

AMBIVALENCE, BINARIES AND
RECONCILIATION: RENEGOTIATION
OF WOMANHOOD IN CAROL
SHIELDS' *UNLESS*

Thesis submitted to the

Institute of Social Sciences

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English Language and Literature

by

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July 2009

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Thesis Subject: Ambivalence, Binaries and Reconciliation: Renegotiation of Womanhood in Carol Shields' *Unless*

Thesis Date: July 2009

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1. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.
2. The advanced study in the English Language and Literature graduate program of which this thesis is part has consisted of:
 - i) Research Methods courses both in the undergraduate and graduate programs.
 - ii) English literature as well as American literature including novel, poetry and drama studies, a comparative approach to world literatures, and examination of several literary theories as well as critical approaches which have contributed to this thesis in an effective way.
3. This thesis is composed of the main sources including several books by the major authors discussed in comparison; and the secondary sources including scholarly articles from academic journals as well as newspaper articles, and theoretical books on the history and a redefinition of womanhood within the feminist theory. The thesis style guides of Turkish universities and international universities as well as many relevant books published by university presses on this subject.

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July, 2009

University : Fatih University
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Degree Awarded and Date : July 2009

ABSTRACT

AMBIVALENCE, BINARIES AND RECONCILIATION: RENEGOTIATION OF WOMANHOOD IN CAROL SHIELDS' *UNLESS*

Elif ŞİMŞEK

The aim of this thesis is to discuss the female identity drawn within Carol Shields' novel *Unless*. Contemporary feminist theory, especially the poststructuralist feminism, takes womanhood into account through a highly intellectual level. Womanhood can be freed from the patriarchal identifications only with the theoretical approach. Nevertheless, the point is that womanhood itself is not an abstract entity. If contemporary feminist theory underestimates the subjective experience according to social, racial and/ or cultural difference, then it will fall short in grasping womanhood being also an experiencing entity. Contemporary feminist theory needs to redefine and renegotiate womanhood through a phenomenological perspective. This will put forward a theoretical method of approach that not only deconstructs the binarism and fictional identifications constructed by patriarchy, but it will also construct a global feminist discourse that appeals to every woman no matter the social, racial and cultural difference.

Carol Shields focuses on this situation of womanhood within the contemporary feminist discourse. She depicts all kinds of women from different social, racial and cultural backgrounds. With her playful narration she employs the phallogentric

terminology to put forward the contemporary condition of womanhood within the patriarchal system that leads its continuity. Shields' phenomenological approach to womanhood indicates her feminist perspective that does not underestimate subjective experience in order to illustrate a strictly feminist understanding.

Key words:

Feminism, Poststructuralist Feminism, Phenomenology, female identity, renegotiate womanhood, writer hood, Neorealism, Carol Shields.

Üniversite : Fatih Üniversitesi
Enstitüsü : Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü
Anabilim Dalı : İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı
Tez Danışmanı : Yard. Doç. Verena Doris Laschinger
Tez Tarihi : Temmuz 2009

KISA ÖZET

AMBİVALANS, BİNARİLER VE UZLAŞMA: CAROL SHIELDS'İN “UNLESS” ADLI ROMANINDA KADINLIĞIN YENİDEN TANIMLANMASI

Elif ŞİMŞEK

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Carol Shields'ın romanı “Unless” de incelenen kadın kimliğini tartışmaktır. Modern feminist teorisi, özellikle de post yapısalcı feminizm, kadınlığı oldukça yüksek bir entellektüel düzeyden ele alıyor. Kadınlık, ataerkil kimliklerden/tanımlamalardan sadece teorisel yaklaşımla kurtulabilir/özgür bırakılabilir. Ancak sorun, kadınlığın kendi başına soyut bir varlık olmamasıdır. Eğer, modern feminist teorisi öznel deneyimi sosyal, ırksal ve/ya da kültürel farklılıklar göz önüne alınarak küçümserse, aynı zamanda bir deneyimsel varlık olan kadınlığı anlamakta yetersiz kalacaktır. Modern feminist teorisi kadınlığı fenomenolojik açıdan yeniden tanımlamalı ve yeniden tartışmalıdır. Böylece, ataerkillikle oluşan binarizm ve kurgusal kimlikleri çözümleyen bir teorisel yaklaşım öne sürmekle kalmayacak, aynı zamanda sosyal, ırksal ve kültürel farklılık gözetmeden her kadına hitap edebilecek global bir feminist söylemi de inşa edecektir/oluşturacaktır.

Carol Shields günümüz feminist söylemindeki kadının durumunu incelemektedir. Sosyal, ırksal ve kültürel farklılığı olan kadınları kitabında tasvir etmektedir. Kitabını kaleme alırken Shields sözde hileli bir yazma tekniği kullanmaktadır. Bu hileli yazma tekniği ile, falosentrik terminolojiyi öne sürerek devam etmekte olan ataerk sistemin içerisindeki kadının durumunu resmetmektedir. Shields'ın fenomenolojik yaklaşımı, onun feminizmden beklediği, kişisel deneyimi göz arda etmeyen, perspektifin kanıtıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Feminizm, Postyapısalcı Feminizm, Fenomenoloji, kadın kimliği, kadının yeniden tanımlanması, yazınsallık, Neorealism, Carol Shields.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to divulge my unbounded gratitude to all who succoured in the composition of this study as an idea, theory and thesis. Firstly I want to thank the thesis committee who despite their loaded schedule accepted to read my thesis and furnished me with their inestimable insights.

Above all, I owe my most special thanks and gratitude to my supervisor Assist. Prof. Verena Doris Laschinger who has always been influential to me with her academic discipline. Without her guidance and help, this thesis would not have been possible.

I also present my appreciation to my chair Prof. Visam Mansur who provided me the time I needed to finish my thesis. I thank my friends Özlem Oktay, Zeynep Çakırbay, Seniye Tilev, Zeynep Uygun and Başak Melike Güven for their support from the very beginning, for believing in me, for motivating me to finish my thesis on time and for being the loving and trusting people that they are.

Lastly, but more than anybody else, I would like to thank my parents, Bekir and Nuray Şimşek who have supported me in every way they could from the very first day of my life. They have always been giving parents and taught me to go through life with patience and compassion. And I thank my sisters Hilal and Feyza, and my brother Muhammet for forcing me to complete my thesis, and being there for me with their kind hearts.

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Introduction

Thanks to feminism women have been provided with many social and economical rights. Until the appearance of feminism the female sex for a long time has been oppressed by the essentialist perspective of patriarchy. Womanhood has led a long history that has been reduced to biological essentialism. With feminism women began to gain status within the social institutions. Nevertheless, the discrimination between women with social and racial differences raised questions.

Until this century, feminism has gone through certain phases, and in each phase womanhood has gained specific liberties from patriarchal assumptions. Fictional identifications constructed within the phallogentric terminology have represented these assumptions. These fictional identifications, being role models such as motherhood and wifhood, were imposed on women by patriarchy. Nonetheless, the previously raised questions that were directed to social and racial discrimination have demonstrated continuity. That is, current feminist theory experiences a backlash because of its highly theoretical approach to womanhood which falls into the trap of underestimating social, racial and/ or cultural experience.

Contemporary Poststructuralist feminist theory offers a specific perspective that deconstructs the essentialism held against women. According to Poststructuralist feminists gender and sex are both culturally constructed notions that impose fictional identifications on womanhood. It is true that constructing a bridge between sex and gender disrupts the binary system that imprisons womanhood in those fictional roles. Thus, unlike the previous feminist waves which fell into the trap of essentialism, Poststructuralist feminists then clearly aim to develop a non-essentialist theory. Nevertheless, such a thesis has a strong tendency to underestimate racial, social and/

or cultural experience. That is, the woman can be freed from her essentialist status within the patriarchal system, but then, womanhood is an entity that also faces with certain experiences dependent on social and racial backgrounds. Unfortunately, contemporary feminism reconstructs a theoretical approach that is abstract in terms of regarding womanhood. That is, while trying to rescue women from patriarchal concepts, its highly conceptual method of approach falls into the trap of reconstructing another binary system that already takes place within patriarchy. And this leads to an ignorance of women's subjective experience that has already been underestimated by the patriarchal social system.

Within this framework, Carol Shields' novel *Unless* illustrates a womanhood through her characters that is concrete in terms of representing her feminist viewpoint. This is put forward through Shields' employing Simone de Beauvoir's feminist phenomenological approach to womanhood. Shields' playful narration, through her female characters, depicts a womanhood whose subjective experience is not invisible as it is within the Poststructuralist feminist theory. The phenomenological perspective through Shields' female characters grants her a feminist writing that brings forth also a highly discursive writing. Unlike contemporary feminism that experiences a conceptual impasse in terms of regarding womanhood, Shields' writing depicts a feminism that puts forward a phenomenological feminist theory. Shields' depiction of her female characters within the novel in a way employs Beauvoir's feminist phenomenological approach to womanhood. This feminist phenomenological approach does not deal with womanhood on thoroughly discursive levels but rather takes the female sex according to a "situation" as Beauvoir denotes in *The Second Sex* (Moi 59). That is,

“Phenomenology undertakes the descriptive analysis of lived experience, in particular of the essential structures of that experience” (Fisher and Embree 20). Thus, if we take phenomenology and feminism together, we can say then that the former will be helpful in terms of granting the latter an understanding that regards the female subjective experience from a much more realistic and objective way.

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to individuals that Simone de Beauvoir has employed through her feminist study has been taken into account as being essentialist by some feminist critics. Therefore, these feminists have been against any relation between phenomenology and feminism. While feminist critics claim Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological perspective as essentialist they also very strongly claim it to be masculinist. Judith Butler is one of the feminist critics who points out her criticism against phenomenology as follows:

Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the “subject” is additionally problematic in virtue of its abstract and anonymous status, as if the subject described were a universal subject or structured existing subjects universally. Devoid of a gender, this subject is presumed to characterize all genders. On the one hand, this presumption devalues gender as a relevant category in the description of lived bodily experience. On the other hand, inasmuch as the subject described resembles a culturally constructed male subject, it consecrates masculine identity as the model for the human subject, thereby devaluing, not gender, but women. (Fisher and Embree 27)

As Butler points out, phenomenology seems to be essentialist and masculinist, however, Merleau-Ponty’s focus on experience can be seen as a necessary approach

feminism can adopt. Linda Fisher in *Feminist Phenomenology* (2000) puts forward a different thesis that in a way contradicts feminist critics like Butler:

Acknowledged as a compatibility even by feminists not particularly inclined towards an association with phenomenology, an emphasis on experiential analysis functions as one of the most fundamental commonalities, and thus as one of the strongest components in a relation between feminism and phenomenology. (33)

Fisher continues as follows, “Phenomenology can provide feminist accounts with the possibility of validating experiential claims through analyses of evidence and givenness, so that such accounts are not only acceptable but *legitimated* in the terms of phenomenological legitimation” (34). While some feminists perceive phenomenology essentialist, and regard any association between feminism and phenomenology calling upon a masculinist perspective, Fisher’s thesis about the “legitimation” of experience seems to be valid. This thesis focuses on the subjective experiences of women that differ according to racial, social and cultural backgrounds. Thus, when we take womanhood from a highly conceptual perspective to disrupt the binaries women have been imprisoned in, I especially recall Poststructuralist feminism here; we actually fall into the trap of essentialism by underestimating racial, social and/ or cultural experience.

Therefore, Simone de Beauvoir’s trailblazing book *The Second Sex* (1949) and her feminist phenomenological perspective have been employed through my study on Carol Shields’ *Unless*. In her book Beauvoir “undertakes a descriptive analysis of the lived experience and situation of women, grounded in a discussion of the thematic, historical, and literary influences and representations” (Fisher and

Embree 34). Shields puts forward such an approach through her narration while depicting her female characters in *Unless*. It is because of Beauvoir's highly conceptual but also phenomenological perspective in terms of illustrating her feminist discourse that I have chosen *The Second Sex* as my main second source.

Moreover, Carol Shields' *Unless* has been a perfect match to Beauvoir's approach to womanhood and so feminism that highly regards subjective experience of the female sex. This moving from a highly ideological feminist perspective to a phenomenological approach has granted Shields with a Neorealist way of writing. This neorealist writing technique illustrates a feminist discourse that Shields puts forward through her female characters. While Shields writes in the genre of light fiction, the reality is that this neorealist way of writing insinuates a very discursive understanding beneath its surface, and it questions patriarchy through the phallogocentric terminology which is a very cunning way of putting her feminist perspective. Therefore, I have taken Simone de Beauvoir's feminist phenomenological approach along with neorealism in terms of bringing forth a feminist discourse that regards subjective experience of women which Shields illustrates through her female characters within *Unless*.

Carol Shields is a Canadian writer, though one must keep in mind that she is a "border crosser" as she has been an American immigrant to Canada. Her novels mostly take place in Canada and they are all published in Canada. Nevertheless, she never has the nationalist tendency. *Unless* may take place in Canada but through her female characters who have different social and racial backgrounds she depicts a perspective that disregards any essentialism, boundaries and/or binaries. Coral Ann Howells refers to Shields' writing style as follows:

Her novels are symptomatic of a particular moment in Western cultural history, with its widespread skepticism about metanarratives of history and nation, its questioning of the terms on which identities are formulated, together with an intense interest in gender construction and the revised dynamics of sexual relationships, while her use of a hybridized fictional form, which form combines life-writing with social history and diurnal trivia, locates her protagonists within a familiar frame of social, professional, and family relations. (80)

Thus, her feminist approach that lies beneath the text and within the female characters perceives womanhood from a broad perspective that takes into account identifications through ambivalence. That is, Shields is against individual identification, and she regards this as a “fictive construction” (Howell 82). Her novels do not seem to be directly critical with racial identities in terms of regarding women from different races and/or cultures. Of course, this does not mean that she is not that much interested in analysing racial identities as a Western white middle-class woman. On the contrary:

She deconstructs whiteness as a category through her scrutiny of the process of identity formation based on family background and inheritance, class, education and profession, age and above all assumptions around gender identity with its “complex network of cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes”. (Howell 81)

Shields’ way of writing in *Unless* depicts a technique that puts forward women from very different racial and social backgrounds, and all these female characters call upon a feminism that regards their individual experiences. Therefore, Shields’

writing in the genre of light fiction denotes a critical understanding against the highly conceptual feminist discourse or rather the Poststructuralist feminism that in a way falls into the trap of underestimating the female experience, especially the ones out of the Western borders. This neorealist way of writing and her adopted feminist phenomenological approach disregards any binarism which the Poststructuralist feminism experiences by being highly discursive and it depicts a criticism in depth against this highly conceptual theory that comes to an impasse while regarding womanhood as an entity.

If to move on to the chapters, the first chapter observes the so called traumatized feminism, the contemporary Poststructuralist feminist theory, which by intellectualizing womanhood faces the danger of falling into the trap of reconstructing a binary system. Patriarchy has already led such a binary system by imposing certain fictional identifications to womanhood which has imprisoned women in a gender system.

Contemporary feminism needs to focus on the subjective experience of women in order to be thoroughly non-essentialist in terms of disrupting binaries. That is, the feminist discourse needs a phenomenological method of approach while regarding womanhood. The backlash of feminism is scrutinized through the chapter to show that perceiving sex and gender as both culturally constructed notions will cause a conceptual impasse. However, as Simone de Beauvoir works on through her book *The Second Sex* (1949), this approach might lead to an understanding that privileges certain groups of women. Nevertheless, within the era of globalization, womanhood needs to be perceived through a phenomenological perspective with which her social, racial and/ or cultural experience will not face any underestimation.

If feminist theory underestimates these subjective experiences, it will lead to no development, but rather it will reconstruct another binary system that paralyses the female body.

The second “Womanhood” chapter brings forth Shields’ phenomenological feminist perspective illustrated through the female characters within *Unless*. Shields depicts a playful narration with which she shows different female characters that have many different experiences. Shields’ phenomenological understanding to womanhood is deeply feminist but it holds a continuity of playful narration that uses the phallogentric terminology in terms of holding the narrative authority. She illustrates different women with social, racial and/ or cultural experiences, and she insinuates her strong feminist perspective through all these women. Shields by drawing the big picture of womanhood that includes different subjective experience denotes a thoroughly phenomenological understanding held within the text.

The third “Writerhood” chapter reads *Unless* through Shields’ writerhood. Shields employs a narrative that plays with the phallogentric terminology. Language and so writing is highly masculine, and to insinuate a feminist understanding Shields works through the phallogentric terminology. Therefore, she employs the neorealist way of writing along with a postmodern method of approach with which she uses parodic strategies. Her writing style also draws upon Luce Irigaray’s notion of “mimicry.” Mimicry calls for a writerhood that works through the patriarchal laws. Shields plays with the language and she, rather than reconstructing a womanhood that adopts the patriarchal identifications, deconstructs the phallogentric terminology from within. And so she disrupts the fictional identifications.

Within this context, *Unless* points out a phenomenological understanding to womanhood that will regard subjective experience. And she indicates a perspective that will not fall into the trap of reconstructing binarism by theorizing womanhood as contemporary Poststructuralist feminism has fallen short with. Shields' neorealist writing style illustrates a feminist phenomenological perspective that then calls for a redefinition of womanhood by regarding the subjective experience along with the discourse itself.

CHAPTER 1

THE TRAUMATIZED FEMINIST THEORY

Feminism within the contemporary society is a concept that in a sense indicates the enlightenment of women that occurred more than a century ago. With feminism the female sex celebrated her emancipation thanks to the Suffragette Movement and began to redefine herself within the Patriarchal social system. Women began to dare to ask questions openly, “Have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?” (Woolf 33). These questions, arose by Virginia Woolf in her trailblazing work *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), introduced the first chain of the feminist movement in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Along with Virginia Woolf in Britain women were scrutinizing their own portrayal within social institutions. The awakened woman revised her sexual identity that is not seen as the second sex but rather as an opposition to the male:

Sex and its nature might well attract doctors and biologists; but what was surprising and difficult of explanation was the fact that sex--woman, that is to say--also attracts agreeable essayists, light-fingered novelists, young men who have taken the M.A. degree; men who have taken no degree; men who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women. (Woolf 34)

So while questions arose publicly, women also began to feel the strength to criticize texts written to justify women’s inferiority. The woman was identified according to fictional though scientifically supported theories:

G. Stanley Hall wrote in his monumental *Adolescence* that woman was unable to solve her own problems or to be her own teacher, preacher or doctor, therefore: “she must be studied objectively and laboriously as we study children, and partly by men, because their sex must of necessity always remain objective and incommensurate with regard to woman and therefore more or less theoretical”. (qtd. in Trecker 353)

Ironically scientists of the era, probably all of them being male, by using scientific formulations tried to justify the inferiority of the female sex. The woman was imprisoned within a binary system that brought forth her body as a blockage rather than being her identical sexual situation as Beauvoir points out, “The body is not a thing, it is a *situation*: it is our grasp on the world and a sketch of our projects” (qtd. in Moi 59). That does not mean that the body gains meaning only when it is placed in a cultural and historical context but rather to take in relation to the individual subjectivity (Moi 60).

In reality, it is Mary Wollstonecraft, the so called grandmother of modern feminism, which constructed the roots of the First Wave feminism with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* written in 1792. Though both Virginia Woolf and Mary Wollstonecraft were essentially prominent writers of feminism, they also brought forth the debates against the theory that still is questioned within certain circumstances. That is, the First Wave feminism was unquestionably a call for an emancipation or if to illustrate a big picture, a revolution of womanhood. Nevertheless, Woolf writes, “Of the two - the vote and the money - the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important” (48). And when she continues with the “very queer facts about the Fiji Islanders (32), she somewhat ignores the working

class women, and with the latter quotation we feel the racist tendency of her against non-European women. With Wollstonecraft the case is not much different, "...Mary Wollstonecraft mentions "harem girls of the East" no less than thirteen times, always in warning that if European women do not improve their conditions, their fates will be no better than Eastern women" (Janowick 51). The exotizing of women of different class, culture or color demands a revision throughout the feminist context, as Virginia Sapiro writes, "[m]ost interpreted as the theorist who modified liberal theory by applying it to women as well as men, [Wollstonecraft] seems therefore to have created a feminism that was merely derivative of bourgeois male thinking" (qtd. in Janowick 74). Women's body is then clearly essentialized, her experience is ignored and the so called emancipation gets a stance just in the "public sphere" addressing a certain group of women.

Unfortunately, this critical aspect of feminist thought has not much changed throughout history. Feminism has become a perception that has been perceived under an academic umbrella with many sections beneath such as ecofeminism or neofeminism. Nevertheless, the problem of feminists' incompetence is to construct a theoretical perspective that regards the female sex according to racial, social and/or cultural experience, in other words, to sense the subjective experience. This method of approach was the crucial point that engendered a neutralization of feminism's embracing womanhood globally and made its call regarding only a certain group of woman with a status in society. This self-deconstructive attitude of the theory in a way silenced a huge part of women. The thing that makes the theory self-deconstructive is to speak on behalf of a group of women with whom you have not

shared anything or rather even feel like to speak on behalf of that certain group of women:

If I find the courage to make an example of myself, I am doing so in the hope that it will be recognized that my experience is an illuminating instance of a more general state of affairs. But as soon as I make any claim at all about any state of affairs, I am saying something about what the world looks like to me. However, much I stake my subjectivity in them; such claims are in their very nature going to be general. Whether I say 'it is raining' or 'woman is the Other', I am speaking for others, inviting them to see if they can find themselves— their own experiences, their own world-view— in such claims, hoping that they will be able to do so, but also knowing that they may not.

(Moi 230)

Thus, when feminists write about womanhood and her experience as an Other they have to be conscious about women from different classes, cultures and races.

1.1. Redefining Womanhood

Whilst First Wave feminism gave women the chance to shake the gender biased patriarchal institutions in which women were forced to fit in certain stereotypes, such as motherhood, it was the Second Wave feminism that followed a much more professional way in terms of drawing the theory upon linguistics, psychoanalysis and other scientific or rather academic areas. Meanwhile, the civil rights movements of the 60s and 70s were also influential to the arising of the New Women Movement. This shows then sexual and racial discriminations' relativity in terms of being the leading politics of patriarchy to construct the Other to define its ultimate fixed entity. Simone de Beauvoir with her ground-breaking work *The*

Second Sex reveals this male conscious attitude of the patriarchal institutions that use the Other like a reflection. That is:

Man never thinks of himself without thinking of the Other; he views the world under the sign of duality, which is not in the first place in characters. But being different from man, who sets himself up as the same, it is naturally to the category of the Other that woman is consigned; the Other includes woman. (Beauvoir 100)

Thus, it seems then that there is a binary system that illustrates woman as the unnatural and the man as natural, the real.

For feminism of the 70s and the 80s it was high time to attack the patriarchal notions placed in society by the patriarchal social system:

The excitement of wild women telling new truths, confronting-patriarchy, naming their existence, making up new words, digging up their history, sharing subordination and empowerment across their differences, disintegrating disciplines, proposing men as a gender rather than the norm, revealing the power relations behind claims of natural difference—are being displaced by volumes telling little about people’s lives, but questioning everything about truth and how it can be known. (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 207)

With the Second Wave women got lose of fictional identifications imposed on them by patriarchy, and this certain patriarchal perspective took her as gender rather than sex. Within this context the catchy slogan of feminism “the personal is the political,” constructed by Carol Hanisch, takes an important role (Ehrhardt 2). Along with this phrase the Second Wave took a way that aimed to disrupt the strict binary between

the domestic sphere and the public sphere, as with these in a way institutionalized space the woman was controlled easier by being imprisoned within the domestic sphere. The woman was not concerned as a sexual body with subjective experience but was essentialized within her biological physique. This perspective holds the idea that “woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself” (Beauvoir 734). Simone de Beauvoir focuses on the difference of the woman from man, she is critical with the patriarchal vision of depicting woman’s existence by relating her to certain fictional stereotypes, womanhood is not taken into consideration as a subjective entity.

Though Second Wave feminism was a successful blow against the centuries-long patriarchal institutions, in the light of First Wave feminists’ movements and Simone de Beauvoir’s ground-breaking work *The Second Sex* (1949), as with the former wave the Second Wave also experienced a backlash. This feminism of the 60s and 70s seemed to speak in the name of women no matter with different color, class and race. Nevertheless, the racist tendency against women of color still took place in the movement itself. The main focus was sexism against women while women with color experienced also the otherness of being from a different race and culture:

This feminism is white led, marginalizes the activism and world views of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression. Hegemonic feminism deemphasizes or ignores a class and race analysis, generally sees equality with men as the goal of feminism, and has an individual rights-based, rather than justice-based vision for social change. (Thompson 337)

While Second Wave fought against women's being presented as the Other and men the norm in the patriarchal system, and while being socially and academically effective in terms of holding an approach on grounds of politics, psychoanalytic and/or linguistics, the white feminist hegemony headed the so called women's movement. Women like bell hooks, Alice Walker and Maxine Hong Kingston were the ones who headed the movement as women with color; however, it was an undeniable fact that the dominance was of the white feminists. Moreover, Second Wave feminism was seen as recognizing a perspective of "double consciousness" which can be explained as the strict dichotomy between the perceived reality of oneself and the cultural image imposed by the racism of others (Madsen 213). Therefore, women with color could not experience "full subjectivity or selfhood" (Madsen 213).

