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**WOMEN AS COMMODITIES OF EXCHANGE IN
TILLIE OLSEN’S YONNONDIO: FROM THE THIRTIES
AND TELL ME A RIDDLE**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this master's thesis titled "Women as Commodities of Exchange in Tillie Olsen's Yonnondio: From The Thirties and Tell Me A Riddle" has been written by myself in accordance with the academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that all materials benefited in this thesis consist of the mentioned resources in the reference list. I verify all these with my honour.

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ABSTRACT

Master's Thesis

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The literature about working class is usually seen as a masculine subject. However, women of working class constitute a significant part of this picture. Tillie Olsen, who has first-hand experience of proletariat life, takes up issue by presenting women's position in her works: *Yonnondio* and *Tell Me a Riddle*, which demonstrate—in addition to the class oppression of the decades that follow the 1930s—the additional cost that women are made to pay just because of their gender. Thus, the theoretical framework of this thesis is a Marxist-feminist approach of the French critic Luce Irigaray. She develops this approach by an analogy between “the exchange of women” in patriarchy and the “exchange of commodities” in capitalism.

The system of the exchange of women in the chosen works of Olsen is demonstrated in the injuries caused by poverty and capitalist patriarchy. In *Yonnondio*, the mother, Anna and her daughter Mazie and likewise, in *Tell Me a Riddle* Eva, the grandmother and her daughters and granddaughters are commodities which have use value and value-in-use to be exchanged by men of various forms. As such, their case can be illuminated by Luce Irigaray's theories of exchange of women, which underlies the stability of patriarchal capitalist order. Therefore, women's reproductive energy is co-opted by patriarchy not only by using their biological functions but also by turning them into ideological tools to help uphold and guard the system. Those women also, either consciously or not, consent to and accept this system as the truth.

Keywords: Tillie Olsen, Luce Irigaray, Exchange of Women, Patriarchy, Working Class Women



ÖZET

Yüksek Lisans Tezi

Tillie Olsen'in Yonnondio: From the Thirties ve Tell Me a Riddle

Romanlarında Metalaştırılan Kadınlar

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İşçi sınıfı edebiyatı genellikle erkeklere ait bir konu olarak görülmüştür. Ancak işçi sınıfı kadınları bu resmin önemli bir parçasını oluşturur. Proleter hayatın içinde bizatihi tecrübe sahibi olan Tillie Olsen eserlerinde bu kadınların durumunu ortaya koyarak bu konuya dikkat çekmiştir: *Yonnondio* ve *Tell Me a Riddle* adlı eserlerinde 1930lar ve sonrasındaki sınıf baskısının yanı sıra kadınların cinsiyetlerinden dolayı ödemek zorunda kaldıkları ilave bedeli gözler önüne serer. Böylelikle bu tezin teorik çerçevesini Fransız eleştirmen Luce Irigaray'ın Marksist-feminist yaklaşımı oluşturur. Irigaray bu yaklaşımını, Marksist eleştiri kuramının “malların değiş tokuşu” düşüncesine, erkek egemen sistemde “kadınların değiş tokuşu” benzetmesi yaparak geliştirmiştir.

Olsen'in seçilen eserlerinde kadınların değiş tokuş edilmesi sisteminin, fakirlik ve kapitalist erkek egemen sistemi yüzünden aldıkları yaralar çok iyi resmedilmiştir. *Yonnondio*'nun annesi Anna ve kızı Mazie, ve benzer şekilde *Tell Me a Riddle*'daki Anneanne Eva ve onun kızları ve torunları, erkekler tarafından değişik şekillerde değiş tokuş yapılan, hem kullanım değeri olan hem de kullanımda değeri olan mallardır. Onların bu durumları, Luce Irigaray'ın arkasında ataerkil kapitalist sistemin sürdürülmesi çabası yatan, kadınların değiş tokuşu teorisi vasıtasıyla aydınlatılmıştır. Bu yüzden kadınların üretkenlikleri, erkek egemen sistem tarafından, yalnızca biyolojik işlevlerine hapsedilmeyip, sistemin ayakta durmasına ve yükselmesine yardımcı olan

ideolojik bir araç olarak da kullanılmaktadır. Bu kadınlar ise ister bilinçli ister bilinçsiz olarak sisteme razı olup, onu hakikat olarak kabul etmektedirler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tillie Olsen, Luce Irigaray, Kadınların Değiş Tokuşu, Erkek Egemen Sistem, İşçi sınıfı Kadınları.



**WOMEN AS COMMODITIES IN TILLIE OLSEN'S YONNONDIO: FROM
THE THIRTIES AND TELL ME A RIDDLE**

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INTRODUCTION

The working conditions of the decades that follow the 1930s in the United States were depicted in various forms of literature often from the point of view of men, making working class literature primarily a masculine subject dealing with struggling male workers and their male counterparts. This situation overshadowed the fact that women constitute a significant part of the working classes and thus women writers like Tillie Olsen, Agnes Smedley and Grace Paley, who often have first-hand experience of proletariat life, have taken up the same issue by presenting women's position in her works. In their works, in addition to the class oppression that every member of the working class face, they demonstrate the additional cost that women workers are made to pay just because of their gender. As would be expected, their number is far fewer than male authors of the same class, which further testifies to the additional demands on women's time and labor. Olsen is one of the most outspoken of these authors. She sheds light on the multiple ways women are abused in a variety of power structures. Most importantly, she writes about the oppression of women as a historical reality, in her own words, "to speak for all those millions like us whose lives are such that they can never come to writing, to give form to that experience which has never, or rarely, been part of literature" (Boucher, 1974: 28). The two of the fictional works she produced, *Yonnondio* and *Tell Me a Riddle*, which are to be analyzed in this study, testify to her commitment to speak for the unspoken.

Women's working class literature brings together the two major philosophical and literary schools together: Marxism and Feminism. The Marxist criticism seems to be an implicit suggestion that should be considered as an adaptation for the pieces I have chosen for this study. While Marxism helps uncover the structures of class oppression especially in capitalism, feminism helps elucidate the gender oppression, namely patriarchy, embedded in capitalistic modes of thinking. Therefore, a specifically Marxist-feminist approach might provide an insight about the structure of patriarchy which shows similar traits as class domination. Thus, the critical framework of my thesis is Marxist-feminist approach.

As Marxist-feminists demonstrate, while they lay bare the workings of class domination and the system of inequality that it fosters and engendered by, Marxist thinkers often turn a blind eye to the fact that even as members of oppressed working class, men reiterate and perpetuate at home the very system that enslaves them. Their wives and daughters become the oppressed working classes at home. These women suffer from all the evil that accompanies poverty and ignorance as well as the extra burdens of being women, such as pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage, rape, and social expectations such as obedience, submissiveness, and silence. Add to this that some of these women might also be part of the army of the workers, we have also a group or women who are doubly oppressed both at work and at home. Expanding Marxist account to include women as well rather than dealing only with men under the oppression of capitalism will enable me to explore how the two works of Olsen, to which I have limited this study, reveal some notions of Marxism adapted by some feminist critics like Luce Irigaray. Irigaray applies some of the key notions of Marxism such as exchange and use value to explain how women are circulated as property in a male-dominated society.

Therefore, shaping and even underlying most 20th century critical approaches like feminism, Marxism has to be understood first and foremost. It is, in fact, seen as history of materialism, according to which all social formations and relations are dependent on the material conditions of a specific historical time. According to Marx, the first priority of human beings is to find a way to transform their labor into a material value to lead their life. The more they produce, the more they shape their environment, or, in other words, their society. Therefore, labor helps social organizations to form as a result of material production, or mode of production, which is the central concern of Marxism.

Because of the priority given to production in Marxism, other sides of social relations are structured by economic relations. The modes of production take different shapes throughout history: the ancient, the feudal and the capitalist modes of production. Whatever their time and place are, the essential motive behind all is class conflict. The major concern of Marx's works and analysis is this class dynamic, especially in capitalism. The typical class conflict engendered by capitalism takes place between the owner of the means of production and those who sell their labor in

exchange. Marx thinks that this exchange is unfair and exploitative. Capitalist class gets the surplus value of any product workers produce. Thus, the value paid to workers in wages, as the outcome of their labor and product, is far less than what bosses earn.

The real problem of exploitation comes right after selling the products. Every product has both “use value” and “exchange value” (Irigaray, 1985: 173-174). Anything having value to trade can be considered as commodity which can be sold in the market. Commodities on the market are the surface of the iceberg, underneath which there are exploitative relations “characterized by owners, governments and their agents continuously introducing technical changes that alter the structure of labor” (Leone and Knauf, 1999: 4). Since capitalism is always concerned with money and profit, through time, new ways of dealing with values of commodities, or new means of production are introduced to the system. Social formations like class divisions are also shaped by this capitalist economic process because even cultural practices are commodified by it. Among these practices, women of lower classes occupy the lowest ranks of a new mode of production, not simply being biologically susceptible due to the reproductive cycles of the female body such as pregnancy and childbirth that leave women physically vulnerable but being socially under the service of maintaining men.

Thus not only the products of the female workers but also their bodies and their reproductive functions are circulated among capitalists and males of all classes. Therefore, proletarian women form a specific subclass of the proletariat which is exploited not only in the formal workplaces where she is super-exploited (paid less than a male proletarian) but also is coerced in the home into laboring to produce a vital commodity (labor power) that is expropriated by the bourgeoisie.

