

THE DEPICTION OF POST WORLD-WAR AMERICAN WOMEN IN SPORTS WRITING: A STUDY OF THE SUN ALSO RISES BY ERNEST HEMINGWAY

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Abstract - Sports is a way of life which teaches us many life lessons to immortalise and impart. It is not merely about winning and losing but it focuses on sportsmanship and fair play. Hemingway in his novel *The Sun Also Rises* depicts the coming up of a new woman. Sports is intrinsic in the depiction of this new woman. Sports truly provides a mirror to the post World War I American society as it bears the tensions and demands of the society.

Keywords - American sports, Bret, Bullfighting and Hemingway,

The Oxford dictionary defines sport as “an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment.” To understand sports only in this capacity of the term will be no less than a sacrilege. Sports are a very noticeable social institution in the American society, and its appeal is in a similar vein to that of a religion. Sports became part of the American consciousness in the late 19th century when many recreational and physical exercises were converted to modern sports, it developed as an inquiry into the American way of life and it still follows closely the sociocultural changes happening in the country. Sport is crucial in understanding the rubrics of American life and culture; the experiences involved in it not only reflect the significance of the culture but also investigate it. The microcosm of the sporting experience has the facility in it to portray the characteristics of the American distinctiveness. Sports have performed universal motif in literature; it operates on various levels as metaphor and the subject matter. It also provides a source of mythology, to create American legends and heroes since there history is very limited. The Promised Land, according to the Hebrew Bible, was the land given as a promise by God to Abraham and his children. The land symbolises freedom and recovery of the race. The very fact that America is referred as the Promised Land denotes the diverse and liberating features of this nation. The land of opportunities always provided varied chances to women, for their stand in society. Various factors that proved decisive in providing opportunities to women were: race, morality, region, religion, and decorum. America was “discovered” by the Europeans, as part of their colonial enterprise. Various indigenous tribes of Native America used to live there; they eventually became victims of the European disease and conquests. The punishment for transgression of Eve was also meted out to the pre World War I American society. The male, as being the superior, and the female as weaker was well situated in that American consciousness. The

characteristics that were allocated to masculinity were pretty oxymoronic, as they were taken as both aggressive and rational for the Public sphere. That is to say, all the privileges were directed towards one specific gender. The other gender was considered meek and soft, thus best for the private sphere. The lifestyle of women was shaped by men for all purposes. The slow and gradual rise of women started with the passing of the Married Woman’s Property Act of 1848; it gave an authority to the married woman to possess her own property. Earlier it was a kind of a marriage gift for the husband. The approval of the bill faced complications in every state, and thus it gave impetus to start various feminist movements in America. In 1869, the National Woman Suffrage Association was formed, to start a long battle in the struggle for voting rights. More than by laws or any regulations, women were confined by the morality and decorum of the society. British writer Frances Trollope in her book, *Domestic Manners of the Americans: Complete in One Volume* comments that: In America, with exception of dancing, which is almost wholly confined to the unmarried of both sexes, the enjoyments of the men are found in the absence of the women. They dine, they play cards, they have musical meetings, they have suppers, all in large parties, but all without women. Were it not that such is the custom. (131) The women in high bourgeoisie families focused on their physical appearance and beauty, as their worth was calculated not by their vocation or competence, but rather by their ornamental beauty and representation. Southern women and Northern bourgeoisie were more bound by the European ideals of gentility. The onus for having an active social role was on the working class women, frontier women and the agricultural women. Religion did more damage to the plight of women, and complemented man and woman with traditional roles of a breadwinner and a mother respectively. The industrialization of the late 18th century saw the focus being shifted to work, than on the leisure activities. Plenty of women worked in the factories, and followed strict rules. In these

factories women earned much less than men, and whatever they earned was contributed to their dowry. The end of the 19th century was a common site for the lower class women to work on low wages to support their families. The American women were mostly working from their home in comparison to the European women who were going to the factories in England. Another important aspect of the American women of the 19th century was that they cared about the social problems in the American society. That is to say, they were considerate about poverty, malady and vulnerability; one could believe that the traditional gender based division of work came useful for them. Women were trained for being good homemakers and mothers; the virtue of selflessness was made essential to their identity. In the 19th century, women participated in charity work significantly. The post Civil-War era saw the dawn of a new era; where allegiance, responsibility and organization promoted a new sense of American identity. In the early 20th century, there was a change in the politics of men, the focus shifted from having political ties only with neighbours to going beyond the geographical restrictions. The focus was shifted from having the same economical and political interests to making the necessary coalitions. The insignificant problem in the society like the identity of women in the society was ignored, and woman suffrage was seen as a harmless occupation. That doesn't mean that the 1920 voting rights of women were gifted to them by men. The women understood that they too needed to broaden their approach in helping people. Charity work and public display of motherhood was proving insufficient on the larger scale. Mary Beard in her text *Making Women's History: The Essential* Mary Ritter Beard explains: It is the same development which has characterized all other public works—the growth from remedy to prevention, and the growth is stable for the reason that it represents economy in the former waste of money and effort and because popular education is leading to the demand for prevention and justice rather than charity. In this expansion of municipal functions there can be little dispute as to the importance of women. Their hearts touched in the beginning by human misery and their sentiments aroused, they have been led into manifold activities in attempts at amelioration, which have taught them the breeding places of disease, as well as of vice, crime, poverty, and misery. Having learned that effectively to "swat the fly" they must swat its nest, women have also learned that to swat disease they must swat poor housing, evil labor conditions, ignorance, and vicious interests. (122) Mary Beard's explanation, that the ideals of domesticated womanhood were conforming and meek, therefore, required a new form; bigger and better than the

