

‘HEARTS IN DEEP SLEEP SEIZED TO LOVE AND FEEL’: READING ELIZABETH BOWEN’S *THE DEATH OF THE HEART* (1938)

Deepa Verma
PhD Research Scholar
SCSS, SLL&CS,
JNU, New Delhi, India
deepa.verma16@gmail.com

Abstract

*The interesting thing about Bowen is her creation of women’s world where we come to know the meaning of being true women, where women are the subject and the object, the speaker and the listener. Bowen has allowed her women to gain experience and identify their true worth and she has given fewer possibilities for male characters. In Bowen’s *The Death of the Heart* (1939), we have, on the one hand, a woman called Anna who dominates other women and her domineering spirit is driven by her status of being wife to a rich husband. On the other hand, there is the sixteen year old girl Portia, who believes in love and possesses a feminine personality. These two women are presented in sharp contrast to each other.*

There is so little agreement about the term “feminism” at this time that it needs some specific comment and definition. I am a feminist, and to me the term “feminist” means one thing only: a woman who likes and trusts other women. (Ermarth 230)

Elizabeth Bowen believes that being a ‘feminist’ does not mean to compete with or dominate other women; it also does not mean to imitate men. A woman should be proud to be a woman; she should know the true worth of her womanhood. In simple terms, feminism is an idea that works on equalizing social, political, and economic differences of the sexes. It is the movement for women’s rights or women’s liberation. Bowen emphasizes that a woman transforming herself into a man is not the objective of feminism. After gaining some social or economical power, a woman should come ahead and help other women in society instead of becoming part of the same patriarchal structure.

In Bowen’s *The Death of the Heart* (1939), we have, on the one hand, a woman called Anna who dominates other women and her domineering spirit is driven by her status of being wife to a rich husband. On the other hand, there is the sixteen year old girl Portia, who believes in love and possesses a feminine personality. These two women are presented in sharp contrast to each other. Apart from Portia and Anna, there is another girl called, Lilian, a

lesbian. Anna is too practical and heartless to love Portia; Portia has romantic illusions about love that breaks when she is cheated by Eddie; and Lillian's love and attraction for another woman has been condemned by society and other women. There is no pattern in which love and relationship can coexist.

The interesting thing about Bowen is her creation of women's world where we come to know the meaning of being true women, where women are the subject and the object, the speaker and the listener. Bowen has allowed her women to gain experience and identify their true worth and she has given fewer possibilities for male characters. Her main concern is to highlight the deliberate distance and absolute lack of sisterhood between Anna and Portia. The coldness of Anna for Portia at times appears strange and disturbing.

Portia represents the sufferings of a girl being rootless and having no place, no nation, and no home to belong to. "Portia had grown up exiled not only from her own country but from *normal, cheerful* family life" (Bowen, *DH* 13). She is immature, innocent, and helpless and has become dependent on others. Having spent an exiled life with her parents, wandering from one hotel to another, after her parent's death, Portia became all alone, weak and dependent on her half-brother, Thomas and her sister-in-law Anna. Anna disliked the arrival of Portia but Thomas insisted on Portia's coming to him for a year and for this "he had stood out against Anna's objections" (Bowen, *DH* 47). Thomas being a man could feel the helplessness of Portia but Anna being a woman could not feel the need to love and help Portia. Anna is regarded by many critics simply as a representation of the unfeeling experience of society.

If a woman is supposed to be soft and innocent with capacity for tremendous love and passion to such an extent that no man can ever match her in motherly affection, a woman can also be harder and rough to such an extent that she loses her femininity, her inherent capacity of motherly love. Anna is such a woman who, after having "two miscarriages" (Bowen, *DH* 46), discarded all her motherly love and affections. A woman, as the culturally imposed definitions of gender imply, is supposed to be weak, emotional, irrational, and incapable of actions attributed to a man and Portia is the epitome of all that. In the novel Anna has been shown to be doing every thing that a man does. She is, in fact, living like a man, enjoying all kinds of freedom, spending most of her time out of home with her male friends rather than her husband; she smokes openly, goes abroad for holidays, and most importantly she never allows her husband and other men to possess her in any way. Anna had inherited property from her father and married a rich man; therefore she never had to struggle for those things that other women had to strive for their whole lives.