Marilyn Buck, a feminist poet and a severe antiracist American activist who has been a political prisoner since 1985, illustrates this otherness in terms of racial and in a way cultural difference:

The woman drops her gaze
looks away and wishes
she had not asked
confused that white skin did not guarantee
a conversation she wanted to have

she hasn't spoken to me since
I think I'll try to stand
in line with her

again. (Thompson 351)

Buck depicts this otherness women with color feel from the perspective of white Second Wave feminist. The Women's Movement of the era called for sexual and social emancipation for all women, but still the movement was seen as white washed by many feminists from different race and culture:

Feminists of color argued that their activism was written out of the histories of second-wave feminist protest; they argued that racial/ethnic and class biases that were part of white feminist ideology and practice have shown up in subsequent scholarship about that ideology and practices. (Roth 3)

Though the "Personal is Political" and also "Sisterhood is Powerful" were forthcoming principles of Second Wave feminism, the main issue that should be considered is to focus on every woman from a perspective that takes her as a subjective being with different experiences. Therefore, it seems that the feminist theory has become incompetent in terms of its academic terminology which is highly conceptual.

At this point one needs to revise what actually was the fight for and against within feminism. Patriarchy already reduced women as biologically inferior beings that needed to be identified by men, so women were the other while men were the norm. What is critical is that feminism constantly has the tendency for a discriminative attitude against women from different backgrounds in terms of class, race and culture. The woman is then again imprisoned in her body and the binary system protects its existence. Benita Roth in her work *Seperate Roads to Feminism* (2004) quotes a colored feminist, Irene Blea, who experiences this crucial tendency as a colored feminist activist, "I was at a NOW meeting and being told by women in

Denver, you have to choose between being a Chicana and being female...and I'm saying is "I cannot separate the fact that I'm brown and I'm female, I can not do it physically to this body, I can not do it emotionally, I can not do it spiritually" (1). Irene Blea's case depicts the contradictory situation of the Second Wave's "Sisterhood is Powerful" principle with reality that takes place in NOW (National Organization for Women), the largest feminist organization in the United States founded by Betty Friedan in 1966, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

While the struggle of feminism was also against the class biased social institutions, the contradictory case with the lower/working class women was not that different with the colored women. First Wave feminism was much more obvious with the class discrimination, but second wave likewise was struggling with a constant self deconstructive attitude against working class women. Actually, Second Wave feminism was also portrayed as being white middle class women's movement, though with which we can not thoroughly agree. Feminism, especially after the Liberation Movement that caused a widespread use of "the pill", offered women autonomy over her body, and women remarkably increased her number of entering the labor market (Cornut and D'arcy 110). Nevertheless, social changes when compared to the number of women entering labor market still seemed to be on a critical stage. Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* (1982) is a perfect example to illustrate this dichotomy feminism held and, unfortunately, is still holding to which I will come. Women began to gain status but the discrimination between women with social and racial differences raised questions. The principle "Sisterhood is Powerful" is demonstrated in *Top Girls* through real sisters with different status in life:

Joyce: Jealous of what you've done, you're ashamed of me if I came to your office, your smart friends, wouldn't you, I'm ashamed of you, think of nothing but yourself, you've got on, nothing's changed for most people/has it?

Marlene: I hate the working class.

...

I don't mean anything personal. I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes.

Joyce: And if they haven't?

Marlene: If they're stupid or lazy or frightened, I'm not going to help them get a job, why should I? (Churchill 85)

Marlene is promoted as managing director to the employment agency Top Girls, the name already insinuates the point Churchill wants to present us. While Marlene represents the middle class women with a status, Joyce represents the working class women who are almost invisible within the feminist movement. It is an undeniable fact that certain women's experience, racial and social experience, has been underestimated by feminist activists that headed the movement academically and politically. "Because nothing's changed and won't with them in" says Joyce again later on the play to which Marlene answers, "Them, them. / Us and them?" (Churchill 86). This little passage insinuates what was happening with the second wave feminism, the so called "sisterhood" took a crucial stage even with real sisters from different classes and experience. Through the play the employment agency Top Girls that depicts the emancipated women's collective activity of the era deconstructs itself. Neither with Marlene nor with the other women accompanying her within the

agency actually work thoroughly for the woman no matter her class, that is, “female bonding or comradeship have no place in their lives” (Cornut and D’arcy 112).

Angie: Frightening.

Marlene: Did you have a bad dream? What happened in it? Well, you’re awake now, aren’t you pet?

Angie: Frightening. (Churchill 87)

Here it is the teenager Angie who knows Marlene as her successful aunt, while it is fear these women provide these future grown up women. Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*’ end prefaces the very future of feminism or actually it warns women and especially the activists of feminism to be careful with what they defend and if everything they fight for politically and academically is applied thoroughly to reality. Another, point within this play which needs to be mentioned a bit is that Marlene is actually Angie’s mother. However, for the sake of liberation motherhood is sacrificed, Angie is never revealed about this fact and Marlene though she has the power to help her never cares for her daughter who already gives no sign of a qualified future. With this play the principle “Personal is Political” we have inherited from our second wave mothers needs a revision. We have to ask ourselves if it is still frightening to be a woman from a different class, race or culture that does not instantly furnish us with a state of liberty as a subject within society. Moreover, another primary critical point is that the feminine body was already regarded as an object that needed to be identified by men, her being the Other while men’s being the norm was what has been fought against for many years. Nevertheless, what I have mentioned until now illustrates that feminism redefined the gendered female sex but

fell back into essentialism by underestimating racial, social and so personal experiences.

Thus, Second Wave feminism yielded to Third Wave which produced in itself the contemporary Poststructuralist feminism. When we compare both these waves it is more like that while the former was deemed essentialist femininity, the latter has more like feminist ethics that deconstruct any kind of essentialism and so binarism:

Poststructuralist theorists of sex and gender are unhappy with the way the 1960s understanding of sex and gender accounts for personal identity and the body. They consider, much as I do, that the 1960s understanding of sex easily turns sex into a historical and curiously disembodied entity divorced from concrete historical and social meanings. Their critique of the sex/gender distinction has two major objectives: (1) to avoid biological determinism; and (2) to develop a fully historical and non-essentialist understanding of sex or the body. (Moi 31)

Our contemporary feminism within the context of Poststructuralism which this thesis will focus has analyzed the condition of womanhood through the lenses of linguistics, philosophy, psychology and other academic areas. This does not mean that the activists of Women Liberation worked on different areas but rather this time feminism depicts a different perspective in terms of redefining womanhood and the feminine body. That is, Poststructuralist feminism scrutinizes the “gender” concept created by patriarchal institutions that have produced a whole social system with binaries.

Poststructuralist feminism unlike the essentialist feminist theory of the Second Wave feminism tries to liberate the feminine body from the phallogentric

language system; theorists like Judith Butler draw upon Michael Foucault's notion of "biopower" in his book *History of Sexuality* (1976). Butler in her ground-breaking work *Gender Trouble* (1990) deals with this in-depth while paraphrasing Foucault:

For Foucault, the body is not 'sexed' in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an "idea" of natural or essential sex. The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations. Sexuality is a historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity. As such, sexuality is understood by Foucault to produce 'sex' as an artificial concept which effectively extends and disguises the power relations responsible for its genesis. (125)

Thus, for Butler sex is a tool of power relations within discourse. According to her both gender and sex are culturally produced notions. As a result, for Butler sex and gender can not be taken as separate entities:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (9)

She is critical with the idea of regarding sex as a natural entity, because then sex becomes actually also a culturally constructed concept.

Actually, Butler deals with the condition of the female body within the phallogocentric language system as a poststructuralist. The body according to Butler and to her co-theorists is almost a theoretical being, an entity that denotes abstractness. To make it clear, they labor under a picture in which they attempt to

escape identity politics by scrutinizing the sex and gender notions as starting point. Along with this method they aim to “undo naive conceptions of subjectivity, and develop a concrete, materialist understanding of the body” (Moi 33). For Butler then to create a bridge between sex and gender will save the woman from all her defined identities assigned to her by the patriarchal and so essentialist discourse. This connotes the idea that poststructuralists try to deconstruct every binary inside and outside the language system.

However, if one insinuates the idea that the body or rather biological facts can never be taken separately from sociological and political facts which means that “if there were biological facts, then, they would indeed give rise to social norms”, then “they paradoxically share the fundamental belief of biological determinists” (Moi 42). As Toril Moi indicates, the thesis Butler and her co-theorists have put forth seems to be deficient in terms of deconstructing binaries entirely. Nevertheless, Butler in her book *Undoing Gender* (2004) seems to be aware of the rigidity of her claim:

Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language. This is not because I think that the body is reducible to language; it is not. Language emerges from the body, constituting an emission of sorts. The body is that upon which language falters, and the body carries its own signs, its own signifiers, in ways that remain largely unconscious. (198)

There we have the tendency to a self-deconstruction likewise with what happened with the other theories of previous feminist waves. At this point to quote Toril Moi would be very helpful:

The problem with the poststructuralist critique of sex and gender is not its ultimate goal. Rather, my argument is that the goal is not achieved, for two reasons: because the starting point for the poststructuralist' analysis is singularly compromising; and because the theoretical machinery they bring to bear on the question of sex and gender generates a panoply of new theoretical problems that poststructuralists feel compelled to resolve, but which no longer have any connection with bodies, sex, or gender. The result is work that reaches fantastic levels of abstraction without delivering the concrete, situated, and materialist understanding of the body it leads us to expect. (31)

Woman can not be reduced to an abstract entity, she is a human being with social, racial or/and cultural experiences. Patriarchy already has been an institution that kept the feminine body as an abstract entity that had a so called existence through gender roles. Experience can not be defined through theorized ways; on the contrary, it is something sensual and physical rather than just being intellectual. And to depict a world through the lenses of intellectualization constructs a limited perspective; this might have the tendency to recreate new binaries that undermine individualist difference and experience.

1.2. Feminism, Trauma and Carol Shields' *Unless*.

Within this context, contemporary feminism, especially Poststructuralist feminism, experiences a backlash like the previous waves. A very critical or rather questionable condition has occurred within the theory which has been a movement by way of which many women have found the strength to challenge the toughened rules of patriarchal institutions and through which they gained many rights.

Womanhood as mentioned before has become a theoretical entity which is not much

different than a situation within the patriarchal discourse which produced otherness by reducing womanhood to a biological entity. Likewise Simone de Beauvoir states:

To say that Woman is Flesh, to say that the Flesh is Night and Death, or that it is the splendour of the Cosmos, is to abandon terrestrial truth and soar into an empty sky. For man also is flesh for woman; and the flesh is clothed in special significance for each person and in each person and in each experience. And likewise it is quite true that woman-like man- is a being rooted in nature; she is more manifest; but in her as in him the given traits are taken on through the fact of existence, she belongs also to the human realm. To assimilate her to Nature is simply to act from prejudice. (285)

In this quotation “experience” is the key word. Thus, while patriarchy denotes fictional definitions about the woman without referring to the subjective experience, feminism also needs to be careful while writing or speaking about womanhood, that is:

To refer to women in order to make representational claims in their behalf. The feminist ‘we’ is always and only a phantasmatic construction, one that has its purposes, but which denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy of the term and constitutes itself only through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that it simultaneously seeks to represent... The radical instability of the category sets into question the foundational restrictions on feminist political theorizing and opens up other configurations, not only of genders and bodies, but of politics itself. (Butler 194)

To take into account Butler’s statement, the “we” in feminism needs to be questioned. Moreover, as I have mentioned formerly, feminism’s theorizing

womanhood has led to an undermining of social, racial and/ or cultural experience and so the feminist “we” currently has the tendency to be an artificial “we”.

This backlash within the feminist movement or rather the paralysis I want to relate with trauma. As the whole story within Carol Shields’ *Unless* also begins with a trauma. Shields’ taking trauma as the cause of *Unless* is most probably a deliberate way of presenting the backlash within contemporary feminism. Though trauma would not be my main focus, I feel the urge to mention about Shields’ attempt to interrelate trauma with feminism. Trauma is a psychic condition which I will not illustrate here in-depth, the case is that trauma is just seen as a psychological condition to which men like Freud have referred to through their many studies. However, trauma has been investigated from a different perspective to which Cathy Caruth’s book *Trauma* (1995) would be very helpful, as Caruth writes herself:

My feminist therapist colleague, Maria Root, has begun to develop the concept of “insidious trauma” (Root, 1989, 1992). By this, she refers to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit. (107)

Thus, if we consider the perspective of the poststructuralist feminist theorists against the binary between sex and gender which weakens its discursive stability in terms of losing control when it comes to physical/sensual difference or experience while theorizing the so called womanhood, so then the word “oppression” may not only refer to the oppression of the patriarchal discourse but it rather insinuates to any discourse that oppresses the woman emotionally, spiritually or mentally. To make it clear, Shields’ using trauma as the key word might insinuate the traumatic situation

of women in our current world in which though feminism is globalized, and so it also refers to these women's silence within this vicious circle.

Another point that Caruth depicts is that trauma is no more an incident that happens after a serious event. We have the tendency to psychic trauma in our everyday lives, and every woman can experience no matter her social or racial status. As Suzanne Pharr demonstrates:

When trauma is unusual, we can pretend safety; engage in the daily self-deceptions that allow us to believe ourselves beyond the reach of the unusual. We can be spectators, titillated by the thrill of risk, safe behind our imaginary psychic barriers; or we can watch in horror as trauma happens to others but reassure ourselves that we are not next because we are safe so long as we do not protest, do not stick out our necks and "make" ourselves into the target. We can ignore the institutions of the society that appear to privilege us as long as we pretend that we will not be next. (qtd. in Caruth 108)

This means that contrary to the "metaphysic vision against women," feminists have to take her (the woman) as a social and so sexual being who still can not escape fictional identifications only when destroying the binary between gender and sex (Moi xiv). Rather we have to accept womanhood as an entity with a body and as Beauvoir states, "The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and a sketch of our projects" (qtd. in Moi 59). Nevertheless, Toril Moi warns us against claims that reduce these accounts to one another and she states that, "Situation is deeply related to the individual woman's (or man's) subjectivity" (Moi 59). Once we accept this vision then we can continue with our fight against the still

going on oppression of women which here along with Shields' *Unless* I relate to trauma and its relation to contemporary feminism.

As a result, we have to accept the still going on psychic trauma especially currently as though feminism is widespread; womanhood experiences many situations in regard to her social, sexual and cultural difference which we can not underestimate. So as Caruth continues with her thesis on trauma:

When we admit to the immanence of trauma in our lives, when we see it as something more likely to happen than not, we lose our cloak of vulnerability. A feminist analysis, illuminating the realities of women's lives, turns a spotlight on the subtle manifestations of trauma, allows us to see the hidden sharp edges and secret leg hold traps, whose scars we have borne or might find ourselves bearing. We are forced to acknowledge that we might be next. (Caruth 108)

Actually, to realize certain realities of women's lives can cause to visible/concrete development in terms of saving feminism from its current backlash. Then we may proudly declare:

Feminism has given history an enormously improved understanding of one between the sexes, and it has given an improved understanding of one of the fundamental divides in society, the one between the sexes, and it has given an improved understanding; and that uncomfortable truth means that the impropriety remains, the grit which continues to produce pearls. (Thom 49)

1.3. Identity, Ambivalence and Womanhood

By way of "trauma" Shields in a way warns us, women, to the present condition of the feminist "we" womanhood within contemporary feminism and so

she insinuates a redefinition of womanhood. That is, trauma metaphorically becomes our start point with which, as Caruth has mentioned formerly, we will revise the current situation of womanhood, her experience as a subject being by reckon in her racial, social and/or cultural experience. Actually, it is trying to get involved within those experiences or rather regard her “situation,” as Beauvoir denotes in *The Second Sex*, without generalizing womanhood by theorizing the sensual/physical being. Carol Shields, within this framework, is very much against conventionalized identifications. Identity according to her is fictional, it is variable and changes from person to person, and to quote a passage from her *The Republic of Love* (1992) will denote her perspective clearly:

She’s sick of her identity; in fact, she’s afraid of it. She has all the identity she wants, all she can absorb. Daughter, sister, girlfriend... She’s learned, too, how unstable identity can be, how it can quickly drain away when brought face to face with someone else’s identity... It was exhausting, the battle to give yourself a shape. It was depressing, too, like an ugly oversized dress you had to go on wearing year after year after year. (qtd. in Howells 79)

Thus, we can not take identity as a fixed entity, especially as our focus is womanhood, then we can never take her likewise this way. Here I will relate Shields’ idea about identity by relating it to the poststructuralist idea of disrupting binaries by claiming that sex and gender are both cultural. Shields in regard of this quoted passage is pretty much recalling Judith Butler’s approach about identity and gender:

This ‘being a man’ and this ‘being a woman’ are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification ... the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm

that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely. (Howells 99)

Though this is the condition of identity in terms of being ambivalent, by locating the female identity in such a context, the poststructuralist feminist theory needs to be careful to not to fall back to binaries and so to generalizations.

While Butler and her co-theorists claim about the ambivalent nature of womanhood, they as I have denoted until now, undermine the subjective experience which feminism actually needs to regard to develop concrete changes within society. That is, we need to regard her, the woman's, whole entity as being a human being like men. Unless, we regard her this way it will be inevitable that she will have the chance to be outside the binary system constructed by social institutions. Then we give her no chance but to deny herself, her body, as a subjective entity, Elisabeth Bronfen deals with this in-depth in *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (1992), as for her:

A woman can gain a subject position only by denying her body... the bind a woman is placed into in cultural representations is that her position in the symbolic or cultural order is that of feminine *body*, so that undoing her body, because it is the site of paralysis, because desires connected with it cannot be realized, also means subverting the position cultural laws have ascribed to her. By undoing her body, she undoes the gender construction which places her in an inferior position, even as cancelling the 'illusion' of gender lets death emerge. (143)

Carol Shields in *Unless* attempts to redefine womanhood as an entity that has a place within society as a being with a body with subjective variable experiences. On the contrary, Butler and her co-theorists see it different. As for Foucault:

The notion of “sex” made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a casual principle, an omnipresent meaning: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. (qtd. in Butler 124)

I am not trying to essentialize the female body but rather I try to invoke a different perspective to the contemporary feminist theory which experiences a backlash, therefore; it needs to redefine womanhood not according to metaphysical aspects, such as “gender and sex are culturally constructed” which has the danger to ignore her existence, but rather keep an ambivalent way that takes into account women’s social, cultural and racial experience.

Only when woman is regarded as a subjective entity can contemporary feminism survive from the backlash, the traumatic condition, and can broaden its call to a much wider female audience with different race, class or culture. Thus, by regarding women this way might make us, women, see through the pain of the Other which will become a call for “visible” sisterhood and so an ongoing global change/development. With the word “global” one has to be careful as such claims have the tendency to generalize, especially when we speak of the female sex. Our contemporary Third Wave feminism’s backlash has occurred mainly because of this “globalized” perspective that, unfortunately, has privileged a certain group of women while an invisible group of women with different race, culture and class still have

been ignored. Şengül Hablemitoğlu in *Toplumsal Cinsiyet Yazıları: Kadınlara Dair Bir Kaç Söz* [Societal Gender Writings: A Few Words on Women] (2004) questions both the words “global” and “womanhood” together and states that globalization might be actually “male” (31). What Hablemitoğlu illustrates through her whole study shows that contemporary feminism has reached a remarkable status but it also has not. She focuses on the ongoing female genital mutilation in African countries which means that there is a minority that needs to be sought out, and this minority is not just one group of women. At this point, it would be necessary to state that, the Western feminism is still on a questionable stage in terms of speaking on behalf of those previously mentioned women. By the way, while some intellectuals examine if Third Wave feminism is Black feminism and demonstrates its developments on the benefit of black women, as Kimberly Springer deals with in her article *Third Wave Black Feminism?* (2002), I think we have to refer back to the above mentioned female genital mutilation issue that insinuates a critical approach to these so called Third Wave Black feminists. Actually, Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her ground breaking essay *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1986) sums everything I have referred until now:

The necessary and integral connection between feminist scholarship and feminist political practice and organizing determines the significance and status of Western feminist writings on women in the third world, for feminist scholarship, like most other kinds of scholarship, is not the mere production of knowledge about a certain subject. It is a directly political and discursive *practice* in that it is purposeful and ideological. It is best seen as a mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourses (for example, traditional

anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, etc.); it is a political praxis which counters and resists the totalizing imperative of age-old "legitimate" and "scientific" bodies of knowledge. (334)

Thus, it can be inferred that the so called Western feminism or/and the contemporary Poststructuralist feminism has the tendency to add some ideology within the feminist discourse.

If to return to Carol Shields' *Unless*, Shields illustrates a remarkable writing in which she insinuates all the critical stages with contemporary feminism. She focuses on the world wide silenced minorities, "She invokes the responsibility of white, Western feminists before a history that has neglected the broad diversity in women's stories" (Pederson Carson 109). Her ambivalent approach to identity that has been demonstrated formerly is seen through her whole writing process, she is not directly critical. Therefore, we might say she uses the light fiction genre while writing her books. Coral Ann Howells comments on Shields way of writing:

[S]peaking from her own position as a white, middle-class women, Shields does not engage with questions of racial or ethnic identity to any significant extent, though it would not be true to say that she leaves racial identity unexamined. Rather, she deconstructs whiteness as a category through her scrutiny of the process of identity formation based on family background and inheritance, class, education and profession, age and above all assumptions around gender identity with its 'complex network of cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes. (81)

Shields tries to reach a point to which many do not dare, that is, though she has been criticized by writing light fiction and so being shallow in terms of dealing with

gender issues in-depth, she actually has exposed the invisible problems within contemporary feminism. Likewise she states:

What interested me...was the unknowability of others, their very otherness in fact...it might be thought that I would be dismayed to discover the limited nature of human interaction, but instead I was heartened...To be known was to be incapacitated, and stripped bare. (qtd. in Pederson Carson 110)

So her aim is then to discover what is beneath. Nevertheless, *Unless* is not just referring the invisible women else where in countries outside Western world but rather it insinuates the painful reality that even the so called present day modern West is not that much a perfect sample by being the host of feminism, if to say metaphorically. Shields narrates a story which will clarify my point:

Assumption and presumption distort our stories. One summer, in north central Iceland, I was told Monica's story. The name Monica pulled on an underground wire, reminding me of that other Monica of the Oval Office. But, no, the Icelandic Monica was virtuous. She and her husband lived in a poor stone house by the side of a gorge which separated them from their village, which they and their seven daughters could only reach by descending the steep sides of the gorge and then climbing up the other side. The husband died, just as Monica's eighth child was to be delivered. She decided to move her house across the gorge, reassembling it on the other side, where she was greatly rewarded and honored for her spirit. A charming folktale, I thought, but no, it is a true story: the stone, the gorge, the seven daughters- and the tale is not old. I was shown photos of Monica, not paintings, photos of her and the

grandkids. It was the president of Iceland who honored her not some ancient tribal chief. (qtd. in Goertz and Eden 31)

Within this framework this thesis will analyze Carol Shields' *Unless* through the lenses of French Feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and her *The Second Sex* and Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Simone de Beauvoir illustrates a phenomenological way in terms of redefining the woman through her subjective experience and her body that encounters racial, cultural and social differences. Though, with Irigaray I will read *Unless* through the linguistic and psychoanalytic approach to the female sex that she draws within her study. According to Irigaray the woman has no existence within the language system which she declares to be thoroughly in the hands of patriarchy's phallogocentric terminology. Irigaray in her study emphasizes that, "The language system, or system of languages, doubled or accompanied by epistemological formalism and formal logic, takes from women and excludes them from the threshold of living in the word" (91). Therefore, Irigaray presents a new language system as Toril Moi indicates in *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985), "Irigaray's analysis of femininity is closely bound up with her idea of a specific woman's language which she calls 'le parler femme' or 'womanspeak'" (144). Therefore, to read *Unless* through lenses of Irigaray seems to denote how Shields by insinuating a feminine attitude to the language system attempts to redefine womanhood. However, her attempt is not essentially a feminine writing but rather a writing that redefines womanhood through the phallogocentric terminology. That is, Shields uses the postmodern parodic strategies along with the neo-realist writing style. Moreover, she employs Irigaray's "mimicry" notion rather than the "écriture féminine" concept.