For most feminist critics, a Marxist methodology seems to be appropriate; Gimenez states that “Marx's methodology is indispensable for identifying the foundations of the inequality between men and women in the capitalist societies” (Gimenez, 2005: 11). Thus, the critical analysis should be relevant to women “whose fate is shaped both by gender oppression and class exploitation” (Gimenez, 2005: 11). According to Gimenez, most contemporary feminist critics have to adopt Marx's views since “as long as capitalism remains the dominant mode of production, it is

impossible fully to understand the forces that oppress women and shapes the relation between men and women” (Gimenez, 2005: 12). In analyzing “the relationship between men and women,” there are some points to be taken into account such as “biological differences in reproduction, men’s need to control women’s sexuality, reproductive capacities and/or their labor and their children’s labor, men’s drive for power over women, the sexual division of labor, the psychosexual effects of mothering and the exchange of women by men” (Gimenez, 2005: 12). All these aspects of universal patriarchy cannot be separated from the mode of production. Therefore, the position of women is totally different from that of men, for the lived realities of women’s lives are completely different from those of men, a point that traditional Marxist critics tend to ignore. Even though some seem to recognize that the case of women differs from that of proletarian men, without a radical critique that lays bare the embedded sexism within the proletariat, a full diagnosis that does full justice to working class women is impossible and any solution to gender inequalities is doomed to failure. These views take the issue of class as the center and the issue of gender as a marginal problem to be dealt with. Iris Young points out, often such an analysis,

accepts the traditional Marxian theory of production relations, historical change, and analysis of the structure of capitalism in basically unchanged form. It rightly criticizes that theory for being essentially gender-blinded, and hence seeks to supplement Marxist theory of capitalism with feminist theory of a system of a male domination. Taking this route, however, tacitly endorses the traditional Marxian position that ‘the woman question’ is auxiliary to the central questions of a Marxian theory of society. (Young, 1980: 180)

Marx’s criticism of capitalism can still be most helpful to feminists. Like what the lives of lower-class people means to Marxists, the lives of women under male domination can be a good point to depart. “Marx once asked,” writes Gayle Rubin,

“What is a Negro slave? A man of the black race. The one explanation is as good as the other. A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations. A cotton-spinning machine is a machine for spinning cotton. Only under certain conditions does it become capital. Torn away from these relationships it is no more capital than gold in itself is money, or sugar is the price of sugar.” (Rubin, 2011: 34)

Departing from this point, Rubin applies the same reason behind Marx's words about "a Negro" to women:

What is a domesticated woman? A female of the species. The one explanation is as good as the other. A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money ... etc. What then are these relationships by which a female becomes an oppressed woman? (Rubin, 2011: 34)

Women in this world are stranded between male dominance and capitalism. They become mothers and also workers or reproducers and producers to complete the tasks they are supposed to do. Like Marxist approach explaining the capitalist structure, a feminist approach lets us understand the patriarchal structure rooted in the capitalist society. In other words, power relations around women are shaped in terms of both class and gender. Marxist-feminist approach helps clarify how the workings of patriarchy parallel the workings of capitalism. For just as patriarchal formations abuse women's reproduction in order to engender new abusive systems based on gender inequalities, capitalism abuses the production of working classes in order to uphold and increase class inequalities. Thus both systems reproduce themselves by exploiting the production (and reproduction, in the case of women) the lower class or gender:

To most socialist feminists the question was not the reproduction of society in general but of capitalism in particular. The exploitation of women was connected with capitalism's drive for profit and its general need to reproduce itself: pressures that led to a sex-divided work-force and the oppression of the house-wife. (Connell, 1987: 35)

Therefore, the term "capitalist patriarchy" by Zillah Eisenstein opens the most suitable stance to develop a theoretical perspective on women's oppression in the capitalist society:

I choose this phrase, capitalist patriarchy, to emphasize the existing mutual dependence, of the capitalist class structure and male supremacy. Understanding this "interdependence" of patriarchy and capitalism is essential to the political analysis of socialist feminism. It becomes necessary to understand that patriarchy (as male supremacy) existed before capitalism and continues in post-capitalist societies. And yet to say that, within the present system of power, either patriarchy or capitalism causes the other is to fail to understand their present mutually reinforcing system and dialectical relationship, a relationship which must be understood if the structure of oppression is to be changed. Socialist feminism in this sense moves

beyond singular Marxist analysis and isolated radical feminist theory. The capitalist class structure and the hierarchical sexual structuring of society are the problem. (Eisenstein, 1979: 5)

Since inequalities begin at home, some critics like Rayna Rapp talks about domestic labor which has affected women's experience since the beginning of history. With the spark of industrialization, women were seen as baby producers into the labor world. Therefore, the household gained importance. "Households are the basic units in which labor-power is reproduced and maintained. This takes place in a location radically removed from the work-place. Such relations therefore appear as autonomous from capital, but of course they are not" (Rapp, 1978: 284). The relation between the household and capitalist system is explained by Rapp as below:

The work that gets done in households (primarily by women) is not simply about babies. Housework itself has recently been rediscovered as work, and its contribution to arenas beyond the household is clear. At the very least, housework cuts the reproduction costs of wage-workers. Imagine if all those meals had to be bought at restaurants, those clothes cleaned at laundry rates, those beds made by hotel employees! Housework is also what women do in exchange for access to resources which are bought by their husband's wages. (Rapp, 1978: 284)

As such, women become the unseen and unpaid labor that exchanges their production and reproduction for a limited access to resources only if that exchange is mediated by their husbands' economic power.

A variety of economic and social phenomena affecting women's lives, such as domestic violence, social stereotyping, domestic labor, and unavoidably patriarchy are some considerations of those critics. One of them is Luce Irigaray who utilizes an analogy that juxtaposes "the exchange of women" in patriarchy to the "exchange of commodities" of Marxist criticism. The term "the exchange of women" is used by her in a section called "Women on the Market" in her book, *This Sex Which is Not One*. Her first argument is that "The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women" (Irigaray, 1985: 170). What she means is the society we live in is constructed upon the idea that there must be an exchange of women like commodities; otherwise, anarchy as in the animal kingdom will ensue. For the social order to be established on a large scale, men circulate women among themselves at different phases of their lives.

In “Women on the Market”, Luce Irigaray examines several forms of exchange of women. Firstly, Marx’s theory of economic relations from which the term, “the exchange of women” (Irigaray, 1985: 170) was derived is the prominent one. Commodities in Marx’s analysis are the basic source of capitalist wealth; therefore, they can be significant in the interpretation of the status of women in society. Marx defines the characteristics of a capitalist society as “the submission of ‘nature’ to ‘labor’ on the part of men who thus constitute ‘nature’ as use value and exchange value” (Irigaray, 1985: 173). Irigaray uses Marx’s description of commodity relations in a capitalist society as an analogy for the patriarchal society where women (nature) are commodities in the market and economy. She asks some questions to make her point:

For, without the exploitation of women, what would become of the social order? What modifications would it undergo if women left behind their condition as commodities—subject to being produced, consumed, valorized, circulated, and so on, by men alone—and took part in elaborating and carrying out exchanges? (Irigaray, 1985: 191)

Irigaray’s analogy goes far deeper and reaches a level at which even Marx is criticized by not having women in his analysis of capitalist society. Women are “always enveloped and veiled” in men’s world, therefore, exploited as commodities in patriarchal society. Possibly because of their invisibility behind veils and envelopes Marx was unable to see the exploitation of women as commodities in patriarchal society. Therefore, Irigaray thinks that Marx’s “science” was not so scientific after all.

Exchange of women thus refers to the various social, economic and ideological interrelations and forces that are functional in these particular stories of the 1930s and 1950s. In this sense, I will argue that man-woman relations encoded in them should be contextualized in terms of the exchange of women as commodities. As Irigaray points out, “Hence women’s role as fetish-objects, inasmuch as, in exchanges, they are the manifestation and the circulation of a power of the Phallus, establishing relationships of men with each other” (Irigaray, 1985: 183). She brings Levi-Strauss’ remark asserting that a society will fall apart without the exploitation of women. Therefore, this circulation or exchange of women as commodities is believed to be the foundation of social, especially economic order, exempting men from being used and circulated. “In other words, all the social regimes of ‘History’

are based upon the exploitation of one 'class' of producers, namely, women. Whose reproductive use value (reproductive of children and of the labor force) and whose constitution as exchange value underwrite the symbolic order as such, without any compensation in kind going to them for that 'work.'" What matters is a game played upon the body of women. Woman's body has two different uses: woman's "natural" body and her exchangeable body. Having a social value, the latter can be exchanged among men. The former is alienated to women since it is shaped and given a desired form by men's point of view in order to display the values of patriarchal society. "Commodities among themselves are thus not equal, nor alike, nor different. They only become so when they are compared by and for man" (Irigaray, 1985: 177).

Irigaray's second argument about the exchange of women is based on the points the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss makes about family structure. Claude Levi-Strauss in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* also proposes that marriage is the most basic form of this exchange. In order to maintain this structure and function properly, he suggests an incest taboo which forbids sexual relations among family members to ensure the exchange of women is brought by men: "The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister, or daughter than a rule obliging the mother, sister, or daughter to be given to others" (Levi-Strauss, 2016: 481). He also says that these connections are exercised by, between and among men by means of the exchange of women: "The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman ... but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners" (Levi-Strauss, 2016: 481).

