

'Feminine' Pornography

- The Mills And Boon Romance

For 70 years, thousands of women around the globe have lived in the dreamworld of the romantic novel popularly called the M and B. Today, there are 1,500 of these novels in the market. And between 80,000 to 120,000 copies of each of these titles are sold. The fact that 18 new titles are released in India each month, indicates the popularity of these romances. Considering their large readership, we need to analyse these novels and the male-female stereotypes they project.

THE Mills and Boon romance is imbued with the regularity of a dose of hashish – and with equally addictive effects. The resultant hallucinations are truly mind-blowing – the ardent female reader's trip has all the disjointed connections of an opium dream and its strange logicity. Milady's stately pleasure dome may be Xanadu or a dingy Liverpool hospital, a Swiss chalet or a cattle ranch in the Australian outback – the only essential criterion is a MAN.

The similarity of each trip doesn't deter our dreaming damsel. She is rescued by a succession of he-man types, from forest, flood, fire, villain or worse, told that they are destined for each other and swept into male arms with clockwork regularity.

The formula is simple : the Helpless Heroine + Vain Vamp + Muscular Male make the typical triangle. For variety the sub plots can make a series of intertwined triangles for example, there may be two extra vamp roles to convince us of the hero's popularity, plus a male villain, plus another male to play faithful friend and admirer to the heroine. From here the ingenious writer may proceed to tangle and untangle the fates of his promising cast, with famine and flood thrown in for good measure.

Unlikely as it may seem, this kind of fiction has a social purpose : it provides role stereotypes for its readers. Thus

helping to create, reflect and reinforce the social status quo. What are these stereotypes which women writers project for their fans?

Helpless heroine : She is always young, beautiful and virgin. She is normally a working woman on her own without family ties. She may have no mother, or have a stepfather, or she may be an orphan. The implications are that she is (a) lonely (b) needs protection, all to be found of course, in our man's muscular arms. This heroine is an 'emotional' woman and her emotions seem to equip her for the traditional mother/wife role in which she coddles / nurses infants and puppy dogs, or as a special privilege enjoys a few brief moments of ascendancy when the male is sick and needs her.

The heroine is a working woman, not a career woman. She may be governess, teacher, nurse, air-hostess, model PRO or secretary i.e. her work is an extension of traditional womanly roles : maternal protection, care and hospitality. And drudgery. The hero invariably earns more than her and is in a position of power vis-à-vis the woman. He may even be her boss, he is seldom equal and never inferior. She extends feminine values to her working life e.g. loyalty. She will shield a guilty colleague and receive the blame, needlessly incurring the wrath of the powerful male hero. The martyred,



misunderstood heroine figure has a strong appeal for most women.

The heroine is not aggressive and will not defend herself; self sacrifice seems a habit with her. To complicate matters she is physically displaced, that is, at the beginning of the novel she is a newcomer to the locale and at an immediate disadvantage.

Vain Vamp : She is an older woman, more experienced at handling men. She may be called Gloria, Evonne, Vanessa or Valerie, names which spell sophistication and artifice, while the heroine is Sally, Cathy, Janet or Marie, simple names which the ordinary readers can identify with. The vamp is sexy, glamorous and determined on hooking the hero by fair means or foul. In keeping with her glamorous image she may be a film star or model. Better still, she may be idle, rich and spoilt. Wife and mother is precisely what the vamp is not meant to be; she does not like children or animals or servants. To hook the male she may assume the clinging feminine role or pretend devotion to children. Ultimately the fact that damns her is her unwillingness to be a door-mat; she is not self-sacrificing and from this it is presumed that she is incapable of love

and maternity.

The vamp provides an alternate femininity – a femininity that spells danger to the male order. She does not accept the passivity of the traditional female roles. She will be huntress, not hunted dove. She is ambitious and uses the weapon available to her – her sexuality. In the novelist's language, she is making herself cheap by "running after the man." The vamp has more power than the good woman, but in hunting down the male she assumes too much power and must be defeated.

Muscular Male : Our man's male appeal is legendary. He has grand or hard names like Grant Jarvis or Dominique Laminaire. As tall, dark and handsome as our heroine is fair, frail and fragile, his reserve 'naturally' appeals to women. He is older and "everything about him is dignified." He is "as distant as a God on Olympus" and as tyrannical. His steel-grey eyes sweep indifferently over our heroine melting her to jelly. He is broad – chested with powerful shoulders (the better to hold you with, my dear). A firm, unyielding jaw adds to the image but his lips can part in a dangerously attractive smile.

The hero is always rich and powerful and commands the respect of subordinates. Children, women and servants adore him. He is socially superior to the heroine, though the vamp belongs to his own stratum of society. The femme fatale fascinates the younger, inexperienced hero, but as he grows older, more powerful (and so more desirable) he becomes wary of her, that is, "he sees through her". The hero now plays King Cophetua to a suitably grateful heroine. The discriminate man has calculated that the lily-white maiden will give him (give in) more.

Emotional rapport seems beyond the comprehension of both the author and the characters : hero and heroine simply never talk to each other. Their bond is "instinctive" i.e. sexual. They may discuss business, but never the nuances

of any human relationship, least of all their own. Such a relationship is a strange basis for marriage.