Though at that time it was not easy for a woman to get a job without any struggle, Anna was reluctant to press herself into a job. Moreover, she seems to have lost confidence in her own capabilities, probably after her break up with Pidgeon, her lover before marriage. Therefore she preferred the easier way of survival by marrying a rich man. Thomas,

therefore, came into the life of Anna as an opportunity and Anna grabbed that opportunity without any delay. Her marriage with Thomas appears for Anna a kind of business that provides her with an easy life. On the other hand Daphne, the step daughter of Anna's nanny, Mrs. Heccomb, is working in a library and she is very popular among people there. It is easy for Daphne to do a small job happily, for Anna it is not that easy due to the class difference. Daphne represents a middle class self-reliant woman of small town whereas Anna represents the upper class artificiality of London. Both of them appear to be feminists as they enjoy the same independence and status as men in society. They know how to position themselves in the company of men but they do not know how to love and respect other women. Both Daphne and Anna, unlike Portia, have crossed the domestic space and have created a private space for themselves, but this transformation is of no help to Portia as they failed to understand her.

The novel is set in the social and political background of the 1930s, the time when women in England began to see possibilities of working outside home. During World War I, more than a million women started doing jobs left vacant by men, who had gone for war, but after the war was over, the government reverted the jobs to men, who returned alive from wars. But by the 1930s, women started working in shops, offices, factories and libraries, etc. As A J P Taylor writes about the 1930s, "In practice, most women remained dependents, particularly in the working class. Wives were lucky to be given a housekeeping allowance. Very few knew what their husbands were earning. In almost every occupation women were paid less than men for doing the same work" (166-67). But Bowen's women, belonging to the middle class, are not dependent on their husbands or the male members of the family. There are nine women characters in the novel including Anna. Although fewer options were available for women to work, the middle class women chiefly earned their living by doing small jobs, e.g., Matchett and Mrs. Heccomb worked as housemaids and Daphne worked in a library, as mentioned earlier. And the upper class women like Anna and Mrs. Quayne inherited property from their fathers and enjoyed the money and status of their husbands. Clara, a friend of Dickie and Daphne, is also a daughter of a rich man. The father of Miss Paullie, Portia's teacher, is a successful doctor and she herself teaches girls. And finally Portia and Lillian are struggling for their identity and survival in London.

Another way of analyzing the Anna-Portia problem has been suggested by Harriet S. Chessman in the context of narrative technique in Bowen's fiction:

Bowen defines two primary positions for women with regard both to narrative and to language. Certain women become objects of narration, in stories told both by primary narrators and by characters who act as narrators, yet as objects, these women tend to resist their forced entrance into narrative, and to desire the presence of another narrative forms. (70)

Anna in novel is certainly the powerful author herself, and Portia unknowingly becomes the character in former's story. Anna is the subject of the novel and Portia is the object, Anna the observer and Portia the observed. Both the women are thus the insider and outsider of the story. The authority with which Anna dominates Portia's life, she appears a patriarch.

In the very opening chapter of the novel, Anna narrates to St. Quentin the story of Portia and her personal diary that Anna has read secretly. Her purpose of telling all these details to St. Quentin is not that she wants to win Quentin's sympathy or love; St. Quentin on his part "detested intimacy, which, so far, has brought him nothing but pain" (Bowen, *DH* 11). It is interesting to find that like Portia, her diary too plays significantly equal role in the novel as she says "my diary's me" (Bowen, *DH* 360). Portia writes about her everyday experience in her diary. Though she has little experience, she tries to make her own viewpoint of whatever she comes to meet. It is through her diary that she talks to herself and the world. According to Anna, Portia is a bad writer and her writing is "completely distorted and distorting" (Bowen, *DH* 7). Anna says to St. Quentin about her bad experience of reading Portia's diary, "As I read I thought, either this girl or I are mad. And I don't think I am, do you." (Bowen, *DH* 7) Anna disliked Portia's writing because it absolutely lacked in creativity and style. She compared it to that of St. Quentin's writing and said "...this is not a bit like your beautiful books. In fact it was not like writing at all." She paused and added, "She was so odd about me" (Bowen, *DH* 8). Anna could not bear the writing of Portia that was not complementary to her. Iqbal Kaur in Introduction to his book *Gender and Literature* (1992) writes, "...creative writing was almost a taboo to a woman who wanted to be considered 'a perfect woman' because for a woman to write meant insubordination which was intolerable to the male dominated society" (xv). Anna with her manly instincts becomes intolerable to Portia's effort of writing. She rather favors that male dominated society which always created obstacles in the creative, artistic or any intelligent act from a woman.