Men's practice of the trade Levi-Strauss postulates is explained by Karen Newman in the beginning of her article, "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*." She presents two different looks towards this system:

For Levi-Strauss, the exchange of women is at the origin of social life. His androcentric analysis seeks to authorize the exchange of women and the male bonds it constitutes by claiming that culture depends upon such ties. Feminists have pointed out two related consequences of Levi-Strauss's claims. On the one hand, the seeming centrality of the woman as desired object is a mystification: she is a pseudo-center, a prize the winning of which, instead of forging a male/female relation, serves rather to secure male bonds. Others have

looked not so much at the woman in this system of exchange, but at the male bonds it establishes (Newman, 1987: 21).

Luce Irigaray is the advocate of the “male bonds” criticism in the exchange system. Quoting Levi-Strauss, she argues that women are “scarce [as commodities] ... essential to the life of the group”; that is why they are exchanged. When it comes to the issue of scarcity, he has such an explanation: “deep polygamous tendency, which exists among all men, always makes the number of available women seem insufficient” (Irigaray, 1985: 170). Irigaray explains how the scarcity of women leads to the hoarding women as the property of male owners just as the hoarding that keeps alive capitalist power relations:

Wealth amounts to a subordination of the use of things to their accumulation. Then would the way women are used matter less than their number? The possession of a woman is certainly indispensable to man for the reproductive use value that she represents; but what he desires is to have them all. To “accumulate” them, to be able to count off his conquests, seductions, possessions, both sequentially and cumulatively, as measure or standard(s). (Irigaray, 1985: 174)

Irigaray provides an answer to the question why the subject of exchange is not men. From here, she makes her point that women are accepted as “the other” in the patriarchal “hom(m)o-sexual” society and as “commodities” of exchange among men. The exchange relations are defined by Irigaray as a homosexual monopoly by men because exchange occurs between people of the same sex, men.

The literary arena where Tillie Olsen started writing was dominated by this hom(m)osexual order. Under the supremacy of male writers, she tried to find a way to survive along with taking part in political activism. Her consciousness and vision come from the social struggles of the time. She achieved an understanding of class and sex as they deeply affect people’s lives. Thus, she brought an insight of both class awareness and feminist look to the literature of her time. Her creative works are related to material conditions of people’s lives and experiences of oppressed women. In order to read her works within the framework of some critical thoughts, one should also have an understanding of the socio-cultural context of her life. In her history, it is possible to find some material conditions leading her to left politics and feminist concerns.

She was born in Nebraska to a Russian Jewish family who migrated from Russia after the Revolution. Her father, Samuel Lerner, worked in a variety jobs

including farming and packing house work. Tillie Olsen (Lerner) left high school in Omaha to go to work because of poverty. The politicized environment around her made her an activist and she joined the Young Communist League at the age of seventeen. Apart from working at several jobs, she took part in literary and intellectual life. During the Depression time, Olsen led a very productive writing life along with the political activism with the Communist Party. The Communist Party sent her to Minnesota and she began writing *Yonnondio* there at nineteen. The same year she had an unplanned baby named Karla despite being hopelessly poor. During this period her daughter's father left them several times. In 1936, she began an affair with Jack Olsen whom she later married and had three more daughters. During this time, she did several jobs to support them. Unfortunately, she gave up writing fiction to focus on bringing up children and working. She remained as an activist but her activism caused her family to suffer more because there was an official hunt for the leftists in the fifties. She began writing again in the mid-fifties resulting in the two works which are the concern of this thesis (Rosenfelt, 1981: 376-377).

Olsen had no opportunity to earn her life by writing because her obligations as an activist, a worker, a woman, a wife and a mother prevented her from getting benefit from writing in the mid-thirties. But she had never totally sacrificed one for the other. As a political activist, she always got involved in the world of working-class people and exposed their lives in a collection of invaluable literature of that time. In addition, because of her and other women writers, the Left, which was definitely dominated by men, started paying some serious attention to the condition of women and to their contribution to political and artistic world. She became a warrior in both intellectual and working class worlds. She was born into misery and poverty and carried to a world of language and literature by her gift.

Olsen published the collection of four stories, *Tell Me a Riddle* in 1961. The stories are about family members' relationship between one another. Each story depicts the injuries caused by poverty and patriarchal system. In 1974, she completed and published *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, which is about a working-class family. Set in the 1930s and 1950s respectively, *Yonnondio* and *Tell Me a Riddle* focus on women's lives under the oppression of those historical conditions. Olsen's novel, *Yonnondio*, written the 1930s, then, lost during long years until she rediscovered and

published it in 1974, takes its name from a poem of Walt Whitman about the disappearance of American Indians. She deliberately chose that historical moment of the oppressed people of American natives, who shared similar experiences of shattered lives as the family, the Holbrooks, in *Yonnondio*. The mother, Anna and her daughter Mazie are the clear victims of harsh conditions in addition to Jim, the husband and the father at the bottom of the class system. Like *Yonnondio*, *Tell Me a Riddle* has a lot to do with lives of some women of different ages and roles: Eva, the grandmother and her daughters and granddaughters. Women in these stories are somehow commodities which have use value and value in use. A woman as wife has its use value for her husband. On the other hand, the very same man also finds himself exchanging other women that can be shared (exchanged) such as daughter and mother. Thus, in this thesis, I propose to study how these women's stories of survival are significant for some Marxist-feminist critics, especially Luce Irigaray. Further, Olsen's communication to us through her fictional heroines by her experiences of reality creates an opportunity of analysis. In the novels, she gives voice to the women who otherwise have no voice of their own. They are only the "objects" living in a society that commodifies them to be exchanged by men of various forms.

In the first chapter, an analysis starts with the cultural contexts of the 1930s in the United States as the basis of a reading of *Yonnondio* since Tillie Olsen's life story is related to the formation of her works. In this chapter, I will then explore representations of women as commodified properties.

The second chapter will be about *Tell me a Riddle*, which deals mainly with some women of different generations. Eva, an old woman who is about to die, is the leading character of one of the four short stories. As in *Yonnondio*, the women, who have been reduced to being the property of men, choose to remain silent in many parts of their family life. Thus, I argue that a commodified woman's body in both novels provides rich grounds for criticism, which will be my point of departure and focus in order to shed light on how the notion of the exchange of women serves the stability of society and state.

In conclusion, the most important aim of my thesis is to take a look at Olsen's selected works, which have a woman's experience of reality. In both of these works,

Olsen demonstrates that lives of her major women characters are shaped as properties of male members of society. Like other forms of property they are exchanged from one owner to the next. As such their case can be illuminated by Luce Irigaray's theories of exchange of women, which underlies the stability of capitalist order.



CHAPTER ONE

YONNONDIO: SALUTING THE WOMEN OF DEPRESSION

Tillie Olsen's writing career starts with the writing of *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* as Tillie Lerner in the 1930s. She attempts to write this novel, which will be treated in this chapter, within the historical contexts of 1930s Depression. The Holbrooks, the family at the center of the novel, experience some of the worst socio-economic and cultural disadvantages of their era. Therefore, as the full title indicates, their story takes the reader to a particular moment in their age. In fact, in order for Olsen's works to be read critically, it is important to understand the historical background of their time. Her entry into the intersections of feminist and Marxist territories has therefore brought her designations such as "revolutionary" and "socialist feminist" under which her fiction is discussed.

The categories of "radical" writing and "working-class" writing often intersect. In *Labor and Desire* (1991) Paula Rabinowitz uses the term "revolutionary" for the more than forty Depression-era novels written by women that she surveys. In "From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition," Deborah S. Rosenfelt uses "socialist feminist" to describe the literary tradition to which Tillie Olsen belongs. (Coiner, 1995: 264)

1.1. WRITING AS A WOMAN IN THE AMERICA OF THE '30S

The economic struggle within the capitalist system of the 1930s is such an oppressive force that the increasing oppression of the male members of the working class is reproduced within the domestic circle as fathers and husbands become additional tools of oppression for their daughters and wives. Normally, this kind of oppression falls on the deaf ears of the male theoreticians and practitioners of Marxism, which focuses on the issues of class discrimination and oppression based on class but not on those of sexism and gender-based oppression. In fact this, Olsen shows, not only turns Marxism into a movement that practices what it preaches

against but also into a self-defeating movement that threatens the solidarity of the laborers upon which it is based. Coiner briefly explains it as follows:

Yonnondio confronts one of the differences within the working class that the '30s CP [Communist Party] minimized—the divisive effects of sexism. At a time when Avram Landry, representing the CP leadership, minimized tensions between working-class women and men, asserting, it is because the husband is exploited [by capitalism] that the housewife's position is wretched and miserable, the novel implicitly emphasizes the way in which the sexual division of labor militates against working-class unity. (Coiner, 1998: 179)

Therefore, Olsen's fictive text can be seen as powerful reaction to the Depression from the perspective of women. Despite the amount of fiction about the economic concern of the time by male writers, Olsen breaks this perception by presenting women in this configuration.

The novel's ties with the 1930s are strengthened further because it is not only a story that takes place within the socio-economic realities of a particular time but it is in fact informed by the author's personal experiences. *Yonnondio*'s narrative is full of details of a family's desperate efforts to survive in the Depression. The novel simply points out the outcomes of a national economic collapse on this family. The novel portrays the unpleasant realities of poverty shaped by Olsen's childhood experience. In her family, as she reported to Erika Duncan, "economic struggle was constant. There was never a time when she was not doing something to help the family out economically" (Coiner, 1998: 143). As a 10-year-old, for example, Olsen has to work selling peanuts after school. Like her, women of the Depression years supported the family budget more, which was the single solution of families to cope with the increasing poverty. However, their often unrecognized contributions softened the stressful atmosphere at home, where we could see jobless husbands and sons, often at the expense of their own potentials: "Younger women had to throw out their expectations about life proceeding in an orderly fashion; they sacrificed education, independence, marriage, and children in order to help their families" (Helmbold, 1987: 638). These sacrifices do not count in men's eyes, for women's domestic labor is not paid though this extra support coming from women is crucial for the family budget:

Whether women contributed unwaged but necessary labor or earned wages, whether they lived in preindustrial or industrial societies, women's economic significance was central to their families' survival.

