure custody rights for unfortunate mothers like herself .... led parliament to pass Infant Custody Act of 1839 .... the act had an important and humiliating proviso: custody of minor children would be granted provided the Chancellor was convinced that the woman was of good moral character! (13)

The woman of the short story is sexually hungry, she wants her husband to be more sympathetic, sensual and expressive about love, she craves deep passionate love and does not get from her husband that's why finds another person, expecting if he could do so.

“A woman doesn't care a fig for love as deep as death- sea and as silent; she wants something that tells her it in little waves all the time. It isn't the love, you know, it's the being loved, it isn't really the man, it's his loving” (Egerton 24)

Her sexual passion led her to fancy various irrelevant things which perhaps are her expression of deep craving for love and freedom, “someway she thinks of Cleopatra sailing down to meet Antony, and a great longing fills her soul off somewhere too...” (Egerton 27). In this case, it is very necessary to bring some lines from Ignatius Nsaidzedze's research article.

Generally victorian morals disdained sex. Men were advised to limit sexual activity in order to maintain their strength. Women were labelled as frigid for their lack of sexual appetite, it should be noted that the first spousal rape law in the United States was passed in 1979 but was often considered as misdemeanor (2).

Though women does not lack sexual appetite but their sexual desire is different from males.

Ignatius also conveys that the Victorian women are sexually abused and they are often victims of rape and violence (2). Lamenting of her sexual inability the woman in “A Cross Line”, said that “crowning disability of my sex; but not willingly... I feel you men would not be match for us” (35-36). The protagonist actually is compelled to think so, because the phallogentric Victorian attitude forces her to think so. As Pramod K. Nayar pointed out, “The women's body, therefore, is only object of study, control, discipline and gaze. The woman is never her own subject. Her sexuality, desires or identity is determined by the social norms that have themselves been produced by men” (99). The gender discretion as well as the repression of women's sexuality

and sexual desire are the commonest and most evident thing at *fin de siecle*. In the short story also, the gender discrimination and repression of sexual desire of the women is crystal-clear . Though this character Egerton beautifully portrays the oppression and the gender and sexuality issues of all women at large.

### **Psychological Condition and Trauma of women:**

Women are supposed to be different from men mentally, they are expected to give peace and comfort to men but deep down inside they have some impending wishes which men do not fulfill, they are at least expected to get some respects but fail to attain, there trauma or hysteria begins. Men had a certain dominance over women, they could do whatever they wanted that is why they didn't care about women's situation. The women were expected to play certain codified roles in society, they sometimes got bored and tired of doing those, as a result of that matter they got hysterical and traumatic , sometimes they had nervous breakdown. The protagonist of a "A Cross Line" repeatedly fancies bizarre things which are really "odd" , and irrelevant but she perhaps in Freud's word repressed desires are latent within herself, she cannot express for the fear of being alienated . She doesn't want to be alienated that is why the desires are manifesting on her mind:

She fancies herself in Arabia on the back of a swift steed, flashing eyes set in dark... surround her , and she can see the clouds of sand swing and feel the swing under her of his rushing stride; and her thoughts shape themselves into a wild song , - a song to her steed of flowing mane and satin skin, an uncouth rhythmical jingle with a feverish beat;, a song to untamed spirit that dwells on her (Egerton 27).



She fancies further that she is “on the stage” in a “cobweb like garment of wondrous tissue” , and in arm there are snakes, which is quite weird and scary. In Victorian Society women had to have thick and lengthy dress but the protagonist wants whatever comfortable and attractive.

She bounds forward and dances, bends her lissome waist, and carves her slender arms, and gives to the soul of each man what he craves be it good or evil (Egerton 27).

Henrik Ibsen also portrays much the same instance in his play *Hedda Gabler* , Hedda is a daughter of General Gabler, who is wealthy and famous, Hedda had to marry because of the society . The society thinks that she is in an age of getting married , Hedda is not so happy in her marriage life. The unhappiness of her life leads her to live in illusion and fantasy. Modern Indian writer Kamala Das portrays the psychological condition of a women when she is jilted in love, though unlike the women in Victorian Society she asserts her inner feelings in loud voice:

It is I who drink lonely

Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns

It is I who laughs , it is I who make love

And then, feel shame , it is I who lie dying

With rattle in my throat. I am sinner,

I am saint. I am the beloved and the

Betrayed (Das 54- 60).

The woman of “ A Cross Line” is a psychologically oppressed and couldn’t express her desires to her husband that is why she chooses to involve in an extra marital affair , Lisa Hagger comments on her affair as her lover “appears to be more her intellectual equal”( Hagger 9).

