

# LIBERATION OF A FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN NANCY HUSTON'S SLOW EMERGENCIES

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## ABSTRACT

This present research paper analyses the theme of woman's liberation through her struggle, ambition, passion and skill with references to the Western cultural and political milieu. There has been a long history of women's suffering and struggle due to dominance of patriarchal conventions and systems over them in the east and the west from time to immemorial. The struggle of woman for her liberation is the major theme of the novel by the novelist Nancy Huston's *Slow Emergencies*. There are many obstacles, in course, on women's way to obtain their liberation and independence in all spheres of life. The female protagonist in Nancy Huston's novel named Lin is obtaining her liberation and fulfilment of her ambition through the means of her struggle, skill, sacrifice, hard work courage in the most commendable way. The research paper examines the process of liberation of protagonist physically, mentally, psychically and emotionally in the familial turbulent situations and burdens. She has to face the familial and professional dilemmas to achieve her ambition of becoming an independent person. The woman must become a self, a subject and independent person, who transcends her definitions, labels, and essence in the society with her great passion, patience, endurance and courage.

## KEYWORDS

Existential Feminism, ambition, struggle, passion, liberation and fulfilment.

## NANCY HUSTON

Nancy Huston is a Canadian novelist and essayist. She was born on 16th September, 1953 in Calgary in Canada. As a child, Huston resided in many places as Canada, Germany and the United States. She spent her most of time in France. She is an Anglo-Canadian writer who began her writing career in Paris in French as an adopted language. She passed her high school from High Mow School. She obtained her Master Degree from The Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales under the supervision of the French philosopher named Roland Barthes from Paris. In the 1970s she was active in the Women's Movement under the leadership of Roland Barthes in France and she taught at Columbia University's Institute for Feminist Studies in Paris in 1980s. She is a bilingual writer, writing in both the languages i.e. French and English. Most of her fictional works she has written in both French and English. First, she wrote her fictional works in French, then, she herself translated them into English. She began her literary writing in 1981, with her first publication of novel in French title named *Les Variations Goldberg*. This novel brought her the French Prix Contrepoint award and was shortlisted for French the Prix Femina award. Since 1981 she has published over 45 books of fiction and non-fiction, including theatre and children's books so far. At present she is one of the leading

social critics and writers in Canada. The present study focuses on her novel *Slow Emergencies* (1996) which deals with the themes of women suffering and liberation.

The novel deals with the universal story of a woman who must choose between her life as a choreographer, dancer, as a wife and a mother. It depicts the two distinct realms of experience of its characters: the professional world of dance and the private world of home and family of its protagonist named Lin Lhomond. The novelist uses many references to fairy tales and folklore in the book. The female protagonist of the novel is the wife of a professor named Derek at a small New England college. They have two children. Their children's names are Angela and Marina. Lin is in a dilemma between her two worlds - artistic passion and familial responsibility. She takes divorce from her husband for fulfilling her career in dance. She pursues her career with unrestrained passion and purpose, and she abandons her family for her career. However, even as she becomes one of the world's most renowned dancers and choreographers, Lin is haunted by the thoughts and recurrent dreams about her children. She feels guilty of abandoning her children. The repercussions of her choice of her career are seen clearly on her husband and two young daughters in the story. They are disturbed emotionally and mentally. The novel describes the emotional turmoil of its protagonist and her family. The novelist focuses on the issues such as existential feminism, ambition, struggle, passion, liberation and fulfilment.

Feminism is aptly defined by Bhasin and Khan to point out the situation of woman:

*Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's work and in society in general and conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation. (3)*

Thus, the protagonist Lin is aware of her position and responsibility in the novel. The novelist of *Slow Emergencies* focuses on the journey of its protagonist in the most appealing and emotional ways. She is very passionate about her ambition of becoming a successful dancer. The protagonist loves most her dance and her ambition of life. In the beginning of story, it is clear that she is a dutiful and ambitious woman, who can do anything for her family and career. Her art of dance is a means of her liberation in the story. As the feminism defines the woman in her different positive roles as, "Feminist criticism begins, I suppose, when the first woman became aware of her relationship to language and conscious of herself as writer, reader and author" (Todd 18). The protagonist Lin is a responsible woman who bears the responsibilities of family on her shoulders and justifies her different roles. As the novelist makes a remark on the protagonist's dutiful nature:

*Derek. I want to let Theresa go.  
What? What for?*

*Lin takes a deep breath.*

*I'd rather do the housework myself. (Huston 54)*

This states that the female protagonist of novel is labourious and accountable to her works. The novelist admires the passion of Lin for dance, "When she is ill, her nurse says to her, "You'll be on the stage in no time, seeing her emerge from the exercise room" (Huston 6).The passion in Lin for life and dance makes her a unique and powerful woman and gives her powerful identity .She has her own dance room, having most of the dance equipments there. Her both daughters resemble her in loving arts and dance. They love and appreciate their mother because she is not only an energetic and passionate mother but also creative artist. The following lines portray the beauty and worthy character of Lin in the most emotional way by her both daughters:

*Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, I like your name better than mine, I want to trade names with you right now, please say yes. You know, like your favourite color is blue and mine is pink. I think your name is the most beautiful name in the world and to be called Lin Lhomond, please say yes, please! Please! okay?*

*You are the most beautiful Mommy in the whole world.*

*You are as beautiful as Italy! (Huston 57-96)*

Here, it is clear that Lin Lhomond is not only a beautiful person but also a loving and valuable mother to her children. The true feelings of her children empower her character in the story. The colour that Lin likes is blue which is the colour of the sky .It symbolizes trust, confidence, intelligence, faith and truth in human being. All these virtues are found in her inherently. Her children want to have her reflections in their lives. The sense of responsible motherhood in her is depicted in the story:

*The children are in the upstairs, Lin can feel their dreams above her, two layers luminous and light in the cricket –streaked silence. Derek is reading his students' papers, leaning forward over his desk in the corner, smoking his pipe.*

*( Huston 68)*

Lin comes up with a statement that indicates she is fed up with the responsibilities of family as:

*Motherhood's not at all what it's touted out to be.*

*In other words?*

*Oh, you know ...women in their kitchens, doing dirty deeds*

*... regressing to infancy with their infants...Dowdy dames*

*With their hair in curlers...*

*And their feet in slippers ...*

*And their minds in soap...*

*Slipping into daydreams...  
 Losing hope....  
 Slapping their children's faces...  
 And making up their own...  
 Yeah, making themselves up-from scratch. (Huston 15)*

These above-mentioned lines elucidate that there are many small works to do in the family by Lin as a housewife. She is bored with the household chores and the responsibilities of family. She feels painful to bear the members of family due to lack of coordination and cooperation in the family. This leads her to the state of isolation and frustration.

For making her own identity, Lin takes some courageous steps in the story. As it said on the concept of human identity, "I search for myself for thus will I find my identity" (Qtd. in Women's Development Workbook 49). With her dancers Susie and Avital, Lin practises dance badly. This gives her strength to make her life great. She fights with her husband. They fight on the matter of celebrating Christmas. As a Jewish Derek is an atheist; he does not want to celebrate Christmas. After this fight, Lin leaves home and drives herself for another place with her daughter Angela. She goes to her parental house for a relief and safety. She takes a divorce from her husband while she is away from the children for her passion and career. It is a big step that she takes easily which proves that she is a courageous and determined person. On the other hand, Derek feels defeated and helpless due to his divorce with his wife. She is a great role-model for her dancers because they even worship her and her talent. In enthusiastic state, she expresses her feelings and happiness for dance and praises her team of dancers such as:

*They would be prepared to break every bone in their bodies for her.  
 Yes it is for this I was born and nothing-no nothing-can equal this joy of  
 making bodies move through space filling the air with movement responding  
 to music with silences in scansion leaps and bounds the soundless cries of all  
 pain and pleasure in the universe. (Huston109)*

Thus, the protagonist also possesses the leadership quality in her that helps her to become an independent artist in her journey of life. Besides a good artist, she is an educated mother, who teaches her little daughter how to put on her socks. It shows the empowerment of the protagonist in the story.

