

## **Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* : A Feminist Study**

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#### **Abstract**

Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* was written in 1973 , the year that witnessed the start of the first phase of the modern feminist movement which was characterized by consciousness-raising , rebellion and agitation. The aim of this paper is to investigate the attitude of American men and American society towards women, how they are treated and apprehended. It also explains how difficult it is for the society, to perpetuate the traditional roles assigned to women and men ,which uphold patriarchy as an ideology. The novel, as an example of feminist literature ,reflects women's attitude towards such societal traditions through its heroine , Isadora Wing ,who is seen as an embodiment of the new female consciousness .

### **Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* : A Feminist Study**

Written in 1973 , Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* as a story has a great impact on the cultural scene of that year. As an advocator of women's "new freedom ,sexual and social,"<sup>1</sup> Jong is identified with feminism,the movement which is largely motivated by and concerned with "the experiences of women, especially in terms of their social, political, and

economic situation"<sup>2</sup> and that tends to promote "women's rights, interests, and issues in society."<sup>3</sup>

Fully aware of the problematic situation of women during the 1960s and the 1970s, feminists struggle to seek a change in female consciousness, and aim at "the transformation of women's perception of themselves."<sup>4</sup> As a term "consciousness raising" has become so "central to contemporary feminism."<sup>5</sup> It may indicate becoming conscious of something, formerly unperceived, or raising something from the unconscious level to the conscious one or being committed "to personal or social change, or both, to elevate the position of women."<sup>6</sup> Jong, as a feminist writer, tries to "awaken the feminine consciousness"<sup>7</sup> through her controversial novel. When asked about the position of women in the early 1970s and what is expected of them during this time period, she said :

You were supposed to get married, have children, take care of a husband ;and that was why there was an epidemic of mad housewife novels in which a woman woke up and discovered actually her sworn enemy was her cranky husband who had made her into a slavery. And I truly hated those mad housewife novels....Because they were blaming men for something that was not literally men's fault. I mean, we were in a terrible predicament as a society, but it was not the fault of individual men or women. We were stuck in certain roles .<sup>8</sup>

From the quotation above, it is clear that the fault is attributed to the American society and its institutions that support the idea of keeping women in the line or in their places. Women are supposed to be contented by their feminine roles, and if they show their inability to adjust to the roles

they are given, they will be considered as unfeminine and deviant "from natural female psychology ." <sup>9</sup>Thus ,the result of the society's intention of fitting women into roles not chosen by themselves is that women are put in terrible and "intolerable conflict between their own conception of themselves and the way others observe and categorize them." <sup>10</sup> Because of sexism and the society's unwillingness to look at women as autonomous creatures or beings, they start to suffer "from an image of the self that paralyzes" <sup>11</sup> their will and their right to live as independent individuals .Sharing acquiescently in the "society's patriarchal definition of them" <sup>12</sup> as inferior beings confined to bear children and serve the family, women, step by step, become unable to live by themselves and begin to lose their sense of self-hood ,autonomy and self confidence .

Tired of such acquiescent , seething housewives, Jong introduces a new kind of female protagonist, who tries to break free from the traditional American "perceived role of a wife," <sup>13</sup> act and live according to her own premises.

Beginning first with the title of the novel, it is symbolic in the sense that Jong's heroine, Isadora Wing is fearful not only of flying literally speaking, but also of living a life of her own as an artist, a poet, and a woman. Even Isadora's last name, i.e. Wing, "underscores the significance of the novel's major theme and symbol." <sup>14</sup> Thus, the question that the novel raises is that Isadora should conform to the desires and expectations of her husband, sisters,and parents, the values and norms of her society, or rebel, i.e., escape these norms, traditions and home, "the space most closely associated with the female" and "transgress the boundaries of proper behavior." <sup>15</sup> Isadora's desire for freedom," independence, and liberation from the structures that oppress a woman," <sup>16</sup> is set in the first chapter, entitled "En Route to the Congress of Dreams or the Zipless Fuck," that

serves as a catalyst for her search for it. While in Vienna with her second husband, Bennett Wing, to attend an international conference for psychoanalysts, she becomes infatuated with or interested in another man, Adrian Goodlove, whom she openly pursues. Being unhappy in her marriage, she willingly surrenders to her restless desire and to the sexual fantasy of "zipless fuck" which she creates and which she believes has met at the conference in the person of Goodlove, who daringly grabs Isadora's ass upon their first meeting. Of the "zipless fuck", that Isadora sees as a form of escape to live freely according to her own terms, and its relation to her stifling and unsatisfactory marriage to Bennett, and to the patriarchal society that she lives in, she comments:

My response to all this was not ( not yet ) to have an affair and not ( not yet ) to hit the open road, but to evolve my fantasy of the Zipless Fuck. The zipless fuck was more than a fuck. It was a Platonic ideal.