On the other hand, Portia's diary is her voice. She has no language and no identity of her own but she is trying to create a world of her own and a voice of her own through writing in her diary. As Luce Irigaray has suggested:

Women have remained silent within discourse, and that to become a speaking or writing subject is by definition to become "the masculine," then an apparently unbridgeable gap exists between as subject and woman as object. To become a subject necessitates a loss of one's actual being, in a distortion and appropriation through language. A woman entering the symbolic becomes by the working of the logic a masculine speaker, and in "speaking" for herself as woman, she participates in a masculine misprision and silencing. (Chessman 71)

Anna by reading Portia's diary has definitely destroyed the introvert self of Portia and this makes Portia speak openly. Writing about one's personal experience is something that one can share only with one's own self and no one else; in other words it is a kind of mirror in

which one can see oneself if not others correctly. Anna in this regard is like a closed book who would never love to write any personal diary as she is so secretive and mysterious and afraid of her past, especially the time when she was of Portia's age.

Anna's critical and judgmental attitude towards Portia and her diary can also be because of her sophisticated high brow-culture of England that wants conventionality, in which an open display of emotion is not supposed to be good. And Anna is not able to understand Portia. Portia, on the other hand, has come to London for the first time and is not aware of the culture of high society, the flesh and the devil in people around. The character of Portia reminds us of Henry James' heroines who are sent to London for experience and maturity. James believed that Americans are innocent by definition and the Europeans claim to have greater experience and older civilization. Portia too get some experience and maturity in London:

The equally sympathetic understanding of both sexes suggests a sort of androgyny in both James and Bowen: the gender of the author becomes irrelevant; others people's lives are viewed with the novelist's sexual antennae unplugged. Both write a good deal about love; the point is that desire in their work is not tied exclusively to gender. (Halperin 76)

While Portia represents innocence, Anna represents experience. Portia's coming to Anna's home is a kind of confinement for the former where there is no love except the motherly care of Matchett, the governess of the home. Bowen with her own experience has made efforts to understand the relationship between innocence and experience. Bowen's interest in the role of innocence is clearly seen by the fact that one of her reoccurring theme is man's primary need for an illusion and the eventual loss of innocence, the acquisition of knowledge through loss, and the entrance into selfhood. Portia had illusion that Eddie loves her in the same way as she had loved him. Her romantic illusions are due to her innocence and, when she comes to know the reality, her romantic illusions are broken altogether.

Though, at the end, Portia realises that in her innocence she had tried to create her own world with people who belonged to Anna first. It is not a surprise that Portia is betrayed by Anna, who secretly read her diary and made it public. She is cheated by Eddie, who never loved her as she did. She is struck by the realization that most of the adults in her life have been viciously criticizing her. At the end we find her in a hotel, a place where she had spent her life with her parents. In the hotel, one sees a new Portia, who speaks openly and has her voice and capacity to take decisions on her own. In Major Brutt's view, when he saw Portia in his hotel's lobby, she somehow found her way there. We notice a change in Portia's appearance and behavior in the hotel. Here she speaks to Major Brutt unlike she has ever spoken before in London about Anna and Eddie and all the others who have disappointed her. Through this Bowen has remarkably shown how significant a place can be for a person who is searching for a place of her own. For Portia the world of hotel has become an

imagined home from which she relates herself easily. In a broader sense, it can be related to Bowen's personal experiences. Bowen always missed her country Ireland while living in London and suffered from a feeling of rootlessness. She frequently went to Ireland and lived there for keeping herself attached to her roots. But where does Portia belong to? She spent her childhood from one hotel to another, one country to another. When Portia lived with her parents, her father could not give her the experience to belong to one country, a proper home or even an identity. After the death of her parents, she is not able to stand on her own and can't survive without support of someone.

