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**CATHERINE BARKLEY AS A NORM WOMAN: A
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Catherine Barkley as a Norm Woman: A Feminist Perspective of Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms

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Abstract – Measured by the gender standards prevailing during the 1920s, when Hemingway wrote *A Farewell to Arms*, Catherine emerged as a modern, independent young woman—quite possibly representing Hemingway's ideal woman. She is an improved, more modern version of Norm Woman. True to the ideals of the Norm Woman that emerged during Hemingway's time, Catherine is a good sport and pal, possessing traditional maternal and domestic qualities without that cruelty or mannishness displayed by some strong women in Hemingway's later fiction. These ideal women are ready and qualified to run away with the man they love and to help him domesticate the world of his wishful dreams. Contrary to Leslie Fiedler's assertion that "Hemingway's men prefer each other's company and the dangers of the manly world to the responsibilities associated with women and civilization" (355), the protagonist of this novel flees from the corrupt and untrustworthy male world into a woman's arms.

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Hemingway's concept of womanhood took shape in the course of his association with three types of women i.e. his mother, Indian girls and his wives. His concept of an ideal woman is the product of his experience with the second group i.e. Indian girls who make no demands and who complicate his life the least. The ideal of this type of womanhood is enshrined in the Indian young girl Trudy or Purdy. She had "plump brown legs, flat belly, hard little breasts, well-holding arms, quick searching tongue . . . good taste of mouth . . ." (Wilson, "Ernest Hemingway: Bourdon Gauge of Morale" 45). She is a type of woman who would be enjoyable in bed and would make no demands whatsoever. It is this acquaintance with Indian girls which sends him on a life-long search for an ideal woman possessing the qualities of an Indian girl and is white too.

Through Norm Woman Hemingway has tried to present a woman who is both modern and principled. Such characters have appeared as Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*, Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Renata in *Across the River and into the Trees* and many others. Some critics have strongly shown their dislikes for this type of characters by categorizing them as "one-dimensional", "submissive," "simpering" and "self-effacing females" (Martin, "Seduced and Abandoned" 226-39).

In Catherine Barkley, Hemingway has presented a modern and independent young woman. She is devoted and self-contained who chooses to love Frederic Henry and is loved by him in return. She is a perfect match for Frederic because after his fleeing from the corrupt and untrustworthy world she is the

only person whose arms provide him a comfort zone. As the book opens, a naïve Frederic surrounded by father surrogates is called "baby" and "good boy" and behaves thoughtlessly. When he is introduced to Catherine, he is blessed. Catherine sees through his game and insists on honesty: "this is a rotten game we play, isn't it? 'What game? 'Don't be dull.' 'I'm not, on purpose.' 'You're a nice boy,' she said. 'And you play it as well as you know how. But it's a rotten game.' 'Do you always know what people think? 'Not always. But I do with you. You don't have to pretend you love me'" (*A Farewell to Arms* 29).

She is establishing the ethical terms for a relationship that will become their private retreat from a deceptive lawless world. It is not that she is nobler than Frederic, she is simply more experienced. Like Brett, Catherine has lost her true love to the war, but unlike Brett she seems strengthened rather than demoralized by the exercise. The source of strength and courage lies within her. In retrospect, she realizes that she was unaware of the pending doom before the death of her fiancée: "' . . . he wanted to go to war and I didn't know.' I did not say anything. 'I did not know about anything then. I thought it would be worse for him. I thought perhaps he couldn't stand it and then of course he was killed and that was the end of it.' (18)

After his death, she behaves like someone who has been psychologically wounded by the war that claimed her first love. But Catherine not only accepts her pain but also shares her insight and growth with Frederic. What the priest and Catherine know is that the only certainty in life is the imminence of death. It

indicates her maturity and philosophical thinking, a kind of quality found in an inspiring and motivating figure. Thornton Wilder has rightly said about her that "she is the true hero of the book" (*Ernest Hemingway* 86).