Irigaray's attempt is seen to be essentialist by some intellectuals in terms of constructing a feminine language which does include a specific feminine system. Paul Smith in *Discerning the Subject* (1988) questions, whether or not Irigaray is essentialist. Diana Fuss' answer to Irigaray's essentialism is remarkable in terms of looking at the theory from a different perspective. She in *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* writes as follows, "To the extent that Irigaray reopens the question of essence and women's access to it, essentialism represents not a trap she falls into but rather a key strategy she puts into play, not a dangerous oversight but rather a lever of displacement" (72). Within this context Shields' attempt to write in an essentialist mode, her writing in the genre of light fiction which is analyzed by the patriarchal perspective to be more like a feminine writing style, then might seem to be an insinuation of a displacement of the binary system that excludes an entity as womanhood, and so to which she will then include a feminine terminology. Nevertheless, her attempt does not indicate any essentialism; rather it is her neo-realist writing that strives through the patriarchal discourse to present the invisible womanhood within the phallogocentric terminology.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), which will be my source in reading and redefining womanhood in *Unless*, is an analysis that leads a phenomenological perspective in terms of redefining womanhood. Simone de Beauvoir through her whole study does employ Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologist theory to which she adds her own perception on gender. In *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) Merleau-Ponty illustrates the experiencing body as follows, "So I am my body, in so far, at least, as my experience goes, and conversely my body is like a life-model, or like preliminary sketch, for my total being" (qtd. in Beauvoir

61). To clarify the relation between these two theorists in the context of *Unless* and the redefinition of womanhood, I will employ another ground-breaking work to my thesis which is Toril Moi's *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (2001). To Beauvoir a body is not just a thing but rather it is a situation, she focuses on the existence of the female sex that is invisible within the patriarchal discourse (Moi 59). Moreover, as I have indicated previously, the subjective experience is the main point within her theory which caused my critical attitude towards Poststructuralist feminist theorists as Judith Butler who does not include the body within the category of gender (Moi 74). Actually, the critical point in Butler and her co-theorists is their combining sex and gender which deconstructs the binary system but underestimates the body as a situation, an experiencing entity that encounters with social and racial conditions. To illustrate a clear picture Moi compares Butler and Beauvoir's perspective:

In Butler's picture of sex and gender, gender becomes completely disembodied and the body itself is divorced from all meaning. For Beauvoir, on the other hand, the body is a situation, and as such, a crucial part lived experience. Just as the world constantly makes me, I make myself the woman I am. As we have seen, a situation is not an 'external' structure that imposes itself on the individual subject, but rather an irreducible amalgam of the freedom (projects) of that subject and the conditions in which that freedom finds itself. (74)

Moi indicates that it is actually this perspective of Butler that makes the body disappear, or rather this idea that the body which is a concrete entity that "experienced as meaningful, and socially and historically situated" (Moi 74).

To conclude, I will read Carol Shields' *Unless* within this framework with which I will lead a non-essentialist way. Thus, employing an ambivalent reading that deconstructs the binaries, but also, I will draw upon an approach to womanhood from her subjective situation. That is, while trying to take her out of a system that has defined her in essentialist terms, my attempt will illustrate a redefined womanhood that is regarded as a subjective entity that experiences social, racial and cultural differences. When we see womanhood through this perspective then we might construct a global feminist theory that reconciles all women without offering the privilege to one and silence the other, the invisible.

CHAPTER 2

WOMANHOOD

The first — killing the Angel in the House — I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved.

Virginia Woolf

The novel *Unless* by Carol Shields scrutinizes the centuries-long concept of womanhood through the lens of its feminist characters. Thanks to feminism a redefinition of the concepts of the female sex has come into existence. Moreover, a realization has occurred of definitions attributed to womanhood by an oppressive patriarchal discourse. Patriarchy essentializes the female body within the framework of biological determinism against which women have fought against severely since feminism's foundational writer Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft is the leading feminist within the feminist history who published her groundbreaking work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). The book was a brave answer to men like Jean-Jacques Rousseau of the Enlightenment Era who ironically called for equality between men. As Robert E. Lerner writes in *Western Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture* (2002):

To Rousseau's specific prescriptions for female education, which included teaching women timidity, chasteness, and modesty, Wollstonecraft replied that Rousseau wanted women to use their reason to "burnish their chains rather than to snap them." Instead education for women had to promote liberty and self-reliance. (667)

Here Lerner presents us how Mary Wollstonecraft, the founder of First Wave feminism, calls for a real emancipation in terms of obtaining social rights to which she adds political rights. However, she falls back into biological determinism by wishing education for women for the sake of motherhood. As she claims in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*:

To illustrate my opinion, I need only observe that when a woman is admired for her beauty, and suffers herself to be so far intoxicated by admiration she receives, as to neglect to discharge the indispensable duty of a mother, she sins against herself by neglecting to cultivate an affection that would equally tend to make her useful and happy. (146)

Here we clearly see that the First Wave feminism backlashes and repeats the patriarchal assumption of woman's biologicistic determinism

Actually, womanhood could not get rid of the imposed fictional identifications that essentialized the female sex to biology and social status designed by patriarchal ethics until the landmark feminist Simone de Beauvoir appeared with her published work *The Second Sex* (1949). She very daringly raised the "woman question" and gave another perspective to the notion of "biologic determinism" within the patriarchal discourse. She points out, "Woman, like man, is her body; but her body is something other than herself" (61). That is, the female body is essentialized within patriarchy but this essentialism, if to say ironically, actually causes the body itself to be a so called nonexistent entity. Woman has become a nonexistent entity because she has been made to adopt certain roles as motherhood and wifeness. This foundational claim of Simone de Beauvoir is noteworthy, as she indirectly deconstructs the biologic determinism of patriarchy by claiming that the

body that is told to be feminine does not belong to her but clearly enough to a system that has created its own fictional reality.

Within this context, we can say that the patriarchal discourse does not include the female sex, womanhood, in terms of being a free individualistic entity with the subjective experience that differs according to the social, racial and/ or cultural background. To clear up this point, there is also the reality of sexual difference between the male and female sex:

But patriarchal cultures have reduced the value of the feminine to such a degree that their reality and their description of the world are incorrect. Thus, instead of remaining a different gender, the feminine has become, in our languages, the non-masculine, that is to say an abstract nonexistent reality.

(Irigaray 20)

Irigaray's perspective is related to Beauvoir's female concept that is constructed as an Other within the patriarchal system. While Irigaray's viewpoint is mainly constructed on linguistics, Beauvoir's is existentialist. Their claims demonstrate a parallel when it comes to the nonexistence of womanhood in the masculine system, as Irigaray continues with her thesis:

Just as an actual woman is often confined to the sexual domain in the strict sense of the term, so the feminine grammatical gender itself is made to disappear as subjective expression, and vocabulary associated with women often consists of slightly denigrating, if not insulting, terms which define her as an object in relation to the male subject. (20)

The problem is that both in the phallogocentric terminology and in the contemporary, poststructuralist, feminist terminology we have the same vicious circle which

portrays the same invisibility of the female. That is, both discourses encounter with the danger of underestimating subjective experience of women which are social, racial and/ or cultural experiences.

I read Carol Shields' *Unless* as a revision of "the 'woman' question" (*Unless* 100). Shields insinuates a critical approach to the patriarchal discourse and its essentialist notions that fix women into stable positions such as motherhood or/ and wifehood even still in all contemporary societies. Wendy Roy depicts Shields' *Unless* as the:

Most explicitly feminist novel, one in which she...expresses more forcefully and openly than she has ever done before her concerns about the continued marginalizing and silencing of women in contemporary society. Her narrative does not just demonstrate feminist strategies...; it names them. (qtd. in Pederson Carson 14)

Wendy Roy's approach actually insinuates another point of departure that *Unless* takes. The point is that Shields presents a phenomenological approach to womanhood which she puts forward with her neo-realist writing style. That is then, Shields' neo-realist writing does not just directly acknowledge her feminist perspective, but rather by playing with her female characters Shields portrays us an authentic phenomenological feminist attitude. As Roy characterizes, she names the feminist strategies through her female characters rather than just referring to them.

It is not only within the patriarchal discourse that the female sex is silenced, fixed and gendered but the contemporary feminist theory has taken a critical course in terms of existing within the same discourse. That is, Second Wave feminism of the seventies yielded to Poststructuralist feminism which tends to be non-essentialist

compared to the former waves that were claimed to deem essentialist femininity.

Nevertheless, contemporary Poststructuralist feminist theory has the tendency to a certain amount to fall back into a similar essentialism like the previous feminisms experienced in terms of underestimating the subjective experience of women.

Poststructuralist feminism is based on the critical assumption that gender is a cultural construction while sex is a natural fact. Judith Butler claims in her landmark work *Gender Trouble* that, “sex is as culturally constructed as gender” (7). Nevertheless, Toril Moi in *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* takes a manipulative maneuver against this thesis and points out that:

From such a perspective it does look as if everything in a woman or man that is not sex must be gender, and vice versa. Suddenly sex and gender start to look like a deconstructable ‘pair’. But this analysis forgets that a sexed human being (man or woman) is more than sex and gender, and that like race, age, class, sexual orientation, nationality, and idiosyncratic personal experience are other categories that always shape the experience of being of one sex or another. (35)

Moi emphasizes, that Butler and her co-theorists seem to deconstruct the binary between sex and gender. However, she claims that these theorists underestimate individualist difference or rather experience. Moi claims for a phenomenological approach, and she indicates that experience needs to come prior to any intellectual understanding of that experience.

Thus, any intellectualization of experience is always belated and by definition constructed. Experience is sensual/ physical rather than intellectual. And it is a sense that contains an aspect of everlasting, universal truth, while intellectual constructions are limited and always falling short of grasping the “truth”. Therefore, the highly

conceptual approach of poststructuralist feminist theory tends to recreate a binary system which essentializes womanhood not biologically or/ and culturally like patriarchy but then it generalizes womanhood theoretically. That is, the subjective experience of women is ignored and so the female sex becomes an invisible entity again but then in another discourse. The female sex must be regarded according to her “situation” as Beauvoir points out with a phenomenological viewpoint in *The Second Sex*. Thus, we can say that the feminist theory has gotten stuck in a conceptual impasse. Carol Shields’ *Unless* presents these critical points within the contemporary feminist theory through Shields’ female characters and her phenomenological approach through a neorealist writing style. Shields with the neorealist fictional approach observes womanhood by playing with her female characters whose subjective experience is constantly put forward. The female characters illustrate Shields’ critical perspective against contemporary feminism and the still going on patriarchal notions.

Therefore, I have employed womanhood within the framework of French Feminism represented by Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Drawing from phenomenological theory, Beauvoir’s is an attempt at redefining womanhood in terms of woman’s experience and her body. In *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* contemporary theorist Toril Moi picks up the argument Beauvoir has made in *The Second Sex*. On the other hand, the book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984) of the French Feminist Luce Irigaray has been a necessary reference through this study on Carol Shields’s *Unless*. Irigaray demonstrates a linguistic and psychoanalytic approach to the female sex by seeking definitions of womanhood and investigating their effects.

According to Irigaray woman does not exist in the language system, womanhood is a fictional entity drawn by the phallogentric terminology which she indicates as follows:

The language system, or system of languages, doubled or accompanied by epistemological formalism and formal logic, takes from women and excludes them from the threshold of living in the word. Bars women from the to-and-fro of words, from the traversal of words that would allow them both to get out of and to return to their own homes, to “take off” from their bodies, give themselves a territory, an environment, and invite the other to some possible share or passage.

(91)

The patriarchal discourse creates a woman imprisoned within a binary system framed by an adapted language system. Shields is not directly critical with the phallogentric language system but rather she indicates a new language through which the female identity will get free from fictional identifications. Actually, this new language is rather her neorealist writing style that redefines womanhood through the phallogentric terminology. Thus, within this context Shields scrutinizes the subjective experience of womanhood according to racial, cultural and social differences or we may say back grounds. Shields plays with different notions of womanhood along with the fictional female characters in *Unless*, and her neo-realist writing observes the female sex not just through a theoretical perspective but rather through the sensual and physical subjective experience. That is, she leads a phenomenological way of understanding about womanhood.

Therefore, Shields’ making use of trauma through the female characters in *Unless* in a way characterizes her viewpoint against patriarchy and contemporary

feminist theory. That is, trauma is defined as a psychological and physical injury through two female characters, Reta's traumatized daughter Norah and the veiled woman who immolated herself. Both women's traumatic condition indirectly confronts with another trauma which Maria Root calls as "insidious trauma" (qtd. in Caruth 107). This "insidious trauma" is demonstrated by Reta, the protagonist, and other female characters within the novel. With this Root "refers to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (qtd. in Caruth 107). This so called "insidious trauma" is in a way what Shields strives to do with her neo-realist writing style through her female characters that struggle within a patriarchal society. Specifically, if to refer to Cathy Caruth's perspective, feminist theory needs to draw "our attention to the lives of girls and women, to the secret, private, hidden experiences of everyday pain," because "traumatic events do lie within the range of normal human experience"(110). Thus, trauma becomes a concept Shields employs through her female characters to depict women's status within the still going on patriarchy. Moreover, her neo-realist writing also illustrates a feminist perspective that does not indicate a highly conceptual feminist discourse, like the poststructuralist feminism, but rather a close observation to womanhood from different aspects. Because women are still traumatized and paralyzed within fictional identifications in contemporary societies, no matter if these are Eastern or Western societies. According to Suzanne Pharr:

When trauma is unusual, we can pretend safety; engage in the daily self-deceptions that allow us to believe ourselves beyond the reach of the unusual.

We can be spectators, titillated by the thrill of risk, safe behind our imaginary psychic barriers; or we can watch in horror as trauma happens to others but reassure ourselves that we are not next because we are safe so long as we do not protest, do not stick out our necks and “make” ourselves into the target. We can ignore the institutions of the society that appears to privilege us as long as we pretend that we will not be next. (qtd. in Caruth 108)

Trauma then becomes a concept that Shields draws through her female characters to depict the hidden trauma all women experience. Thus, feminist theory must not just regard womanhood through a highly conceptual perspective, but it also needs to take into account social, racial and/ or cultural experience. Actually, this phenomenological approach of Shields parallels with her neo-realist writing.

2.1. The ‘Woman’ Question

All my life I’ve heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, but I’ve never understood what they meant. To lose. To have lost. I believed these visitations of darkness lasted only a few minutes or hours and that these saddened people, in between bouts, were occupied, as we all were, with the useful monotony of happiness. But happiness is not what I thought. Happiness is the lucky pane of glass you carry in your head. It takes all your cunning just to hang on to it, and once it’s smashed you have to move into a different sort of life. (*Unless* 1)

These opening words of *Unless* by the narrator, Reta Winters, already gives an impression of the disturbance she has begun to face which she calls her “new life” (1). Reta Winters is a writer, translator, a wife and a mother, and Carol Shields will

present us different concepts of womanhood seen through these lenses. This means that we will perceive womanhood through a very wide perspective that is laid before us by Carol Shields. This new life of Reta precisely begins with the millennium, 2000. It is important that her personal unhappiness is very much related with the arrival of the millennium. That is, the “acute pain” and the bankrupt in spirit and body” she experiences denotes a general experience of the female sex even in an era in which feminist theory is so to speak globalized (1). We can say then:

Still, we are far from a world where gender does not influence a subject’s social and political standing or role. Feminism continues to fight an uphill battle to influence a gender-biased system. Part of the problem can be located in the very position taken by feminism itself as it tries to influence an entrenched patriarchal system from the outside. (Fischer 2)

Reta herself refers to this certain condition of women as follows:

But we have come so far; that’s the thinking. So far compared with fifty or a hundred years ago. Well, no, we’ve arrived at the new millennium and we haven’t “arrived” at all. We have been sent over the side pocket of the snooker table and made to disappear. No one is so blind as not to recognize the power of the strong over the weak and, following that, the likelihood of defeat. (99)

This quotation from the chapter “Instead” illustrates the current condition of womanhood which Shields will question within the whole novel.

Thus, even if contemporary feminist theory calls for a wider audience currently, the theory is still reaching a limited group of women. To speak in the name of woman, however, “is to hide the individual woman or to reduce her to what is the lowest common denominator in her life and that of others” (Campbell 48). Of course,

this does not mean that feminists have to experience certain things to speak in the name of women. But rather the vicious circle has happened because of the intellectualization of womanhood, specifically a current condition of contemporary poststructuralist feminist theory that encounters a conceptual impasse. This perspective ignores the experience of women like Reta Winters. Thus, feminists need to handle with womanhood not just on a discursive level like the patriarchal discourse that has underestimated subjective experience, but rather they need to hold a phenomenological approach that regards social, racial and/ or cultural experience.

Discourse is always needed, however; intensive discourse will cause limited understanding of womanhood and lead to an abstract approach to women's sexual reality that includes more than the theory. Kate Cregan in *The Sociology of the Body* (2006) paraphrases Susan Bordo's attitude against the poststructuralist understanding of the body within the feminist discourse or/and theory in her study *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) is as follows:

Bordo is also quite right to question the tendency of postmodern theorists such as Butler and Susan McClary to recreate the body as yet another form of text, that is for privileging the notion of the free-play of meaning and forgetting to attend to the complex materiality of the body in time, space and culture: ' If the body is treated as pure text, subversive, destabilizing elements can be emphasized and freedom and self-determination celebrated: but one is left wondering is there a *body* in this text? (38)

Therefore, the poststructuralist feminist discourse will face a conceptual impasse that will not appeal to every woman with different or rather subjective experiences.

Cregan continues on this point as follows:

Indeed, as we have seen, materiality ends up yet again taking a poor second place to the mind. However, Bordo is careful not to condemn people for using increasingly available postmodern medical interventions to reshape or manipulate their bodies. Her concern is rather ‘to highlight a *discourse* that is gradually changing our conception and experiences of our bodies, a discourse that encourages us to “imagine the possibilities” and close our eyes to limits and consequences’ (39). In life there are *material* consequences. (170)

Here Bordo and Cregan are very much close to Simone de Beauvoir’s approach to the body as a situation. That is, Beauvoir’s phenomenological perspective to the female sex claims for a discourse that regards subjective experience. The “material consequences” within this quote are not to denote the essentialism of the female sex but rather to take woman as a subjective entity. Irigaray’s contribution to this thesis is worth to quote here, as according to her:

The idea that I was born a woman but I must become the spirit or soul of this body I am. I must open out my female body, give it forms, words, knowledge of itself, a cosmic and social equilibrium, in relation to the environment, to the different means of exchange with others, and not only by artificial means that are inappropriate to it. (116)

Therefore, contemporary poststructuralist feminist theory that claims that sex and gender are both culturally constructed, and whose aim is to deconstruct the binary system previously developed by patriarchy actually reconstructs another binary that underestimates the subjective female experience. Thus, the female as an entity loses visibility again but then in another system.

The backlash of feminism and the concept trauma are very much related at this point as *Unless* starts with an insinuation of a loss Reta reveals at the beginning of the novel. Her daughter Norah experiences trauma and has deserted her family by sitting on a pavement on street with a cardboard sign around her neck on which writes “Goodness”. Moreover, it is just after this loss that Reta Winters begins to write her second novel, a sequel to *My Thyme Is Up*, so from all these we can infer a process of change that will be put forward with trauma. Another very important considerable fact is that Shields has chosen Reta as a narrator who is a writer, translator, a mother and a wife. It is then clear that in *Unless* along with Reta we will seek through female identities from very different perspectives. Reta seems to be a writer and translator that has a life of certain status. But then we witness her saying, “I can get my hair brushed back and securely pinned up each morning in a mere two and a half minutes and I consider my coiffure one of my major life accomplishments. I really mean this” (31). The brushed back and secure style of hair already refers a sense of controlling, as women in the patriarchal system need to control their feelings. Within Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) the “hair” concept has a specific importance along the text. Jane Eyre’s hair is always neat; however, while Jane depicts Bertha Mason, she especially focuses on her hair as being “disheveled” (Bronte 310). If to refer to a specific sample from the novel, Mr. Brocklehurst’s, the master of Lowood School where Jane is educated, objection against a girls curled hair in *Jane Eyre* indicates the patriarchal perspective to control women. “Why, in defiance of every precept and principle of this house, does she conform to the world so openly— here in an evangelical, charitable establishment— as to wear her hair one mass of curls?” (Bronte 65). Thus, Shields’ using this “hair” concept through

Reta implies this patriarchal attitude of imposing women certain notions that control womanhood and disrupt the subjectivity. The securely pinned hair of Reta is more like the security of patriarchal notions imposed on her which she still can not question thoroughly or rather openly.

Unless refers to many different types of women whom we will explore through the thesis. That is, Shields through her fictional female characters scrutinizes the contemporary feminist theory, its approach to women from different culture, race, social class and so from different backgrounds. Nonetheless, certain groups of women have become invisible, though they were already invisible within the patriarchal system; unfortunately, womanhood has become an entity that experiences a loss, a backlash currently.

Along with the interrelation between trauma, womanhood and contemporary feminism, trauma in *Unless* denotes a group of traumatized women with different social, cultural and racial backgrounds. Shields in *Unless* illustrates a phenomenological approach that takes womanhood as an ambiguous entity in regard to her subjective experience. Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir depicts:

Now, what specifically defines the situation of woman is that she-a free and autonomous being like all human creatures-nevertheless discovers and chooses herself in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to turn her into an object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is for ever to be transcended by another consciousness which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject-which always posits itself as essential-

and the demands of a situation which constitutes her as inessential. (qtd. in Moi 4)

Beauvoir's perspective here focuses on a critical approach to patriarchy, however, this certain perspective we can also adapt to the contemporary feminist theory that has to perceive womanhood as an ambiguous entity. Toril Moi in her article comments on the quote by Beauvoir as follows which will clarify my thesis, "While we are all split and ambiguous, she argues, women are more split and ambiguous than men. For Simone de Beauvoir, then, women are fundamentally characterized by ambiguity and conflict" (4). Nevertheless, Poststructuralist feminism or rather contemporary feminism by intellectualizing the female sex constructs another binary system that underestimates the subjective experience and so pushes women into a traumatized condition.

"But we have come so far; that's the thinking," says Reta with which she implies the contradictory condition of women that is still stuck within the binary system (99). Nevertheless, as Beauvoir and Moi have depicted, women can not be taken as a whole entity, rather the concept is split with many fictional identities that have been imposed by patriarchy. And what Shields denotes is that women have not thoroughly arrived to a point of survival from the patriarchal identifications though contemporary feminism has reached many women. Of course, we can never remain blind what feminism has provided women in the present day world, for instance:

Feminist academics have themselves attempted to come together in the Women in Social Work Network (WSWN 1986) to raise the profile of gender in social work teaching and consider how to transcend the theory-practice divide. The

standing Conference for Heads of CQSW Courses regularly addresses the issue of sexism. (Campbell 99)

Moreover, currently we have active organizations such as RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan). Yet again all these organizations are much more separately active. Therefore the so called “sisterhood” has become more like a façade.

Feminism needs a “horizontal comradeship” as Nancy Duncan quotes Chandra Talpade Mohanty (43). Though there have been many organizations to protect the rights of women still a certain group is privileged while groups of women are silenced and so invisible. Duncan continues on quoting Mohanty as follows:

Within nations and communities, campaigns about legal rights, about representations, about the provision of communal goods and resources unite and divide women. Across nations, these and other issues – of war, religion, persecution, mutilation and torture unite and divide women. And the very processes spatial globalization, of space- time compression that has had such an impact on the everyday lives of millions of people, may be used to annihilate the space and distance between them. (qtd. in Duncan 43)

So then, womanhood is such an entity that needs to be perceived through an ambiguous and a phenomenological identification that differs according to racial, social and cultural experience. This will then, metaphorically speaking, lead to a so called umbilical cord between all these women that construct a concrete “Sisterhood”. Thus, highly intellectualized feminist theory will not be beneficial to all women if it does not change its politics. Therefore, the issue is not still reaching practically a successful status; rather it maintains its theoretical approach to

womanhood that generalizes women. And the question if it really has saved women from those fictional identities even after the millennium continues reverberating.

Due to this paralysis within feminism Shields' and so Reta's writing in the genre of light fiction, that is the neo-realist writing style, seems to be a critical reference to this vicious circle within the feminist discourse. Within this context, Reta, the narrator of *Unless*, is criticized by her mentor Danielle Westerman whose feminist books Reta translates from French to English:

She suspects I've abandoned the "discourse," as she always calls it, for the unworthiness of novel writing. She has a way of lowering her jaw when she skirts this topic, and her eyes seem refreshed with disappointment. She is such a persuasive force that I often find myself agreeing with her; what really the point of novel writing is when the unjust world howls and writhes. (224)

Of course, it is an unquestionable truth that without a counter discourse women could not have reached certain political and social rights. Nevertheless, Danielle Westerman's critical thesis against novel writing is her highly conceptual approach to womanhood which is the reason of "traumatic feminism" that survives on just political aspects rather than reaching women from different groups. Toril Moi finds this approach very risky as to her "to take up a political position is to risk being wrong. In the same way we may find ourselves lumbered with the wrong style in the wrong place. The risks of style are also the risks of political commitment" (21).

Moi's belief in "the risk" women like Danielle Westerman face is the risk to underestimate a phenomenological approach to women and to generalize the female sex that falls into the trap of essentialism while the aim has been to disrupt the gender binaries.

