

CHAPTER TWO

THEME OF SEXUALITY

The theme of sexuality forms a major concern in the novels of Matt Cohen. The centre of the action of The Disinherited, (1974) is a family farm, north of Kingston in Ontario. The novel portrays the history of three generations of the Thomas family and the farm they occupy from the first clearing to the present, that is from the beginning to the end. The family begins with Richard Simon Thomas in the mid-nineteenth century. Richard, who was the ancestral pioneer of the family, comes from Ontario. His son Simon Thomas and his grandson Richard Thomas carry on the inherited farm in progressive way to satisfy their ambitions. They open and expand new fields totally away from the urban life in rocky wilderness which results in sexual tensions and violence.

The story of Thomas family is revealed through discontinuous sequences from the past evoked by the present action. Richard Thomas is the present owner of the farm. He suffers a heart attack and he is admitted in the Kingston hospital. Subsequently, he dies after a month of another attack in the hospital. After the death of his father, Simon, Richard occupies a dominant position on the farm. Initially, Richard and his wife Miranda have no son of their own and, as a result they adopt Brian. But a year after the adoption they have their own son, Erik. Erik is not interested in the family farm and country life. After Richard's death, Miranda owns the farm and according to Richard's will Brian could live and work

there as long as he wishes. Erik now goes to Toronto to enjoy city life.

Sexuality is the dominant theme in The Disinherited. In the first generation Elizabeth has children from both her husband and his cousin. Simon is her legitimate son who has a sexual relationship with Katherine. She is a daughter of Henry and Elizabeth Beckwith who were running the school on the farm. She has also love relations with Simon's son, Richard. In the last generation Erik, Richard's son, has love affair with Rose Garnet and Valerie. As pointed out by John Moss, "Matt Cohen's sexual liaisons are never directly incestuous but inevitably involve several members of the Thomas family in their consummations and consequences."¹

Even in the generation before Simon, infidelity which shapes future affairs to considerable degree dominates sexual relationships. The poet William C. Thomas seduces his cousin, Richard's wife Elizabeth. He describes it in his diary which is later read by Simon. Though Elizabeth is his mother, Simon is fascinated by the account in the diary:

June 5: I dreamed we must go outside & lie beneath the tree & she will receive me & then the truth will be known to her as it was to me so we may make

each other stronger & show others the way to God.
He is with me at all moments & I will bring her to
Him.

June 6: I explained my dream to her & we went into
the field as was instructed being careful we were not
seen. She does not understand how wild & pagan
this country is. My cousin is evil & does not trust me
& God will punish him. Insects constantly swarmed
about us & we had to go back to the house before it
was done.

June 7: I am a slave & prisoner here. My cousin
would like to be a gentleman but he cannot even
succeed in pretence. There is violence in his house &
he cares for nothing but money. His body has been
removed from God & it makes his wife suffer.

June 8: We are his instruments only & today it was
done.²

Simon refers this relationship saying, "They say my father
caught them in the barn"³. Simon feels himself as much heir to the
poet William as to his natural father Richard Thomas. The poet has
an illegitimate son, Frederick Thomas, from Elizabeth.

In the second generation Simon Thomas is arrogant and seducer in his middleage. Even as an old man he lives in open scandal with a housekeeper in town. He also has his extramarital relationship with his best friend, Herman White's wife. Once while discussing with Richard, Simon says:

"You Know, I remember every woman I've ever had." He spoke in his usual self-righteous way, as if he was proudly reciting his prayers. "And in my opinion", he smacked his lips, "the best time to have a woman is in the morning, in winter, before or after the milking, it doesn't matter"⁴

The affair dominates the novel and determines the continuous course of family history in his love affair with Katherine Beckwith. She has entered into Simon and his son Richard's life when Simon's wife, Leah Thomas, got sick. Katherine stays like a fulcrum between them. Matt Cohen has aptly narrated the seducing nature of Simon in the following lines:

In fall and winter, while school was on and it was cold, Simon officially shared his wife's room, keeping her warm, as he would say, but really just keeping himself warm by being that much closer to Katherine's bed. But in the spring and summer,

when Katherine lived at her own house, Simon would sleep downstairs on the sofa [in his own house].⁵