Norm females are those who make their male counterparts feel "never lonely and never afraid." Following his desertion from the front, Frederic adopts Catherine's perspective that "there's only us two and in the world there are all the rest of them" (*A Farewell to Arms* 139). Catherine and Frederic are married by nature through their compatibility, if not by law, and their moments of togetherness add up to a flight from civilization into a prelapsarian state. Frederic likes Catherine to let her long hair down: "I would watch her while she kept very still and then take out the last two pins and it would all come down and she would drop her head and we would both be inside of it, and it was the feeling of inside a tent or behind a falls" (102). The ability of Catherine and Frederic to be one signals a loss of self-consciousness comparable to that of a mystical spiritual experience. With the right woman, Hemingway seems to say through the character of Catherine, paradise may be regained. The ending of the novel with the death of Catherine and the stillborn son proves that the "only good woman is a dead one" (Fetterley 71).

Catherine proves a blessing for war wounded Frederic Henry who might have developed "melancholia, mental confusion, delusion and hallucinatory disturbances" had he not met her. However, before the blast at Plava where Henry is wounded, Catherine is only a game playing for him. When she slaps him for attempting to kiss her, he tells us: "I felt that I had a certain advantage . . . I was angry and yet certain, seeing it all ahead like the moves in a chess game" (*A Farewell to Arms* 24). Four days later, Catherine asks Frederic: "'You did say you loved me, did not you?' 'Yes' I lied. 'I love you.' I had not said it before" (28).

The ideal woman that Hemingway aims to point out is one who creates in her partner you a sense of love for her. When Catherine walks into the hospital room in Milan, where Henry is, he says: "When I saw her I was in love with her. Everything turned over inside of me . . . God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with her. I had not wanted to fall in love with anyone. But God knows I had" (84). Catherine has also proved for him an ultimate source of support when he is disillusioned about his sense of immortality.

Catherine Barkley shows many traits associated with war stress on the homebound women who each day scanned the military casualty lists for the names of their husbands, sons and lovers. Gradually, we come to know that she has lost her fiancée in the battle of the Somme: "'It belonged to a boy who was killed last year.' 'I'm awfully sorry.' 'He was a nice boy. He was going to marry me and he was killed in the Somme.' 'It was a ghastly show' (18). She also tells that she began her nursing career at the end of 1915, when her

fiancée was enlisted. She says: "Since the end of 'fifteen. I started when he did. I remember having a silly idea he might come to the hospital where I was. With a sabre cut, I suppose, and a bandage around his head. Or shot through the shoulder. Something picturesque . . . He did not have a sabre cut. They blew him all to bits" (19). Had she known what the war would be like, she would have married him before he left: ". . . why did not you marry?' 'I don't know . . . I was a fool not to. I could have given him that anyway. But I thought it would be bad for him.'" (18)

This past disturbed her mentally as she was thinking of long term relationship with her fiancée. That is why, during the initial meetings; Frederic finds her behavior erratic and perplexing. First, she slaps him when he attempts to kiss her: "I . . . put my arms around under her arm. 'No,' she said. I kept my arm where it was. 'Why not?' 'No.' 'Yes,' I said. 'Please.' I leaned forward in the dark to kiss her and there was a sharp stinging flash. She had slapped my face hard. Her hand had hit my nose and eyes, and tears came in my eyes from the reflex" (24). Immediately afterward, her behavior gets changed and she ends crying on his shoulder: "'I'm so sorry . . . I'm dreadfully sorry . . . you are sweet.' 'Yes. You are a dear. I would be glad to kiss you if you don't mind.' I kissed her hard . . . and her head went back against my hand and then she was crying on my shoulder. 'Oh, darling . . . You will be good to me, won't you'" (24-25)?

On his third visit, Catherine becomes a different woman altogether, instructing him in his role, telling him what to call her and how to say certain phrases: ". . . You call me Catherine?" 'Catherine.' We walked on a way. 'Say,' 'I've come back to Catherine in the night.'" 'I've come back to Catherine in the night.' 'Oh, darling, you have come back, haven't you?' 'Yes'" (28-29). She is quite obviously acting out a reunion with her dead fiancée. She tells her confused, would-be lover: "I had a very fine little show and I'm all right now. You see I'm not mad and I'm not gone off. It's only a little sometimes" (30).