Though her husband pampers her, spoils her but what she actually needs, is not given. Like

Hedda's husband Tesmen , the husband of the protagonist involves himself in study most of the time, she cannot get time what she craves for. Perhaps her sexual desires are also repressed:

She can see herself with parted lips and panting, rounded breasts and a dancing devil in each glowing eye, sway voluptuously to the wild music that rises , now slow, now fast, now deliriously wild, seductive , intoxicating, with a human note of passion in its strain. She can feel the answering shiver of emotion that quivers up to her from the dense audience, spellbound by the motion of her glancing feet ; and she flies swifter and swifter, and lighter and lighter, till the very serpents seem alive with jeweled scintillations (Egerton 28).

Defining what causes psychological trauma, Freud gives very important insight of that matter, which is quite relevant to the psychological trauma of women who are repressed . Though the quote is found in Frantz Fanon's book *Black Skins White Masks*, but the quote is entirely taken from Freud:

This trauma, it is true, has been quite expelled from the consciousness and the men of the patient and as a result he has apparently been saved from a great mass of suffering, but the repressed desire continues to exist in the unconscious; it is on watch constantly for an opportunity make itself known and soon it comes back into consciousness, but in a disguise that makes it impossible to recognize; (Fanon 123)

The women have also suffered a lot in phallogocentric society, after suffering for a long time they eventually burst out and becomes revolutionary. Egerton also penned down because of some reasons though her writing is quite a bit different from other feminist writers. A major follower of Egerton, Katherine Mansfield also portrays much the same picture in his writings, his short story “Bliss” is also enigmatic. In the story the protagonist Bertha thinks herself that she has

'absolute bliss', that is why 'every objects appear luminous and she herself wants to run and dance instead of walk, throw things up into air and laugh at simply nothing', she behaves like a 'drunk and disorderly' but after some times she realizes that she is in 'fancy', she has nothing of her own, even her husband does not love her. George Gissing is also a 'New Woman' writer like Egerton, she also portrays the contemporary society's norms and how unmarried and abandoned women become known as 'odd woman' in her novel *The Odd Women* (1893), in an conversation between Widowson and Monica about their limits in society :

‘Woman’s sphere is the home, Monica, unfortunately girls are often obliged to go out earn their living, but this is unnatural, a necessity which advanced civilization will altogether abolish. You shall read John Ruskin; every word he says about women is good and precious. If a woman can neither have home of her own, or find occupation in any of else’s she is deeply to be pitied; her life is bound to be unhappy. I sincerely believe that an educated woman had better become a domestic servant than try to imitate the life of a man' (Gissing 144).

Edgerton’s depiction of women’s psychological condition and trauma in some way different because she portrays the intellectual pain in a very enigmatic and complicated way, which needs deep attention and continuous reading to understand them properly. The woman of the story constantly has to hear many abusive word, 'I believe you are half a witch' (31), which psychologically torments her, and this kind of word is used in case of every woman in that society. So women generally got tormented and oppressed. She says 'I am infernally miserable' (33). In protest of these word 'witch', the woman further conveys 'It is the freedom, the freshness, the vague danger, the unknown that has a witchery of me -ay for every woman'(35), here the writer generalizes the suffering and pain. Sometimes she could not control her emotion and could

not keep her mental state calm and composed, the repeated attack on her psychology by her husband makes 'a strange look of disappointment flits across her face and is lost in an hysterical peal of laughter' like Miss Minnie Cooper in William Faulkner story "Dry September". Every women such as Bertha, Nora, Hedda, Minnie Cooper, Monica etc. – all suffer from psychological trauma and fail to find happiness in their male-companions which actually makes them more hysterical and traumatic. Egerton through her intellectually enriched short story presents a clear and enigmatic depiction of the psychological condition of women in the Victorian Society. The other writers also present the same picture which is actual picture of all women who desire a better and elevated life, who are educated and want equal rights or perhaps equal reciprocation of their sensitive feeling, though much later gradually they achieve some rights and become emancipated and liberated.

### **Suppression of Women's Desire:**

The woman in Victorian Society are not capable of explicitly express their desires, but most of the time they have to suppress their desires and go by the rules of patriarchal society, this is evident in most of the Victorian writings. For instance *Candida* (1898), who loves Eugene Marchbank, they are in intense relationship but she has to choose her husband to love up and abandon her lover which is quite against her will or desire, like *Candida* the protagonist of "A Cross Line" also has to abandon her lover, who is her psychological peace, where she finds relief from rigid life. Like *Candida* it is her own personal decision to forsake her desire. Her becoming pregnant acts like an vivacious weapon which actually compels her to leave her lover, although it's the sense of becoming pregnant norm, the patriarchy utilizes motherhood weaken women.

Bell Hooks elucidates upon it very illustratedly in her book *Feminine Theory: from margin to center*:

Motherhood was a serious obstacle to women's liberation ,a trap confining women to the home, keeping them tied to cleaning, cooking, and child care. Others simply identified motherhood and childbearing as the locus of women's oppression Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women (133).