To boast of chastity is not the local custom but Simon Thomas is considered to be somewhat exceptionally descriptive in his talk, especially at community gatherings where many of the apparent subjects of Simon's anecdote are present, before their husbands. But no one believes what Simon says except Peter Malone, Katherine's husband, who threatens him to set fire to Simon's house, if he finds him talking with Katherine. Thus Katherine has her love affair with both Simon and Richard. She has a child from Simon that does not survive after birth. As she cannot marry Richard, she later marries Peter Malone. Even by chance sometimes both Simon and Richard visit her house and she satisfies both of them. Once Richard comes to Katherine first, and after sometime Simon also comes to her, when Richard is in her bedroom. She puzzles herself and says:

"Excuse me a moment", Katherine said. "I am freezing". She went upstairs, her bedroom that winter was directly above the kitchen, and knelt beside Richard on the bed. "I'll just give him a cup of tea," She said. "He must be half dead from cold. You stay here". She took a sweater from the floor and

put it on. On her way downstairs she closed the door softly.

"I didn't interrupt you, did I ? " Richard's father said. "A person doesn't always know" ⁶

Katherine satisfies Simon downstairs on the wicker chair.

The last generation of Thomas family is represented by Richard's adopted son Brian and his own son Erik. Brian who has married Nancy has once found by Richard with Katherine's youngest daughter in the barn. Erik is unmarried and has affairs with many women. Whenever he is on the farm he goes to Rose Garnett, the propheteer who is already married. Her husband is frequently out of the house for most of the time. He gives more importance to his mechanical painter, a machine made by him, than his own wife. Once Rose taking Erik in her bedroom says, "He wouldn't mind about this, but he'd kill me if he knew I'd shown someone his machine".⁷

Whenever Erik is in Toronto for his university education, he has love affair with Valerie. Erik returns from Toronto when he receives telephone call from Brian informing that Richard is admitted in the hospital for he suffered heart attack. Even though he is coming to look after his father, on the way he feels, "He should be back in Toronto with Valerie, building castles".⁸

Erik returns to Toronto after Richard's funeral and has his sexual affair with another new girl, who is already pregnant for four months.

It seems that all these sexual relationships narrated in the novel have one or another reason behind it. In the first generation the poet could develop his affair with Elizabeth, because her husband Richard was weak. He could not satisfy her sexually. In the second generation Simon's wife Leah is sick and on the other hand his arrogance and seducing nature results in his love relations with other women like Katherine, who has already married Peter Malone. In the third generation this sexual relationship becomes more complex as both Simon and his son Richard have affairs with Katherine. Katherine encourages Richard to develop her sexual relations with him, as Simon becomes old. Erik has his affairs with many women because he himself is unmarried and a woman like Rose encourages him as her husband is not at home for most of the time.

Wooden Hunters (1975) which is set on an island off the coast of British Columbia, also deals with the theme of sexuality. There is a single town with changing population according to seasons. During the summer with tourists and fishing, it goes up to 600, but in the winter it is barely half of it. There is a lake near the

ocean called Indian Lake. In the town C.W. Smith from Montana has his hotel and he works for the welfare of loggers. Loggers come to this place for their commercial interests and destroy the forest as well as the old culture of the natives. As a result natives are against them and they struggle for the retention of their culture.

Laurel Hobson, a young and beautiful woman, is the central character of the novel. She is the urban fugitive. When she first comes to this island six years ago, she meets Johnny Tulip, who is the piano player at C.W. Smith's hotel and she has her love affair with him. After her sliding down the cliff and having injury to her spine, she is admitted to the hospital at Vancouver. When she recovers, from her injuries she finds the middle class life so tasteless that she returns to the island. She takes over an abandoned cabin and learns to become a ruthless hunter. Now she forgets her past and starts a new life. She meets Calvin, a young man and falls in his love. Though she becomes the lover of Calvin, Johnny Tulip remains her best friend. The three of them spend most of their time in the hotel of C.W. Smith. They together fight against the loggers.