Thus, this model counters the myths that women do not work and that the “private” family is separate from the “public” economy. (Helmbold, 1987: 632)

Likewise, Olsen’s writing career is filled with intervals due to economic hardships that require her immediate attention. She stops writing *Yonnondio* until 1970s when she is free from the controversial role for women: getting domesticated. She is unable to write as a result of circumstance. After being silent for a long time, Olsen’s fiction depicts her personal experience of being neglected wife and mother in poverty. As her individual experience directly linked to working class people and women in general, the realities of the time are presented in a bitter way:

In large part, these stories are tales of terror. Consistently, the text insists on the power of industrial capitalism to cripple, wound and exhaust the Holbooks and their neighbors, to drain their bodies of productive power and personal resources. Men are injured at work, women by domestic abuse and rape children by hunger and neglect. (Entin, 2004: 71)

Although women’s participation in the family income is a fact, in addition to being denied recognition as wage earners, they become targets of prejudices that associate them with domesticity. Therefore, women face discrimination at home and at work place. For example, campaigns against women’s employment in place of men on certain jobs “associated with men” are common whereas it is found demeaning for men to work at “female jobs.” In the patriarchal world, men are never supposed to earn their living by doing laundry, ironing, babysitting etc. Also, patriarchy wants women to know where they belong to while earning money. Women are forbidden to violate *men’s jobs* in men dominated society. Laura Hapke brings the realities of the day in her book, *Daughters of the Great Depression*:

Americans had engaged in a lengthy and impassioned debate on women in the workplace well before the anxieties of the Great Depression rekindled the nation’s interest in the subject and gave it a new urgency. [As many women gained jobs,] the controversy over feminine labor outside the domestic, or “natural,” sphere informed low to highbrow fiction, mass-circulation magazines and newspapers, and a wealth of reformist exposes and traditionalist studies. (Hapke, 1995: 4)

Even when they remain within the domains of the family without seemingly contributing to the family income or in addition to paid labor, women labor at home as caretakers, cooks, cleaners and other sorts of domestic labor. For instance, Olsen also cares for her younger brothers and sisters and “she remembers from an early age

that sense of never having enough time” and solitude that “has haunted her most of her life, that sense of most women and her own mother feeling starved for time” (Coiner, 1998: 143-144). Apparently, women are supposed to serve the family, the society and the sustainability of the state as a commodity of exchange, laying out their productive and reproductive output.

The tone of Olsen in *Yonnondio* is therefore both Marxist and Feminist. Marxism suggests that people of the Depression are oppressed as a result of class conflict whereas Feminism approaches oppression as based on gender. Olsen tries to create awareness about both dominations whether it appears as capitalism or patriarchy. Marxism provides Olsen the theoretical tools that will clarify not only the oppression of capitalism but also patriarchy. Although classic Marxism approaches the issue of class as a homogeneous unit, it does highlight machinery behind work and production, which turns workers into commodities:

Working-class texts foreground some of the causes—the trappings of an economic system that transforms humans into commodities. Working—class writing unmask the fact of work and production, which is, as Jameson notes, “the very key to genuine historical thinking” and “a secret as carefully concealed as anything else in our culture.” (Coiner, 1995: 254-255)

Likewise, women become transformed into commodities, twice in their case. Not only do they become identified with what they (can) produce but they also become real commodities as reproductive bodies being circulated among male members of society. In fact, the exchange of women seems to be the more ancient form of commodity exchange, which only later informs capitalism. The notion of ownership begins with capturing women after having war with enemies. In other words, women are the first commodities held and circulated by men. Veblen calls this period as “lower barbarian stage” in which women are exchanged as captives like slaves by men. The rise of patriarchy can be observed as the private ownership of women appears as “an extension slavery” (Veblen, 1994: 16).

Being a working class and female member of society helps her depict the reality from personal experience and from both perspectives. Olsen demonstrates how the harsh working conditions of the 1930s initiate a familial conflict causing male members of the working classes to dominate often with violence the female members of the same class, namely their daughters and wives. If the husband is

oppressed or exploited by capitalism, his masculine power over his wife makes her much more miserable than him in the system.

Olsen's experience of class and gender during the Depression years goes back to her life in Omaha. Her parents, Samuel and Ida Lerner, are active socialists. After dropping out of high school, Olsen joins the Young Communist League. Then, she is sent into prison in Kansas City for organizing packinghouse workers. There, she becomes very ill. In 1932, Olsen moves to Faribault, Minnesota. While resting to recover from her illness, she cannot be politically active but finds the freedom to write *Yonnondio*. Olsen is one of few women who can afford to do so. Yet her freedom does not last long: She becomes pregnant and bears a daughter, Karla, at nineteen. Not only do her pregnancy and the ensuing experience of motherhood interrupt her career as a writer, it brings her further economic hardships. She describes her conditions as follows: "We were terribly, terribly poor ... When you [couldn't] pay your rent you just moved" (Coiner, 1998: 145).

Olsen spends the Depression Era bringing up children, doing low-paid jobs, and taking part in Communist Party activities. In 1936 she begins to live with Jack Olsen and has three more daughters. She does a variety of jobs working as a waitress, shaker in the laundry, transcriber in a dairy equipment company, capper of mayonnaise jars, and secretary. Her ambition to write continues though squeezed between the demands of her daily labor. She explains:

Time on the bus, even when I had to stand, was enough; the stolen moments at work, enough; the deep night hours for as long as I could stay awake, after the kids were in bed, after the household tasks were done, sometimes during. It is no accident that the first work I considered publishable began: "I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron." (Coiner, 1998: 146)

Olsen's writing career is interrupted by the facts of being a woman and having a lower-class origin, therefore, spending much of her time for earning money and doing housework, both labors paid none or little because of the conditions of the 1930s, the years of Depression. Olsen is among the first to show the reader what lies behind even the class issue, which itself is almost a taboo in the US, the condition of women among the ranks of the working class, who become oppressed twice, once because of their class and twice because of their gender. She uncovers the witnessed inequality in suffering among all the members of the working classes by laying bare

the patriarchal formations engrained even within the Marxist thought. Olsen thus names the unnamable in her works. Coiner's interpretation on Olsen as a working-class woman writer supports the importance of revealing the masked lives of women because Olsen tries to make working-class women visible, who are unnamed throughout their lives by portraying in her works many of the hardships she experiences first hand. She brings women's domestic labor into the agenda by her narrative and establishes a bridge between class and gender in the Depression Era America. Olsen's texts dealt with in this study are distinctive in a way that they both unveil what is neglected about working-class women's lives and furnish working-class women's literature.

1.2. YONNONDIO: A STORY OF WORKING CLASS MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

No picture, poem, statement, passing them to the future
 Yonnondio! Yonnondio!—unlimn'd they disappear;
 To-day gives place, and faces—the cities, farms, factories
 fade;
 A muffled sonorous sound, a wailing word is borne through
 the air for a moment,
 Then blank and gone and still, and utterly lost.
 From "Yonnondio," Walt Whitman

Tillie Olsen wrote her novel *Yonnondio* in the 1930's, but what she wrote was lost during the years until she found her writings somewhere and published it in 1974. Throughout this time, she got married, had children and was busy with political activism. The novel is named after a poem by Walt Whitman which represents all Native American Indians who are not present. Crenshaw writes that "the word the Iroquois [Native American Tribe] used to address the state, then as Whitman says in his poem, its mere mention 'is itself a dirge'" (Crenshaw, 1995: 177).

Whitman brought a Native American presence into American poetry in "Yonnondio" as if he knew of their disappearance from the American landscape: "Yonnondio! Yonnondio! – unlimn'd they disappear; / ... A muffled sonorous sound, a wailing word ... / Then blank and gone and still, and utterly lost." "Yonnondio" is in fact a fitting title for Olsen's novel for a number of reasons. First,

Olsen describes the lives of men and women who, like many of the Native American tribes, disappear from history as if they have never existed. Furthermore, she writes about the lives of women, “unlimned” not only in the grand narrative of Capitalism but even in that of Marxism. Finally, the indefinite ending of the novel further connects the poem to the novel.

The novel *Yonnondio* is the story of the Holbrooks steeped deep in their poverty. Olsen tells the story of two women’s experiences in a world of horror: Anna and her daughter Mazie. She explores their lives at the center of a man called Jim, the husband and father. Their world is a real nightmare full of oppression that they have to endure. Even though it is difficult enough, to be part of that lower social class as a human being, being women at the bottom of everything is the worst. Jim gets Anna to be his wife, demands her to mother his children, and later has a daughter, which are all part of a possession game in which he is ready to share his daughter with another man, all testifying to the Capitalist practices on women.

The ’30s increase the demands on the working classes and diminishes their expectations to make ends meet. The Holbrooks have their own share from such hardships that mark the era. The family is dragged from place to place in search of jobs and conditions that will provide them with mere livelihood as they move from a Wyoming coal mining town to a farm in Nebraska, and lastly to a meat-packing plant in an industrial town. In each of these places, Anna dreams of a better life not only for herself but also, more importantly, for her children. The demands of motherhood never allow her to dream only for herself; rather, she prioritizes her family even in her dreams for the future.