To get her liberation, the protagonist suffers a lot. The hidden suffering of women is pointed out the following line, "Let me not be sad because I am born woman in this world; many saints suffer in this way by Jana Bali" (Qtd.in Kamala Ahamed, I.G.55). Similarly, the novelist depicts the pain of Lin vividly and realistically in the following lines for her empowerment as:

*Lin is sleeping badly these days, as always when a new dance is inside her. Her body throws obstacles in her path as she didn't want or weren't allowed to do it. She battles with neck aches and screaming knees, head colds and wisted ankles, the way fairy -tale heroines fight to overcome combs that shoot into forest and scarves that lengthen into rushing rivers. (Huston 36)*

The extreme physical suffering of the protagonist is measured in the story with the rich use of natural imagery and personification by the novelist. As research scholar, Rattan in his research paper entitled "Concept of New Woman in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters," quotes on female protagonist and her liberation such as:

*She walks into her journey of liberation with her great determination and patience .She knows that her freedom and meaning of life lies in her struggle and education. After passing through many tough experiences of her life she leads her life towards her liberation and quest for her identity. (HJCR 215)*

Thus, the protagonist travels many parts of world like Italy France and America with dance team. She faces many challenges in her journey for her liberation and identity. But her determination shoots her into name and fame.

*She faces dilemmas between her family and dance :The dance is perpetually newborn, the dance grow so strangely and unpredictably, the dance does not get old, it uses my body to say what it has to say but it does age and change, I myself will die, that doesn't but how can I dance if my children are going to die. (Huston 64)*

The dilemma of the protagonist is resolved when she chooses dance as her final goal of life.. Her utmost passion for her career is reflected on, "Lin drinks nothing at all because she yearns to dance and then she dances, without a partner, her body thrashing and thrashing all by itself" (Huston 66). She is also worried about her friends. Her new work in dance is called Pietas which requires twenty women. It shows that she leads many other women towards their empowerment due to her talent and her power of character. As Zelda D' Aprano describes the sense of woman empowerment and determination which permeates many of the women who consciously identified as liberationists:

The strength and courage of women was becoming more and more apparent to me

*... We had no-one on our side... no political parties, no governments, no armies, no police, no trade unions and religions... All we had ourselves- women- and we had our backs to the wall for there was nowhere we could go....*

*we were forced by sheer need to combine with each other for what we wanted and the only way forward was the possible unity of sisterhood among women. (145)*

Thus, the protagonist of the novel finds strength to liberate herself from the burdens of family in her art of dance, public participation and courage. But she pays the huge price for her success and her liberation in her course of life and journey. She sacrifices her family for fulfilling her dream. Her inexhaustible passion for dance liberates her from a housewife and makes her a successful dancer. As the poetic lines from the poem of Rabindranath Tagore quotes on the subject of human freedom:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls.(Qtd.in. by Kumar in 37)*

Hence, Lin's knowledge of dance and life provides her a way to get her state of freedom in her life by breaking the barriers of her life. On the issue of women liberation, the Vietnamese people boldly claim:

*The Women's Liberation Movement has developed in response to the needs of women who refuse to be imprisoned in their "proper place". We must all work together to change all those things our society which tell us we are second class.*

*(Sydney Women's Liberation Group 1969)*

In the same way, Lin works with the collaboration of her dancers to reach at her pinnacle of success and she reaches. She finds the way for her dream by her means of dance. On the theme of freedom, Rashmi Sahi says: Freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and tenacity to adhere to it (170). On her long journey of life, she shows her courage to do what makes her identity and makes her free.

## **CONCLUSION**

To sum up, Nancy Huston's *Slow Emergencies* introduces the readers to the idea of the female liberation and empowerment, which can be achieved through the rigorous processes, sacrifice and arts of living. Lin, being the protagonist of the text, gets herself liberated from the unending shackles of familial responsibilities. Her art of dance leads her towards liberation and empowerment. Her life is equipped with the means of dance, which paves a successful niche to the protagonist for making her individual identity and personal and professional successes. This dance shoots her into the name and fame. The means of art and skills helps people liberate in their life. Art or skill is a powerful tool of human empowerment and liberation. The novelist Nancy Huston depicts her protagonist in a realistic way and she acquires her liberation and empowerment by her struggle, determination, patience, sacrifice and the means of her art on her long and passionate journey. The memories of her

family, which she left for her career, inflict her on emotional and mental pain frequently. They terribly haunt her and plunge her into the state of melancholy and alienation. Her liberation fulfills of her dream to be a dancer and choreographer. The skill in human being is important for the freedom and success of life.

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