If Anna would have loved Portia and would not have read the latter's diary or if Thomas would have loved and cared for Portia, the story might have been different. In case Portia would not have advanced her friendship with Eddie or if Eddie would have truly loved Portia and finally if Portia would be a man and not a woman, the story must have taken a different turn. Portia's helplessness in the novel is more intense because she is a woman who has entered an unknown world. Had Portia been a man, she would have lived as Eddie has been living, as both of them are orphans. In that case she would not have to go to Major Brutt, a man of her father's age, and prayed him to marry her and she would cook for him and do every thing for him. Portia has illusions that Eddie is her hero and can love her with all his heart. Unfortunately there is no love in Bowen's world. Instead there is a kind of struggle for survival. Portia is able to make us feel concerned for her because of her innocence and ignorance. Bowen defines innocence in her philosophical words:

Innocence so constantly finds itself in a false position that inwardly people learn to be disingenuous. Finding no language in which to speak in their own terms, they resign themselves to being translated imperfectly. They exist alone; when they try to enter into relations they compromise falsifyingly---through anxiety, through desire to feel impart and to feel warmth. The system of our affections is too corrupt for them. They are bound to blunder, then to be told they cheat. In love, the sweetness of violence they have to offer involves a thousand betrayals for the less innocent. (Bowen, *DH* 133)

Portia and Anna thus are significant in their own ways and so are the other women characters in the novel. The novel may be said to be written for women and not for men as Bowen has given nothing significant to her male characters. They all are ordinary common men. On the basis of one's gender, we can not determine the role of male and female. Both men and women are opposite to what they are expected to be according to their gender.

It was Bowen's arrangement to show how in modern world or specifically the high-brow culture and conventionality where every one keeps one's real self under several masks, the very heart of the people, their emotion and feelings have been dead and the entry of an innocent girl Portia in this heartless world, which pretends to be alive, was like a puzzle for her that she fails to solve.

It is interesting to find whose heart in novel is dead. It is not Portia but Anna whose heart has stopped feeling for others, she is unable to make relationships, and she has lost not only her capacity for love but also her femininity. Anna maintains a kind of distance and we notice this in the beginning of the novel how Anna “posted herself at the far side of the fire, in her closefitting black dress, with her folded arms locked, wrapped up in tense thoughts. For those minutes of silence, Thomas fixed on her his considering eyes. Then he got up, took her by one elbow and angrily kissed her. “I’m never with you,” he said” (Bowen, *DH* 43). It is not that Anna had relationship with other man as when Eddie had tried to kiss her she had made a fuss out of that. Anna is living a mechanical, practical and artificial life and pretends to be happy, though somewhere in her inner self she knows that she lacks something vital in her life and this she realises in the presence of the innocent girl Portia, whose presence makes her uncomfortable.

The condition of Anna is more pathetic than Portia and we feel more pity for Anna than for Portia. Anna is not only hard and callous from inside but is also impassionate. Eddie says to Portia about Anna “I don’t think she’s got any passion at all” (Bowen, *DH* 367). It is from the very beginning we feel that it is not Portia who is the author’s chief concern but Anna whom we follow throughout the novel. The novel is more a tragedy of Anna than of Portia. To make things clear, Bowen once said in a radio interview in 1950 about the novel:

I’ve heard (it), for instance, called a tragedy of adolescence. I never thought of it that way when I wrote it and I still don’t see it in that way now. The one adolescent character in it, the young girl Portia seems to me less tragic than the others, she at least, has a hope, and she has not atrophied. The book is really a study; it might be presumptuous for me to call it a tragedy of atrophy, not of death so much as of death sleep. And the function of Portia in the story is to be the awaked one; in a sense therefore she was a required character. She imparts meaning rather than carries meaning (Warren 143).