Anna’s life, from early on, testifies to the workings of capitalist and patriarchal exploitation. Since she is already married at the beginning of the novel, one can assume that an exchange has already taken place between her father and her husband. Later, in her married life, her body and what it has reproduced along with what she has produced have become her husband’s property. She has constantly become impregnated by her husband, for whom her body is a domain of sexual power on which he exercises his property rights. While her multiple pregnancies become a heavy price for Anna both as they jeopardize her health and imprison her at home, they symbolize and seal Jim’s ownership rights over her. However, Jim is not

the only one that claims her body; her children constantly demand her body especially during pregnancies and breastfeeding periods. Under the circumstances, demands of motherhood and being a wife clash: she is not readily available to her husband sexually. She is married to a man who considers her body his property, therefore, compulsory pregnancy brings some issues for Anna's "owner." She already has three children and she is not able to feed and provide clothing for them. The fourth one creates some more misery to both her and other children. Secondly, in the role of a mother, she has to give up everything related to being an entity which has an identity, so she is reduced to only a bundle of pain. Apart from being a wife to a man, Anna is forced to be a mother as part of a regular process of commodification. Jim does not give her the help or respect she deserves because the capitalist value system has the imperative to degrade her. For Anna, therefore, her pregnancy is not an incident to enjoy but a reason for losing her hopes. Anna's condition will definitely affect everyone in the family since she has to worry about earning money, fighting against illness, suffering from the violence of her husband and more importantly worrying about her children: "What is happening to them, what will be? My babies, my children. . . . Heavy to take up again, being poor and a mother" (Olsen, 1974: 109-110).

Anna is exploited in many ways under the name of motherhood. Being a wife and a mother is something similar to being a slave. In slavery, people are unpaid workers for some others; likewise, a woman is employed as domestic service for free as wife and mother. Women produce and reproduce for their husbands and children at home in required services of the discourse of wifedom and motherhood that range from meeting sexual needs of men to giving birth to their children, and to taking care of them and doing domestic work.

Motherhood connects women to male-domination in such a way that erases women's worth and selfhood even for themselves. The socially constructed "knowledge" of motherhood based on self-sacrifice and self-evasion seem to be intuitive results of motherhood rather than definitions enforced by patriarchy, which defines manhood in opposition to womanhood:

Women's claims to motherwise common sense do not suggest their collective autonomy and power because women's knowledge is not acquired as a group in opposition to men, but, appears to be

individually intuited. Thus, the gender conflicts that exist are made invisible. (Luttrell, 1989: 42)

Thus, initiated by patriarchal discourse, the motherhood as a discourse is so well-established even among women that they themselves bear and reproduce all the consequences caused by it. They find themselves in a paradox of escaping or enduring, but there is no way for them to leave their children behind. Women, especially after they become mothers, are thus confined in a double-bind. The emancipation of women from the responsibilities of motherhood seems far-fetched. Women accept their mothering as something that is very natural so both women and men take motherhood for granted.

Just as the discourse of motherhood makes women's labor related to childbirth intuitive and thus unpaid, their working outside the house to support the family is ignored although the facts testify to the significant numbers of women working outside home. Hembold points out

[w]hether women contributed unwaged but necessary labor or earned wages, whether they lived in preindustrial or industrial societies, women's economic significance was central to their families' survival. Thus, this model counters the myths that women do not work and that the "private" family is separate from the "public" economy. (Hembold, 1987: 632)

Anna's poverty and lack of education increase her invisibility and insignificance. Coupled with the duties of motherhood, they all disarm her and isolate her from the world around her. In fact, being poor and uneducated is a deadly couple in coping with this miserable world with her children alone. Anna really wants to do something, but no one is out there to give her a hand. The society she is in sees them like animals to be ignored. According to the doctor who examines her, she is one of those: "damn fools who ought to be sterilized" (Olsen, 1974: 101).

The degrading images of lower classes are commonplaces not only among the capitalists but also among the educated members of the upper classes, such as the doctor in the example above. Such judgments on the lower classes stem partly from the lack of hygiene at poor homes. Kimberly S. Drake sheds light on the purpose of Olsen's including other oppressive forces on women of working-class: "Working-class homes are 'soiled and exhausted,' just like the women who work to manage them, but they are soiled by oppressive social and economic conditions, not intrinsically, Olsen subtly suggests here" (Drake, 2011: 146). Olsen's plan here is, by

showing the conditions of lower class people face during the Depression Era, to insert her socialist ideology into the novel under the story of Anna, an oppressed women who is in the middle of poverty and patriarchy. The system of exchange that turns women into commodity thus results in conditions marked by extreme deprivation and lack, even of health and hygiene. After all, if women die due to such circumstances, a new one replaces her.

Although Anna may be taken to be a weak character in many respects under the ruling power of men, she manages to stand as a courageous poor woman. She does the laundry job and has a garden to raise fresh food for the family in order not to give up. However, all her efforts fail leading her to reject a life like that. She wants to go out a lot as if she has no domestic responsibilities. In nature where she is not a mother, wife or daughter, away from the harshness and frustration of the house, she finds herself: “a need was in her to be out under a boundless sky, in unconfined air, not between walls, under the roof of a house” (Olsen, 1974: 123). For the first time in her life, with the social and economic ties that bind her to patriarchal relations losing their significance, Anna feels free from being a property: “a separation, a distance—something broken and new and tremulous—had been born in her ...” (Olsen, 1974: 123). Yet this experience cannot be hers forever. She soon returns home, to the environment that confines her. Probably because the anguish of return is much harder, she does not want her daughter to know the feeling of freedom. When her daughter Mazie wants to get out of the *house*, Anna makes her stay at home and help her with the housework and the kids, as part of her education to become a wife and mother:

“Shut that kid up”, Anna demanded of Mazie. “I dont care how.” Mazie gathered him up, with a bread crust for him to suck on, and a diaper, and slipped out ... The baby lay warm in her other arm, there where it ached from carrying him. (Olsen, 1974: 25)

If Mazie tastes this natural freedom, she will never become part of the exchange system, the price of which is becoming a loose woman.

Mazie is six years old when she does all this stuff at home for the sake of helping her mother. While her five-year-old brother Will plays around as normal children do, as a girl child she cannot do that. Because of her gender, her natural inclinations to play are repressed as she is an apprentice trained to become a woman, a mother, and a wife. During this apprenticeship process, ironically, her master is not

his father but her mother. Tired to the bone, Anna relegates the duties of feeding the younger children to Mazie:

Mazie awoke suddenly ... Then she dressed and changed the baby's diaper ... and went into the kitchen.

"Ma, what's there to eat?"

"Coffee. It's on the stove. Wake Will and Ben and don't bother me."

(Olsen, 1974: 4)

Despite the insignificant one year of difference between them, Mazie "mothers" Willie who sleeps on her shoulder and the youngest boy Ben finds his place tellingly on her lap: "Willie slumbered against Mazie's shoulder. Ben drowsily had his head in her lap" (Olsen, 1974: 38).

Anna inadvertently teaches Mazie how to be a woman, in other words, how to be a commodity of exchange. In this process, when Jim is not around Anna replaces him as authority that represents the interests of patriarchy. She mimics his power and even cruelty especially in her dealings with Mazie. Even if the ruling power of the family, Jim, is absent, his substitute Anna takes over his place and becomes the acting power. What is worth noting here is that the authority and power that Anna assumes are never her own; she simply acts *on behalf of* her husband. Not only does she reproduce *for* the system she reproduces *the* system.

This power relationship in the apprenticeship of daughters is something similar to one the state applies to its people. The family is the microcosm of the state in order to control people, mainly women. The father is the representative controller of the state as an authority in the family. Fernbach also sheds light upon the milestone the state is built on by proposing that "the state was historically created as the institutionalization of masculine violence" (Connell, 1987: 128).

Power in the state is strategic because there is more at issue than a simple distribution of benefits. The state has a constitutive role in forming and reforming social patterns. For instance the state at a superficial level supports marriage through taxation incentives, housing and so on. At a more fundamental level marriage is itself a legal action and a legal relationship, defined, regulated and to some extent enforced by the state. (Connell, 1987: 130)

The imprisonment of women at home is the final stage of commodification. A man takes a woman from her father as part of exchanging commodities so that the man tries to get best from the woman. The commodification of women depends on the isolation of women. Anna, in a way, is married to her home, doing the cleaning,

cooking, laundering, and raising children. Jim, on the other hand, is a real practitioner of freedom, and he returns to home whenever he likes. Being identified with the home, Anna has ironically no place at home because she, herself, turned into a property, she literally *is* the home itself. Lash and Palmer remind us of the early twentieth century notion that “women lived best by living for others,” and this can only be done in “dedication to homes, to husbands, to children, and to community” (quoted in Drake, 2011: 148). Once such erasure becomes discursively maintained and internalized by women themselves, women are ready to be physically, mentally and emotionally consumed as commodities, by oppressors in different shapes and for different purposes:

Once Anna had questioned him timidly concerning his work; [Jim] struck her on the mouth with a bellow of “Shut your damn trap.” (Olsen, 1974: 9)

Jim threatened in a violent rage, while Anna only stared at him, almost paralyzed, “and stop looking at me like a stuck pig.” (Olsen, 1974: 10)

Jim’s violence against his wife rises when Anna questions his work, which is a delicate issue for men. He goes to town and gets dead drunk on the payday before home. A similar violent reaction appears again in the later part of the story: “just let her say one word to me and I’ll bash her head in” (Olsen, 1974: 88). Whenever Anna talks about the needs of the family, she has to face with Jim’s way of communication: verbal aggression and violence.