Nonetheless, while Reta indirectly criticizes the intellectualized perception of contemporary feminism, she straightaway adds her ambiguous approach to novel writing, “Novel helps us turn down the volume of our own interior “discourse,” but unless they can provide an alternative, hopeful course, they’re just so much narrative crumble. Unless, unless” (224). Thus, it is true that we focus on the subjective experience of womanhood but we have to be careful not to fall into the trap of essentialism that will lead to a backlash. The backlash which Shields observes through her female character here might be very much related with the contemporary Third Wave feminism’s point of view to womanhood. That is, Third Wave feminists actually perceive womanhood through the lenses of subjective experience; likewise this thesis is trying to focus. They seem to employ a phenomenological method of approach to womanhood, as:

Third wavers embrace what we term embodied politics, which is personal and often physical, bodily action that aims to provoke change by exercising and resisting power in everyday life. We identified three forms of embodied politics :(1) redefining identity by engaging the complexities of differences, ambiguities, and multiplicities in and between women, (2) building and working with coalitions to forge an inclusive solidarity, and (3) engaging in personal acts of resistance in local sites where injustices occur. (Fixmer & Wood 2)

It seems that this movement is quite equivalent to what Shields defends in *Unless* in terms of the emergence of regarding woman through a phenomenological perspective that never ignores women’s different racial, social and cultural stances. However, like Reta states we must not “turn down the volume of our own interior discourse”

while writing a novel, but rather “provide an alternative” through the individual experiences women face. Therefore, Shields’ neo-realist writing style proves to be a cunning way that illustrates a phenomenological approach to womanhood through patriarchal notions adapted to female characters within *Unless*. Thus, Shields’ criticism against patriarchy with her neo-realist writing becomes an indirect attack to patriarchy, and a criticism to the poststructuralist feminist theory that will not be able to adapt its highly conceptual theory on every woman. Within this context, as Natalie Fixmer and Julia T. Wood add:

Third wave feminists’ insistence on acknowledging and wrestling with complexities and contradictions within and between women motivates them to build coalitions that allow women to identify simultaneously with multiple identities that have sometimes been regarded as separate and even divisive. In addition, building coalitions helps third wavers resist tendencies to ignore or devalue people who belong to groups other than their own. (4)

Nevertheless, to focus on this aspect through feminism has constructed a detachment between the previous feminist movements and the contemporary feminism. Tiya Miles notes that:

Perhaps the main problem [for third wave feminists] was our ignorance of feminist history” (p. 172). Interestingly, to support her claim, Miles quotes from Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*: ‘By ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes... [H]istorical amnesia keeps... us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread’. (qtd. in Fixmer & Wood 9)

Thus, Shields' depicting a strong affection between Reta and Danielle Westerman might insinuate the idea of not losing touch with the previous feminist movements with whom we, woman, have arrived to our contemporary status and could not if those movements did not take place. It also might refer to the "Sisterhood" notion of feminism with which women from different back grounds have to come together. Only when all women reconcile with each other, can feminism improve its politics.

Within *Unless* ambivalent womanhood or/and split identification is a constant upcoming picture through all the female characters. This is to criticize the essentialist attitude against women hold by patriarchy which also insinuates a critical stance to the contemporary feminism. That is, Shields' neo-realist writing and her playing with the female characters indicate a feminist perspective that regards womanhood through the lenses of Beauvoir's phenomenological understanding about women. Judith Butler in her book *Undoing Gender* (2004) writes that, "The category of women has been used differentially and with exclusionary aims, and at all women have been included within its terms; women have not been fully incorporated into the human" (37). Reta illustrates this split and so ambiguous condition of women when she goes to the beautician Madame Sylvia:

I may well become a regular. Eyebrows, lashes, full facials, neck massage. I have led a reflective life of thought, a writer, a translator, but all this is about to change. The delicate skin around my eyes was demanding attention. Has Tom noticed? I don't think so, Christine and Natalie don't really look at me in that way; they just see this water color blob that means mother, which is rather how I see myself. (28)

Even though Reta is a woman of our time and being a woman with “a reflective life of thought”, she realizes that she exists rather as a mother and a wife (28). Of course, it does not mean that these identifications are negative aspects that oppress women but rather it is seen that some women still can not have an identity out of these patriarchal stereotypical roles. Thus, then:

If patriarchy oppresses women as women, defining us all as ‘feminine’ regardless of individual differences, the feminist struggle must both try to undo the patriarchal strategy that makes ‘femininity’ intrinsic to biological femaleness, and at the same time insist on defending women precisely as women. (Moi 82)

Contrary to women’s long history of essentialist identifications within patriarchy, feminist theory must pay attention not to fall into the trap of a reconstructed essentialism that already takes place within the patriarchal system. Therefore, the feminist theory needs to construct an ambivalent understanding that regards the female sex according to her subjective experience, and so lead a phenomenological approach to womanhood.

Within this framework, we need to come to the point of deepening our focus on the interrelation between trauma and the big picture of womanhood in contemporary feminism that Shields illustrates to us through her female characters in *Unless*. From Reta’s narration we note the already mentioned critical state of feminism and its relation to trauma:

The problem is, I'm not sure I believe in the thunderclap of trauma. A stubborn screen of common sense keeps getting in my way and cancelling the filigree of fine-spun theory. Isn't our species smarter than that? Somewhere, wired into our brains, there must exist a little bean-shaped nerve cluster that registers the relative *proportion* of events and separates the exceptional experience that we can shrug off simply because it is exceptional from the slow, steady accumulation of incremental knowledge, which is what really delivers us to the brink, one small injury bleeding into another until the whole system tips over. (269)

This quotation that takes part almost in the end of Reta's narration in *Unless* has come forth after a self-realization process through Norah's trauma.

Thus Norah's trauma through *Unless* has a strong metaphoric stance, as it illustrates the traumatic position of women in the contemporary poststructuralist feminist theory and the still surviving patriarchal discourse. The hypothesis of the "thunderclap of trauma" can not convince Reta anymore. Cathy Caruth's feminist understanding will be very helpful in terms of perceiving trauma from a different aspect. According to Caruth:

Ultimately, a feminist analysis of the experience of psychic trauma requires that we change our vision of what is "human" to a more inclusive image and will move us to a radical revisioning of our understanding of the human condition. The mental health disciplines, assigned to the position of secular high priests, are faced with a choice. Do we, as did Freud a century ago,

betray the truth of what we know of the immediacy and frequency of traumatic events in daily life (Mason, 1984)? Or do we follow the radical potential of psychoanalysis, which opened the doors to the unconscious and the irrational, to the next stage in which we retell the lost truths of pain among us? Do we act as handmaidens of the status quo, saying that only those already ill suffer from cultural toxicity? Or do we name as poisonous those institutions of society that might sicken anyone? (110)

The trauma Norah experience is not a pure medical illness but rather it is something every woman experiences within the contemporary world. Trauma is the state of paralysis within the fictional identities developed by the patriarchal discourse and it also indicates this stuck position of women even in a world in which feminism is, if to call so, globalized.

Trauma in *Unless* is hidden beneath the text, as we learn almost in the end that Norah's condition has been a result of a traumatic event. Reta's depiction of trauma is very much denoting Caruth's thesis about "psychic trauma," that is a mental trauma which is hidden within the daily life of every individual. Reta feels the pressure of common sense that regards trauma as a suddenly happening "thunderclap" that occurs after a specific event; however, she implies that the process has begun long ago with women. It is rather a process as Reta describes, "One small injury bleeding into another until the whole system tips over" (269). Nevertheless, Reta's husband Tom's comment on the issue of trauma Norah experiences is very much vocalizing the common sense Reta criticizes to be simple, "I don't actually say this aloud to Tom as he delves into the subject of trauma, hoping to rescue or at least

understand Norah by tracking down that “thing” that leapt out at her last spring and knocked her out of her life” (270). Her husband Tom’s point of view against Norah’s trauma is typical Freudian that is hold against women. This Freudian perspective insinuates the patriarchal assumptions Tom holds that Reta never openly reveals to the reader which is Shields’ neo-realist and so indirect way of writing. On this trauma concept Ruth Leys paraphrases Freud, as to Freud trauma:

Was constituted by a relationship between two events or experiences —a first event that was not necessarily traumatic because it came too early in the child’s development to be understood and assimilated. And a second event that also was not inherently traumatic but that triggered a memory of the first event that only then was given traumatic meaning and hence repressed. (20)

Contrary to Freud’s thesis, the trauma in *Unless* likewise Shields’ ambiguous approach while presenting her feminist perspective points out a trauma which Cathy Caruth calls as “insidious trauma” by quoting her feminist therapist colleague Maria Root. Caruth clarifies Roots concept as follows, “By this, she refers to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (107). Thus, Tom’s comment on women whom he thinks to have been experiencing trauma actually denotes a very patriarchal point of view that underestimates the female subjectivity and belies this underneath the trauma concept imposed on the female sex.

In her book *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities* (1994) Nancy Chodorow writes that according to Freud in his *Studies on Hysteria*, and so to the patriarchal perspective on which Freud always constructs his scientific approach, women “are for the most part afflicted with the physical and mental pain of hysterical symptoms or the overriding insistence of obsessional neurosis” (14). Regarding Freud’s theories such as the penis envy, Chodorow quotes from Kenneth Lewes’ *Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality* (1988) who refers to the Oedipus Complex which according to Freud “operates by trauma and necessarily results in neurotic conditions”(qtd. in Chodorow 43). It is clear that Freud’s patriarchal mentality developed these approaches to womanhood which certified the inferiority of the female sex scientifically. And these scientific notions reinforced the biologic essentialism imposed on women by patriarchy.

To return to Reta who reveals this patriarchal point of view that Tom indirectly vocalizes:

He suspects Danielle Westerman suffers from some long ago childhood trauma, that she, at eighty-five, still reverberates with an unrecognized shame or loss or sorrow of a highly specific sort. Because Tom is a man, because I love him dearly, I haven’t told him what I believe: that the world is split in two, between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by

a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang.

That's the problem. (270)

Nevertheless, the problem according to Tom is to identify "the trauma and making it visible" (263). On the contrary, Reta alleges this idea as, "So simple, so clean" (264). Shields' illustrating Tom as a doctor is very important then, as Tom's so called reasonable perspective characterizes the typical masculine stereotype within the patriarchal institution. That the trauma of Norah needs to be exposed with clear-cut notions is Tom's patriarchal vision that blinds him against the social oppression women experience. It is not simply the trauma that needs to be exposed but rather it is Norah herself whose invisible position through the novel indicates the invisible social reality patriarchy imposes on women:

Because a woman can not place herself as an object for herself. And because, unsettled by this lack of "possible position," she allows herself to be placed by the other- man or mother. She herself does not love herself as object. She may try to love herself as innerness. But she cannot see herself. She has to succeed in loving the invisible and the memory of a touch that is never seen, that often she feels only in pain because she is unable to perceive its place, its "substance," its qualities. (Irigaray 60)

Irigaray identifies womanhood within patriarchy with invisibility. However, from this quote we can infer a criticism against the poststructuralist feminist discourse that leads the same method in terms of regarding womanhood through its highly

conceptual lenses. Unfortunately, womanhood experiences another invisibility even in a theory that has been constructed for the sake of freeing the female sex from fictional identifications.

The patriarchal perspective Tom illustrates is so blind that even once he perceives Norah's trauma as a deliberate manipulation which Reta depicts as follows:

Tom doesn't say but he sometimes intimates that Norah is manipulating us. Either that or punishing us for some reason. I resist this interpretation. Tom goes every Friday morning to see her on the way to his trilobite research meeting—he is the only “lay” member of this small group— at the University of Toronto. He's given up talking to her. Now he just sits with her for half an hour, on a folding chair he takes along for that purpose, and slips her money in an envelope. Cash, not cheque. Norah lives outside the realm of cheques and banks and signatures, even though there's a bank on the corner where he sits and another across the street. Is it when he's counting out the twenties that Tom thinks: manipulation? (218)

It is an important fact that Tom is a so called fanatic of the trilobites. The trilobites “the extinct, unlovely arthropods that occupied every sea and ocean in the world. They hung around for a long time ago, like hundred million years,” this species proves Tom's attitude against Norah (73). Tom's obsession with the trilobites, an extinct species, implies his conventional and so patriarchal point of view that survives on the notions of these perspectives. Moreover, ironically by sitting on a folding chair while Norah sits on the pavement portrays the lack of communication between the

daughter and father. Reta already implies this lack of communication with her viewpoint about Tom's regarding Norah's behaviours as manipulation. Thus, Tom's perspective remains within patriarchal assumptions that try to survive by traumatizing women and by putting them in an invisible position.

Shields' neo-realist writing style depicts many patriarchal notions through the female characters and these characters' experiences within the patriarchal society, like we see with Tom's attitude against Norah. Womanhood is still regarded through strict patriarchal identities and so contemporary feminism needs to construct a discourse that holds a phenomenological method of approach to womanhood. Within this context, we need to return to Reta's theory about women:

The world is split in two, between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang. That's the problem. (270)

The key words in this passage are the "uncoded otherness," "shut down our bodies" and "seal our mouths," these are direct references to the traumatic and invisible condition of contemporary womanhood. That is, the world has "committed antinarcissism in her! A narcissism that only loves itself if it makes itself loved for

what is lacking! They have created the loathsome logic of antilove. The “*Dark Continent*” is neither dark nor unexplorable: It is unexplored only because we have been made to believe that it was too dark to be explored” (Cixious 68). Thus, trauma metaphorically is the notion Shields employs to explore through the dark continent woman is identified with in the patriarchal system. Shields with her phenomenological and so neo-realist writing style through her female characters in a way presents the sealed bodies and so experiences of womanhood. The trauma within contemporary feminist theory continues and will continue to silence women if it does not allow a phenomenological understanding to womanhood. Otherwise, as Reta defines, the patriarchal mentality will then traumatize women against “the fireworks and streaking stars” and so she will be nothing (270).

The last mentioned but actually the initial step of Reta’s writing and self-realizing process begins with the critical big picture Shields addresses through Reta. As Reta is obsessed with domestic labour, her motherhood and wifeness roles which are deliberately characterized through Reta herself. That is, womanhood is still stuck within constructed identities imposed by patriarchy. Nevertheless, before the big picture it is worth to illustrate Norah’s stance almost through the whole novel: A girl on the pavement, aged nineteen, once a university student and she has a board hanging around her neck which signs the word *Goodness*. This is the portrayal of Norah’s so called trauma. However, as I have mentioned before trauma is a metaphor. Shields’ neo-realist writing in a way demonstrates the contemporary condition of womanhood. And from this phenomenological rapprochement we can sense a criticism against a feminist theory that ignores women from different

cultures, races and classes. A feminism that regards womanhood through a highly conceptual perspective which has been successful until now currently has become the façade. Sandra Harding in her *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (1991) invokes an outstanding sample that takes place in our present day world:

Women at the top of race and class hierarchies who succeed in science tend not to criticize or work against those forms of domination that oppress their sisters in other classes and races; they can easily become mere tokens whose individual achievements has little or no positive effect on the situation of the women who are not so favored. This is not to say that these women have not had to struggle mightily and unfairly to achieve the credentials and positions that flow so much more routinely to their male colleagues, nor is it to say that they intend such consequences. Nevertheless, it is frequently the case that their hard-won success does not significantly improve the situation for other women. (67)

We can take Harding's perspective to the feminist understanding of today that needs to revise its approach to womanhood to get rid of the conceptual impasse, especially which is experienced currently by the poststructuralist feminist theory.

Within this framework, the word "goodness" that hangs around Norah, and her traumatized position seem to be a reference to the passive womanhood patriarchy imposed on women which is an unquestionable truth. Nevertheless, Shields' message is to scrutinize this certain concept together with the constantly appearing catch

phrase “Goodness but not Greatness.” Goodness at first hand represents passivity in *Unless*, “an abstraction” or rather “an imaginative construction representing the general will of a defined group of people” as Reta’s friend Lynn denotes (115). Shields’ catch phrase “Goodness but not Greatness” is what patriarchy has made women to identify with themselves. Interestingly, Shields feints very cunningly by showing “goodness” stereotypically as passivity but then she deepens her interrogation by touching the fringes of Danielle Westerman and her feminism with which she in a way presents the critical attitude of contemporary feminism that theorizes womanhood:

“How can she go on living her life knowing what she knows, that women are excluded from greatness, and most of the bloody time they choose to be excluded?”

“Going on their little tiny trips instead of striking out on voyages.”

...

“After all Danielle’s efforts to bring about change.” From Lynn. “She’s still not included in the canon.”

“Except in women’s canon.”

“Inclusion isn’t enough. Women have to be listened to and understood.”

“Men aren’t interested in women’s lives,” Lynn said. “I’ve asked Herb. I’ve really pressed him on this. He loves me, but, no, he really doesn’t want to know about the motor in my brain, how I think and how—”

...

“It’s as though I lack the authority to enter the conversation. I’m outside the circle of good and evil.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that most of *us* aren’t interviewed on the subject of ethical choices. No one consults us. We’re not thought capable.”

“May be we aren’t,” Anette said. “Remember that woman who had a baby in a tree? In Africa, Mozambique, I think. There was a flood. Last year, wasn’t it? And there she was, in labor, think of it! While she was up in a tree, hanging on to a branch.”

“But does that mean—?”

“All I’m saying,” Annette continued, “is, what did we do about that? Such a terrible thing, and did we send money to help the flood victims in Mozambique? Did we transform our shock into goodness; did we do anything that represented the goodness of our feelings? I didn’t.” (117)

Feminists like Danielle Westerman have made women realize their oppression within the patriarchal system; however, realizing and constructing theories are not sufficient any more. Greatness is a fundamental fact that women have to get in touch with, but if greatness is sufficient for women is an issue that needs to be considered profoundly. Danielle Westerman’s name already insinuates a contradiction with her feminism which is most probably a deliberate play of language that Shields employs. If we analyze her surname we get the notion of a Western man. Thus, the novel in a way criticizes a feminism that Danielle Westerman defends. This is a feminism that draws upon a method that introduces the typical racially and socially discriminating

policy of Western patriarchy. Simone de Beauvoir in one of her interviews comments on this kind of feminism from a different viewpoint as follows:

Unfortunately, women who have important posts very often adopt masculine standards-power, ambition, personal success- and cut themselves off from other women. On the other hand, to refuse everything, to say, even when there is something which really should be done, “Ah, that's no longer feminist,” is a pessimistic, even masochistic tendency in women, the result of having been habituated to inertia, to pessimism. To be feminist doesn't mean simply to do nothing, to reduce yourself to total impotence under the pretext of refusing masculine values. There is a problematic, a very difficult dialectic between accepting power and refusing it, accepting certain masculine values, and wanting to transform them. I think it's worth a try. (qtd. in Jardin 6)

This approach of Beauvoir will be very helpful in terms of questioning the terms greatness and goodness. That is, Shields with her phenomenological perspective and so with her neo-realist writing is scrutinizing the theoretical approach certain feminists lead such as poststructuralist feminists. Sensual and physical experience can not be belittled, and of course, racial, social and cultural differences are leading facts in terms of regarding women through the lenses of feminism.

From Reta's conversation with her female writer friends we get the idea that goodness within the contemporary world is a synonym to passivity:

Goodness is not guaranteed” (257), Reta realizes; in fact, “goodness has no force; none” (257). Ultimately, Reta questions the efficacy of goodness because “it has emptied itself of vengeance, which has no voice at all” (310).

Like Norah, who has swallowed silence, goodness is passive, but Reta's newfound feminism requires action. (Foster Stovel 14)

Though, this is the case we get from the conversation, Shields also makes us realize the fact that even greatness that Danielle Westerman depends on does not assure a certain place for women in contemporary social world:

Still, we are far from a world where gender does not influence a subject's social and political standing or role. Feminism continues to fight an uphill battle to influence a gender-biased system. Part of the problem can be located in the very position taken by feminism itself as it tries to influence an entrenched patriarchal system from the outside. (Fischer 2)

Shields' depiction of the conversation between Reta and her friends slowly moves to a critical point. The illustration of women from different and very far countries at first sight seems to be the very big picture of stereotypical Western point of view Shields follows. Shields' neo-realist writing plays both with the language but she also plays with conventional perceptions within the Western society against the Eastern societies. She draws our attention first to these women in Africa; however, she afterwards follows a different path and takes the female oppression to Reta's Canada, a Western country:

“And remember,” Sally said, “that woman who set herself on fire last spring?

That was right here in our country, right in the middle of Toronto.”

“In Nathan Phillips Square.”

“No, I don't think it was there. It was in front of —”

“She was a Saudi woman, wearing one of those big black veil things. Self-immolation.”

“Was she a Saudi? Was that established?”

“A Muslim woman anyway. In traditional dress. They never found out who she was.”

“A chador, isn’t it?” Annette supplied. “The veil.”

“Or a burka.”

...

“She died. Needless to say,” Annette said.

“But someone tried to help her. I read about that. Someone tried to beat out the flames. A woman.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said. (118)

Shields has taken the racial, cultural and social experience to the very country which is a so called Western country. Thus, she in a way metaphorically creates an umbilical cord between these women and the women in those countries such as Mozambique. Moreover, we can also infer from Shields’ writing that the patriarchal reality does not take place in the so called underdeveloped Eastern countries but it holds its reality every where. If we consider Shields’ portrayal of Reta and the other female characters through the conversation, we realize that patriarchy still oppresses women globally. Nevertheless, we must notice that the self immolation of the veiled woman is not thoroughly known by Reta and her friends. Although there is the constant tendency of an up coming truth about the case, all the conversation takes place in an ambiguous way. Reta has not even heard about the burning of the veiled woman and the woman who tried to save her. And that her friends have half knowledge insinuates a traumatic silence still continuing on behalf of some women who are not still visible.

But the trauma concept is not that clear within *Unless*, though it constantly appears directly or indirectly, its repetition is interrelated with women's invisibility, or visible but then passive and silenced. We can say then that the numb situation of these women illustrated through the conversation about other women with different experiences mirrors the trauma Norah experiences:

In trauma one moves forward into a situation that one has little capacity to imagine; and that's why it shatters whatever one had that was prospective or experiential in the past. Whatever prospective consolations one brought to that experience. And being shattered, one struggles to put together the pieces so to speak, of the psyche, and to balance that need to reconstitute oneself with the capacity to take in the experience. Something tells one, or one becomes partly aware, that if one doesn't take in some of it one is immobilized by the numbing, that the numbing is so extreme, in that kind of situation. But this is not a logical process, and it's not a conscious process primarily. So one is inwardly or unconsciously struggling with how to cohere and how to absorb and in some measure confront what one has had thrust upon one, what one has been exposed to. And that's what trauma is all about.

(Caruth 137)

Trauma has become a concept with which the female characters in *Unless* are questioned through their status in their personal lives.

Actually, *Unless* questions those women's perspective against their own lives and other women's lives. That is, trauma is illustrated by Shields as a paralysis that has imprisoned women into patriarchal identifications, and she also depicts trauma as a notion that demonstrates the paralysis of some groups of women who still do not

realize the experiences of other women in the patriarchal system. Cathy Caruth in her *Trauma Explorations in Memory* (1995) comments on the perspective some women lead in terms of distancing themselves from other women's experiences and their perceiving feminism through intellectual levels as follows:

I only must deal with the small violences to the spirit that any such as I encounter in daily life. I am cushioned by my white skin, my upper-middle-class status, my education and access to language and resources. No one has *yet* beaten or raped me, or torn me from my home or taken my job or threatened my life. This is not to say that no one ever will. By insisting that the personal is political, a holy truth of the feminist vision, it is impossible to remove myself and my experiences from my understanding of the etiology, meaning, and treatment of psychic trauma. I must be willing to face its presence and potential in my life, to understand the political and social realities in which I am situated and which will wound me no matter how adamantly I deny it. (109)

This view denotes a critical approach to the underestimating of subjective experience poststructuralist feminist theory sets forth by regarding sex and gender culturally constructed. But with this thesis they might fall into the trap of being ineffective against the just mentioned oppressions Caruth has depicted. Caruth's perspective senses a phenomenological approach to womanhood; therefore, Shields' neo-realist writing style appeals very much to Caruth's feminist viewpoint.

Within this framework, the big picture of the veiled woman and Norah also can be regarded from a different aspect. It is the reconciled womanhood of both West and East which we can say as the clear picture of "Sisterhood". The names of both

Reta and Norah are very important at this point. In the IDEA Conference Şeyda İnceoğlu claimed that the name Norah in *Unless* is an allusion to the Arabic name “Noor” which means light, the name has a connotation in Latin in which it has the meaning “bright light” (Manisa, Turkey 2009). Besides, Reta’s name according to İnceoğlu means “speaker” in Latin which she relates with Reta’s self-awareness that moves along the novel. Nothing is a coincidence in *Unless*, Shields has realized the narrative hunger within fiction which we sense from her neo-realist writing that employs a phenomenological method of approach with her female characters. With these female characters she depicts her criticism against patriarchal notions and the highly conceptual poststructuralist feminist theory. Reta sets forth this perspective of Shields as follows:

Unless. Novelists are always being accused of indulging in the artifice of coincidence, and so I must ask myself whether it was a coincidence that Norah was standing on the corner where Honest Ed’s situated when a young Muslim woman (or so it would appear from her dress), in the month of April, in the year 2000, stepped forward on the pavement, poured gasoline over her veil and gown, and set herself alight... Norah... had walked over to Honest Ed’s to buy a plastic dish rack, which she was holding in her hand when the self-immolation began. (Why a plastic dish rack? — this flimsy object—it’s purchase can only have evolved from some fleeting scrap of domestic encouragement.)... The dish rack became a second fire, and it and the plastic bag in which it was carried burned themselves to Norah’s flesh... Stop, she screamed, or something to that effect, and then her fingers sank into the woman’s flesh. (315)

Shields draws an interesting interrelation between the fire and Norah. If to refer back to Şeyda İnceoğlu's interpretation about Norah's name, Norah becomes the representative of both West and East by being Norah and Noor. The dish rack as a symbol of the domestic sphere and the melted flesh of both women becomes another crucial connection between East and Western. All these ironically denote a new beginning within Reta's life and her narration that takes place after Norah's trauma. Shields' illustrating such a perspective that refers to many aspects contemporary women experience is her belief in constructing a bridge between literature and real life. Therefore, she employs the neo-realist writing style which leads a phenomenological way of method while being critical with patriarchal assumptions. As she notes:

For if literature is not about the world what is it about? Luckily all the world is up for sale. Unluckily; a good part of the world falls through the narrative sieve, washing through the fingers of the recorders' hands and becoming lost. It is this simultaneous abundance and loss that I want to think about: how, while the narrative cupboard is bursting, the reader is often led fed but still hungry. There is so much that lies out of reach so much that touched only tangentially on our lives, or confronts us with incomprehensible images. (qtd. in Goertz & Eden 20)

Shields while trying to demonstrate her critical perspective against patriarchy and contemporary feminism, she gives limited or missing details like the missing clearness within the conversation Reta and her friends had while talking about the self-immolation of the veiled woman. She is deliberately giving slight clues so that we come to know the critical point she states. That is, beneath the text we come to

realize that the so called mental trauma that paralyzed women like Reta, Danielle and Lois has caused Norah's visible and so physical trauma. The invisible trauma these women experience is inherited by Norah who is representative of the future generation womanhood.