C.W. Smith, the hotel manager, has his wife in the city away from him and he has kept Mary Gail, Johnny Tulip's sister, as his

mistress and waitress in his hotel. On the other hand she has her love affair with 'the boy' who is C.W. Smith's servant. The boy joins the natives against his master C.W. Smith, and murders him in his own hotel and he himself also sacrifices his life in the fight.

The Novel is a study of the dope, drink, and sex against a background of remarkable violence and the exploitation of the natives. Laurel Hobson comes to the island six years ago along with her friend Louise, as Laurel's parents die in a car accident. Three days after their arrival to the island Johnny finds them "sitting in their tent and in the rain, unable to start a fire"⁹ and brings them to his home. He is forty one years old and still a bachelor staying in his mother's house. Laurel and Louise live there for a week and the last night Laurel gives up her virginity to Johnny. The description goes on as follows:

He unzipped the sleeping bag and slid his hand between her legs. It was unexpected. His hand was calloused and rough, felt like sandpaper against her skin....

"Hurry up". She pulled him into the sleeping bag, on top of her. His pants were open and half pulled down. She could feel the buckle of his belt

biting into her knees. Nothing else. Johnny Tulip smelled like beer and tobacco and cedar smoke.¹⁰

Their affair continues till she slides down the cliff and breaks her spine. After her recovery in the hospital at Vancouver, from her fatal injuries, she returns to the island forgetting her past. "The breaking and knitting of her spine seems to symbolize the remaking of her personality,..."¹¹

Now she falls in love with Calvin, a young man of her age, on the island. Calvin has seen her first as "dangerous and sharp, a crazy woman running through the woods with her knife, her bottle, her taped-up rifle".¹² As she believes firmly in her love with Calvin, she stops taking pills purposely and becomes pregnant. During this period her first lover, Johnny Tulip, who is of her father's age, remains her good friend. As Laurel had her sexual relation with Johnny Tulip six years ago, Calvin also had sexual relation with a woman. He himself tells this to Laurel:

"Five years ago", Calvin said. He had been living with a woman then too, a woman who worked as a receptionist for an eye doctor. After a couple of months she had packed her suitcase and left. Then he had gotten a postcard from her saying she had runaway with the doctor.¹³

Johnny Tulip also has sexual relations with the missionary's wife before he met Laurel. There is no morality, no social restraint to the sexual relations in the society. Sexuality is free and anyone can go with anybody. Laurel tells Calvin about her friend Louise that Louise is the first girl she knows whoever goes to bed with anyone at her age. When they were in grade ten, Louise slept with a man because he offered her five dollars.

C.W. Smith is an American who sells out his small feed business in Montana and moves to this island. He has been in the air force and has the experience of war. He becomes the owner of the hotel at the north end of the island, where he accommodates the loggers and the fishermen. He serves both Indians and whites without discrimination. His wife Gladys is an expensive wife, who lives away from him at Montana. She keeps long haired cats for contests and sends him pictures of the cats winning prizes. In the painful absence of his wife he consoles himself with his waitresses. Even he tries to yield Laurel Hobson when she was working in his hotel but she teaches him a lesson. One day at closing time when Laurel passes C.W., he reaches out for her. Setting down her tray on the nearest table, she stops and throws her arms around his neck and says:

"Oh C.W.," Laurel said. "You are too much". She dropped to her knees in front of him and clasped her hands at his belt and pulled down his grey and black striped trousers and his red flowered boxer shorts.

"I brought you a present", Laurel said. She reached into her blouse and pulled out a picture with bits of tape at the edges. She stuck the picture to where his shirt-tail hung down below his vest and between his knees.¹⁴

After this incidence he never thinks about Laurel and keeps Mary Gail, Johnny Tulip's sister, as his mistress and waitress in the hotel. On the other hand, Mary Gail has her affairs with a number of lovers and being unmarried she has a child that does not survive. She lives with C.W. Smith but at the same time she has her secret love affair with the boy, who is a mechanic and a driver of C.W. Smith's hearse.