domestication. They combined civic virtue and public good with the Republican values to give new wings to their political careers. The suffrage of 1920 didn't intimidate the male political traditions, but the new woman of the 1920s found domesticity a redundant occupation. Hence, she adopted the male values and behaviour of the 19th century. Women left their "home" to seek a new identity. Also, the Lost Generation syndrome left a significant impact on the aspect of gender games, as both the genders saw a role-reversal and breaking away from the traditional duties allotted to them. This era in the American society marked the beginning of a more enhanced and healthy relationship between men and women. The advent of the war always has some groundbreaking results, and it brings cosmic changes in the working of a society. War not only does physical damage to goods and properties, but it also damages the moral and social beliefs of the society. The process of restoration acts as a gateway for the marginalized section to come at the center. The American society, post World War I, saw the modification in gender roles. The Victorian ideal of the "angel of the house" changed dramatically, as women experimented with the male roles. Women came out in short hair and frocks to provide boyish charm to their persona. This coming out of the "other" sex, also involved leaving the private sphere and challenging men in their personalized space. Brett Ashley of *The Sun Also Rises* is representative of this class, who "plays" with the notion of masculinity. The modification in the society made women play more like a hitter of the baseball game. In the gender sport, an underdog was able to dislodge the champion of the game.

Game of Brett in *The Sun Also Rises*: Ernest Hemingway is regarded as the propagator of this "Lost Generation" syndrome. As described in the second chapter, this generation was hollow and searching for new directions. The War shattered the social and cultural conventions of early 20th century America. Even though America participated in the War pretty late, and for the greater part was neutral, the little participation resulted in ruptured gender binaries. The strict Victorian ideals of being a woman took a back seat, and women left it to themselves to define their beings. They emerged as partners, and not socially inferior to men; the way Jake Barnes treats Brett as his partner highlights this change. Since chapter one of this dissertation pointed out the role of Machismo in the novel, here in this chapter, the case of role reversal will be looked at. The Great War saw the entry of women to war industries to fill in the boots of the men gone for War. They adorned new ways of dressing and style; here in the novel, Brett Ashley is presented as a character that has short hair and is pretty boyish in her charm. Brett can be

seen here as an individual playing against a whole team. The jersey she wears is symbolic of everything that was used earlier to mow down the spirits of the previous women players. Ironically she has the title of Lady attached to her name, which keeps reminding us of the failure of Victorian standards. The clothing of Brett is tight and a bit revealing as well. Jake, the narrator describes her as: Brett was damned good looking. She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy's. She started all that. She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht, and you missed none of it with that wool jersey. (19) The quote from Jake clearly focuses on two things, first, her boyish hair and second, her exposure of the skin. The spotlight on these two aspects shows the creation of a femme fatale figure of Brett at the power center of the society. The description of Jake also defines the fashion of this new generation. The title of Lady goes into thin air from here since. Her dressing sense echoed the fashion trend of the most daring women in American society, who were shifting away from the traditional gender roles. Paris provided Brett an excellent home pitch for her to give her best performance. Paris remained the fashion capital from the beginning, and Brett was pretty much up to date with the requirement of the time. In a traditional society, men were provided with sexual freedom to define their masculinity. Women, on the other hand were suppressed with the family role and worship of their partner. Masculinity was defined with having multiple sexual encounters, thus proving man's sexual prowess. Here, in the novel, as Brett takes up the position of a new woman, she is involved in many sexual encounters with men; literally taking the position of the traditional male figure. The Victorian ideals prohibited women to enjoy the pleasure of sexual encounter, and taught them to contain themselves. For those women, the act of sex was more of a duty than a mode of enjoyment. Here, in the novel, Brett uses the act of sex as her symbol of emancipation. The sexual liberation is the best shot of Brett in this game of society. Also, it is worth noting that the Lost Generation participated in meaningless sex and promiscuity, but Brett in a way uses it to enhance her identity. Almost every lover of Brett, which includes all the important male characters of the novel (except Bill) are jealous of Brett's sexual freedom. They wished to repress her, especially Jake. He considers Brett as his only love; incidentally, Jake is also the narrator of the novel. His description of Brett's sexual encounter is filled with misery and jealousy. The sexual freedom of Brett is akin to the privilege provided to only men. Brett's relationship with Mike further liberates her in this game of post World War I society. Mike is the fiancé of Brett, and he too participated in the Great War like