( *FF*.Ch.1 , P.9)<sup>17</sup>

According to Isadora, to achieve freedom, the zipless fuck must follow certain conditions, namely brevity and anonymity in the sense that it prevents any reference to the person in contact. It, she thinks, is :

seemingly free of all remorse and guilt; because there is no talk of her late husband or of his fiancée; because there is no rationalization; because there is no talk at all. It is free of ulterior motives. There is no power game. The man is not "taking" and the woman is not "giving." No one is attempting to cuckold a husband or humiliate a wife. No one is trying to prove anything or get anything out of anyone. The zipless fuck is the purest thing there is.

( *FF*. Ch.1 , PP.12-13)

As it is mentioned before, the “zipless fuck” is a form of escapism for Isadora, or an expression of her desire of running away from "typical American female experience,"<sup>18</sup> of having a husband and several children to raise . In fact, what makes Isadora restless is that her longings are so "un-American." She, as a poet, has the aspiration to get exuberance through solitude:

Five years of marriage had made me itchy for all those things: itchy for men, and itchy for solitude . Itchy for sex and itchy for the life of a recluse. I knew my itches were contradictory – and that made things even worse. I knew my itches were un-American - and that made things still worse. It is heresy in America to embrace any way of life except as half of a couple. Solitude is un-American. It may be condoned in a man....But a woman is always presumed to be alone as a result of abandonment, not choice.

( *FF.Ch.1, P.9* )

The above cited lines, as a matter of fact, reflects Isadora's rejection of the American society which looks at women who seek independence and self-reliance as being abandoned or rejected. The role of the female is "to complement her mate as a wife or mother."<sup>19</sup> Marriage is considered as the goal of women. Thus, it is a privilege to be chosen by men and single women are considered failures because they do not have this chance of being chosen by men. Singleness is regarded as "an unhealthy state and any single woman who claims self-possession is clearly deluded."<sup>20</sup> To be pursued by men, women are "expected to be beautiful, sexy, and above all young."<sup>21</sup> Isadora Wing, just like all other females, is obsessed with this idea of beauty. Thus, it does not make a difference whether a woman is

educated or liberated since women are still entrapped by beauty according to her:

I loathed every extra ounce of fat. It had been a lifelong struggle: gaining weight, losing it, gaining it back with interest. Every extra ounce was proof of my own weakness sloth and self-indulgence. Every extra ounce proved how right I was to loathe myself, how vile and disgusting I was.

(*FF.Ch.17, PP. 269-270*)

Nevertheless, Isadora resists the demands that society imposes upon women, and "singles out psychoanalysis for attack because of its support of the traditional female sex role."<sup>22</sup> This idea is clearly shown in the novel through Isadora's exchange with her latest analyst, Dr. Kolner whom she considers ignorant of "the subordination of American women in general, and of gender oppression as a major source of women's psychological problems in particular."<sup>23</sup> Objecting to what he thinks is female "normality" that she regards as patriarchal and oppressive, she responds with the following outburst:

Don't you see that men have always defined femininity as a means of keeping women in line? Why should I listen to you about what it means to be a woman? Are you a woman? Why shouldn't listen to myself for once? And to other women? I talk to them. They tell me about themselves\_ and a damned lot of them feel exactly the way I do \_ even if it doesn't get the Good Housekeeping Seal of the American Psychoanalytic.

( *FF.Ch.2, P. 15* )

Jong, as a feminist, is hostile to psychoanalysis since it reproduces "patriarchal inequalities."<sup>24</sup> As a psychoanalyst himself and a product of patriarchal America, Bennett Wing uses psychoanalysis to make his wife under his control. Realizing that she is infatuated with the English Laingain Adrian Goodlove, Bennett insists on her going back home and reenter therapy.

Isadora's view of marriage as an institution is contradictory. Though she believes in it, she thinks that it restricts her own desires and longings. Her skepticism concerning this institution is made clear in the following quotation in which she reflects her rejection of the idea that marriage can end all female sexual fantasies and day dreaming:

I was not against marriage. I believed in it in fact. It was necessary to have one best friend in a hostile world, one person loyal to you. But what about all those other longings which after a while marriage did nothing much to appease? .... Those longings to hit the open road from time to time, to discover whether you could still live alone inside your own head, to discover whether you could manage to survive in a cabin in the woods without going mad; to discover, in short, whether you were still whole after so many years of being half of something.