Their sexual union makes them both more whole, relieving Catherine's guilt for not giving herself to her dead fiancée while comforting Frederic. Both are living for each other's moment, completely interdependent, an ideal union. As the summer passes, Frederic becomes her religion, and he fills the vacuum created by the lost company of soldiers with his love for her: "We had many small ways of making love and we tried putting thoughts in the other one's minds while we were in different rooms. It seemed to work sometimes but that was probably because we were thinking the same thing anyway. . . . we said we are married," and Catherine said, "you're my religion. You're all I've got" (104). Both he and she are war wounded, and both use each other, in the best sense, to bind those wounds. While Frederic is recovering from his surgery, Catherine becomes pregnant. Catherine hides her pregnancy for three months before telling Frederic because she doesn't want to bother him: "What is the

matter, Catherine?' 'Nothing. Nothing's the matter.' 'Tell me.' 'I don't want to. I'm afraid I'll make you unhappy or worry you.' 'Tell it.' 'Do I have to?' 'Yes.' 'I'm going to have a baby, darling. It is almost three months along. You are not worried, are you? Please please don't. You mustn't worry'" (123-124).

She considers that women are made to give only pleasures and support rather than pains and worries to their counterparts: "'I did everything. I took everything but it did not make any difference.' 'I'm not worried . . . I only worry about you . . . you are pretty wonderful.' 'No I'm not. But you mustn't mind. I'll try and not make trouble for you. I know I've made trouble now. But haven't I been a good girl until now . . . it will all be like that. You simply mustn't worry'" (124). When Frederic says that he worries about having a child and offers to marry, Catherine refuses to do so because she considers that a married woman is a burden on her man and at the same time she will lose her independence because a married nurse would be sent home: "I wanted us to be married really because I worried about having a child if I thought about it . . . we talked about it and Catherine said, 'but darling, they'd send me away.' 'May be they wouldn't.' 'They would. They'd send me home and then we would be apart until after the war'" (104).

Another quality of Hemingway's norm women is that they have a caring nature both as mothers and as mistresses. Catherine Barkley half-mothers and half-mistresses her counterpart Frederick Henry. Unlike Brett, whose drives take her from man to man and from city to city, Catherine wants no other life than with Henry, no other man than he. She drinks little and displays none of Brett's geographical restlessness. She is so warm and caring that where she is, home is. For instance, even the red plush hotel room in Milan which for several minutes makes her life feel like a whore is changed into home by her presence: "'Come over, please. I'm a good girl again.' I looked over at the bed. She was smiling. I went over and sat on the bed beside her and kissed her. 'You're my good girl.' 'I am certainly yours,' she said. After we had eaten we felt fine, and then after, we felt very happy and in a little time the room felt like our own home. My room at the hospital had been our own home and this room was our home too in the same way" (138).

As if Hemingway were looking back for contrast to the Circean figure of *The Sun Also Rises*, Rinaldi says about Catherine: "Your lovely cool goddess. English goddess. My God what would a man do with a woman like that except worship her" (61)? She rescues, pities, comforts, companions, and sustains, just as she in turn is rescued from the "Craziness" induced by her lover's death when she has finally involved herself sufficiently in Henry's growing love. Her hair is long; she dresses like a woman and gets on well with other woman like her friend Ferguson. Yet she feels the happiest when she is alone with her husband. She

would be unhappy and possibly frightened on the wine-cask in Pamplona. She is at ease in Milan in the midst of a war because she is a young woman in midst of love. Like Maria, she is a completing agent for the hero and is in turn completed by her association with him. Brett, on the other hand, is an agent of depletion.

In the light of Hemingway's depiction of Catherine, it may be argued that he doesn't seem to commit himself to the emancipation of women or to become, in the usual sense of the term, an ardent feminist. The answer would be, perhaps, that his women are truly emancipated only through an ideal service. His heroines, in most of the cases, are meant to show a symbolic or ritualistic function in the service of the artist and the service of man. As a heroine she happily attends to her counterpart's physical as well as emotional needs.