C.W. is interested in Mary Gail and has given her a ring and wants her to marry him. But according to Mary, marriage is a crazy thing, and above all she doesn't like him anymore because "He's so old. He's got hair on his chest and he has bad dreams all night."¹⁵

Mary Gail and Laurel sleep together at night when Laurel is living in Johnny's house. Laurel feels that Mary Gail's jeans are hot, her

thighs and belly burning through the denim, igniting the sudden and overwhelming odour of every man who has slept with her. Here Laurel and Mary Gail's lesbian relations are exposed and the theme of lesbianism is also mentioned in the novel.

The third novel, The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone (1979), which is about the central character Kitty Malone and the events in her life, is yet another novel having sexuality as a major theme. Kitty Malone, still a teenager, seduces Pat Frank who is already an adult and a drunkard. Both live at Salem and they have their love affair. But when Kitty proposes to marry him, in spite of her strong love and desire, he denies the proposal. Pat lives with his glass-eyed twin brother Mark. As Pat refuses, Kitty leaves Salem for Toronto. She wishes to settle there and starts working in a restaurant where she comes across a city slicker Randy Blair. She goes to live with him in his apartment and when she finds herself that she is pregnant, she marries him and gives birth to a son, who is also named as Randy. Though she lives with Randy Blair she never entirely sheds her infatuation for Pat Frank at Salem. She doesn't live with Randy for a long time. She takes divorce from him and along with her son returns to Salem and lives in her grandfather's house. According to a divorce agreement, her son, Randy will live two months every summer and ten days at

Christmas with his father and remaining part of a year with his mother.

Kitty takes up again with Pat and they have a daughter called Lynn. Now Kitty has a cyst and to get it operated she is admitted to the hospital. While she is in the hospital, during visiting hours Pat takes her out for sometime and they marry before a justice. Once in a quarrel, Kitty's son Randy drives his truck over Kitty's brother, Charlie. Pat, who is forty nine years old and a skeleton alcoholic, goes to Toronto to take revenge on Randy but both Randy and his father beat him cruelly.

Kitty's mother Ellen dies and Kitty is brought home from the hospital to attend her funeral. The funeral party converts into marriage party of Kitty and Pat.

The obvious theme of the novel is sexual relationships. Major characters like Kitty Malone, Pat Frank, and Mark Frank have their sexual liaisons. Kitty, the central character, initially has her love affair with Pat, who is already an adult. But Kitty, still a teenager, seduces him in the dreaming hay fields of Kingston. Their affair continues for next twenty years as Kitty tells Pat:

We have been doing it for twenty years and we'll do it for twenty more if we get the chance, goddamn, I

never would have believed it, goddamn, I never would have believed I was born for this.¹⁶

But when she proposes to marry him, in spite of her strong love and desire, he denies to marry her. Pat does not think himself the right person for her. He thinks that he will be her destruction because he believes secretly that his brain is shrinking and the voids left in his skull are filling up with dust. He tells her plainly, "I am too old. You have to make your own life".¹⁷ She feels very sorry and passively cries the first time after her fathers death. She decides to leave Salem for Toronto and the next morning she was on the train with one suitcase only, headed for Toronto – the biggest, most confusing and exciting city she has ever heard of. During her journey she only thinks over Pat Frank's decision not to marry her. In Toronto she gets a job in a restaurant and a room in Boarding house on Jarvis street. After a couple of weeks she meets Randy Blair in a bar and gets attracted towards him. He has an attractive personality with white teeth and full lips. His eyebrows and lashes are thick and blond. His deep rounded brown eyes attract her more. He is healthy like a teddy bear, a city Panda. After their first meeting they start visiting each other frequently and later even start living together in his apartment. When she comes to know that she is pregnant, she decides to marry him.