( *FF*. Ch. 1 , P. 7-9 )

Being unsatisfied in her life with her Freudian husband, who spends much of his time working at the hospital, Isadora turns to autobiographical writing as an outlet to enjoy her sexual fantasies and dreams. Thus Isadora is in conflict between her duty as a wife and her own imagination. Though she does her duty to Bennett, whom she thinks satisfies her sexually, she still goes on thinking of Adrian Goodlove in her head. In turning to writing,

her fantasies and her lover, she thinks she "can fill in those empty gaps to feel herself a more fulfilled person."<sup>25</sup>

Isadora, as a woman writer, spends most of her time expressing her own doubts and guilt:

I'm very dependent. I fall apart regularly. I go into horrible depressions and hardly come up for air. Besides, no man wants to be stuck with a lady writer. They're liabilities. They daydream when they're supposed to be cooking. They worry about books instead of babies. They forget to clean the house....

(*FF.* Ch. 8 , P. 123 )

Isadora's problem is that she is unable to find or define herself. As a result, she always tends to "lose [ herself ] in a man." ( *FF.* , Ch.18,P.84) She can't decide which path to follow, to be either a woman or an artist, to choose her body or her mind. As a modern novelist, Jong explores the idea of the divided self which is "especially relevant to twentieth-century concerns."<sup>26</sup>

Through her elopement with Goodlove, Isadora tries to escape her past, family, and parents and feel her freedom, the possibility that she thinks is difficult to achieve in the American society:

Then why did our lives seem to come down to a long succession of sad songs about men? Why did our lives seem to reduce themselves to manhunts? Where were the women who were really free, who didn't spend their lives bouncing from man to man, who felt complete with or without a man?

( *FF.* , Ch. 6 , PP. 94-95 )

Refusing to be sanctioned by the American patriarchal society, Isadora rejects the idea of emulating her mother and her three sisters who

"seethe with jealousy at Isadora's literary ambition because they have elected to forgo all creative aspiration,"<sup>27</sup> and conform to the American female role of the housewives as being bearers of children. Her reluctance of this idea is shown in the following quotation in which she contemplates whether or not to have children:

What I really wanted was to give birth to myself-  
the little girl I might have been in a different family, a  
different world....

What did they have to keep rushing me and  
trying to cram me into the same molds that has made  
them so unhappy? I would have a child when I was  
ready . Or if I wasn't even ready, then I wouldn't.

( FF., Ch. 3 , PP. 43-44 )

In her journey with the existentialist Adrian Goodlove, she again contemplates the American female position, i.e. , Mrs. America role , that she detests, to escape her reality:

I suddenly had a position to be that ordinary girl.  
To be that little housewife, that glorified American  
mother, .... That was the solution! To be ordinary! To  
be unexotic! To be content with compromise and TV.  
Dinners and "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" I had a  
fantasy then of myself as a happy housewife. A fantasy  
straight out of an adman's little brain. Me in apron and  
gingham shirtwaist waiting on my husband and kiddies  
while the omnipresent TV. set sings out the virtues of  
the American home and the American slave-wife with  
her tiny befuddled brain.

( FF., Ch. 15 , P. 239 )

The quotation above shows Isadora's ambivalence in relation to this fantasy and her struggle to find her identity as an American woman writer, the point that she finally reaches once her lover confronts her with his desire to come back to his wife and children in Cherbourg. Thus, left alone in a Parisian hotel, she is empowered to comment that she is to spread a number of her published book of poems around Europe:

They were designed to prove that I was not just an ordinary woman. They were designed to prove that I was exceptional. They were designed to prove that I was to be given safe conduct. I clung pitifully to my status as exception, because without it, I would be just another lonely female on the prowl.

( *FF.*, Ch. 16 , P. 256 )

Isadora thinks that she has been the victim of Goodlove, but at the same time, as she thinks, he helps her in that he serves as an instrument of her freedom, self-discovery and self-realization. Isadora finds herself through her own writing that she thinks is "the submarine or spaceship which takes me to the unknown worlds within my head.... A new vehicle, designed to delve a little deeper (or fly a little higher ) ( *FF.* , Ch. 12 , P. 199 ) . Surviving a night alone in the Parisian hotel, she manages to accomplish her wholeness by "contemplating her body in the mirror and pursuing her manuscripts."<sup>28</sup> An evidence of her change and her becoming whole occurs at the end of the novel as she, on her way back to Bennett in London, rejects the chance offered to her to experience her "zipless fuck" with a stranger on a train, the prospect that previously "fueled her sexual

fantasies."<sup>29</sup> Rather than exciting her, she realizes her favorite erotic fantasy with abhorrence:

Puzzling wasn't it? A tribute to the mysteriousness of the psyche. Or may be my psyche had began to change in a way I hadn't anticipated. There was no longer anything romantic about strangers on trains. Perhaps there was no longer anything romantic about men at all?