Anna’s desire to get out of the house, in fact, means that she wishes to separate herself from being a wife and mother, in other words, as commodity. Olsen’s political message is made clear in Anna’s rejection of her roles of wife and mother in a traditional sense. However, Anna’s getting away from housework gets the attention of Jim though she does laundry work for others. He repeatedly associates Anna with the domestic duties, which she neglects: “You aint well enough to keep us ‘uns clean, ... I said you aint well enough for what you got to do for us ‘uns now. ... You fixin to get sick on me again? Ferget that launderin, Anna ... Ferget it, Anna. Ferget that launderin, too” (Olsen, 1974: 134-137). Anna’s negligence of housework is totally unacceptable, because beyond these responsibilities, she has no existence: “She began to neglect the already neglected house to go out and weed and work in the garden” (Olsen, 1974: 133). Even in the garden, Ben, her little son reminds her of her domestic duties of motherhood and

womanhood: “‘Let’s go in, Momma,’ pulling at her in sudden fright. ‘We got to go in. Its supertime. Don’t talk goofy, Momma. Mommas always goes in’” (Olsen, 1974: 139).

Anna cannot find a way to alleviate her trapped position. She gradually loses both her physical and mental strength, a case that becomes totally intensified after she is raped by Jim and miscarries her baby as a result. She feels weak, has almost no energy to live, let alone understand her conditions. The house with which she is identified turns into a metaphorical coffin for her. As she gets isolated and lost, in her paralyzed mind, she cares for neither Jim nor the children. She begins to live in a world totally isolated from the grim reality that surrounds her. When she is at home with her children, her very state can be understood in these lines:

... old songs would start from her lips and tears well from her eyes, tears she did not even know she was weeping, till Ben would come in, standing lacerated till she would notice him and ask, What’s the matter, Benjy, did you hurt yourself?” and he could come over to her and say gently, “Mommy, you’re crying.” (Olsen, 1974: 81)

When she can free herself from the weariness of domestic duties, however, Anna also becomes a new person: When she walks around the street with her children to find some vegetables, she is not a mother figure any more. Instead, she gets the taste of her freedom: “‘I dont remember since when I been out just walkin like this’” (Olsen, 1974: 140). What Mazie discovers is “a remote, shining look ... on her face, as if she had forgotten them, as if she had become someone else, was not their mother anymore” (Olsen, 1974: 144). The final words of Part Seven summarize this feeling: “Never again, but once, did Mazie see that look—the other look—on her mother’s face” (Olsen, 1974: 147). Olsen wants Anna to believe in the new role she is about to play, but society pushes her down to a stone hard reality. But the house is waiting for her, which means getting back to her duties of motherhood and wifehood.

Being squeezed into a role that denies her selfhood and freedom, Anna finds herself moving like a robot. When she does the cleaning, “Anna’s knees begin to tremble. No, she dare not sit,” and she says to herself “*You know if you set down you’ll never make yourself get up again*” (Olsen, 1974: 186). She forces herself to become numb to the excruciating heat. In fact, these trying external conditions metaphorically describe her state of mind. She wavers between giving in to desperation and finding hope. When she finally manages to get out of her distressed

psychology towards some hope, she also feels the wind cool the air. Thus she interprets Bess's little play with the jar lid as a sign that there is still reason for hope and she can, like her, let go of everything at will. Watching Bess, suddenly a vague illumination comes over her:

Bang!

Bess who has been fingering a fruit-jar lid—absently, heedlessly drops it—aimlessly groping across the table, reclaims it again. Lightning in her brain. She releases, grabs, releases, grabs. I can do. Bang! I did that. I can do. I! A look of neanderthal concentration is on her face. That noise! In triumphant, astounded joy she clashes the lid down. Bang, slam, whack. Release, grab, slam, bang, bang. Centuries of human drive work in her; human ecstasy of achievement; satisfaction deep and fundamental as sex: *I can do, I use my powers; !! !! Wilder, madder, happier, the bangs. The fetid fevered air rings with Anna's, Mazie's, Ben's laughter; Bess's toothless, triumphant crow. Heat misery, rash misery transcended.* (Olsen, 1974: 190-191)

Anna is in desperate need to find solace in something whether it is the wind that cools her body temporarily, or her baby's instinctive joy at discovering her powers of control. Testifying to her total loss of control and being beset by forces that she can neither control nor understand, the outside world thus becomes a world of signs in which Anna looks for comfort. Observing Ben's effort to achieve something reminds Anna of being alive and having power to overwhelm the hardships in the house like Olsen's socialist ideals of uprising against the status quo.

Anna's desperate situation has a direct impact on Mazie the most. Although she is only six, she has frequent psychological ups and downs. The more she sees her mother helpless, the more difficulty she feels to adapt herself to the world. For a six-year-old child, Mazie has fears which drag her into hopelessness and confusion. She cannot distinguish what is real and what is not when she is outside in the streets.

The long street stretched infinite, a space that could never be finished travelling over, distorted buildings blocking each side. There was no sky only a slab of one, draining colors, vanishing into darkness.

She put her arm around a lamppost. Its solidity was fearful to her. As for the first time she saw the street and people, and it entered into her like death. (Olsen, 1974: 99)

The streets in which she tries to seek refuge "enter into her like death" because, like home, Mazie sees in them the solidity that will not bend to her will. The streets lined by "distorted buildings" providing no sight of sky, become, albeit wider, an extension of the limitations of the home.

Caught up within the snares of patriarchy which designates the place of women as home, Mazie can never truly transcend the boundaries of home, her prison. Only the outdoors can provide a girl with the freedom she needs. The twelve-year-old girl Ginella, a friend of Mazie's, temporarily achieves this sense of freedom, for she moves into a tent on the top of a dirt hill, where she imagines herself to be anything she desires: "On the dump there is Ginella's tent, Ginella's mansion, Ginella's roadhouse, Ginella's pagan island, Ginella's palace, whatever Ginella wills it to be that day" (Olsen, 1974: 157). Olsen tries show that even a dump could provide a place of freedom for women. Here, Ginella creates her own world and shares some romance stories such as "*Sheik of Araby. Broken Blossoms. Slaves of Love. She Stopped at Nothing. The Fast Life. The Easiest Way*" (Olsen, 1974: 158). Unlike Anna and Mazie who have no place of their own, Ginella enjoys being whatever she wants. But outdoors cannot belong to girls or women forever; the freedom that comes with the openness of space is short lived. Ginella's freedom likewise lasts until the heat hits the city for some days. Ginella gets ill and leaves her tent for her mother's house where heavy load of housework is waiting. Although Ginella is ill, she has to work at home. The boundaries of home designate the end of the freedom and the fantasy world; at home even real excuses are treated as fantasies and fantasies have taste of the harshness of reality. While she had fantasized about the luxuries of an exotic life outside, now Ginella's fantasies are of "*Slave of Desire. Forbidden Paradise.*" A world in which she can be what she wants is only possible in her dreams: "Classy, I want to be classy," she whispers to herself (Olsen, 1974: 184).

At home, both women and young girls lack space of their own. Although the female characters are associated with the home and domesticity, they have no place in these homes. When Anna spills a perfume bottle Mazie made herself for Ginella, Mazie gets angry because Anna has taken the bottle out of the cupboard where it belongs, reprimanding Mazie: "next time dont keep it where it dont belong" (Olsen, 1974: 178). Mazie's response testifies to her sense of being dispossessed, which in Ginella's case is resolved by seeking in refuge in a fantasy world: "I don't have no place ... *Why dont I have no place?*" (Olsen, 1974: 178). She is a part of the house but cannot find even a small place for her. Although the home seems to be a feminine

space, its dominant force is not women; a bigger presence lurks behind the seemingly female authority even at home. Women's responsibilities at home are not accompanied with the authority that should come with it. When Mazie's mother wants her to "get lunch," for example, Mazie protests:

"Why is it always me that has to help? How come Will gets to play?"

"Will's a boy."

"Why couldn't *I* get borned a boy?" (Olsen, 1974: 177)

Mazie's protest is perfectly well taken, for it is *because* she is a girl and Will is a boy that she has to help set the lunch while Will can play outside. Because girls have use value at home, they are not allowed to get out of it. While Will and Ben enjoy their time outside as little men, Ginella and Mazie can only taste that freedom in their escapes. Ginella and Mazie are candidates for perfect domesticated women and their unwillingness is always criticized by their mothers. Both refuse to be constructed into the role of women. Ginella has a tent where she spends time alone temporarily, and Mazie finds herself a place in nature whenever she could get the chance to get away from her parents.

Home and domesticity thus stand for the constructedness of womanhood and motherhood. For once outside the home and away from the restrictions of civilized space, female characters can be themselves, free from the roles attached to them. When Mazie is in nature, she is neither a mother—nor a wife-to-be:

Once, hungry, degraded, after a beating from Anna for some mischief, Mazie lay by the roadside, bedded in the clover, belly down, feeling the earth push back against her, feeling the patterns of clover smell twine into her nostrils till she was drugged with the scent. The soft plodding of a buggy gathered into her consciousness.