Thus, the social viewpoint towards a mother or a pregnant woman suppresses their desire, which actually restricts them to evolve further. 'In contrast to labor done caring environment insight the home, labor outside the home was most often seen as stressful, degrading ,and dehumanizing (Hooks 134). Hooks further brings out the experiment of other women after they are pregnant or become mother ' "we are tired of the isolation of the home, tired relating only children and husband, tired of being emotionally and economically dependent; we want to be liberated to enter the world of work"(134). The woman (the protagonist) in "A Cross Line" also needs the company of that lover to find mental peace, to take leave for some times from mundane life, but she cannot continue it. Lamenting the deeds of life she says:

People have needed me more than I them. I have given freely whatever they from me in the way of understanding or love; I have sore places they showed me, and healed them , - but they never got at me. I have been for myself, and helped myself, I have borne the burden of my own mistakes... called me fickle, - understanding that gave me nothing, and that when I had served them their moment was ended , and I was to pass on (Egerton 32).

Though she laments about her life, how she had to suppress her desires, but she comprises with all these things because she had no other way. Her final decision of abandoning her love hinges on completely pregnancy which is physical and psychological change. Julia Kristeva elaborated upon pregnancy in her book *The Kristeva Reader* :

Pregnancy is first of all an institutionalized form of psychosis : me or it, my own body or another body. It is an identity that splits , turns in on itself and changes without becoming other: the threshold between nature and culture , biology and language (Kristeva 297).

Bringing Kristeva and Egerton together researcher Nicole M. Fluhr writes :

“for Egerton , as for Kristeva , maternity is a state that transforms the question of relationality; her stories , which frequently conjoin mothers and female artist or writers, use these women’s interactions with one another not only to reconsider the relation between women’s creative and procreative work, but also to stage comparative investigation of how mothers and artist might understand and figure both subjects...and objects that surround them”(249).

The protagonist of “A Cross Line” actually tells the news of her pregnancy to her maid Lizzie, the only named character , according to many researchers including Lisa Hager, she is an 'animal-like' figure. He is a fallen woman, who is not married but had an illegitimate child, the society could not accept her child and that way why the child or cannot be a single without male-parent . “Egerton exposes maternal desire as socially constructed and passed from one generation of women to the next”(Jusovà 40). ‘Egerton seems to consider women’s instinct and desires capable of resisting (and possibly even subverting ) the repressive and manipulating effect of civilization . Although suppressed by “culture” women’s instincts (located in their bodies)

remain, according to Edgerton's suggestion, mostly unchanged, concealed, and preserved underneath the façade of femininity, providing a link with preindustrial, prediscursive "nature"(35). Though the researcher sees that women's desire is emancipated, but actually the desire is not emancipated, because the woman decides to abandon her desire, Eleanor

Fitzsimmon's points out:

She admitted confessing to having no views on 'emancipation' or 'woman question' ....

Edgerton regarded concepts like morality, purity and restraint, advocated by many New Woman writers, as 'the instruments of degradation, alienating women and men from their 'nature' from their bodies and instincts' (1).

Most of the critics argue that motherhood is one of the major reasons behind the suppression of women's desires. Shulamith Firestone argued in her book *Dialectic of Sex* that women can only be free can be free from pregnancy or 'reproduction'. Ruth Hubbard is eager to ask women 'to what extent different ways of giving birth empower women or, alter, natively, decrease our power to structure childbearing (Hubbard 162). On the other hand researcher Rachel Stroup sees the concept of motherhood or womanhood in a completely positive way:

Woman's role as a wife and mother was deeply intertwined with her identity as a pious woman, as both were the defining functions of women in their respective spheres .

Therefore, opponents of modern womanhood often argued that a woman's choice to forego marriage and motherhood led to an immoral life (Stroup 21).

Some critics or researchers supports motherhood and some think that it is the main weak point which weakens and demoralizes women. In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora could defy the patriarchy and listens to her heart, abandons the husband. Though whether her bold step would lead her a good future or not, no one knows, but unlike Candida, or the protagonist of "A Cross

Line”, doesn’t fear the society, she even abandons motherhood by abandoning her husband and three children. She bursts out: 'But our house has been nothing but a playroom. Here I have been your doll wife, just as at home I used to be Papa’s doll child (144), and finally 'From blew heard the reverberation of a heavy door closing' (123). But in the story, unlike Nora she 'hanged something on the lilac bush' which means she winds up the relationship with her lover and abandons her desire for the whole life, and it is noteworthy that she chooses the male-codified way of living life, where women have no desires at all. It is the patriarchy , it’s the social view towards a pregnant woman or mother, it is the fear of being alienated from society cause the suppression of women’s desires, not only of protagonist's desire but also of every woman’s desires in Victorian Society.

To conclude, George Egerton presents the gender discrimination and sexual oppression of women on the one hand and the psychological condition of women in a Victorian Society through the character of her short story on the other. She also universalizes all women’s pangs and terrorized and hysterical or traumatic state because of the male oppression. The women’s desires are also suppressed for the fear of being alienated from the society, the norms of patriarchy, is also depicted vividly in Edgerton’s short story “A Cross Line”.

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