Kitty Malone she had been, Kitty Malone Blair she had become. In a stone church in Toronto, with only her mother and her brother to see her off, she had wed Randy Blair as soon as she found out she was pregnant.¹⁸

Though she marries Randy Blair and has a son, she never entirely sheds her infatuation for Pat Frank. Besides Randy Blair doesn't treat her well and, as a result, she decides to leave him and comes to the railway station. Suddenly -

... she thought she was going to scream out to the whole station that this crazy florid taxi driver had filled her guts with kids and then left her in an apartment that was hotter than a tin - roofed hen house and only wanted to come home to get food and loving as if he had invented the whole world by picking her up in a bar three years ago.¹⁹

She returns to Salem along with her son to live in the house, her grandfather had built for his retirement before he falls to his death from the barn roof. After returning to Salem Kitty starts her love affair again with Pat Frank for another twenty years of haphazard shacking-up, from which she has a daughter called

Lynn. Kitty's father has been killed in a car accident and her mother, Ellen, has retreated into merry senility.

When Kitty is in the hospital, one day during visiting hours Pat takes her from hospital to city hall and a justice marries them. At the time of marriage Pat is "forty nine years old, the oldest never wed bachelor in the whole township aside from his twin brother".²⁰

Though Pat has love relation with Kitty for the last twenty years before their marriage, he has had an affair with a waitress called Rita Laughton.

Pat's twin brother Mark Frank, a welder by trade, has sexual relation with a widow of his best friend Stanley Kincaid, Violet Kincaid. Her husband is died in a car accident and Mark sees the shadow of Stanley Kincaid from the very first night he beds down with the widow. He feels as if the ghost of Stanley is following him. Mark only likes to visit her but does not want to marry, as he fears to marry her.

The theme of sexuality discussed in this chapter has some complex backgrounds. In The Disinherited the extramarital relationships develop mainly because one of the partners is weak or sick. The poet seduces Elizabeth and she falls victim because

her husband Richard S. Thomas is not virile. In the same way Simon's wife Leah's sickness brings Simon close in contact with Katherine. At a certain stage Simon's young son Richard also attracts Katherine's love and they become rivals for her love. Katherine finds an outlet to her sexual appetite in her extramarital relationships with other men because her husband is socially and economically inferior to her lovers. She prefers young Richard to his old father Simon as in Wooden Hunters, Marry Gail prefers the boy, the young servant to the old master C.W. Smith. But in The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone the love relationship develops as initiated by teenager Kitty, who seduces Pat Frank who is an adult. He refuses her marriage proposal and so she leaves Salem to Toronto. She becomes pregnant by Randy Blair in Toronto and then she marries him. But as she never entirely sheds her infatuation for Pat and bad treatment given by Randy Blair she takes divorce from Randy and she returns to Salem. There she gives birth to Lynn from Pat and then they get married.

In Wooden Hunters Laurel Hobson has her relationship with Johnny Tulip but after her recovery from an accident forgetting her past she falls in love with Calvin. This love triangle of Johnny – Laurel and Calvin remains intact because Johnny accepts his new role as Laurel's friend. Just like Katherine in The Disinherited Laurel also prefers young Calvin to old Johnny Tulip. As John Moss rightly

said in the introduction of Wooden Hunters, Laurel has much the same appeal as Katherine Malone in The Disinherited – perhaps in some respects both are manifestations of male fantasy. All the women characters like Katherine, Elizabeth, Laurel, Mary Gail, and Kitty are the victims of their circumstances in which they fall in love with other men.

Sometimes these love relations create rivalry between lovers which gives birth to violence which is discussed thoroughly in the next chapter.

Notes and References

1. John Moss, Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 189.
2. Matt Cohen, The Disinherited (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 61.
3. Ibid., p. 58.
4. Ibid., p. 87.
5. Ibid., p. 90.
6. Ibid., p. 55.
7. Ibid., p. 16.
8. Ibid., p. 26.
9. Matt Cohen, Wooden Hunters (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p. 45.
10. Ibid., p. 48.
11. George Woodcock, Matt Cohen and His Works (Toronto: ECW Press, n.d.), p. 33.
12. Matt Cohen, Wooden Hunters, op. cit., p. 196.
13. Ibid., pp. 107-08.
14. Ibid., p. 26.
15. Ibid., p. 160.

16. Matt Cohen, The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone
(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), p. 69
17. Ibid., p. 73.
18. Ibid., p. 18.
19. Ibid., p. 16.
20. Ibid., p. 210.