Anna can be said to be the protagonist of the novel. Her character is not only explored in Portia’s presence, but other women characters, too, seem to have the same role, i.e., to add something more in our understanding of Anna’s character. Portia, like a mirror, comes before Anna and Anna has to see in Portia the utter hollowness of her inner self:

She saw Portia, kneeling down by the fire, look up at Major Brutt with a perfectly open face---her hands were tucked up the elbows of her short-sleeved dress. The picture upset Anna, who thought how much innocence she herself has corrupted in other people---yes even in Robert: in him perhaps most of all. Meetings that ended with their most annihilating and bitter quarrels had begun with Robert unguarded, eager---like that. Watching Portia she thought, is she a snake, or a rabbit? At all events, she thought, hardening, she has her own fun. (Bowen, *DH* 55)

Lilian and Miss Paullie are two other women characters whose roles in the novel are small but significant. Miss Paullie represents an independent woman who has devoted her life for the education of girls who would not get their regular education due to any reason. She is the head of the school which Portia and Lillian attend. Paullie is the one who is using her education, money and status for helping all those girls who are unfortunate. Lilian's figure is important for she is the one who has fallen in love with a woman instead of a man. And her unusual love could not be successful. It compelled her to spend her youthful days in depression as she is heart broken and criticized by the society. Portia's friendship with Lillian is questionable. What is the role of Lillian, a lesbian, in the novel and why Portia chooses Lillian as her friend among many girls? Bowen through the character of Lillian has thus mentioned lesbianism that was rarely mentioned in that time. After Major Brutt's decision that Portia should go back to Thomas and Anna, Lillian appears to be the one on whom Portia can trust and seek help for survival.

Bowen has repeatedly emphasized that men's sexual desires are generally the dominating force in them, on which they have no control. Men like Eddie, Thomas, Piedgon and even Mr. Quayne can be said to possess this universal weakness. McDowell opines, "Thomas and Eddie indicate that they fear not only being hurt by others but also being forced to recognize and admit their own weakness, as well as, from others" (12). The more her male characters seem to be obsessed for sex, her women characters are cold and bound to be moral and impassionate. The colonized body of women has ceased to have desires for sex. It appears they have no sexual need as when their heart dies their body, too, stops feeling. Bowen has never ever attempted to capture an intimate romantic scene in her novels. A kissing is mentioned in both the novels and this is always enough for her. The marriage of Thomas and Anna is just a social and moral bounding; there is no physical or spiritual intimacy between them.

There is no love and life, the novel is filled with symbolic deaths, and actual deaths. In the very first chapter, Anna, while narrating the Quayne's story to St. Quentin, says "What a number of deaths in Thomas's family!" (Bowen, *DH* 13). First of all, the very title of the novel indicates death, and then as we read we find that Portia's parents have died, and Mrs. Quayne, Thomas' mother, has died, too. Mrs. Heccomb's husband, Dr. Heccomb has died. And if we see symbolic deaths in the novel, we see how except Portia's awakened self, every one in the novel is in deep sleep, Bruce Harkness writes, "Though its (the novel's) title refers to the betrayal of the adolescent, the novel is as much the tragedy of a whole society as her's" (504). Even the house of Thomas and Anna is dark and lifeless like their relationship. And Portia does observe this silence in the house.

In conclusion, *The Death of the Heart* is a typical Bowen novel in that it concerns a young orphan searching for a sense of identity in a world which refuses to acknowledge her significance. Mark Schorer contends that *The Death of the Heart* shows that "to live at all,

the heart must be broken” (19). L. G. Strong, on the other hand, sees Portia, the innocent protagonist, as belonging “to eternity unlike the adults of the novel, who have surrendered to time” (140). Portia is a typical Bowen protagonist, as Alfred McDowell writes of her characters, “In some way all of Miss Bowen's protagonists are searching for a home, or for what to them is the same thing, the principle of order that governs their world and that will provide for them a sense of identity by allowing them to fit themselves into that order” (6).

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