The heroine always misjudges the hero's intentions. He, in turn, may help her out in material matters or in cases of physical accident (male expressions of thoughtfulness). But he is singularly incapable of understanding or helping the woman with her emotional problems, most of which he causes. Nevertheless, the female ethic is categorical about one thing – there can be no sexual contact unless there is an emotional relationship. In the absence of such a relationship we are persuaded that the couple is ideal for each other simply because they fulfil traditional 'good white man' and 'good white women' roles. And because they are 'attracted' to each other.

Traditionally, sexual emotion in women is only justified when it is cloaked by romantic emotion. Passion is out of the question. A sexual relationship is described in euphemisms : "His mouth sought hers and it seemed to her as if the whole world was swept away from them and they stood alone above the clouds in the glory of the sunshine which had something divine about it." Sexuality is hinted at in statements like : "She had a subtle quality, a smouldering fire somewhere", or "for an instant he had glimpsed a fire burning behind the screen – the sensuality of her budding woman – hood in the lovely long line of her throat and small curving breasts." Descriptions of sexual emotion take refuge in clichéd poetic metaphor and simile : "Just for a moment their mouths touched: the petal of a flower against the petal of a flower." These lovers "tremble deliciously" or "quiver with an ecstasy like wine in their veins." In the latest novels there is more titillation, more blatant sex description but sex itself is never described and the reader must be content to leave the couple in a passionate embrace, on the final page.

The interesting fact is that this sexual euphemism and metaphor sells. It sells

to the adolescent schoolgirl and equally well to the middle-aged housewife. It sells in spite of the fact that undisguised erotic stimulation can be found in any bookshop. Why don't these women simply resort to pornography? If specific social taboos keep away from porn, why not read authors of the Harold Robbins variety, who make no greater demand on the intellect and provide more sex? Obviously these women prefer sexual fantasy to the reality of sex.

Perhaps they sense the hostility to their sex that writers who favour blatant sex description harbour? In contrast the women's romance is written by women, from the female point of view. It projects a world and a relationship in which women can be safely 'feminine'. Above all, this romance world waters down sex and provides a 'feminine pornography.'

This fictional world excludes all consciousness of science, art, literature, music or indeed of any culture beyond table manners. It is a world devoted exclusively to emotion – and it is the world of Indian women. Romantic emotion in women guarantees fidelity, pliability and so reinforces patriarchy. So does the premium on virginity. Does this justify the obsessive cult of 'love'? Can we dismiss such fiction as escapist and inconsequential? Behind the romantic mists is no eldorado, but the same old world entrenched a little deeper into your subconscious, reader. □

Overhead in a newspaper office.
Male Colleague (in loud voice) : This should not happen, young lady.
Female Colleague : Why not ?
Male (louder) : NO
Female : O.K.

When discussing Manushi with Ms. X, a 'happily' married housewife, she said, "What's wrong with pleasing one's father and husband?"

After this in the course of conversation, I asked Mr. X, "Do you know how to type?"

Ms. X (with sudden bitterness) : "No, he dictates, both in office and at home."

Silk Prison

sinuous, sensuous, seductive silk
prison, prettily packaged, powdered,
perfumed, well-groomed, lips red, nails red,
well read, well bred, well tuned, but doomed to
decay, depression, and subtle suppression, silent
submission to repeated repetitious repetitions,
self-doubts, bilious bouts, births, babies,
bottles, blues. I didn't choose
this particular noose whose
wailing wakefulness watches
weary lines imprison vacant eyes.
lies, lies lies. This house is full of holes,
love lies in a lust hole, hope hides in a hell hole,
self skins in a shit hole, brains bleed in a blood hole,
dreams drown in a death hole, death drums from the life hole,
I am full of holes, cannot be whole, cannot float, cannot
fight, cannot sink out of sight, please turn on the light

Neena Nehru

Choosing Hell

We shall not escape Hell, my passionate
sisters, we shall drink black resins –
we who sang our praises to the Lord
with every one of our sinews, even the finest.

we did not lean over cradles or
spinning wheels at night, and now we are
carried off by an unsteady boat
under the skirts of a sleeveless cloak,

we dressed every morning in
fine Chinese silk and we would
sing our paradisaic songs at
the fire of the robbers' camp,

slovenly needlewomen (all
our sewing came apart) dancers,
players upon pipes; we have been
the queens of the whole world!

first scarcely covered by rags,
then with constellations in our hair, in
gaol and at feasts we have
bartered away heaven,
in starry nights, in the apple orchards of paradise

Gentle girls, my beloved sisters,
We shall certainly find ourselves in Hell!

Marina Tsvetayeva

A Simple Tale

I didn't want to be – no, never,
I didn't want to come.
Yet I had to come, had to be,
my tears mingling with my mother's tears.

"What ? Again ! A girl again ! Aren't you ashamed,
woman ?"
Growled the man,
And, crushed under the burden of guilt, hiding her
face, the woman wept.

Unloved, uncared for, hungry, exhausted,
the unwanted howled.

That was the entry.
The path from then on, narrow circuitous,
was filled with stones, but the rhythm the same.

To fetch, to carry, to cook, to wash,
to meet the lust in bed, to bear year after year,
A submissive silent slave sold to life for nothing.

And then the exit –
Sins washed clean in a deep cool pool
Sins burnt to cinders in a golden blaze-

Suicide? Accident ? Murder ?

Who cares ? Just a woman has died
Just a female.