Jake. Mike is someone who spends most part of the day in consuming alcohol. It seems like Brett controls the relationship, as she is seen hopping from one bed to another. The mutual contract between the two is symbolic of the dominance of Brett in the partnership. The desperation of Mike can be seen with the fact that the promise made by Brett to marry him proves like an insurance agreement for him. In this partnership between Brett and Mike, the captain of the team is Brett, who provides him with security, similar to what Victorian women sought in the patriarchal setup. Mike's nod to the sexual freedom of Brett can be understood with his dialogue between him, Brett and Jake at the bar in the novel. Mike says "Mark you. Brett's had affairs with men before. She tells me all about everything" to which Brett replies coolly "Michael and I understand each other" (125). Brett is not discreet about her actions at all; she keeps her game open and her playing technique as intuitive. She asserts her sexual identity pretty freely; for her she is not doing anything wrong. Mike may seem complacent about all these, but his inherent jealousy can be judged by the fact that shortly after this incident, he is involved in a fist-fight with Cohn, another suitor of Brett. In her quest to sexual freedom, Brett emasculates many, which even included sportspersons such as Romero and Cohn. This liberation of Brett is similar to rise in the stature of women in the American sports. American women sport is symbolic of the undeterred passion of womanhood in the social and cultural milieu of the American society. As mentioned in the introduction of the dissertation, women slowly but steadily gained footing in this male stronghold. Sports are typically considered as a male-oriented field, where aggressive masculinity and aggression comes into play, which are traits of machismo. Women converted their leisure time activities into competitive sports. Cycling and skating became their tool of emancipation; they started doing these as mere recreation activities. It all began from their private sphere of home, from domesticity, and then they moved out to clubs and eventually to the national stage. Later they picked sports like tennis to further provide wings to their vocation of emancipation. Acceptance of Article IX in the American educational institutions was a Godsend for them; the year 1972, marked the dawn of a new era in the participation of women. It states that "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." In the novel, Brett's freedom is emblematic of the coming liberation of the women in Sports. The way she overpowers Cohn and Pedro Romero proves that the time for women has really come. The first line of the novel describes the

persona of Cohn as “Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton” (3). The athletic capability of Cohn is noteworthy, thus his emasculation by Brett is profound. He falls in immediate love with Brett, as soon as he sees her. The persona of Brett was an overpowering one for him. In Jake’s account of the first meeting between Brett and Cohn: She stood holding the glass and I saw Robert Cohn looking at her. He looked a great deal as his compatriot must have looked when he saw the Promised Land. Cohn, of course, was much younger. But he had that look of cager, deserving expectations. (18) Indeed there is little doubt that Brett being at the center of attraction was more appealing to Cohn than anyone else. Cohn is a Jew, who carries the stigmas attached with that being. He is looked down upon in every field and gatherings. During his college days, boxing helped him to regain his standing, and made him rise above the hate. Boxing as a sport redeemed him of his roots in the college, and now as he is out of the college, the ghosts of the past are haunting him again. His occupation as a writer doesn’t guarantee him stability in his life, which he seeks. Brett is indeed like a Promised Land for him, something which can redeem him again. Cohn is involved with Brett in only one sexual encounter, and that leaves him madly in love with Brett. Initially, Cohn is married to Frances, who subjugates him very deeply. Cohn is trying to change his team; he is looking for a new captain to lead him. In the text, According to Jake: Cohn had married on the rebound from the rotten time he had in college, and Frances took him on the rebound from his discovery that he had not been everything to his first wife. He was not in love yet but he realized he was an attractive quantity to women and the fact of a woman caring for him and wanting to live with him was not simply a divine miracle. (7) Cohn is a very sensitive character in the novel. One sympathizes with him greatly, as he is dominated by every character irrespective of profession and gender. He only needs a stable life, where he is not socially looked down upon. And Brett guarantees that life for him. Brett leaves Cohn, and moves to another man soon after. This leaves a deep impact on Cohn, who is almost depressed after the Brett episode. He resorts to fist-fights to showcase his irritation. Pedro Romero in the novel, according to Jake, is at the pinnacle of masculinity. His expertise in the manly game of bullfighting makes him no less than a legend of the game. In Pamplona, everyone wishes to be him, and one can even sense his aggressive masculinity with the fact that even Brett falls for him. Only in Romero she does find a competitive rival. Brett even confesses her love for Romero in front of Jake. Romero’s character is a pure character, he is from Spain. Bullfighting takes place at his native place, he is proud of the fact that he