She turned on her back. Above the stars clustered, low, bright, still winged. As if she had never seen them before. Her breath caught. The buggy was stopping, an old man got out. Old Man Coldwell. (Olsen, 1974: 45)

Old Man Coldwell, Olsen's nature hero has some resemblance with Walt Whitman, whose poem provides the title for Olsen's novel *Yonnondio*. He is a wise old man loving books and nature. Coldwell teaches Mazie how to discover life through books in order to become a self-confident girl. He is the only adult who treats her as nothing but a six-year-old child with the inner power to decide what and who she wants to be: "Whatever happens, remember," he advises her, "everything, the nourishment, the roots you need, are where you are now" (Olsen, 1974: 53).

Being with Coldwell is the second best place for her after nature. With him, for the first time she feels someone totally new: “Mazie sits with a sense of non-being over her—of it being someone other than she is sitting there...” (Olsen, 1974: 54). Her relationship with Coldwell develops quickly; he wants to introduce Mazie to books because they will provide for her an understanding of life that will help her realize her potential. When he dies, he leaves the books of Wilde, Dickens, Blake and Greek myths to her. But as if to abort Mazie’s chances, Jim sells the books for half a dollar. A man of patriarchy destroys the hope of a little girl whereas the wise man Coldwell calls her “my wonder-gazer companion” (Olsen, 1974: 54). Mazie’s short enlightenment of not being identified by the notions of patriarchy, being a daughter of exchange, did not happen in her mother’s life. On the other hand, Mazie’s chance of being free from patriarchy ends with her father’s interference. Thus, Mazie’s prospects of free agency and selfhood abruptly end as her father claims his rights of ownership over her in the exchange system, which will turn her into a prospect wife and mother.

The novel ends in a vague way without reaching a specific destination for either Anna or Mazie. Constance Coiner analyzes this vague conclusion of the novel by pointing out some parallelism between Anna Holbrook and Tillie Olsen. Olsen “recounts a dream her mother had, while dying, of the universal human baby, ‘holy with *possibility*,’ that Bess so apparently represents” (emphasis added in Olsen, 1974: 178). The baby girl Bess has no identity, ““the human baby, before we are misshapen, crucified into a sex, a color, a walk of life, a nationality” (Olsen, 1974: 178). Bess is only a baby, a human form in-becoming, without any labels attached. She represents the hope of resisting the constructions such as gender, class, or race. She is not forced into any of the identities that become prison houses for the oppressed, especially for women. The bang of the jar lid Bess causes to drop is the cry of women who do not wish to be under the strain of patriarchy. Bess reminds Anna of the full potential of what she could be outside the definitions of daughter, wife and mother; the baby gives Anna a moment of glimpse beyond the patriarchal identities of women, which transform them from free individuals into commodities in the system of exchange.

Having assigned a role and not being able to move is also a problem for Olsen. A creative and lucrative writer like her was prevented from publishing her novel after about forty years just because of her being trapped into motherhood. Olsen recognizes that practice of motherhood is a role played by women to satisfy the needs of men who own them. Therefore, a happy ending can never be seen for Anna and her daughter Mazie because such a conclusion is not for them as long as they are objects of exchange among men.

Anna Holbrook and Tillie Olsen's experiences show some similarities in that, in the name of exploration of the exchange of women, what Anna lives as a mother reflects the experiences of Olsen as a wife. Marriage as an institution brings lower class women face to face with harsher economic conditions. Under these conditions, it is quite normal to see poor married women as victims of the value-driven capitalist system. Working class men are, therefore, ready to abuse women just because they see them inferior as their wives, especially their commodity. For example, there are mainly two roles of women as views and mothers in Jim Holbrook's mind: "what other earthly use can a woman have, I'd like to know?" (Olsen, 1974: 2). However, these two usages of Anna sometimes clash in Jim's world. He does not want to share Anna's body with his children, especially, when she is pregnant, breastfeeding or has an abortion, which makes her sexually unavailable to him.

When it is time to breastfeed, Anna's body is claimed by the baby. It means Anna's body now turns into an object of exchange between the baby and the father, which makes Jim wait his turn. Breastfeeding means consuming a woman's body without paying for it. Both the baby and the father want to consume her body for their own desires. Fasick suggests in her article "The Edible Woman: Eating and Breast-Feeding in the Novels of Samuel Richardson":

Doctors and moralists argued that the health and well-being of the child required maternal feeding. However, since breast-feeding mothers were expected to abstain from sexual activity, the practice went against the wishes of husbands who feared interference with their sexual pleasure. In this conflict, the needs of the child are pitted against the desires of the father. (Fasick, 1993: 19)

Likewise, Gökçen argues: "Since breastfeeding women were advised to abstain from sexual intercourse the feeding 'rights' of the baby often clashed with the conjugal rights of the husband" (Gökçen, 2015: 196). This is the reason why Jim

does not want to limit his sexual desire and share her body with the children. Anna's body never belongs to herself, it is owned either by Jim or her children as Irigaray suggests: "Culture has taught us to consume the mother's body—natural and spiritual—without being indebted" (quoted in Orr, 1993: 209). The conflict of interests between children and husband in the exchange of women has always arisen when it comes to consume her body. Children need their mother's body when they are babies whereas their father should wait his turn to have it during this period. The body of the women then becomes a zone of conflict.

The female body is treated with utmost brutality by those who claim its ownership. Jim is always drunk and beats both Anna and the children: "He had nothing but heavy blows for the children, and he struck Anna too often to remember... in a blind rage, as if it were some devil she was exorcising" (Olsen, 1974: 8). Olsen demonstrates the helplessness and sense of entrapment such women feel in the face of such brutality. Jim insists that she does not help in spite of her being "Kitchen help, farm help, milkin help, washwoman help. And motherin too" (Olsen, 1974: 55). All this domestic work Anna does is taken for granted by Jim, a domestic representative of patriarchy. Jim does not care about Anna's labor because he never thinks it as something valuable. In fact, if he wants to get somebody else to do the errand, he will definitely pay for it. Anna is never paid for the things she does because they are pre-assigned her in terms of the rules of patriarchy. Since for the male-dominated mentality, domestic labor seems to be an extension of the female body, the heaviness of this work load never bothers Jim. Instead of empathizing with the trials and tribulations of the five pregnancies and four childbirths his wife has endured because of him, he talks about her as if she has no value: "'Goddam woman—what's the matter with her anyhow? Dont even have a wife that's a wife anymore—just let her say one word to me and I'll bash her head in'" (Olsen, 1974: 81). Jim starts seeing the house "like a smothering grave," never noticing what that house means to Anna.

Luce Irigaray divides the woman's body into two distinctive halves, "natural" and "exchangeable" ones. Anna's natural body is the property of Jim, and he has the right to do anything he likes: "Anna's body [is] bloated, violated, and ill from pregnancy, rape and miscarriage" (Entin, 2004: 75). Raping is one of the most

violent practices he exercises on her. She thus has no right on her own body. However, Olsen also sees Jim as a victim of capitalist system since, even though he rapes Anna and causes her miscarriage, he is not totally incapable of affection. After getting a job at a meat packing house, Jim rushes home to celebrate the Independence Day, but Olsen interferes. Not being aware of a victim of capitalist patriarchal society, Anna asks, ““What independence we got to celebrate?”” (Olsen, 1974: 139). Olsen wants to emphasize that there is no independence for women of such classes at all. Capitalism provides them with a series of ideological pre-installed roles, so they, especially men, can practice this as if they have value like commodities.

In the role of the husband, Jim, the owner, has the right to do anything to his wife, the object. This commodification of women can also be seen in his dealings with his daughter. Jim’s ownership and commodification of Anna are extended to those of Mazie. He behaves so unthinkingly to oppress Anna and Mazie that the result becomes devastating as in the rape scene in the novel. Mazie witnesses that her father rapes her mother. For an eight-year-old girl this experience is unforgettable. She cannot do anything to stop him as she is too young and weak to help her sick and pregnant mother:

What was happening? It seemed the darkness bristled with blood, with horror. The shaking of the bed as if someone were sobbing in it, the wind burrowing through the leaves filling the night with a shaken sound. And the words, the words leaping.

“Dont, Jim, dont. It hurts too much. No, Jim, no.”

“Cant screw my own wife. Expect me to go to a whore? Hold still.”
(Olsen, 1974: 107-108)

As a result of this rape, Anna miscarries in front of Mazie on the kitchen floor. She gets out of the house to escape from all these, but she cannot get away with them. Such violence increases Mazie’s sense of suffocation but she is unable to escape it. Her situation is no different than the situation of livestock as both are reduced to commodities. Like these domesticated animals, she has no shelter other than her father’s. Therefore, her life becomes a nightmare. Without her father’s shelter, “... the world was so cold,” and it is “useless to resist, to cry out, because it is a voiceless dream to be endured” (Olsen, 1974: 85).

Olsen deliberately describes this scene so vividly that the horror of male cruelty strikes the reader as both wife and daughter become its helpless victims. The doctor who comes after Anna’s miscarriage has a patronizing attitude to lower class

people like them because they are poor and uneducated: ““Your wife’s a sick person. Needs all the rest she can get ... So does the baby”” (Olsen, 1974: 111). Then, Jim goes out to find Mazie, the other commodity, to tell her

“Were you scared, were you scared? Mama’s sick, awful sick, Big-eyes. Awful sick, and the doctor says she needs everything she cant get, tells me everything she needs but not how to get it.” (cry from a million swollen throats), ... (Olsen, 1974: 112)

Jim’s sense of domination over his woman’s body finds expression in forced sex or rape. As an oppressed member of his social class and being exploited by his boss, he has to prove his manly power over what he owns. Early on the same day, his boss shows his dissatisfaction with the work Jim and the other workers do by insulting them, ““so ten foot is all you women made today, huh? What I want to know is what the hell you do when you’re on the job, suck titty?”” (Olsen, 1974: 86). These words cannot be digested easily by any man, especially a married man like Jim. While drinking with Tracy, an unmarried man, his mind is occupied with this thought all night: ““All right for Tracy to talk, he doesn’t have a wife and brats. But no man has any business having ’em that wants to say a man. Having to take all that crap”” (Olsen, 1974: 87). Drunk that night, he goes home and rapes his wife since he cannot do anything but showing *himself* who is the boss. The irony is that Tracy has no woman to use and he is the only man who challenges the boss and quits the job.