Shields' approach with trauma in *Unless* is very much alike with Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1989). Interestingly, both writers employ the neo-realist writing style to illustrate women's oppression within patriarchy, and through their female characters they warn the feminist theory that needs to perceive womanhood through a phenomenological perspective. The nonfictional memoir of Kingston begins with a traumatic event in which her aunt commits suicide. She is silenced at the very beginning of the book by her mother, "You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you" (3). It is at first hand the mother who silences the daughter but this is a certain paradox, as she by telling the story of the aunt already reveals the secret and makes it known. Both in *The Woman Warrior* and in *Unless* trauma silences a woman for the sake of another woman's keeping a narrative. In Kingston's story the silence of the aunt is inherited by Kingston herself or she is made to absorb the silence, as her mother expects from her not to tell anyone. However, this is a clear paradox as I have interpreted previously. Because to Kingston, "There is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have" (16). The "they" here is the immigrant society and her mother. Nevertheless, this silence is never passive while she continues, "My aunt remains forever hungry. Goods are not distributed evenly among the dead. My aunt haunts me — her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her" (16).

To relate Kingston's memoir to Shields' *Unless*, Reta's narration also actually begins with a dead body though we are not informed right in the beginning of the novel. Shields in *Unless* demonstrates a very different way of narration. As in her story the daughter is silenced while the mother is writing on her silence and indirectly she writes on the silenced dead body of the veiled woman. The dead bodies symbolically represent the result of patriarchal assumptions within women's lives. From this, it can be understood that, "The body, or the embodiment, of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological... In other words, feminist emphasis on embodiment goes hand in hand with a radical rejection of essentialism" (Braidotti 4). Thus, the body within both these texts is to save womanhood from the patriarchal perspective that essentializes her biological embodiment. Moreover, for Jeniffer Griffiths, "The exploited female body emerges as the readable text from the scene of the traumatic event, silenced in its own moment but resonating with traumatic shock in the surviving, passed-down narrative" (2). Women, both in Shields' and Kingston's novels, may become invisible with death or they might be silenced; however, these invisible women paradoxically get a certain role in terms of constructing a narration that reveals women's subjective experience.

Actually, the picture of the silenced daughter in *Unless* and the mother that is beginning her writing process through the daughter's trauma implies Shields' critical attitude against patriarchal notions. By putting the patriarchal notions forward along with her neo-realist writing, Shields in a way claims for a feminist discourse that rather than offering a highly theoretical approach to womanhood, perceives

womanhood through the social, racial and/ or cultural experience. For instance, Shields points out specific reasons that have silenced Reta's daughter Norah in a still patriarchal society. That is, Reta's obsession with domestic labor, her being stuck within motherhood and wifehood are the only assumptions she introduces to her daughter. Moreover, Danielle Westerman's highly discursive feminism also does not appeal to this new generation woman. As Reta paraphrases Westerman, "She believes that Norah has simply succumbed to the traditional refuge of women without power: she has accepted in its stead complete powerlessness, total passivity, a kind of impotent piety" (104). Nevertheless, Westerman's hypothesis is too simple to adapt to Norah's condition. A highly conceptual feminist theory will fall short in grasping the sensual/physical truth about women. Thus, in a way Norah has inherited the trauma womanhood experiences both in patriarchy and in the highly theoretical feminism, which are represented by her mother Reta and Danielle Westerman. Therefore, paradoxically to gain visibility the veiled woman has sacrificed herself. Her submission to the fire she has lighted herself metaphorically denotes her gaining visibility to make other women realize her as a woman representing the women from different cultural, social and racial back grounds. Moreover, with this kind of self-immolation she has made other women like Reta realize through her their position within the still surviving patriarchal notions. We can not describe womanhood according to specific identifications; they already have been depicted according to fictional identifications such as motherhood and wifehood by patriarchy.

Both in *The Woman Warrior* of Maxine Hong Kingston and *Unless* it is important that Norah and the dead aunt ghostly linger within the texts. Because these women represent women who have never been regarded according to their subjective

experiences, they are imprisoned in certain identifications. Unfortunately, within *Unless* Reta has the close tendency to be representative of a system like patriarchy which imprisons women in certain stereotypes. The very innocent seeming present that Reta looks forward to buy for Norah already insinuates this certain tendency of her:

The scarf became an idea; it must be brilliant and subdued at the same time, finely made, but with a secure sense of its own shape. A wisp was not what I wanted, not for Norah. Solidity and presence were what I wanted, but in sinuous, ephemeral form. This was what Norah at seventeen, almost eighteen, was owed. She had always been a bravely undemanding child. Once, when she was four or five, she told me how she controlled her bad dreams at night. “I just turn my head around on the pillow,” she said matter-of-factly, “and that changes the channel.” She performed this act instead of calling us or crying; she solved her own nightmares and candidly exposed her original solution—which Tom and I took some comfort in but also, I confess, some amusement. I remember, with shame now, telling this story to friends, over coffee, over dinner, my brave soldier daughter, controlling her soldierly life.

(89)

While it might seem that Reta has a very motherly feeling to Norah in terms of being protective, the reality within this long passage slowly changes the protective attitude she portrays when she mentions about Norah’s controlling her dreams. While Reta tells that she felt some delight in Norah striving to control her dreams. It is ironic that Reta characterizes her daughter’s trying to control her dreams with silence as bravery. Thus, we might say that Reta has taken part in Norah’s silence. On the other

hand, Reta's likening Norah to a soldier in a way indicates what Mary Wollstonecraft criticized the patriarchal system for more than a century ago. Wollstonecraft writes in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that, "Soldiers, as well as women, practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness" (150). What Reta provides Norah as a mother is absorbing silence and passivity. Moreover, she does not provide her daughter with a strong and lasting future but rather she imagines a future like the silk scarf which she describes as, "Something temporary and necessary: this dream of transformation, this scrap of silk" (90).

Within this context, Reta's contribution to Norah's silence and so in a way her own trauma can be regarded as I have denoted before with the inherited trauma. Norah through her mother has absorbed silence as her mother's acceptance of conventional roles of patriarchy. Unfortunately, these roles have blocked Reta's understanding her daughter. Just at this point Norah's middle name carries some weight. We learn almost in the end of the novel from Lois, Norah's grandmother, that Norah's middle name is Charlotte. Charlotte is a name after one of Reta's childhood friends whom she describes as "exceptionally docile and obedient" (151). The key word comes forward through her description, as Charlotte owns an "essential goodness" with which she is honored early death that had confused little Reta's mind (151). However, what needs to be scrutinized is Reta's giving Charlotte's name to Norah as a middle name which in a way made Norah inherits Charlotte's goodness with contribution of her mother.

Another aspect of Reta's contribution in Norah's silence is her failure in communicating with her daughter. Shields portrays the lack of communication between the mother and the daughter as follows:

“I can’t love anyone enough.”

“Why not?”

“I love the world more.” She was sobbing now.

...

“There is literature,” she said. “And language. Well, you know. And branches of languages and dead languages and forgotten dead languages... It’s all so big, and I love all of it.”

“But what—?”

“And whole continents. India. Especially those places like India that I’ve never seen...”

“You could spend a year travelling, you know, Norah.”

“Think of the tides. They never forget to come and go. The earth tipping in space. Hardly anyone understands them” (128- 129).

Norah’s method of speech implies a certain way of *angst*. *Angst* is a term attributed to Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish Philosopher, according to whom such a state of questioning is related to a certain amount of anxiety with which the human being has stepped into a “stage for transition” (Come 61). Arnold B. Come in his *Kierkegaard as Humanist: Discovering My Self* (1995) reflects his ideas about angst as being in a condition of becoming oneself, but this process can occur only when the individual dares to shatter his/her position in society. Kierkegaard exemplifies his thesis of a conventional man in society as follows, “Charming! He has been happy married for several years, as it says in novels, is a dynamic and enterprising man, a father and citizen, perhaps even an important man; at home in his own house the servants call him “He Himself”...” (qtd. in Come 61). If we adapt this sample to Reta and her

conversation with her daughter, we can see a certain resemblance between Kierkegaard's man with his charming life and Reta to whom we will return later on. Norah is the one who already has the tendency to enter this stage of angst with which she has almost freed herself from the girl who controlled her dreams to a woman who declares to her mother, "I'm trying to find out where I fit in" (132). Reta is so obsessed with her wifehood and motherhood that she can not realize that her daughter is trying to construct a way of communication with her. Ironically, what Reta advises to her daughter is to see "someone in the counseling area" (131), a temporary formula like the scrap of silk she bought for Norah. Nevertheless, Norah's condition is the anxiety of a lost identity and the Kierkegaardian angst is her search that Reta never dared until Norah's trauma process. Therefore, Norah's struggle to communicate with her mother ends up with inefficient advises which detaches Norah from herself and her family.

Norah's angst, her detachment from home and the traumatic event has resulted in a live on street as vagabond. It is as if she has realized that trying to become herself, a woman, is accepted only when she paralyses her total being to patriarchal notions. Reta depicts Norah's realization process very beautifully:

There is a bounteous feast going on, with music and richness and arabesque of languages, but she has not been invited. She is seeing it for the first time, but now she will never be able to shake it from view. A deterioration has occurred to the fabric of the world, the world that does not belong to her as she has been told. Again and again and again. She is prohibited from entering.

From now on life will seem less and less like life. (134)

To continue with Irigaray:

Woman is submitted to all kinds of trials: she undergoes multiple and contradictory identifications, she suffers transformations of which she is not aware, since she has no identity, especially no divine identity, which could be perfected in love. Quite apart from an explicit violence on the part of men . . . woman is subjected to a loss of identity which turns love into a duty, a pathology, an alienation for her. (qtd. in Dellamora 1)

Contrary to the female figure Irigaray has illustrated, Norah has realized the trials and therefore she suffers. Shields herself never strives to depict womanhood according to specific identifications, as she has her postmodern perspective constructing fictional characters who are ambivalent in terms of their personalities. At this point, Irigaray's description about women's not having a specific identity does not claim for a specific identity but rather she focuses on those patriarchal roles that never take womanhood as an entity with different experiences. Thus, Norah's struggle to communicate with her mother ends up with Reta's inefficient advises as Reta still has been leading her charming mother and wife roles which she can not escape until Norah's trauma.

To return to Kierkegaard's very conventional sample man with his charming life. The man figure and Reta are almost the same in terms of being imprisoned in their fictional identities social institutions have made them to adopt. That Reta leads a conventional life accorded with patriarchy is already insinuated with the old house she lives in with her family which is named as the McGinn. Thus, there is the inherited patriarchy that is already symbolized with the house. It might seem a paradox that Reta has not been married with Tom officially but even this will not satisfy any reader in terms of her taking his name as she tells:

What's confusing to people is that I have taken his name. I grew up as Reta Summers and when I was eighteen with long straight brown hair down to my waist and enrolled in French studies, I met a medical student named Tom Winters and so we had on our hand a "situation". We could become a standing joke or else one of us could change seasons. (57)

Actually, the point is not about her changing her surname but rather the process of imposition she has never tried to escape from. She has found another identity within this Reta Winters who can not escape the mother and wife roles that were formerly adopted by Mrs McGinn, the former owner of the house they currently live in. Therefore, Reta could not perceive her daughter Norah's struggling with hard questions about her oppressed womanhood. Within this framework to Simone de Beauvoir:

The home becomes the centre of the world and even its only reality; 'a kind of counter-universe or universe in opposition' (Bachelard); refuge, retreat, grotto, womb, it gives shelter from outside dangers; it is this confused outer world that becomes unreal. And particularly at evening, with shutters closed, the wife feels herself queen; she is disturbed by the light shed abroad at noon day by the sun that shines for all; at night she is no longer dispossessed, for she does away with what are not her possessions; from under the lampshade she sees shining a light that is her own and that illuminates her dwelling exclusively: nothing else exists. Reality is concentrated inside the house, while outer space seems to collapse. (469)

Simone de Beauvoir's long passage from *The Second Sex* perfectly concurs with Reta's striving for being a charming role model for motherhood and wifhood to

which one of her descriptions about these adopted roles would be thoroughly supportive:

There are other things I could do with my time besides clean my house... Instead I'm writing a second novel, which is going very slowly, because I wake up in the morning anxious, instead, to clean my house. I'd like to go at it with Q-tips, with toothpicks, every crack and corner scoured. Mention a new cleaning product and I yearn to hold it in my hand; I can't stop. Each day I open my eyes and comfort myself with the tasks that I will accomplish. It's necessary, I'm finding, to learn devious means of consoling oneself and also necessary to forgive one's eccentricities... In the afternoon ... I get to my novel and produce, on a good day, two pages, sometimes three or four. I perch on my Freedom Chair and think: Here I am. A woman seated. A woman thinking. But I'm always rushed, always distracted. (64)

Ironically, this woman is never free and she is always interrupted with her daily obligations. She even can not be freed from these obligations when she is on her writer tour; dreams interrupt her being away from her house:

Away from home, liberated from my responsibility for meals, my unexecuted calculations steal into my dreams like engine run-on and leave me blithering with this diminished store of nurture and the fact of my unpreparedness. Such a small dream crisis, but I always wake with a sense of terror. (85)

Nonetheless, it is when Norah starts to sit on street with a board hanging around her neck which writes "goodness", that Reta begins to realize her daughter and through her daughter her own traumatized position in life.

The constantly put forward catch phrase *goodness* that is identified with the passive womanhood begins to lose its place in Reta's life and this time it is her turn to feel the so called *angst* of Kierkegaard. "This is insane, these errands, these visions, my stepping into cantilevered space and allowing myself to be tipped from skepticism to belief" (46). Her hesitation begins to increase through her narration as she continues, "My, my, such a good woman, so organized too. Enough of that! Yes, I must get home. A long day, yes... I want, I want, I want. I don't actually say these last words; I just bump along on their short, stubbed feet, their little dead declarative syllables—while buttoning up my coat and making my way home" (47). Whatever Reta does to keep order with her role as a wife and mother, she realizes that she feels no satisfaction with her position in life. As Joan Tronto states in *Moral Boundaries* (1993), "In a culture in which domestic relations are privatized in order to control women's power, those who do the work of caring, as well as those in need of care, are devalued" (qtd. in Landsman 8). Thus, we can interrelate all these again to *Unless*, being a novel that tries to present women's subjective experience by leading a phenomenological method of approach. And here we see the big picture of a woman in Western society this time.

Though Reta is a woman of our own era with a status, her condition through the novel insinuates a different reality about women in West. While West normally is seen to provide freedom to women in terms of their having gained political and social rights. There is actually not much difference between the veiled woman and Reta, as both women sacrifice certain things from themselves. That is, Reta's constantly demonstrated domestic labor through the novel depicts just a different version of patriarchy but then oppression and essentialist identifications are alike.

And so Reta declares the bitter truth about herself, “I am still I, though it’s harder and harder to pronounce that simple pronoun and maintain composure” (197). Within this framework, if to quote Irigaray:

Women’s health suffers above all from their lack of self-affirmation and from the impossibility of or denial of a definition of women as subjects and objects by and for themselves. They are deprived of a subjective order by which they can unify their corporeal vitality. A body can only be sound if it has personal or spiritual project or objective, keeping it together and bringing it to life.

(105)

Women no matter to which culture they belong have subjective experiences and what is beautiful with *Unless* is that with Shields’ neo-realist writing we encounter with different phases of womanhood. Moreover, what Shields labors on is to make us perceive womanhood as a global entity with racial, social and cultural individualistic experiences. One of the main problems women face is that, “Women have been impeded by their generative responsibility... Women were busy bearing children, busy gathering edible grasses or bulbs... Women have been hampered by their biology. Hampered: such a neutral and disingenuous concept and one that deflects blame” (*Unless* 100). The word “woman” needs to be redefined not just within theoretical or intellectual terms, but rather through women’s physical and sensual experience. To quote Beauvoir about womanhood:

It is on the level of communication that the word has its true meaning: it is not a reduction to pure silence, to darkness, to absence; it implies a stammering presence that fails to make itself manifest and clear. To say that woman is mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not

understood; she is there, but hidden behind veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances. What is she? Angel, demon, one inspired an actress? It may be supposed either that there are answers to these questions which are impossible to discover, or, rather, that no answer is adequate because a fundamental ambiguity marks the feminine being: and perhaps in her heart she is even for herself quite indefinable: a sphinx. (285)

Women have been alienated from themselves and from each other like Shields depicts with the unsuccessful attempt of communication between Reta and Norah to which we also can add the silent mother-in-law, Lois. While Lois is thoroughly silent through the whole novel we only hear her talking to Arthur Springer, the editor of Reta. It seems to be that Shields still insinuates the failure of communication between women. Reta and Lois never demonstrate a clear dialogue through the whole novel. Lois explains her silence as follows, "Except lately. She can't talk anymore. She doesn't trust herself. Toads will come out of her open mouth. She'll hurt people's feelings" (298). Actually, Reta also contributes to this silence of Lois. It is almost in the end of the novel that Reta begins to question Lois' silence:

Why have you been so silent all these months? I asked my mother-in-law,

Lois. Why didn't you tell us what was wrong?

Because no one asked me, she said.

And Arthur Springer did ask you?

Yes. He leaned across the kitchen table, his chair scraping on the floor, an oddly deliberate and intimate act, and said, "Tell me all about your life, Lois."

(316)

Thus, the lack of communication is depicted very clearly through Lois and Reta's condition.

Along with Reta's narration here, Lois' comment on Norah's trauma is very much like Reta's comment that comes after her self-realization process. Lois tells to Arthur that, "Women were supposed to be strong, but they weren't really, they weren't allowed to be. They were hopelessly encumbered with fibres and membranes and pads of malleable tissue; women were easily injured; critical injuries, that's what came to you if you opened your mouth" (299). Thus, we can refer back to Caruth's notion of "psychic trauma" that has its place within every woman no matter her social, cultural and racial status. Shields' phenomenological approach to womanhood might denote this perspective of Caruth who claims that trauma might have a deeper meaning for women, she writes as follows:

A feminist perspective, which draws our attention to the lives of girls and women, to the secret, private, hidden experiences of everyday pain, reminds us that traumatic events do lie within the range of normal human experience. Faced with this reality, we will be moved to include in our understanding of human responses those events that *are* unusual. (110)

Until now I have mentioned about these so called "unusual" events that Caruth sees to hide trauma itself.

Though womanhood has reached a certain amount of global importance it still needs to be revised. And contemporary Poststructuralist feminism needs to see womanhood through the lenses of subjective experience and not through just theories which may not appeal to every woman. Feminism currently dangerously appeals to a specific group of women while there are many women whose experience can not be

put in a general context. Reta seems to depict this paradoxical condition of womanhood within the contemporary society:

I looked at Gwen/Gwendolyn, my old friend, and then down at my hands, a little garnet ring, a gift from Tom back in the seventies, one week after we met. I thought of my three daughters and my mother-in-law, and my own dead mother with her slack charms and the need she had to relax by painting china. Not one of us was going to get what we wanted. I had suspected this for years, and now I believe that Norah half knows the big female secret of wanting and not getting. Norah, the brave soldier... We're so transparently in need of shoring up that we're asking ourselves questions, endlessly, but not nearly sternly enough. The world isn't ready for us yet; it hurts me to say that. We're too soft in our tissues, even you, Danielle Westerman, feminist pioneer, Holocaust survivor, cynic, and genius. Even you, Ms. Reta Winters, with your new old, useless knowledge your erstwhile charm. We are too kind, too willing —too unwilling too— reaching out blindly with a grasping hand but not knowing how to ask for what we don't even know we want. (98)

At this point it would be necessary to mention about Danielle Westerman who represents a contemporary feminist whose works Reta translates from French to English. As I have depicted before the surname of Danielle Westerman denotes the Western and masculine attitude of feminism within the feminist theory. Reta's role as a translator is also interrelated with her being a mediator between all women within the text. It would be necessary to add Reta's fictionalizing Mrs McGinn's personal life as a woman which reveals her tendency to construct a so called umbilical cord between women with her narration she already does:

I can imagine Lillian/Dorothy/Ruth standing at this sink, cutting wax beans into one-inch pieces and covering them with water, sighing and looking at the clock. Almost suppertime... She is a woman of about my size and age, a medium frame, still slim, but widening at the hips... Some essence has deserted her. A bodily evaporation has left her with nothing but hard, direct questions aimed in the region of her chest, and no one would ever suspect that she might be capable of rising to the upper ether of desire, wanting, wishing.

(56)

As a translator and so a mediator Reta has been introducing another woman from a different era whose experience most probably has been underestimated. So Reta by imagining a Mrs McGinn disrupts her silence and tells her story which might be possibly true.

Nevertheless, when we come back to Danielle Westerman, we see that her feminism as a mentor to Reta does not include that much communication. Thus, still there is a certain alienation and silence going on. Through *Unless* one comes to realize that there is something missing with Danielle Westerman's position within the text. That is, there is a sense of loneliness which we already regard from the title of her book of poetry *Isolation*. And her memoirs she writes in French which are translated by Reta imply a certain amount of loneliness too. Reta perceives this as follows:

There is something missing in these memoirs, or so I think in my solipsistic view. Danielle Westerman suffers; she feels the pangs of existential loneliness, the absence of sexual love, the treason of her own woman's body. She has no partner, no one for whom she is the first person in the world order,

no one to depend on as I do on Tom. She does not have a child or any surviving blood connection for that matter; and perhaps it's this that makes the memoirs themselves childlike. They go down like good milk, foaming, swirling in the glass. (15)

Danielle Westerman's indistinctive presence within the text seems to give the message of lack of communication between women.

As a representative of feminism Westerman lacks to appeal to all women within the text directly, her presence is only through Reta and through the translations. Along with Reta's interpretation about Westerman's memoirs we can refer to Virginia Woolf's ground breaking saying:

These were two of the adventures of my professional life. The first- killing the Angel in the House-I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. (qtd. in Bronfen 395)

Thus Danielle Westerman might experience such a problem with her feminist perspective. Moreover, until the end of the novel we learn that this lack of communication and so this so to speak silence has been caused by a past experience with the mother that Danielle had not revealed to Reta. It is very interesting that though these women know each other for almost forty years, that it is only after Norah's traumatic case that these women form a certain amount of communication. "Unless we ask questions," Reta says, otherwise, she could not learn that Danielle's mother tried to strangle her and that Danielle broke her bond with her mother that time (316). Women need to ask themselves and each other questions, and women must communicate, reconcile with each other. Because it is this lack of

communication, this silence that has made the patriarchal notions' continuation. As Irigaray writes, "No love of other without love of same" (89). And she continues:

A symbolism has to be created among women if love among them is to take place. Right now in fact, such a love is possible only among women who are able to talk to each other. Lacking this interval of *exchange*, whether of words or deeds, women's passions work on an animal or vegetal level, in rather a cruel manner. Why, on what grounds, does society, does the community, have an interest in maintaining women's silence? In order to perpetuate all the existing norms of the society and the culture which also depend on separating women from each other. (89)

That is, women need to listen to themselves and each other by regarding their social, racial and cultural experiences.

Within the patriarchal system women have been identified with emotional feelings rather than logic against which feminists have been fighting since long. Moreover, as *Unless* constantly puts forward, it is "Goodness but not Greatness" that women are made to absorb. Nevertheless, Shields' feminist perspective seems to present a vision that regards womanhood not just through theoretical aspects but rather through a phenomenological perspective that depicts their personal accounts. And this certain phenomenological aspect denotes these women's subjective experiences which will even make a feminist as Danielle Westerman realize her own silence. Such a perspective disrupts the binary system that imposes strict roles and identifications to sexes.