Catherine as a woman is an example of total self-effacement and complete surrender. Her love for Henry reaches its zenith during the summer that they spend together in Milan. She is there to do his bedding and only that which he wishes her to do. For example, at one point she says: "'I'll say just what you wish and I'll do what you wish and then you will never want any other girls, will you . . . I'll do what you want and say what you want and then I'll be a great success, won't I?' 'What would you like me to do now'" (96)? That she is happy and satisfied in surrendering herself is repeatedly evident in her words "darling don't make a separate me, I'm you." Catherine has, therefore, completely effaced herself, her wants and her needs. She exists in and only for Henry. There is no separate identity for her.

Catherine even works to fulfill the psychological vacuum created in the mind of Henry during the retreat. When Henry sees two virgins he starts thinking about Catherine: "If there were no war we would probably be in bed. . . . Catherine . . . in bed between two sheets. . . . Which side did she sleep on? May be she wasn't asleep. May be she was lying thinking about me . . . good night, Catherine . . . I hope you sleep well. If it's too uncomfortable, darling, lie on the other side. . . ." (176). After escaping from the retreat, Henry gets off at Mestre. Here it is the thought of Catherine that comes to his mind in whose company he thinks of being at home and says: "The head was mine but not to use . . . only to remember Catherine. But I knew I would go crazy if I thought about her when I was not sure yet I would see her . . . only about her a little . . . and my lying with Catherine on the floor of the car" (207).

Catherine is the only person with whom he wants to eat, drink and sleep. So he directly goes to the hospital to inquire about Catherine: "At the hospital I went to the porter's lodge. His wife embraced me. . . . 'Won't you have breakfast with us?' 'No, thank you. Tell me is Miss Barkley here at the hospital now?'

'No,' the porter said. 'She is away.' My heart went down" (213). When after a long period Henry and Catherine are united, he finds that her love for him is the same as it was earlier. There is no change in her gentle and submissive behavior towards him. Even though Ferguson is very upset that Catherine is on an advanced state of pregnancy, though they are not married yet. But Catherine has no grievance. She is more concerned about Henry's safety and asks: "Won't they arrest you if they catch you out of uniform?" 'They'll probably shoot me.' 'Then we'll not stay here. We'll get out of the country.' 'I'd thought something of that.' 'We'll get out. Darling, you shouldn't take silly chances" (223).

She shall accompany him anywhere he wishes to go to escape arrest. She is forever assuring him and accommodating him and indulging in all his whims to make him happy. Catherine is not worried about their not getting married and assures him that she will always behave as a good wife. However, Catherine is a bit self-conscious and anxious and wants to know if the child will make any difference to their love. When they started for Lawson for the baby they took a room in a medium ranged hotel and Catherine set about trying to make it look like home. When Henry called Catherine to come over to the bed, Catherine complies but says she cannot be much fun as she has to set the room so urgently.

The last chapter of the novel reveals all the positive qualities of Catherine which can be expected from a Norm Woman. We are struck by her bravery and courage as she undergoes a long and arduous labour. Even when on the verge of death she does not whimper and is anxious for Henry and the baby. She is not afraid of death. She begins to cry not because she is scared but because she feels that Henry must be having a difficult time. She is in a lot of pain and she wants to have the baby quickly but she cannot help it. Her only worry is that Henry should be happy. Her last words are: "I'm not afraid. I just hate it." 'Do you want me to do anything, Cat? Can I get you anything?' Catherine smiled, 'No.' Then a little later, 'You won't do our things with another girl, or say the same things, will you?' 'Never.' 'I want you to have girls, though'" (293). She is so complementary to Henry that when she dies Henry feels that he has lost everything: "I sat outside in the hall. Everything was gone inside of me. I could not think. I prayed that she would not. Don't let her die. Oh, God, please don't let her die. I'll do anything for you if you won't let her die. Please, please, please, dear God. . ." (292).

Therefore, conforming to the concept of ideal woman, Catherine Barkley has lived and died to the expectations of Henry. Among the initial novels of Hemingway, she is a character of her own sort. But in his later novels like *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Across the River and into the Trees*, *The Garden of Eden*, we do find such figures that resemble Catherine in many aspects.

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