belongs from here, unlike the expatriates in the novel. According to Jake: Romero never made any contortions, always it was straight and pure and natural in line. The others twisted themselves like corkscrews; their elbows raised, and leaned against the flanks of the bull after his horns had passed, to give a faked look of danger. Afterward, all that was faked turned bad and gave an unpleasant feeling. Romero’s bull-fighting gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time. He did not have to emphasize their closeness. (145) He is like a foil for other major characters in the novel. He is pretty much forward with his approach towards life. And, bullfighting holds a very important position in his life. Amongst this Lost Generation, he is the only ray of hope. Characters like Jake, Cohn and Mike should try to find purpose in their life, by looking at Pedro Romero. The relation of Brett and Romero is based more on unorthodox social conventions, than on traditional rules of the game. Romero gifts Brett a piece of bull’s ear to show his admiration for her. No doubt, even Romero couldn’t escape the glory of Brett. She realizes that Romero is only a 19 years old boy, and has a lot to offer to this society, she can’t think of destroying his career and taking him out of Spain. Brett’s rejection of Pedro Romero shows her commitment towards the sportsman spirit, which seeks mutual respect of each other participating in the game. Just as the sport of baseball has social significance for America, bullfighting holds similar implications for Spain. Sporting heroes hold much respect in the society, and are role models for the society. Brett realizes that, and breaks up with Romero to leave some hope around. The relationship of Jake Barnes with Brett is an intriguing one, and one can sense the tension around it. On one hand is Jake, who is representative of the Lost Generation of men who have returned from the War as wounded and disillusioned. On the other hand is Brett, who is representative of this class of new women who, at the time of war gained new strength in the society by filling up the shoes of missing men. The legacy of both the characters clashes quite intensely to provide no cure for this generation. Jake represents the ‘wound’ed image of Victorian masculinity. He is devoid of any say or role in Brett’s life. Jake in some way undergoes the gender makeover, so prevalent in the age. The wound that Jake Barnes carries is symbolic of the memories of atrocities committed against mankind in The Great War. The War wound emasculates him, and the treatment meted out by Brett, makes the mockery out of his injury. Jake’s inability to perform sexually not only makes him a lesser man, but also compromises his position in society. The comment of the General on his injury

that “he has given to war more than his life” denotes the helplessness of Jake. Leave about winning the race to win the newly liberated Brett; he cannot even compete in the game. His helplessness lies in the wound that he received in the War. Through various activities like playing sports, drinking, fishing trips and sound knowledge of the male sport bullfighting, he tries to compensate for his loss. But he cannot acquire the trophy, Brett. Jake is aware of his situation and points out: I lay awake thinking and my mind jumping around. Then I couldn't keep away from it, and I started to think about Brett and all the rest of it went away. I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry. Then after a while it was better and I lay in the bed and listened to the heavy tams go by and way down the street, and then I went to sleep. (27) The thought about Brett makes him have sleepless nights, and he can't rest at all. He tries to put away the thought of Brett, but it comes to him again and again. Brett is like a memory etched in his consciousness of a famous sport star. Crying is seen as a feminine characteristic, and by accepting it, Jake is putting forward his new identity. The emotional awakening of Jake, and his respect for Brett makes him an ideal of the Lost Generation. One can question his masculinity, but one cannot question his non-traditional view of looking at a woman. Brett, the female hero (-ine) of the novel *The Sun Also Rises* is no less than a historical woman advocating the advent of the first half of the 20th century woman. Even though she hails from England, but Hemingway has portrayed her as the symbol of womanhood in the

post World-War I American society. There are various shades present in her personality, like she acts as an almost motherly figure to Jake, consoling him for the travesty of the War. She also acts as femme fatale for characters like Mike and Cohn. In dealing with Pedro Romero, she acts selflessly, and decides to leave him for his own good. Her approach towards life is that: life is too short to be wasted upon petty things, and at this juncture (post War), one should make the most of the time. The War not only presented women with opportunities to fill in the shoes of men in American society, but it also proved instrumental in reshaping the attitude of women. Voting rights in 1920 proved a catalyst in the creation of a “new woman.” Brett is seen as a bull fighter, who is taming all the bulls around her. She is also the symbol of the rise of women in the American sport society, as she uses her sexuality to gain authority over masculinity, which is similar to women playing sports, who transformed recreational activities into competitive sports in the American society. World War I saw the emergence of a new woman, who has overtaken the conventional role of a traditional woman. Brett, even though a British national, showed the true character of an American woman of post World War I society in *The Sun Also Rises*.

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