A phenomenological understanding will also protect the feminist theory to fall into the trap of any essentialist idea. That is, fighting against a perspective of a

social institution sometimes ends up with a reconstruction of the same system and its binaries. Edward Bond's play *Lear*, an epic rewriting of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, produced in 1971 necessarily illustrates such a viewpoint. Lear within the play is an oppressive father and autocrat who build a wall against imagined enemies. His two daughter's Fontanelle and Bodice in a way represent the oppressed women at first sight. These women rebel against him; however, they continue with building the wall and the war when they take the head. Ironically this time their father becomes their prisoner they oppress. Bond in his preface to the play calls for a "method of change" (LXV). If to adapt this perspective to *Unless*, we can say that Shields has a similar call in terms of constructing a method of change while redefining womanhood. Rather than constructing a highly conceptual feminism, very much like the patriarchal discourse, a phenomenological method of approach will save feminism to reconstruct a theory like patriarchy. Moreover, difference is an important fact in terms of regarding the female sex according to social, racial and/ or cultural differences. The protagonist Reta once falls into the trap of keeping a binary, as she reports a dialogue between her and Danielle Westerman:

Dr. Westerman: poet, essayist, feminist survivor, holder twenty-seven honorary degrees. "It might be better," I said once, pointing to a place in her first volume of memoirs and trying not to sound overly expository, "to use the word *brain* here instead of *heart*." She gave me a swift questioning look, blue-veined eyelids up. Now what? I explained that referring to the heart as the seat of feeling has been out fashion for some time, condemned by critics as being fey, thought to be precious. She considered this for a second, then

smiled at me with querulous affection, and placed her hand on her breast.

“But this is where I feel pain,” she said. “And tenderness. (63)

Luce Irigaray in her book *Je, Tu, Nous* (1993) questions the notions “equality” and “difference” in terms of womanhood as follows:

To demand equality as women is, it seems to me, a mistaken expression of a real objective. The demand to be equal presupposes a point of comparison. To whom or to what do women want to be equalized? To men? To salary? To a public office? To what Standard? Why not to themselves? (12)

And she criticizes the demand “for sex to be neutralized” likewise poststructuralist feminists suggest to be a solution against the binary system of patriarchy. And Irigaray continues writing:

In fact, egalitarianism sometimes expends a fair amount of energy denying certain positive values and getting nowhere. Which leads to the crises, disappointments, and periodic setbacks in women’s liberation movements, and their failure to make a permanent mark in History. (13)

Thus, while women fight against fictional identifications that patriarchy has imposed on them, they have to be aware of not reconstructing another binary system.

With Danielle Westerman Shields invokes the responsibility of the Western feminism to a diversity group of women globally. Therefore, she calls for a phenomenological feminist method of approach which she presents with her neo-realist writing style that will regard subjective experience. Another fact is Danielle’s broken umbilical cord with the mother which proves the above mentioned claim from a different phase in terms of the feminist call for equality. There is still a continuing lack of communication between women. And Shields portrays this lack of

communication through the mother and daughter relationship. We see the unsuccessful relation between Reta and Norah and with Danielle and her mother.

Another broken umbilical cord between the mother and daughter is Reta's writer friend Gwen Reidman whose surname again like Westerman insinuates some masculinity. Moreover, it is very interesting that Gwen has closed her navel with an operation for the sake of her young husband. But her comment about this situation is ironic while Reta paraphrases her, "She spoke of erasure, how her relationship to her mother—with whom she was on bad terms anyway—had been erased along with primal mark of connection" (93). Thus, the cunning language play with the surnames is Shields' critical point she wants to put forward. The issue about communication has even broken the bond between mothers and daughters. Shields in a way with her female characters that can not construct communication denote a feminist perspective that should reconcile women.

Here I want to refer to Elif Şafak's article *Vahim Bir Anne Kız İlişkisi*, the English translation is *A Grave Mother-Daughter Relationship* (*Zaman Gazetesi*, 11 May 2008). Elif Şafak, a famous Turkish novelist, in one of her articles focuses on the mother-daughter relationship between Alice Walker, a black activist feminist and writer of *The Color Purple* (1982), and her daughter Rebecca Walker. She emphasizes on how hard Alice Walker worked against the oppression of women and racism against the blacks. Nevertheless, Şafak makes us see Alice Walker through the eyes of her daughter with whom Walker is in bad terms. While Alice Walker is perceived by many women, especially black women, to be an idol, Şafak asks how her daughter regarded her mother. To Rebecca Walker her mother was illustrated by many women to be egalitarian and libertarian, but then Şafak depicts the other side of

the medallion. To paraphrase Şafak on Rebecca Walker; daughter Walker tells that her mother went to far places to write, these might be hotels or a summer house, and she left her daughter to the neighbors. This lack of communication and this broken mother- daughter relationship reaches to a climax point when Rebecca gets pregnant at the age of fourteen. To Rebecca this was in a way of a cry for help, as her mother struggled for other girls and women and so she thought this pregnancy might be a way of reconstructing the umbilical cord. However, Alice Walker's solution is painful, she calls a doctor, arranges an appointment and she just hands in the information to her daughter. What is important to be noticed here is that if we return to Danielle Westerman, the situation might be adapted to a mother or a daughter, while feminists strive against gender discrimination they need to be careful not to give harm to the mother-daughter relationship which is in a way the core of global sisterhood.

As Reta declares, the problem is “the compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang” (270). All these have put women into a sort of loneliness with which women lack the communication even between mothers and daughters. “This cry is overstated; I’m an editor, after all, and recognize purple ink when I see it. The sentiment is excessive, blowsy, loose, womanish. But I am willing to blurt it all out, if only to myself. Blurting is a form of bravery. I’m just catching on to that fact. Arriving late, as always” (270). Actually, not only Reta is late but also women like Danielle Westerman, the representative of feminism within *Unless*, are late in regarding womanhood according to subjective experience. Experience is sensual and physical rather than intellectual. When the Poststructuralist feminists

attend to disrupt the binaries between sex and gender by regarding both notions to be culturally constructed to free woman from binaries, they experience a conceptual impasse and fall short in grasping the “truth” of womanhood that differs according to social, racial and cultural experience.

Lastly, I want to refer again to another article Elif Şafak has written in which she reviews a book. The article is titled as *İşte Böyle Güzelim* in Turkish which is also the title of the book she reviews; the English translation will be then, *That's It Dear* (*Zaman Gazetesi*, 21 Sept. 2008). As a matter of fact, I will only paraphrase a part of the article which thoroughly appeals to my point within this thesis. Şafak depicts the so called fictional identities constructed within the society as “crust identities of women” and she continues explaining her thesis. To her, women still have roles and certain names when one looks at her from outside, she is a mother, wife, young woman, married, widower and many other adjectives adapted to her. While these artificial identifications form a mass, women begin to hide their private realities. It does not matter if a woman is a feminist or a housewife, all these women are burdened with their personal histories, and they still have missed futures and non-lived lives and loves.

Şafak’s proposed solution is then communication between women, because, otherwise this certain nodus will not be resolved and so unhappy mothers and daughters will continue from generation to generation. Therefore, the last words I want to give to Reta who quotes Danielle Westerman, “Subversion of society is possible for a mere few; *inversion* is more commonly the tactic for the powerless, a retreat from society that borders on the catatonic” (*Alive*, 1987, p. 304)” (218). The two words “subversion” and “inversion” indicate Shields’ way of writing or rather

putting forward a feminist perspective that leads a phenomenological method of approach to womanhood. That is, Shields' neo-realist writing style depicts the contemporary condition of womanhood within the patriarchal society. She presents her criticism through the female characters within *Unless* who strive within the patriarchal system. Thus, writing through the patriarchal context offers Shields "inversion," turning the hidden reality inside out, rather than an open attack of "subversion". This seems to be a way of writing that reveals the truth about nonexistent womanhood within patriarchy. And we can also infer from her phenomenological method that feminist theory needs to perceive women according to social, racial and/ or cultural experiences. Along with these, contemporary feminist theory then needs to reconcile women for the sake of an efficient discourse.

To perceive womanhood as an entity with different experiences will free all women from a feminist perspective that traumatizes the female sex within a conceptual impasse. Because if contemporary feminism, especially Poststructuralist feminism, underestimates the subjective experience every woman lives, it will fall short in appealing to women globally, and the theory will face up with the danger of fall into the trap of essentializing womanhood and silencing women with a lack of communication. Women need reconciliation and all need to regard each other through their ambivalent individualities, we have to have a vision that does not perceive women according to specific identifications. Or even go too far by claiming, "As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country," if to quote Virginia Woolf (qtd. in Cixous xvi).

CHAPTER 3

WRITERHOOD

Carol Shields in *Unless* pursues a way of renegotiating and redefining womanhood by employing a neorealist writing that focuses on the woman's subjective experience. Shields depicts different female characters within *Unless* through a neorealist perspective. As Neorealism contains postmodern techniques together with realist techniques, Shields seems to claim against essentialism by constructing an ambivalent approach to womanhood. To clear my point, Shields and the protagonist Reta's writerhood pursues a way of analysis of womanhood that is invisible within the phallogentric terminology. And it is this womanhood concept that also faces the danger of being invisible within the contemporary, poststructuralist, feminist terminology. This vicious circle within the Poststructuralist feminist terminology seems to underestimate the female subjective experiences which are social, racial and/ or cultural experiences.

This chapter will especially scrutinize the writerhood of women in *Unless* through the lens of the French Feminist Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984). As to Irigaray woman is invisible within the language system, it has become a fictional entity depicted by the phallogentric terminology. She indicates her perspective which will be the main path I will lead through this chapter as follows:

The language system, or system of languages, doubled or accompanied by epistemological formalism and formal logic, takes from women and excludes them from the threshold of living in the word. Bars women from the to-and-

fro of words, from the traversal of words that would allow them both to get out of and to return to their own homes, to “take off” from their bodies, give themselves a territory, an environment, and invite the other to some possible share or passage. (Irigaray 91)

She linguistically perceives womanhood to be an invisible entity, and she insinuates another linguistic approach in which womanhood will appear. Thus, “Woman is not only the Other, as Simone de Beauvoir discovered, but is quite specifically *man’s* Other: his negative or mirror-image. This is why Irigaray claims that patriarchal discourse situates woman *outside* representation: she is absence, negativity, the dark continent, or at best a lesser man” (Moi 133).

What Shields denotes in *Unless* has another aspect which is to bring forth a neorealist linguistic approach that regards every woman’s subjective experience in terms of her racial, sexual and/or cultural difference. That is, *Unless* through its fictional aspect put forward through neorealism in a way introduces a critical understanding against the contemporary poststructuralist feminism that employs an intellectual method of approach to womanhood. This method supports a thesis of constructing a bridge between sex and gender to disrupt the binary system within the phallogocentric terminology. Sex and gender are never separate notions according to feminists like Judith Butler who insist on Foucault’s view point who claims that “sexuality and power are coexistence and that we must not think that by saying yes to sex we say no to power” (Butler 131). Nonetheless, this perspective has the strong tendency to fall into the trap of essentializing woman which will generalize her sex by ignoring her subjective experience. Likewise her fictionalized identity within

patriarchy she will be put in another binary system that again does not regard her subjectivity.

To Butler, “Gender is performative insofar as it is the effect of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized under constraint. ... There is no subject who precedes, or enacts this repetition of norms” (qtd. in Moi 56). Moreover, she claims that, “The distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (qtd. in Moi). According to Toril Moi, Butler’s poststructuralist perspective affirms that “a woman is gender” (75). “Butler’s concept of gender does not encompass the concrete, historical and experiencing body” (Moi 75). On the other hand, Caroline Ramanazanoğlu and Janet Holland warn us against the feminism of the 1990s, “The 1990s academic feminist has to exercise extreme caution in making any claims about what the social world is like, or risk being snubbed as essentialist and foundationalist” and they continue by quoting Kate Soper who points out that “as feminists become more sensitive to the conceptual difficulties of the issues they have raised, they risk losing sight of feminism’s ‘original goals’” (207). Therefore, this thesis mainly revises womanhood through the lenses of Simone de Beauvoir and her phenomenological method of approach to womanhood. As Toril Moi argues calling upon Beauvoir, “Lived experience, she would say, is an open-ended, ongoing interaction between the subject and the world, where each term continuously constructs the other” (56).

Within this context, if “the feminine has become, in our languages, the non-masculine, that is to say an abstract nonexistent reality,” we initially need to bear in mind to put forward woman with a language system that also demonstrates her subjective experience (Irigaray 20). Shields’ neorealist writing seems to be a critical

reference to the contemporary feminist discourse because contemporary Poststructuralist feminist theory experiences a paralysis in representing womanhood according to subjective difference. On the other hand, the protagonist Reta's writing in the genre of light fiction denotes an underlying criticism directed to phallogentric terminology. Through *Unless* we encounter with women who have different backgrounds with different experiences. Shields draws upon a neorealist writerhood that puts forward womanhood within the patriarchal discourse. To deepen this kind of writing, it would be necessary to bring forth a definition of neo-realist literature according to Kristiaan Versluys's *Neo-realism in Contemporary American Fiction* (1992). In this collection of essays Winfried Fluck defines Neorealism as a kind of merging of postmodernism and realism. Postmodernism's experimental textuality and the play of words/characters allow Shields to illustrate the subjective experience of womanhood in a non-essentialist way. Nevertheless, Fluck claims that unlike postmodern literature the neorealist aesthetic experience does not aim at "the radical defamiliarization in the construction of meaning" and the "textual disorder providing a quasi-mimetic representation of the chaos of our present day world" (68). While Fluck characterizes neorealism, he initially refers to the so called "experimental postmodern text" which:

Seems to be characterized on all of its levels by such movements between what appears to be mutually exclusive. It freely moves between fiction and reality (that is, between ontological levels), between romance and realism (that is, generic levels), as well as between mythic and 'ordinary' dimensions of meaning (that is, between semantic and cultural levels). Far from being a literature of exhaustion, entropy, or chaos, it is a highly creative literature

which, by its constant mixture of modes, explores the possibilities as well as the problems of cultural dehierarchization. (69)

Thus, Neorealism emerges within this context and becomes a textual concept that links realism and postmodernism:

The purpose of this linkage is to get away from a polemical mode of argumentation and from various unproductive dichotomies in order to demonstrate that the new realism is not just a naïve conservative backlash to postmodern daring and innovation, but a new type of writing with its own potential for contributing to our contemporary cultural situation. (Fluck 67)

Within this framework, Shields' writerhood is working through a writing that employs simplicity but then order, as she uses chapters within the text. Moreover, she brings the cultural and social critical truth with a sort of masking, as she employs the phallogocentric terminology in terms of presenting the truth about female experience. To quote Kristiaan Versluys, "In (neo-) realism sophistication is manifest in simplicity, or better; simplicity is but the mask for underlying sophistication" (8). In a way this is precisely what Shields manages by writing in the genre of light fiction, showing different female characters with different social, racial and cultural backgrounds and these women's position within patriarchy. A sort of traditional way of writing with chapters that somewhat denotes a sense of order but then on the other hand letters within the novel that disrupt the order; a certain dichotomy is brought forth. On the light fiction genre and telling the lives of women, the same dichotomy occurs that we can explain according to her believing in "certain traditional structures on the way women talk among each other, seeming to digress but actually telling side stories integral to the main story" (qtd. in Werlock 14). That is, the neo-

realist writing is to put forward a patriarchal discourse through which she illustrates the invisible/ non-existent womanhood and so constructing a feminist discourse.

What Shields insinuates is to bring forth lives of women that feminism needs to realize in terms of not being a theory that appeals to a certain group of women.

Shields herself already denotes:

It seemed I wrote about ordinary people – whoever they are- and their ordinary, yet occluded, lives. And I also wrote, more and more, about that subjunctive branch of people (*mea culpa*) who were curious about the details of *other* ordinary people, so curious, in fact, that they become biographers or novelists, those beings who were allowed societal permission to investigate.

(qtd. in Carson Pederson 8-9)

According to Emily Charlotte Carson Pederson's study, "This valorization of curiosity in authorship reflects her concern that women's lives have been given short shrift in literary history, for it is the lack of investigation into the lives of "ordinary people" that has deprived literary history of women's stories" (9).

Thus, Reta's writing with light fiction becomes a way of insinuating a revision and a redefinition of womanhood through a very ordinary but then subversive way of writing. Sarah Gamble describes this as follows:

After all, narrative is not an infinitely flexible medium but one which necessarily has to function according to certain conventions; moreover, it is inextricably dependent on language, a notoriously slippery medium of communication. Shields has spoken of the way in which she uses her fiction to pinpoint 'the failure of language, the gaps in language,' a statement which

indicates her fascination with the notion of using her narrative to convey the unsaid or (even more radically) the unsayable. (45)

Shields's way of writing might seem an allusion to Luce Irigaray's theoretical and linguistic approach to womanhood called *feminine ecriture*. Instead Beauvoir opts for a way of stealing, "Women simply have to steal the instrument; they don't have to break it, or try, a priori, to make of it something totally different. Steal it and use it for their own good" (qtd in Jardin). Both Shields and her protagonist Reta in *Unless*, by writing in the genre of light fiction steal the language of phallogentric terminology. That is, they depict a writing style within the patriarchal system, but then their writing consciously already invokes a feminist perspective.

The term *feminine ecriture* has a strong tendency to essentialism, and it would be artificial in terms of invoking a writerhood that is consciously feminine in order to disrupt binaries constructed by patriarchy. Interestingly contrary to this viewpoint, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak claims to disrupt binarism with essentialism which Diana Fuss approves as follows, "[A] woman who lays claim to an essence of her own undoes the conventional binarisms of essence/accident, form/matter, and actuality/ potentiality. In this specific historical context, to essentialize 'woman' can be a politically strategic gesture of displacement" (qtd. in Kirby 97). Thus, it might seem sensible to claim that such a way of writing does not cause for a danger to fall into the trap of essentialism but which is more like a method to construct displacement. Interestingly, though Beauvoir in her interview with Alice Jardin indicates that she does not believe in an essentially feminine writing, she also adds another view of hers. About her novels *She Came to Stay* (1943) and *The Mandarins* (1954) she says the following:

A man couldn't invent that feminine sensibility, that feminine situation in the world. I have never read a really good novel written by a man where women are portrayed as they truly are. They can be portrayed externally very well- Stendhal's *Madame de Renal*, for example-but only as seen from the outside. But from within... only a woman can write what it is to feel as a woman, to be a woman. (11)

Actually, Reta, the protagonist of *Unless*, invokes such an understanding when she comments about the characters of her novel, a sequel to her former novel titled as *Thyme In Bloom*, “...I am not inside Roman’s massed angular head. It is Alicia’s skin I wear. I see through her woman’s eyes, reach with her woman’s fingers, stroking the thick and rather sticky wool of Roman’s brushed-back hair” (110).

Along with Spivak and Diana Fuss, Luce Irigaray claims *feminine ecriture* to be fundamental in terms of disrupting fictional identifications imposed on woman. Irigaray has been criticized severely of essentializing womanhood linguistically. On the contrary, “To the extent that Irigaray reopens the question of essence and women’s access to it, essentialism represents not a trap she falls into but rather a key strategy she puts into play, not a dangerous oversight but rather a lever of displacement” (Fuss 72). Contrary to Diana Fuss’ regarding Irigaray’s essentialism to be a way of displacement, my claim is rather that Shields’ non-essentialist perspective in her employing a neo-realist writerhood does not demand such a feminine writing. “Yet labeling a style essentially feminine and linking it biologically with the female body are problematic moves inside a model that wishes to overcome binaries” (Emig 184). And this might be reconstruction of nonexistent womanhood that already occurs within phallogentric terminology. This is

very much the same condition poststructuralists have through their theoretical approach to womanhood.

Shields in *Unless* then depicts a writerhood that happens within the system, employing the language of the patriarch and pointing out the subjective experience going on within the system as the female experience can not be expressed outside the discursive system. That is:

Subjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience is a subject's history's enactment. Historical explanation can not, therefore, separate the two. (Scott 34)

Thus, *Unless* perceives the experience of women by way of phallogocentric terminology to reveal that what has been invisible within the discursive system. And this approach refers to the contemporary feminist theory that needs to go beyond its highly conceptual perspective. Therefore, the protagonist, Reta's narration closely expresses this criticism directed to both patriarchy and Poststructuralist feminism. Reta different verb a wife and mother whose daughter Norah leads a life of a vagrant. She obsesses about her domestic labor:

I dust and polish this house of mine so that I'll be able to seal it from damage. If I commit myself to its meticulous care, I will claim back my daughter Norah, gone to goodness. The soiling sickness that started with one wayward idea and then the spreading filaments of infection, the absurd notion—Tao? — that silence is wiser than words inaction better than action—this is what I work against. And probably, especially lately, I clean for the shadow of Mrs. McGinn, too, wanting

to drop a curtsey in her direction. Yes, it was worth it, I long to tell her, all that anxiety and confusion. I'm young enough that I still sigh out: what is the point? But old enough not to expect an answer. (62)

Here Shields draws a woman whose obsession with domestic labor indicates the reality of women's anxiety and having no satisfaction in life. Beauvoir explains this in a clear way, as she writes:

Cleaning is getting rid of dirt, tidying up is eliminating disorder. And under impoverished conditions no satisfactions is possible ;the hovel remains hovel in spite of the woman's sweat and tears; 'nothing in the world can make it pretty'. Legions of women have only this endless struggle without victory over the dirt. And for even the most privileged the victory is never final. (470)

Reta interestingly links her dusting with a call for her daughter and in a way breaking up the silence. Her wish to drop curtsey to Mrs McGinn insinuates her mediation role between women who were and still are invisible. Here we see an attitude of the neo-realist fiction, a way of sharing experience which Shields refers through the whole novel. Womanhood needs to be redefined and this can be done when women are given the chance to expose their experiences and share these experiences. Winfried Fluck writes about neorealist fiction as follows, "What is gained by the return to a promise of shared experience is a kind of blood transfusion for a signifying process that was in danger of being suffocated by over theorization" (83). Likewise poststructuralist feminism engages in this sort of over theorization by conceptualizing womanhood while forgetting about experience.

In her Pulitzer Prize winner novel *The Stone Diaries* (1993) Carol Shields writes Daisy Goodwill Flett's, an ordinary woman's, fictional autobiography. Referring to decades of the previous century, she says, "I do think women were overshadowed then, of course, and I think they are overshadowed today" (Werlock 16). This quote very much demonstrates what Shields different verb through *Unless* in terms of drawing upon women's lives with different personal experiences and backgrounds.

Unless employs a narrative that alludes constant feminist perceptions in a way with mimicry. In their attitude the characters perform mimicry of patriarchal clichés. Luce Irigaray's feminist approach to Lacan's psychoanalytic theory demonstrates the method Shields applies to her writing:

[Irigaray] mimics Lacan's phallus in order to expose it; elsewhere she explains that ironic imitation is a strategy for uncovering the repression of women: "To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself... to... ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible. (qtd. in Berg 9)

As I have mentioned before, Shields depicts Reta as a woman who is obsessed with her domestic labour, motherhood and wifehood and who is both a light fiction writer and a translator. Reta along her narration depicts this condition of dichotomy which she presents as follows:

A house requires care. Until recently the Merry Maids came and cleaned our house twice a month, but now I call on them less and less frequently. Their van rolling into our drive-way, the women's muscles and buoyancy and booming

equipment wear me out. I mostly look after the house myself. I deal with the dust and the dog hairs, wearing my oldest jeans and a cotton sweater coming unknit at the cuffs. Cleaning gives me pleasure, which I'm reluctant to admit and hardly ever do, but here, in my thoughts, I will register the fact: dusting, waxing, and polishing offer rewards... I especially love the maneuvering of my dust mop over the old oak floors. (60)

Reta's obsession with domestic labor is very often illustrated throughout the novel. The protagonist's portrayal is stereotypically a woman who has adopted her role within the patriarchal system. She is so committed to her role within the domestic sphere that she describes her position as follows, "My life as a writer and translator is my back story, as they say in the movie business; my front story is that I live in this house on a hill with Tom and our girls and our seven-year-old golden retriever, Pet" (50). For Reta her writerhood has more like a secondary status to her domestic life, of course, this does not mean that when a female writer regards her writing as her "back story" is a proof of her adoption of the patriarchal roles given to woman. Nonetheless, a woman like Reta has to change the places of the priorities in her personal life to get rid of her conventional roles. Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* that:

Woman's work within the home gives her no autonomy; it is not directly useful to society, it does open out on the future, it produces nothing. It takes meaning and dignity only as it linked with existent beings who reach out beyond themselves, transcend themselves, towards society in production and action. (475)

Therefore, “for Beauvoir, there can be no liberation until women themselves cease to reproduce the power mechanisms that confine them to their place” (Moi 17).

Until her daughter Norah’s trauma Reta has always been a woman who is striving for being a so called organized “good woman” as she calls herself (47). Actually, her writerhood career is a latter step, before her step into fiction writing Reta started translating Danielle Westerman’s works, a premier feminist and her mentor, and some short stories also were included in her writing list. While spending her time with her mentor Danielle Westerman, Reta very interestingly lead a counter way of life to the old feminist. As for Reta motherhood and wifehood were her priorities to her personal development as a writer and translator:

Three daughters, and not even thirty. “How did you find the time?” people used to chorus, and in that query I often registered a hint of blame: was I neglecting my darling sprogs for my writing career? Well, no. I never thought in terms of career. I dabbled in writing. It was my macramé, my knitting. (4)

The likening of writing to handwork such as macramé seems to be an allusion to the mythological character Philomela whose tongue is cut by Tereus, her brother-in-law who raped her. In this certain story by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* Philomela reveals her story through weaving.