( *FF.* , Ch. 18 , P. 286)

This indicates how Isadora's consciousness has undergone a change. She is no longer moved by these sexual fantasies that she has previously seen as a form of liberation or escape from "the prison house of patriarchal ideology."<sup>30</sup>

Abandoned, Isadora has no other alternative than to go back to her husband in London on her own terms, perhaps to rebuild her marriage by assuming "different consequences of her action, which represents her as a feminist-thinker in her ability to pluralize possibilities and outcomes."<sup>31</sup> Thus, the novel ends with a sense of uncertainty, leaving the reader to expect what is going to happen:

Perhaps I had only come to take a bath. Perhaps I would leave before Bennett returned. Or perhaps we'd go home together and separate. It was not clear how it would end. In nineteenth-century novels, they get married. In twentieth-century novels, they get divorced. Can you have an ending in which they do neither? ....

But whatever happened, I knew I would survive it. I knew, above all, that I'd go on working. Surviving meant being born over and over.

( *FF.*, Ch. 19 , P. 292 )

Isadora's survival and rebirth is, thus, symbolically speaking, shown through her experiencing her menstrual period while she is having a bath in Bennett's bath tub. It not only signals the blood wedding between her "formerly conflicting selves,"<sup>32</sup> but also her being relieved of her own fear of independence and "baptized into a new phase of womanhood."<sup>33</sup> Thus, Isadora manages to survive and distinguish herself as an independent individual by freeing herself from the "cold stone" that has worn inside her chest for twenty-nine years.

Ending her novel in this way, Jong believes that it, as it is clear in the following comment, is a direct response to the literary conventions of two centuries:

Above all, I wanted to show Isadora as a survivor – in opposition to all those 19<sup>th</sup> century heroines who die for the one sexual transgression ( *Bovary*, *Karenina*, et al.) and to those 20<sup>th</sup> century heroines who suffer madness, breakdowns, the death of their children, imprisonment in dying marriages, and the like.(the retribution for female independence is always harsh indeed).<sup>34</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As one reads Erica Jong's novel, *Fear of Flying*, s/he can conclude that its heroine, Isadora Wing, is in conflict with her reality. She, as a married woman, feels herself imprisoned by the legal institution of marriage, thinking that it impairs and represses her own desires and longings, which find their own expression in her sexual fantasies and her extra-marital relationship with the existentialist, Adrian Goodlove, who through his existentialist way of life, helps Isadora to reconsider or think of her life.

Isadora's realization is attributed not only to Goodlove but also to reading and writing that she considers as the base through which she can acknowledge herself as an autonomous being. Thus, Isadora, through her life experience and writing, manages to confront her own reality, coming back to her husband changed and truer to herself and to the people around her.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Charlotte Templin, *Feminism and the Politics of Literary Reputation: The Example of Erica Jong* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p.182 .

<sup>2</sup>"Feminism," Free English Literature Essays. 2010.allrfree.blogspot.com/2010/11/feminism-02.html,16/1/2014.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Grazyna Zygado, "To Have It All-Erica Jong's Heroine as a Female Artist" in *American Studies* . Vol. XXI, [www.asc.uw.edu.pl/theamericanist/vol/21/21-53-67.pdf](http://www.asc.uw.edu.pl/theamericanist/vol/21/21-53-67.pdf) 16/1/2014.

<sup>5</sup>Joan Cassell, *A Group Called Women: Sisterhood&Symbolism in the Feminist Movement* ( New York: David McKay Company, Inc. 1977 ), P. 15 .

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.P. 17 .

<sup>7</sup>Jessica Bomarito and Jeffrey W. Hunter, eds., *Feminism in Literature: A Gale Critical Companion*, Vol.4 ( Detroit: Thomson Gale Corporation, 2005), P. 445.

<sup>8</sup>Cited in " 40 years Ago, 'Fear of Flying' Showed Women Like Sex,Too," 2013..wap.npr.org/news/books/228487056,15/11/2013.

<sup>9</sup>Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran, eds., *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*( New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1971 ) P. 251 .