Philomela’s raped body and her cut tongue depicts patriarchy’s essentialist perspective to the female body. Within these mythological stories, belief is substantiated through the human body (Scarry 188). Patriarchal notions have constructed fictional identifications for women but these are applied to her body, the system perceives womanhood essentially through her body rather than regarding her according to her subjective experience. These essentialist identifications have

silenced women physically like Philomela or metaphorically like Reta who can not escape her roles within patriarchy. Lois, Reta's mother-in-law who through the novel talks almost in the end of *Unless*, depicts this essentialist understanding very clearly:

Except lately. She can't talk anymore. She doesn't trust herself. Toads will come out of her open mouth. She'll hurt people's feelings. She has an opinion about what happened to Norah, and she doesn't want anyone else to know. They'd think she was crazy. Women were supposed to be strong, but they weren't really, they weren't allowed to be. They were hopelessly encumbered with fibres and membranes and pads of malleable tissue; women were easily injured; critical injuries, that's what came to you if you opened your mouth.
(299)

The female body is institutionalized, her sex has been generalized. Beauvoir protest against these generalizations by claiming as follows:

But to say that Woman is Flesh, to say that the Flesh is Night and Death, or that it is the splendour of the Cosmos, is to abandon terrestrial truth and soar into an empty sky. For man also is flesh for woman; and the flesh is clothed in special significance for each person and in each person and in each experience. (285)

A woman's individual self is silenced within the patriarchal system which is, unfortunately, a trap contemporary poststructuralist feminism may fall in. And as Lois says, "Women were supposed to be strong" (299), unfortunately, still within this so called globalized world some women are silenced and invisible. When Poststructuralist feminists regard sex and gender to be both culturally constructed

entities, they will silence the personal experiences that are racial, social and/or cultural differences.

To the allusion of Philomela and her weaving we might deepen its relation to Reta and her writing. On Philomela's weaving Elisa Marden writes in *Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy, and Language* (1999) as follows, "The language with which she communicates her body's silence is a language that is no longer bound to the body. Beside herself with rage, she tells of her violation and mutilation through weaving" (164). Thus, telling her story through her weaving might be a neorealist style as weaving is a patriarchal concept related with conventional femininity. So we may say she uses the phallogocentric terminology to reveal her experience within the system. Irigaray's "mimicry" concept also can be adapted to this interpretation, as this concept claims for a way of writing in which women's condition within patriarchy is presented through the phallogocentric terminology.

Reta's likening her writing to a kind of handwork is a foresight of her being a transmitter between her metaphoric silence against patriarchy and other women's silence within the text. Especially, the silence of her traumatized daughter Norah and the veiled woman who has burned herself is the focus. Marden continues on Philomela's weaving by referring to a quote by Ovid, "The writing is one of outrage and necessity; the text explains that "great pain is inventive, and cunning comes from wretched things" (164). However, we must keep in mind that Ovid's interpretation denotes the patriarchal perspective in which writing the body is a feminine technique, and the mind is masculine. This illustrates an essentialism of the woman that is reduced to her body. But then Reta does not weave but she writes a fact that disrupts the essentialist viewpoint of Ovid. While Philomela's "great pain" Ovid describes to

be as inventive, it is really very much related with Reta's pain. She faces with this pain when her daughter begins to live as vagrant on street, we learn later this to be a result of trauma. Ovid's describing great pain to invent cunningness, if to adapt it to Reta with the pain she feels to her daughter's trauma, she will come to a realization that happiness is not what she thought (*Unless* 1).

Actually, the bodily pain is felt by Norah and the veiled woman but Reta will be the transmitter of their pain and silence, different than Philomela's transmission of her story by herself:

...I, Reta Winters... felt as a child, rummaging through an even younger child's mind and seeing nothing but a swirl of images before words and grammar arrived, a sort of fingerpainting, wet and vivid smears of color that signaled, mostly, danger. I recognized from the beginning that I was obliged to regulate the world, but in secret. (143)

Reta's transmission will be done in secret as she acknowledges, the secrecy is her role within patriarchy as a proper mother and wife, but underneath her position lays the criticism directed to patriarchal identifications imposed on women. Reta's referring to her childhood emphasizes the absorption of patriarchal notions within childhood that begins with words reaching her, these denote a certain "danger," as she Reta herself says. Moreover, she claims that her childhood is missing and on this she quotes Danielle Westerman, the representative feminism within *Unless*, "The trouble with children," Danielle Westerman once said, "is that they aren't interested in childhood" ("Autoreflections," private interview, 1977). Yes, and when they do finally develop sufficient curiosity, it's too late" (142). Women do absorb the phallogocentric terminology while they grow up, motherhood and wifehood become

concepts already revealed to girls from the very beginning. Here the late “curiosity” is this belated awareness and confusion that has caused Reta’s questioning this absorption of patriarchal identities adapted to her. And her daughter seems to struggle within this awareness as a new generation woman who has unconsciously or consciously realized the otherness of woman much earlier than Reta:

I’ve kept a steady eye on my own growing children, watching for signs of a similar disorientation and hoping I can jump in and rescue them with assurance and knowledge. Norah, of course, has temporarily been lost. She’s got my disease, only worse. (152)

Reta refers to her previous naive thought to save her daughter in a situation of disorientation, though the problem is that, this disease is not just related to her daughter and her but a much broader group needs to be concerned about.

Reta’s transmitter position is a reference to the contemporary feminism that needs to be aware of women who are still silenced currently within the twenty-first century. Thus, this paradoxical pain between Reta, Norah and the veiled woman is “as Elaine Scarry has argued, ‘the inherent instability of the verbal (and visual) sign is that a representation can work in two ways; it can coax real pain into visibility or push it into further visibility’” (qtd. in Bronfen 45). That is, through Norah Reta will be lead through a process of self-realization, the pain will awaken her from the adopted identifications of patriarchy and its still silencing affect on women no matter her race, culture or social status. As she says, “I am supposed to be Reta Winters, that sunny woman, but something happened when her back was turned. Reta’s dropped a ball in the schoolyard; she’s lost that curved, clean shell she was carrying home from the beach” (42). The sterile life she imagined she lived in has been a life

for the sake of the patriarchal society, but as Elisabeth Bronfen depicts, “Woman’s function is duplicitous. She is seen to figure as the site of the truth and as embodying the proof that there is no truth; enigma and its impossibility. Her body hides a truth that could potentially be disclosed or it hides the fact that there is nothing to hide” (264).

Through Reta we are acknowledged about a social truth that women within the contemporary world, no matter they are Eastern or Western, experience a kind of trauma that has paralyzed their perspective against other women and their own personal position in life. A kind of traumatic memory has occurred. Cathy Caruth describes such a trauma as, “Traumatic memory has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary activity” (163). That is, Reta experiences a sort of “psychic trauma,” Caruth explains this as follows, “A feminist perspective, which draws our attention to the lives of girls and women, to the secret, private, hidden experiences of everyday pain, reminds us that traumatic events do lay within the range of normal human experience” (110). The traumatic memory of Reta has prevented her seeing the restricted sphere and perspective she has been given by patriarchy in terms of perceiving her position of herself and her family to be sterile. Reta’s constant obsession with her domestic labor is already a proof of her struggle for in vain autonomy, Simone de Beauvoir senses such a position of women “far from freeing the matron, her occupation makes her dependent upon husband and children; she is justified through them; but in their lives she is only an inessential intermediary” (475). Shields wants us to see the oppression women face within the patriarchal social system. While we need a feminist discourse we also need to look in through the subjective experience of womanhood that still

continues within this century. Therefore Shields' yielding on postmodern parodic strategies is very much linked with her neo-realist writerhood that reveals the current social reality of womanhood. "Linda Hutcheon suggests that postmodern parodic strategies are often used by women writers 'to point to the history and historical power of those cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing both in such a way to deconstruct them'" (qtd. in Bronfen 406).

Shields tries to illustrate the big picture of womanhood that globally has been paralyzed. Her approach to a global perspective that questions patriarchy and contemporary feminism will be transmitted through Reta and her neorealist writing, as she denotes, "The story teller, or novelist, may be answering questions that no one has posed, but that everyone recognizes" (Shields 22). The questions are in a way directed to feminism that needs to realize women who are still fighting against oppression or even who are not aware of their silenced experiences within patriarchy such as Reta herself. We may say then, while patriarchy has burned the veiled woman concretely, Reta burns herself within the system metaphorically. Reta herself already implies this burning by referring to her cleaning, her husband Tom's enrolment within the cleaned house and Mrs McGinn who is the former owner of the house:

I clean my house and he "enrolls" into a silence that carries him further away from me than the fleeting figure of Mrs. McGinn, who rests like a dust mote in the corner of my eye, wondering why she was not invited to her friend's baby shower on that March herself. Her life has been burning up one day at a time—she understands this for the first time—and she's swallowed the flames without blinking. Now suddenly, this emptiness. Nothing has prepared her for

the wide, grey simplicity of sadness and for the knowledge that this is what the rest of her life will be like, living in a falling-apart house that wishes she weren't there. (65)

The flames of the self-immolation refers to women's position within patriarchy, but it also paradoxically foresights awareness, in a way enlightenment indicating a self-realization process that Reta will experience. On the other hand, the melted flesh of Norah and the veiled woman is both a message of sisterhood that feminism needs to demonstrate as a global call. And Reta's constructing an umbilical cord with Mrs McGinn illustrates an identical message. That is, it draws the truth of subjective experience, a phenomenological approach, which changes according to social, racial and cultural differences which feminist discourse must not underestimate.

The dead body of the veiled woman depicts also another aspect of Shields' and Reta's writerhood. The phallogocentric terminology by depicting womanhood according to fictional identifications already ignores the existence of womanhood as an entity. "The concept of woman mediates the relations between man and his Others – other men, nature, his own self. This is not a reciprocal relation: women are defined in reference to men, as helpmates, wives, mothers, caregivers of men" (Duncan 25). Thus, she exist only in relation to men, this also strongly appears within literature to which Shields focuses on heavily. Therefore, the neorealist fictional approach of light fiction brings forth the womanhood through the patriarchal discourse. Within this framework, Sandra Gilbert writes:

Since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which, defining them as 'Cyphers', deny

them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept from attempting the pen. (qtd. in Moi 57)

Reta's striving against a man like Arthur Springer, the later editor after Mr Scribano, who interferes her writing is an implication to the patriarchal perspective that tries to overpower her and her writing:

Arthur: This manuscript, these pages before us, is about the central moral position of the contemporary world. I think it is exceptionally important that we not present this with the title you have suggested, *Thyme in Bloom*. Personally, I prefer *Bloom* on its own.

Reta: Just— *Bloom*?

Arthur: What a word that is. Suggestive but not literal. And you can see how it gestures toward the Bloom of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, that great Everyman. (282)

Arthur Springer's male oriented view point tries to interrupt Reta's writerhood, to her female autonomy. The second title he suggests to Reta's second novel indicates an obstacle to her subjective writerhood, as the suggestion "Bloom of Ulysses, Leopold Bloom, that great Everyman" is already another reference to a phallogentric terminology (282). Springer denounces his patriarchal view point when he tries to change Reta's name:

Reta: Reta Ruth Summers.

Arthur: Wonderful, I love Summers. It fits perfectly with *Bloom*, doesn't it? ...The month June. There is a kind of prenatal blood hyphen there, if we can just pin it down. We, Scribano & Lawrence, could present you as R.R.

Summers. I like it. It sounds solid. Yet fresh. A new discovery: R. R.

Summers.

Reta: Using initials, though, might make it sound like, you know, that I'm a male writer.

Arthur: Does it matter? You're dealing with universal themes. You've gone beyond the gendered world. (282)

The irony appears when Springer says, "You've gone beyond the gendered world," as until now what he is striving for illustrates his patriarchal perspective to control Reta's writerhood. Thus, with Shields' neorealist fictional writing we see that the woman is imprisoned in such a system that she already can not define herself, and even the female writer can not protect her writerhood, she constantly faces with obstacles even in our present world.

Shields' metafictional approach to women's writerhood is drawing the big picture of the still going on oppression against women even on intellectual level, though it does not seem that clear-cut when we look to Reta's conversation with her editor Arthur Springer. But of course, with the neorealist writing Shields insinuates the underlying oppressive patriarchal reality in Springer attitude. Virginia Woolf depicts this tendency of the masculine to interrupt the female writer as follows:

For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgments, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is? (46)

Fiction to Shields invokes the reality of feminine experience that differs in terms of being social, racial and/ or cultural; the feminist discourse needs to be careful to not to fall short when it comes to the theory itself and its relation to identify womanhood literally.

Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* also writes that fiction includes more truth than fact when she starts her story about the so called fictional Oxbridge and her visit to there (5). Within this context, Shields and her protagonist write in the genre of light fiction, because, as Reta denotes, "The genre of "light" fiction rules out bodily perfection. We are not allowed to garland our men and women with exceptional good looks... Light fiction, being closer to real life, knows better" (206). Then, as Kate Campbell writes, we can claim that, "Literature itself, and the analysis of literature, can offer a relative discursive freedom in negotiating experience" (160). And so with the genre of light fiction these women writers aim to deconstruct the fictional identifications that disregard their existence both in patriarchy and contemporary poststructuralist feminism that needs to construct a phenomenological understanding to womanhood. Because if we claim that sex and gender are non different notions then we will face with the danger of reconstructing the phallogocentric terminology. We will imprison women into the essentialist language system, as Irigaray depicts, "Woman, who enveloped man before birth, until he could live outside her, finds herself encircled by a language, by places that she cannot conceive of, and from which she cannot escape" (80). That is, the woman becomes rather a nonexistent entity, and she exists only through the patriarchal identifications. Therefore, Shields by leading neo-realist writing style makes the women visible but then in a confusing way, she strives within the phallogocentric terminology to illustrate

subjective experience of women. Winfried Fluck observes this confusion within Neorealism as follows:

But there is a price to be paid for the neorealist effort to reconnect signification with experience. Instead of anchoring and stabilizing the textual system, as in classical realism, the representation of a reality, is now infected by the instabilities of the process of signification itself, so that reality, as represented in the new realism, is dominated by the unstable, decentered features. (83)

The “decentered features” include the postmodern critical approach to identity in *Unless* and it is the fixed feminine identity within patriarchy, and of course the warning against the contemporary feminist theory that needs to be careful not to define womanhood through a highly conceptual discourse.

Thus, if to return to the dead female body and its representation with a phallogocentric approach within literature that Shields and Reta invoke through their writerhood. Elisabeth Bronfen in her groundbreaking book *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992) scrutinizes the representation of the female body within art and literature. Bronfen seeks out dead female bodies that have served for the aesthetic target of their male survivors, she analyses Freud’s writings on his daughter Sophie’s death, the Swiss Painter Ferdinand Hodler’s sketches on his dying mistress Valentine Godé-Darel’s body and Gabriel von Max’s painting *Der Anatom* (1869). With these work of arts “not only is a text created over a dead feminine body, but this sacrifice also gives a second birth to the artist” (Bronfen 125). The artist here is the masculine, the representative of the patriarchal system

that defines women only through role models that are fictional such as motherhood, wifehood, the seductress or/ and the virgin.

The female body is essentialized within the phallogentric terminology, as Robert Graves expresses, “Woman is not a poet: She is either muse or she is nothing” (qtd. in Bronfen 360). Therefore, Reta’s narration precisely begins after the self-immolation of the veiled woman and her daughter’s trauma. These women, one physically and the other rather metaphorically silenced, depict Shields’ critical perspective towards literature that introduces patriarchal assumptions to art. However, her focus is on the phallogentric terminology generally within every institution of the society that keeps women from identifying herself. And the poststructuralist feminist theory needs to be aware that that a sort of theoretical approach to womanhood might have such a strong tendency to ignore the woman’s subjectivity. According to Bronfen within such a terminology:

A woman can gain a subject position only by denying her body. Though a renunciation of the soma is part of all cultural development, the bind a woman is placed into in cultural representations is that her position in the symbolic or cultural order is that of feminine *body*, so that undoing her body, because it is the site of paralysis, because desires connected with it cannot be realized, also means subverting the position cultural laws have ascribed to her. By undoing her body, she undoes the gender construction which places her in an inferior position, even as cancelling the ‘illusion’ of gender lets death emerge. (143)

Thus, the veiled woman by escaping her body and Norah metaphorically by closing her body to the outer world undoes the gender. Such a suicide of a woman within *Unless* Bronfen explains by referring to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* that:

Depicts a woman using death as a conscious act of setting a mark, as a form of writing with her body, a materialization of the sign, where the sheer material factualness of the dying and the dying and dead body lends certainty, authority and realness to this attempt at self-textualisation. (141)

Nevertheless, another aspect of the corpse of the veiled woman is that here the artist is another woman who textualizes the female. Reta will be mediator of silenced women and so she will liberate them from being essentialized within a system that does not identify them according to their subjective experience, or rather a literature perspective that underestimates a phenomenological approach to womanhood.

Another assumption that needs to be scrutinized through the textual architecture of the veiled woman and Norah is Shields' insinuating a global feminist attitude through her writing. It is an essential fact that Reta's narration within *Unless* and so her self-realization process begins after this event, though we are acknowledged about the real event thoroughly in the end of the novel. Actually, the case is indirectly mentioned through Reta's meeting with her female writer friends, but then it is a very slight reference to the real case:

"And remember," Sally said, "that woman who set herself on fire last spring?"

That was right here in our country, right in the middle of Toronto."

...

"She was a Saudi woman, wearing one of those big black veil things. Self-immolation."

“Was she a Saudi? Was that established?”

“A Muslim woman anyway. In traditional dress. They never found out who she was.”

...

“But someone did try to help her. I read about that. Someone tried to beat out the flames. A woman.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said. (118)

With this Shields might invoke the weak reconciliation between women, especially, the reconciliation between Eastern and Western women. There is a still going on marginalization against women within Western feminist discourse in terms of its writings. Chandra Talpade Mohanty analyses this as follows:

I do not question the descriptive and informative value of most Western feminist writings on women in the third world. I also do not question the existence of excellent work which does not fall into the analytic traps I am concerned with. In fact I deal with an example of such work later on. In the context of an overwhelming silence about the experiences of women in these countries, as well as the need to forge international links between women's political struggles, such work is both path breaking and absolutely essential.

(336)

Mohanty questions the Western feminist discourse’s still going on hegemonic attitude towards women from different racial, cultural and social backgrounds that are categorized as women from the Third World. Shields neorealist textual architecture with the self-immolation of the veiled woman may also be a criticism

against the feminist discourse and its writings on these women whose experience is invisible or inadequately mentioned. As Mohanty criticizes:

Western feminist writing on women in the third world must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship— i.e., the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas. Marginal or not, this writing has political effects and implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience. (336)

Therefore, Norah's paralyzed body with the board on which writes *Goodness* in a way addresses the contemporary feminist theory that criticizes the phallogentric terminology on pushing women in certain fictional identifications of which goodness is one category to silence her. Norah's vagrancy on street with the word "goodness" depicts Shields neo-realist writing that illustrates the female position within the patriarchal social system. But actually she reverses the discourse from within by putting forward women that in a way represent themselves, such as Reta and her mediator role between other women.

Irigaray writes on the invisible position of womanhood and the fixed terminology of patriarchy as follows:

For a sublimation of the flesh, what is lacking is a passage through silence and solitude which leads to the existence, the emergence of a speech of one who is born in a space still to be defined by him, to be marked by him, so that, when speaking of himself, he can also speak of himself to the other, and hear him. (149)

When Reta's friend Annette asks, "Did we transform our shock into goodness, did we do anything that represented the goodness of our feelings?" (117), she implies

this point of view about the phallogocentric terminology that has fixed certain signs and has adapted these to genders. The masculine authority constructs fictional identifications or we can also say metaphors fix women in specific identities that even they themselves can not realize the adoption of these metaphors. As Reta paraphrases Danielle Westerman:

Metaphors hold their own power over us, even without their fugitive gestures. They're as real as the peony bushes we observe when we're children, lying flat on the grass and looking straight up to the undersides of leaves and petals and marveling: Oh, this is a secret territory... But, in fact, everyone knows about this palpable world; it stands for nothing but the world itself. (61)

Sabina Lovibond claims that, "It is not we who speak but language that speaks through us" (2). And she argues that, "We ourselves are not, really the originators of our words and actions" (2). So if we move on to "goodness" and the constant appearing catch phrase "goodness but not greatness" which reveals the oppressive fictional identifications against women, then we can say that through the neo-realist style of writing women writers can change the signs within the phallogocentric terminology. And feminist theory also strictly needs to regard the subjective feminine experience, which are racial, social and/ cultural experiences. A writerhood that constructs a writing through the hegemonic language of patriarchy and which reverses its concepts from within.

Within this framework, Luce Irigaray's "mimicry" and so the neo-realist writing style that Shields employs produces the image of the dead veiled woman and Norah's silent body on street deliberately to point out invisible oppression women experience in patriarchy no matter their social, racial and/ or cultural status.

There is both a self-textualization of the female bodies but then there is the transition to a real text that Reta writes. This illustrates again Shields' neo-realist writing that steals into the phallogentric terminology. That is, the creator of art is mostly regarded to be a male artist. Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert observe this when referring to previous texts as follows, "In the nineteenth century (as still today) the dominant patriarchal ideology presents artistic creativity as a fundamentally male quality. The writer 'fathers' his text; in the image of the Divine Creator he becomes the Author-the sole origin and meaning of his work" (qtd. in Moi 57). Therefore, Shields writing within this context reveals her critical perspective through the system that oppresses women writers and their creativity. Toril Moi explains this writing style by indicating Irigaray's "mimicry" notion:

If as a woman under patriarchy, Irigaray has, according to her own analysis, no language of her own but can only (at best) imitate male discourse, her own writing must inevitably be marked by this. She cannot pretend to be writing in some pure feminist realm outside patriarchy: if her discourse is to be received as anything other than incomprehensible chatter, she must copy male discourse. (140)

So the tendency to essentialize the female body then turns into an ambivalent position by leading Reta into a process of self-realizing and through this process being the mediator of these silenced women with her writing. As Luce Irigaray denotes, "Women cannot be self-assured without language and systems of representations being transformed, because these are appropriate to men's subjectivity; they are reassuring to the between-men culture" (96). Thus, the neorealist writing is then a method that will construct a displacement of the binaries

defined by the patriarchal culture. That is, by employing the patriarchal notions on the surface of the text, and so by gaining a way to write through these notions will grant the female writer to explore the system from within. While writing through the system the female writer will then gain a so called right to change the notions with displacement. Reta's writerhood is not out of the phallogentric terminology, her writing takes place within the system itself. That is, she invokes Irigaray's "mimicry" with which she insinuates the feminine experience but then through the phallogentric terminology.

Carole-Anne Tyler in *Female Impersonation* (2003) writes about Irigaray's using the concept "mimicry" to deconstruct Lacan's thesis on the binary of Symbolic and Imaginary. The female takes place within the Imaginary; Irigaray to disrupt the constructed binary by Lacan introduces an approach in which the female will act throughout the Imaginary. Tyler explains this as, "In mimicry, woman "repeats" the imaginary—but *as* imaginary" (21). The woman will then according to Tyler enter the symbolic, however, this so called symbolic, phallogentric terminology then, to Jane Gallop "can be reached only by not trying to avoid the imaginary, but knowingly being in the imaginary" (qtd. in Tyler 21). Thus, Reta's writerhood that starts after the event of the self-immolation of the veiled woman and her daughter's vagrancy, which are stereotypically the big picture of women within patriarchy, proves her tendency of writing through mimicry.

Reta's writing in the genre of light fiction illustrates her play with language through mimicry. However, writing in the genre of light fiction is criticized for being a "tricky proposition" (*Unless* 247). Reta is herself criticized by a woman writer to whom she writes a letter by saying:

Women writers, you say, are the miniaturist of fiction, the embroiders of fine “feeling.” Rather than taking a broad canvas of society as DonDeLillo does, or Phillip Roth, who interprets relationships through the “lens of sexual yearning,” women writers such as—and here you list a number of female names including my own—find universal verities in “small individual lives.” This, you go on to say, is a “tricky proposition,” which only occasionally works. (247)

Within this context, Reta seems to demonstrate with her womanhood and writerhood a woman who has adopted the patriarchal roles. Nevertheless, the mimicry method that Shields leads is actually a trick of her writerhood. Reta’s perspective to light fiction writing actually denotes Shields’ target with this method of writerhood:

I’m not interested, the way some people are, in being sad. I’ve had a look, and there’s nothing down that road. I wouldn’t reply, as Anne Karenina does when asked what she’s thinking about: “Always about my happiness and my unhappiness.” The nakedness of that line of thought leads to a void. No, Ms. Winters of Orangetown much prefers the more calculated protocols of dodging sadness with her deliberate maneuvers. She has an instinct for missing the call of grief. Scouring the separate degrees of innerness makes her shy. A reviewer writing about *My Thyme Is Up* two years ago charged its author—me—with being “good” at happy moments but inept at the lower end of the keyboard. Well, now! What about the ripping sound behind my eyes, the starchy tearing of fabric, end to end; what about the need I have to curl up my knees when I sleep? Whimpering” (107).

At this point we get the sense of where Reta's writerhood will lead its way; she is criticized for being "inept" like Shields has been criticized for by writing in the genre of light fiction. However, this genre is to reveal the female experience that is invisible or underestimated within the contemporary feminist discourse. Those women face the danger of nonexistence, as Frymer-Kensky describes, "Women gain perspective from being pushed off to the margins of the public world, the margins of the political world. There is always something dangerous and also numinous about the margins" (qtd. in Murphy 10). Though Reta with her writerhood will prevent the danger of being pushed off to the margins and with disclosure through light fiction she will construct her margins as a numinous status. Moreover, Miriam Wallraven has a very interesting approach to such a writing, she in *Women's Writing* (2008) by referring to Victorian Women Writers writes:

Women authors are, and have been, marginalized authors who are writing from the periphery; yet they have to attempt to write themselves into the centre to a certain degree in order to be heard and read at all. This implies making use of strategic discourses to legitimate their textual productions.

(391)

Thus, Wallraven claims that women should use a valid or rather authoritative discourse to enter the canon. On the other hand, as she continues, "Occult literature, particularly if it is also combined with feminist positions and written by women, is thus doubly excluded from the centre where "truth" and meaning are produced" (391). Nevertheless, the case can act on the contrary, Wallraven here refers to Yuri Lotman's *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (1990), she writes:

It is important to realize that Lotman argues that the movement of cultural and artistic innovation takes place from the margins into the centre, a dynamic which can be traced in the case of the Victorian occultism, which increasingly influenced many intellectuals and artists at the end of the nineteenth century. (392)

According to this perspective we can claim then Reta's writerhood to have a paradoxical position in terms of writing through the "tricky proposition" of female writer that is through the patriarchal discourse but also her being a mediator between other women within *Unless*.

Shields in her biographical study *Jane Austen: A Life* (2001) writes about those female writers who represent occult literature, the literature that is on the margins like light fiction. She answers a question about Jane Austen's novels that reveal everything except failing to mention about the Napoleonic Wars, she writes,

But shouldn't Jane Austen at least have mentioned one battle or general by name? Why is there not a word about the rapidly evolving mercantile class and the new democratization of Britain? What about changes in political structure, in the power and persuasion of the Church, in the areas of science and medicine? These questions are often challengingly presented, as though novels are compilations of "current events" and Jane Austen a frivolous, countrified person in intellectual drag, impervious to the noises of the historical universe in which she was placed. (3)

Nonetheless, Shields defends Austen by arguing that she wrote all these issues indirectly within her novels, but may be she has been criticized for not writing the way man would like it (3). According to these ideas we can then claim that Shields'

and so Reta's writing is tricking the reader in terms of writing in light fiction but then presenting the serious picture of womanhood currently. Against this critical perspective, Reta herself already answers by saying, "What about the ripping sound behind my eyes, the starchy tearing of fabric, end to end; what about the need I have to curl up my knees when I sleep? Whimpering" (107).

Moreover, another assumption about Reta's illustration as being inept and having no interest for sadness by writing light fiction is, as I have mentioned previously, the façade. (Unless 107) Though she depicts her writing as follows:

I'm working toward that moment, bristling with invention... How can a woman who has lost her daughter and is suffering acute separation anxiety be capable of writing a comic fantasy? Although, it must be said that Mr. Springer, my new editor, does not agree with me about *Thyme in Bloom* being a comic fantasy. *Au contraire*. (238)

It seems to be necessary to mention about Shields' employing French through the text which refers to her being a Canadian. The French through the text depicts the multiculturalist Canadian identity. Nevertheless, Shields does not indicate a specific Canadian or rather nationalistic identity. Coral Ann Howells in her introduction to Shields initially writes, "Where is here? Who are we? These are the questions that have formed the codes of the debate over national identity in English Canada for the past thirty years" (79). Shields in her neorealist writing adopts the multicultural reality of Canada with nonessentialism, though her novels mainly take place in Canada. However, we must keep in mind that she is a "border crosser," she has been an American immigrant to Canada (Howells 80). If we take all these into consideration, we can say these features prove her neorealist attitude of writing, as

one of the characteristic of neorealism is to connect the text closer with the outside. Actually, Coral Ann Howells will describe this approach much more clearly as follows:

Her novels are symptomatic of a particular moment in Western cultural history and nation, its questioning of the term on which identity are formulated, together with an intense interest in gender construction and the revised dynamics of sexual relationships, while her use of a hybridized fictional form which combines life-writing with social history and diurnal trivia, locates her protagonists within a familiar frame of social, professional, and family relations. (80)

We also might say that the employment of the regional place interestingly has become fictional through her writing and so this once more proves her belief in nonessentialism.

To return to Reta's "writing a comic fantasy" (238). The façade lies within the comic attitude which is Shields' way of playing with the language through light fiction. Laura Miller reviews Reta's status as follow:

Reta may be militantly cheerful... but she isn't stupidly so... Shields' fiction has always had [a] sort of stealth spikiness, like soft fish that when bitten into, turns up a web of bone, or like that sweet middle-aged lady next door when were growing up, who turns out to have been watching you more shrewdly and understanding you more completely than you ever suspected. (qtd. in Pederson Carson 13)

Thus, the naïve picture hides the hard questions that are directed to patriarchy and to the feminist discourse that falls into the trap to ignore women as a subjective entity.

To this viewpoint Toril Moi has an interesting perspective in her *Sexual/Textual: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) which already has been beneficial while interpreting Shields's attitude in drawing a so called cheerful Reta. Toril Moi refers to the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin who "has shown in his influential study of Rabelais (*Rabelais and His World*), anger is not the only revolutionary attitude available to us. The power of laughter can be just as subversive, as when carnival turns the old hierarchies upside- down, erasing old differences, producing new and unstable ones" (40). Thus, we can say then that nor Reta neither her writing in the genre of light fiction denotes any ineptitude. Rather it is a discursive criticism directed to patriarchal notions, and her method of writing is very much authentic in terms of using a different understanding of writerhood that is both serious and comical. "According to Irigaray, woman's 'authentic difference' will only reveal itself in autonomous terms outside of logocentric discourse" (Abshoff and Hird).

As Reta writes from the margins with her light fiction genre she indicates a critical movement directed to the canon, owned by the phallogocentric which is thoroughly a way of neo-realistic writing that Shields yields. The authenticity appears on the point of light fiction being a genre that normally takes place on the margins within literature. Reta is criticized by one review on her *My Thyme Is Up* as follows, "Mrs. Winters's book is very much for the moment, though certainly not for the ages" (80). Contrary to this conventional masculine perspective hold against light fiction, Reta writes about social realities and so this makes her authentic. Actually, the marginalized position her literature is granted is the very surface, as her fiction addresses to the ages long social oppression women experience.

Shields playful writerly authority is only interrupted by critical letters scattered in between the events narrated in the novel. The first letter is placed just after the Chapter titled “Yet” in which Reta talks about her last conversation with her daughter. Actually, daughter and the mother go *incomunicado*, as Reta behaves still like the stereotypical mother and wife. However, it is an important detail that prior to the first letter until the end of the chapter Reta begins to realize her daughter’s situation in terms of being a lost womanhood. And then she says referring to Norah, “From now on life will seem less and less like life. No, I am not ready yet to believe this” (134). Suddenly, Reta moves on to her first letter as if answering the questions in her mind about her daughter, she writes:

I have a nineteen-year-old daughter who is going through a sort of soak of depression... which a friend of mine suspects is brought about by such offerings as your Great Minds of the WIW, not just your particular October ad, of course, but a long accumulation of shaded brown print and noble brows, reproduced year after year, all of it pressing down insidiously and expressing a callous lack of curiosity about great women’s minds, a complete unawareness, in fact. You will respond to my comments with a long list of rights women have won and you will insist that the playing field is level, but you must see that it is not. I can’t be the only one who sees this. (137)

All the letters like this one depict a discursively feminist perspective; Reta is completely exposing her strict feminist attitude against women’s still going oppression. But then, she never sends these letters and except the last one she never writes her full name. She tells her reason for doing this way in her last letter, “I’ve written several letters this year to those who have outraged me in one way or another;

but I have never mailed any of them or even signed them. This is because I don't want to be killed... But now I don't mind if you kill me" (309). Here the fear of being "killed" metaphorically invokes the patriarchal power still oppressing womanhood as an entity, and Reta can only write her full name in the last letter which in a way indicates her feminist perspective to have reached a point of self-awareness. The naming process through the novel also indicates the play with reality and fiction that neo-realist fiction yields. That Reta fictionalizes herself though the letter genre is much more related to realism, so she disrupts the conventional tendency within letter writing. Malcolm Bradbury writes:

The novel becomes the imaginative and imaginary means by which we may break free from the facts, which in the totalitarian order are of course the official fictions, into those realms of historical and social feeling that constitute our days of 'laughter and forgetting'. Thus we maintain the novel as 'an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become'" (23).

The neo-realist writing style Shields yields is very much what Bradbury related above. For instance, the chapters demonstrate a sort of order but then the disruption with the spread letters Shields indirectly reveals her critical understanding against phallogentric order through writing.

But, of course, Shields' playful authority has a larger influence through the novel, she rather alludes her criticism against patriarchy by using its motives through the whole text. Shields' cunning narration lies beneath the surface of the light fiction genre she invokes. That is, her employing the neorealist writing style as Margaret Atwood comments on this certain feature of Shields, "Because she's a comic writer and genuinely funny, early on, she was put in the 'sweet' box, where she does not

belong. The fact is, there's a dark thread in everything she writes" (qtd. in Foster Stovel 12). Another critic who reviews Shields writing style is Barbara Ellen. To her "there are those who worry about the breadth and scope of Shields' vision. That she is too domestic, too measured and calm, too nice about anything. Not dark enough... One review surmised that Shields did not 'do sadness well' " (qtd. in Pederson Carson 12). Shields' playful writerhood is an allusion to her ambivalent perspective to every social/cultural definition, statement and role, for instance, to Shields "the very concept of individual identity may be nothing more than a fictive construction" (Howells 82). Most probably, she would agree with Lévi-Strauss' perspective against so called truths of social constructions within this framework. Susan Sontag paraphrases Strauss on this perspective, as to him "all behavior... is a language, a vocabulary and grammar of order; anthropology proves nothing about human nature except the need for order itself. There is no universal truth about the relations between, say, religion and social structure. There are only models showing the variability of one in relation to the other" (78). Therefore, Shields's feminist perspective in *Unless* seems to disregard the poststructuralist feminist theory that fails to reflect every woman by underestimating her subjective experience and racial, cultural and/or social condition within the patriarchal discourse.

In the beginning of the novel Reta illustrates a peaceful and loving family picture. Then she moves into a process of scrutinizing womanhood, which alludes to Reta's ambivalent status:

I have a husband, Tom, who loves me and is faithful to me and is very decent looking as well, tallish, thin, and losing his hair nicely. We live in a house with a paid-up mortgage, and our house is set in prosperous Rolling hills of

Ontario, only an hour's drive North of Toronto. Two of our three daughters, Natalie, fifteen, and Christine, sixteen, live at home. They are intelligent and lively and attractive and loving, though they too have shared in the loss, as has Tom. (2)

The novel already begins with a distorted picture of happiness. Actually, this is the picture of the unmentionable, the invisible, the woman in patriarchal discourse. Reta does not initially mention Norah's vagrancy, she moves on to her writing list, and her narration never directly depicts a clear criticism against patriarchy. Lisa Johnson argues that the "allowance for distortion in representing 'reality' permits Shields' women characters and readers to reject existing rules of behavior, decorum, and identity" and reflects "an embrace of playful authority" (qtd. in Pederson Carson 17). Thus, Shields's perspective to social constructions or rather fictional realities/ identities that surround women is critical in terms of her being against strict social truths. That is, every theorization of women will deconstructs itself, so the feminist theory can only construct a valid feminism that calls upon all women's racial, social and/ or cultural experience.

Therefore, it is not Danielle Westerman as a premier feminist that is given the role as a mediator but it is rather Reta, a woman who has come to realize her and other women's oppression only after her daughter's traumatic experience. Actually, Shields' language play already implies Westerman's barely perceptible position within the text if we focus on her surname which denotes her skepticism against Western feminism. Reta illustrates both the experience and the transmission of the experience in terms of her writerhood. This phenomenological approach of Shields is critical with the feminist discourse that underestimates the subjective experience of

women. At this point, it is worth referring very slightly to Simone de Beauvoir's phenomenological approach to womanhood which she has adopted from Merleau-Ponty. According to Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology is ... a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'" (vii). This perspective Beauvoir adapts to womanhood, she quotes Merleau-Ponty in *The Second Sex* as follows, "So I am my body, in so far, at least, as my experience goes, and conversely my body is like a life-model, or like preliminary sketch, for my total being" (61). Within this context, Shields' writing style observes subjective experience of women from within the patriarchal system rather than perceiving womanhood through a highly theoretical perspective. To return to the book, Reta's writing has a reconciling attitude in terms of herself being both the experiencing woman and the writer. She has also the strong tendency to reveal other women's experiences. "Ordering my house calms me down, my careful dusting, my polishing. Speculating about other people's lives helps, too" (107), she illustrates the woman within the patriarchal system who is busy with her domestic labor but then she also constructs a transmitting attitude with other women and their experiences:

Gwendolyn Reidman in Baltimore has just come out lesbian... And there's Emma Allen off with her daughter and daughter-in-law to a spa, where the two younger women will give themselves over the mud wraps and massage and leave Emma, who's forty-four, the same as me, to feel guilty about falling into the vanity trap. Then there is Mrs. McGinn, who whispers her loneliness through the floor-boards and who, in all probability, shook her dust mop on the same porch railing I banged on this morning, doing my daily

rounds. There's the violet late-afternoon autumn transparency entering the box room from the skylight... Up here, on the third floor of the house, my senses sharpen and connect me with that other Reta, young Reta, not really so far away. There's my dead mother, who taught me French and also thrift. Every day her image rises up in one form or another, brushing against me with a word or gesture... Who else? There's Lois, my still-living but silent mother-in-law, and this silence I must deal with soon, or get Tom to deal with. And, of course, there is the immense, hovering presence of Danielle Westerman. (108)

This long quote indirectly depicts the silenced and invisible female experience; moreover, Reta's narration reconciles and includes all these female characters which is Shields' feminist perspective that calls for all women no matter which class, race or/culture they come from. While discursively and writerly authority is usually male, here Reta seems to be in charge of all these women. We may regard Reta as the discursive authority ordering, structuring, dividing, and evaluating other women's experiences. Michael Foucault's argument about the interrelation between discourse, power and knowledge might be referred at this point. According to Foucault, "Discourses create effects of truth" (qtd. in Fox 3). And D. Armstrong depicts this association as follows, "Power assumes a relationship based on some knowledge which creates and sustains it; conversely, power establishes a particular regime of truth in which certain knowledges become admissible and possible" (qtd. in Fox 3). Within this context, Reta's writerhood seems to be portrayed by Shields through a discursive method of approach that grants Reta an authority within the patriarchal discourse in which the authority is normally male.

Besides, those women the hovering presence of Danielle Westerman gains importance through Reta's self-realization process. Reta has been Westerman's translator but Reta's questioning begins only after Norah's vagrancy. To Reta, Danielle Westerman represents the feminist discourse, and also the feminine übermutter, her authority, which she gradually questions. Hers is also a story of self-empowerment between women. Reta indicates all these when she says referring Danielle by saying, "She is the other voice in my head, almost always there, sometimes an echo, sometimes the soloist" (152). Danielle Westerman becomes the reminder of Reta's dark side, the side which asks point blank questions, "Danielle Westerman, her life, her reflection on that life, has taught me that much. Don't hide your dark side from yourself; she said to me once, it's what keeps us going forward, that pushing away from the blinding brilliance" (82).

Therefore, Reta's writing in the box room in the attic alludes to the dark side of womanhood that is pushed into nonexistence. Her reconciling womanhood in the attic is a reference to the "mad woman in the attic". Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert in their groundbreaking book, *The MadWoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (2000), depict Bertha Mason, the mad woman in the attic in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, as Jane's "truest and darkest double" (360). Likewise Bertha Mason is Jane Eyre's dark side that is repressed because of social conventions; Reta's dark double is repressed too. Nevertheless, while Bertha Mason dies for the sake of Jane Eyre and the attic stay to represent the secret self that a woman must not expose within the patriarchal society, in *Unless* Reta, on the contrary, writes her novel in the attic. Shields by situating Reta's writerhood indicates the representing of the attic but then not concealing the

female truth, rather exposing the critical questions through her writing. Reta's narration implies this feminist perspective as follows:

So who is this madwoman, constructing a tottering fantasy of female exclusion and pinning it on her daughter? Often— I don't tell Danielle this— I don't bother to put the words down at all— I *think* my letters line by line, compose them in my head as I dust under the beds. That's enough to keep me sane. Yet I need to know I'm not alone in what I apprehend this awful incompleteness that has been alive inside me all this time but whose name I don't dare say. I'm not ready to expose myself. (227)

The “mad woman” image is the patriarchal identification imposed on womanhood that needs to hide its dark side, the critical side that has the tendency to stand against the conventions.

On the contrary, to “the mad woman in the attic” image Reta successfully rewrites the story of another woman, Alicia, in her sequel titled *Thyme Is Bloom* in which she consciously illustrates a female character that counteracts the feminine image of herself. The attic acts not as a prison for the female self but rather it becomes the unconscious of womanhood who needs to get rid of the phallogentric terminology paradoxically with neo-realist writing which acts through the discourse itself. Neorealism's work is discourse in terms of acting through the discourse, but it also plays with the discursive rules consciously and purposely, with intent and subversively. Another aspect of Neorealism is simultaneously establishing narrative coherence and deconstructing it as Reta puts forward through the fate of her female character Alicia in her novel. Reta's slight plot twist that implies her feminist

approach through her writerhood is exposed with her changing Alicia's decision on marriage:

Alicia's marriage to Roman must be postponed. Now I understood where the novel is headed. She is not meant to be partnered. Her singleness in the world is her paradise, it has been all along, and she came the world close to sacrificing it, or, rather, I, as a novelist, had been about to snatch it away from her. (172)

Reta's self-realization process is proved through her writing her novel, she does not make Alicia marry Roman and so with this she prevents the fictional identifications patriarchy has fixed on womanhood. Every notion belonging to the phallogentric terminology will be disrupted:

Alicia knows she and Roman will survive, but she— *she* will be the destroyer, the breaker of promises, hard-hearted, unkind, bringing corrosion and damage to an existence that has been underpinned with natural goodness. Love, marriage, children, a nest in which to nestle. The comfort of it, the natural curvature to which we cling. (256)

Thus, by making Alicia an independent woman, Reta ends up her process of self-realization, the process of writing her novel *Thyme In Bloom*, and her daughter will return home. Thus, Reta's writing with Irigaray's "mimicry" notion throughout the phallogentric language system, and so her writing in the genre of light fiction results in a writing that has reached a point of freeing womanhood from certain fictional identification. As Judith Butler writes, "If subversion is possible, it will be subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the laws turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself"

(127). The patriarchal laws that turn against itself through the neo-realist writing style then will offer a redefinition of womanhood, afterwards, “The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its “natural” past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities” (Butler 127).

Moreover, the feminist discourse urgently needs recognition and a reconciliation of womanhood which regards women’s experience that differs according her racial, social and/ or cultural background. This kind of renegotiation can never be attained by just disrupting the binaries between sex and gender through a highly conceptual perspective as the poststructuralist feminist theory claims, but rather by taking into account subjective differences between all women. Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out a critical approach to a sort of generalization of womanhood in terms of such a feminist theory. Mohanty writes:

Thus, for instance, in any given piece of feminist analysis, women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression. What binds women together is a sociological notion of the “sameness” of their oppression. It is at this point that an elusion takes place between “women” as a discursively constructed group and “women” as material subjects of their own history. Thus, the discursively consensual homogeneity of “women” as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women. (338)

Her feminist perspective insists on a discourse that regards and so represents the still silenced and invisible women within all societies. As she emphasizes herself, we need a feminist discourse in which “the focus is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a particular group of women as “powerless” in

a particular context” (338). But rather, constructing a discourse that finds “a variety of cases of “powerless” groups of women to prove the general point that women as a group are powerless” (Mohanty 338).

Within this framework, Shields’ and her protagonist Reta’s writerhood refer to those women whose hunger for a language and so a theory that fits their experience. As Reta illustrates this hunger in one of her letters:

I, too, am hungry for the comfort of the “entire universe,” but I don’t know how to assemble it and neither does the oldest of my children, a daughter. I sense something incomplete about the whole arrangement, like a bronze casting that’s split open in the foundry, an artifact destined by some invisible flaw to break apart. (273)

As a result, if the contemporary feminist discourse underestimates these sort of subjective experiences of women from different class, race and/ culture, still variety groups of women will be then silenced, and these women will continue with their already nonexistent status already presented by the patriarchal system. This will lead then feminism to nowhere but to essentialize womanhood. Therefore, a development will occur in terms of renegotiating womanhood only when the feminist theory regards a method that includes the feminine subjective difference, which is the racial, social and/ or cultural experience of every woman. Thus, Shields writing through Neorealism seems to be then a method of approach that exposes the subjective experience of women within the current world that needs to be realized in terms of their different backgrounds rather than observing womanhood through conceptualism.

Conclusion

Carol Shields in her novel *Unless* scrutinizes the method of approach to womanhood within the contemporary Poststructuralist feminism. Through the novel Shields puts forward women characters that illustrate different subjective experiences. Her putting forward women with social, racial and/ or cultural differences indicates a feminist understanding through narrative authority. Interestingly, her narration follows the phallogentric terminology in terms of demonstrating subjective experience of womanhood. With this she draws the big picture of women within the patriarchal system.

Unles seems to lead a method of approach that implies the lack of subjective experience within the contemporary Poststructuralist feminism. The feminist discourse needs to draw not only on theorizing womanhood to deconstruct binarism and the fictional identifications, but it also needs to regard social, racial and/ or cultural experience. In *Unless* Shields implies a feminist theory that does not intellectualize womanhood but rather takes the physical and sensual experience also into account.

With the Poststructuralist feminist theory womanhood has been rescued from imposed fictional identifications constructed by a highly gender focused binary system. Nevertheless, Poststructuralist feminist theory by regarding both sex and gender as culturally constructed concepts may face the danger to fall into the trap of underestimating the subjective experience of women. When we look at *Unless* we see that womanhood can not be freed from these binaries if we underestimate the subjective experience. Intellectualizing womanhood will reconstruct it as an entity that falls into the trap of essentialism again. With essentialism I mean, to generalize

womanhood as an entity. Womanhood includes certain different experiences which are, if to repeat again, social, racial and/ or cultural differences. Only if, a feminist discourse that follows a phenomenological approach to womanhood along with a discursive perspective can put forward a feminist theory that deconstruct patriarchal identifications imposed on womanhood.

Shields' approach to womanhood through *Unless* leads a phenomenological feminist perspective that is also highly discursive in terms of the presence of female characters that illustrate the imposed fictional identifications by patriarchy. Women in patriarchy can be granted subjectivity only when undoing the body. Therefore, Simone de Beauvoir's phenomenological feminist perspective necessarily will present the silent and invisible womanhood within patriarchy. In regard of Beauvoir's approach, the contemporary feminist theory that experiences a conceptual impasse needs to redefine its highly theoretical feminism.

Shields' novel poses a neorealist narratological solution which denotes a third way of defining and talking about women. This neorealist image of womanhood within patriarchy she illustrates in *Unless* in a way grants the feminist theory with a feminist phenomenological perspective that has already been presented by Simone de Beauvoir half a century ago. This neorealist writing style seems to pose a criticism against the Poststructuralist feminist theory's limits which comes into a conceptual impasse in terms of taking womanhood into account as an entity that has subjective experience.

Shields values experience but without essentializing womanhood, she puts forward a new understanding of womanhood and also writerhood, closely connected

with her new understanding of neorealism, which challenges not only the essentialist feminist discourse but also poststructuralist notions.

With *Unless* Shields through her female characters depicts a feminist perspective that presents womanhood as an experiencing entity rather than an abstract notion. Her narration follows the phallogentric terminology but with a conscious method of approach that employs the authoritative language system to deconstruct stereotypical role models imposed on womanhood. This comes to her neorealist writing style which in a way includes the “mimicry” concept of Irigaray. That is, Shields illustrates her phenomenological feminist perspective through a neorealist way of writing. She puts forward female characters that represent the patriarchal notions that are imposed on womanhood. This kind of a parodic strategy, which also denotes her postmodern attitude, grants Shields a feminist perspective that regards the subjective experience of women within the system. This method of approach is also very much discursive; however, what Shields’ feminism calls for is rather a feminist theory that does not fall into the trap of intellectualizing womanhood.

Unfortunately, the current backlash within feminism experiences such a highly conceptual impasse which constructs another binary system. Thus, feminism needs to lead an ambivalent method of approach that never underestimates the social, racial and/ or cultural experiences of women. Therefore, Shields’ neorealist narratological solution which I have associated with the feminist phenomenological perspective constructs a feminist discourse that redefines womanhood by regarding social and racial differences. This method of approach denotes a tendency to reconcile women from these different backgrounds within the feminist discourse that

will lead to a nonessentialist theory and a theory that does not face the conceptual impasse like the Poststructuralist feminism.

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