<sup>10</sup>Helge Normann Nilsen, "American Woman's Literature in the Twentieth Century: A Survey of Some Feminist Trends," *American Studies in Scandinavia*, Vol.22, (NP:University of Trondheim, 1990), P. 29 .

<sup>11</sup>Gornick and Moran.P. XIII.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>"Essay on *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong," [www.essayempire.com](http://www.essayempire.com)15/11/2013.

<sup>14</sup>Jane Chance Nitzsche, " "Isadora Icarus":The Mythic Unity of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*," *The Rice University Studies*, Vol. 64 . No. 1, [www.dspace.rice.edu/.../article-RIP641-Part 8 .pdf?...1](http://www.dspace.rice.edu/.../article-RIP641-Part%208.pdf?...1), 16/1/2014 .

<sup>15</sup>Heidi Stettedahl Macpherson, *Women's Movement: Escape as Transgression in North American Feminist Fiction*( Amsterdam: Editions Rodop: B.V. , 2000 ) P. 88 .

<sup>16</sup>Eva Zetterberg Petterson, *The Old World Journey: National Identity in Four American Novels from 1960 to 1973* , "Unpublished Dissertation"( Stockholm: Uppsala University Library, 2005 ), P. 149 .18/1/2014.

<sup>17</sup>Erica Mann Jong, *Fear of Flying* ( NP.: New American Library, 1973) P. 9 . All subsequent references to the novel are taken from this text which is abbreviated as *FF* .

<sup>18</sup>Zygadto,P. 58 .

<sup>19</sup>Petterson, P. 144 .

<sup>20</sup>Imelda Whelehan, "Sex and the Single Girl: Helen Fielding, Erica Jong and Helen Gurley Brown" in *Contemporary British Women Writers*, Emma Parker, ed. ( D.S. Brewer: The English Association, 2004 ) P. 28 .

<sup>21</sup>Gornick, and Moran . P. VII .

<sup>22</sup>Nilsen,P. 34 .

<sup>23</sup>Petterson,P. 145 .

<sup>24</sup>"Feminism and Psychoanalysis," 2005.np. 16/1/2014.<http://www.Encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3435300503.html>.

<sup>25</sup>Alexandr Belov, Marriage and Sexuality in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, "Unpublished thesis"( NP.: The University of Oslo, 2011), P.87 .18/1/2014.

<sup>26</sup>Nitzsche,P. 93 .

<sup>27</sup>John Reidar Holmes,*The Search for the Inner Landscape:The Inner Landscape as a Source of Freedom in the Novel Fear of Flying* , "Unpublished Honor Paper"( np.: Linneuniversitetet, 2011),<http://urn.nbn.se:lnu:diva-13664> ,16/1/2014.

<sup>28</sup>Petterson,P. 156 .

<sup>29</sup>Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*( np.: American University Press, 1991), P. 90 .

<sup>30</sup>Petterson,P. 159 .

<sup>31</sup>Belov, P. 89 .

<sup>32</sup>"Essay on Fear of Flying by Erica Jong," 2013. [www.essayempire.com](http://www.essayempire.com) . 15/11/1013.

<sup>33</sup>Nitzsche, Jane Chance. P. 99 .

<sup>34</sup>Cited in Lisa Maria Hogeland, *Feminism and its Fiction: The Consciousness Raising Novel and the Women's Liberation Movement*(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), P. 78 .

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رواية أريكا جونغ خوف التحليق : دراسة مطالفة  
بالمساواة بين الجنسين  
المدرس: هديل هاتف جسام  
جامعة ديالى / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية / قسم اللغة الانكليزية

الخلاصة

كتبت أريكا جونغ روايتها ، خوف التحليق ، عام 1973 ، وهو العام الذي شهد ولادة المرحلة الاولى من الحركة الحديثة المطالبة بالمساواة بين الجنسين والتي تميزت بنمو شعور الوعي والتمرد والاهتياج .

إن الهدف من هذا البحث هو أن نستقصي موقف الرجال والمجتمع الأمريكي برمته للنساء . يبين البحث كذلك كيف انه من الصعب للمجتمع أن يحافظ على الأدوار التقليدية الممنوحة للنساء والرجال ، والتي بدورها تدعم المجتمع الأبوي كأيدولوجية . لذلك فإن الرواية تعكس مواقف النساء كونها نموذج للأدب المطالب بالمساواة بين الجنسين تجاه هذه التقاليد الاجتماعية من خلال بطلة الرواية ، إيسادورا ونغ ، التي ينظر إليها على انها تجسيد للوعي الانثوي الجديد .