In the rape event, Anna plays a crucial role. In Jim’s unconscious mind, he feels that he cannot react to the boss like Tracy does because he has the responsibility for a wife and children. Although Jim thinks he has to bear the burden of a wife and family, in fact it is Anna who prevents Jim from losing his job or other possible worse outcomes. Next to Anna’s silent power, his helplessness can be observed throughout the novel. For example, he is not able to protect Mazie from Sheen McEvoy, a mine worker who believes that the mine is a woman: “The mine was hungry for a child; she was reaching her thousand arms for it. ‘She only takes men ‘cause she aint got kids. All women want kids” (Olsen, 1974: 15). McEvoy accuses the mine, the woman, of killing men. In order to stop this, he tries to exchange Mazie with the lives of men. This specific incident proves that Mazie as a daughter both has an exchange value in Jim’s possession and practical value in McEvoy’s patriarchal mind.

McEvoy's act is based on thousands of years of human practice called sacrifice. It is based on giving up a part of the property that humans have acquired from Nature, a female entity. Sacrificial practices are based on the idea of ownership since one cannot give up of what he already has not claimed ownership. For this reason, human sacrificial victims are those who are assumed the weakest and unable to resist. Mazie, both as a female and child, is best fitted to be a sacrifice in order to stop the blind punishment that is assumed to come from Nature to the stronger and more powerful members of society. She is the not only an exchangeable body but also an expendable one. It is worth remembering at this point that Antique and early Middle Ages witnessed heated arguments about mining. While some saw mining as an unethical violation of female Nature as mines and minerals were considered to be the fetuses of lower forms of life waiting to be born in the womb of the Earth, some others had already commodified the Earth and Nature as a property (Merchant, 1980: 29-41).

Claiming ownership of Nature has resulted in the exploitation of humans as well. The first exploited bodies are female bodies, but the members of males are added to these exploitable bodies as working classes. In addition to pointing out the oppression to which women are exposed, Olsen draws a clear picture of lower-class family world by the help of Wyoming. There, the men are miserable in the mines, which are early graves for them. The women and children are vigilant to the sound of the whistle which signals the death of miner.

In one of the explosions, Jim is able to survive and decides that they as family will move to a farm. This decision may be a chance for them to have a better life because Anna also does housecleaning and laundry for others. But these efforts are not adequate to feed their children. The Holbrooks' new life on a Dakota farm begins with a relief but the oppression the capitalist system exerts follows them. Olsen demonstrates how the lower classes have become uprooted and without a place they can call home as a result of constant exploitation and abuse. Then, their next stop is an industrial city where Olsen portrays the capitalist environment as vivid as possible:

Monster trucks shake by, streetcars plunge, machinery rasps and shrieks. Far underneath thinly quiver the human noises—weeping and scolding and tired words that slip out in monosyllables and are as if

never spoken; sighs of lust, and guttural, the sighs of weariness; laughter sometimes, but this sound can scarcely be called human, not even in the mouths of children. A fog of stink smothers down over it all- so solid, so impenetrable, no other smell lives beside it. Human smells, crotch and underarm sweat, the smell of cooking or of burning, all are drowned under, merged into the vast unmoving stench. (Olsen, 1974: 63)

The industrial city is dominated by the machines which swallow human voices and turn them into incomprehensible utterances. Thus it appears as a further force that dehumanizes and ejects workers out of its mechanical system. Mazie, for example, is knocked down by a drunk in the street and called a “stinking little bitch.” The earlier inhabitants of that place do not want foreigners to take their jobs. Olsen expresses her political views about the misery the capitalist society caused:

Perhaps it frightens you as you walk by, the travail of the trees against the dark crouched house, the weak tipsy light in the window, the man sitting on the porch, menacing weariness riding his flesh like despair. And you hurry along, afraid of the black forsaken streets, and look no more. But there are those who have looked too much through such windows, seeing the pain on everything, the darkening pain twisting and writhing over the faces, over and about the lamp like a wind to blow the flame out. (Olsen, 1974: 95)

Olsen takes us to the very heart of industry and exposes the conditions the workers endure to us. Since she and her father worked in meat-packing plants, she has firsthand knowledge of such places. These places show not only the exploitation of the working classes as a whole but they also testify to the sexism embedded within the working classes. Both the capitalists and the male members of the working classes collaborate in the exploitation of working class women. For example, young girls and women work in places “where men will not work” (Olsen, 1974: 152). It is a place of “death, dismemberment, and vanishing entire for harmless creatures meek and mild, frisky, wild—Hell” (Olsen, 1974: 153).

The Depression years increase the oppression of women with the added burden of poverty. Capitalism dehumanizes women of working classes even further than the male members of the same classes. Women’s production and reproduction are exploited and appropriated by the system in such a way that they turn into helpless tools of the system. They experience exploitation in the family, which mimics the workings of capitalism in the work place. Neither their wages nor their children belong to them. As such, they experience the ultimate level of alienation, for

in addition to the alienation of male working class based only on production, the female *bodies* virtually belong to either their fathers, their husbands, or their children. Thus, their case exceeds economic exploitation: *they* are reduced to commodities. The continuity of their economic and bodily appropriation is guaranteed by their ideological alienation, a case that we can observe especially in Olsen's mothers, for they become the first tools of patriarchal shaping of younger women, who might resist becoming commodities.

Olsen describes the helplessness of her characters rather than provide the reader with promises of change for the better. It is for this reason that the ending of *Yonnondio* leaves us at uncertainty. Like Anna, for whom the future "loomed gigantic beyond her, impossible ever to achieve, beyond any effort of doing of hers: that task of making a better life for her children to which her being was bound" (Olsen, 1974: 127), the novel ends with expectation for a distant future.

CHAPTER TWO

TELL ME A RIDDLE: RELUCTANT STORYTELLERS, STORIES LOST IN RIDDLES

The 1950s mark the beginning of the most prolific years in Olsen's career as a writer. A collection of stories called *Tell Me a Riddle*, which consists of "I Stand Here Ironing", "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" "O Yes," and "Tell Me a Riddle" respectively, was written in these periods although its publication date is delayed until 1962. In the stories, class and gender issues take the center stage, foregrounding mother, wife and daughter. Unlike *Yonnondio*, in which poverty is the backbone of the storyline, in *Tell Me a Riddle* Olsen's themes gain a more personal tone that focuses in more detail on the inner dynamics of the family relationships of her characters, a change probably due to the lapse in time between the publication of her first novel and this next phase of publications. Although Olsen portrays different formations of families in each story in the collection, what they all have in common is the focus on the women, mothers and daughters. While she is telling the story of a single mother and a troubled daughter in "I Stand Here Ironing," she tells the story of a single lost man who desires to have a family in "Hey Sailor, What Ship?", a story of a conflicted mother and a daughter in cultural dilemma in "O Yes," and a story of whole bunch of children, grandchildren of an old couple in "Tell Me a Riddle." In each story Olsen voices the frustrations, desperations and dilemmas of women trapped in roles that do not fit them.

2.1. "I STAND HERE IRONING": RAISIN' DAUGHTERS IN THE SUN

"I Stand Here Ironing" includes the inner monologue of a mother who finds herself confronted with the choices she has made in raising her first child, Emily. This interior monologue is prompted by a call the narrator gets from Emily's school, telling she needs help. The call makes the narrator, a mother of five children deserted by her first husband soon after Emily's birth, think about Emily's past, as her daughter shares it with her own. The process of remembering almost imitates the back and forth moves of the iron in her hand. The story is in fact a monologue of a

mother who reconciles herself to her past deeds. She expresses her mistakes and tries to reach a stage of forgiveness by questioning herself.

The first part of the process is the narrator's thoughts about her daughter Emily. She asks the questions herself: What has happened to Emily? Why has her life changed? The answers to these questions lie behind the fact that her father leaves them when she is eight months old. As a single mother struggling to make a living, the narrator has to go to work and let another woman look after Emily. Even though she tries to be with her baby as much as she can, the conditions are beyond her control. Unable to make time for the care of her daughter, the narrator has to consent to send Emily to live with her father's family. Therefore, Emily's early life is spent under the care of grandparents, institutions and caretakers, who fail to recognize the "miracle" (Olsen, 2013: 6) she has been to her mother and do not give her the care that she deserves. When Emily returns home after some years, her mother can hardly recognize her because of her weakness and illness. She is no longer the beautiful little baby that the narrator remembers, for "all the baby loveliness" (Olsen, 2013: 6) of had gone out of her.

Emily's emotional isolation results from her separation from her mother either at her father's family or worse, at institutions where she has to spend part of her childhood. That long time causes Emily incurable wounds, especially during the period of eight months at a "convalescent home" (Olsen, 2013: 8) during which she is not allowed to get her mother's letters in case there might be germs from her parents. Emily feels so distanced from her mother after this that she does not even respond her calls for a hug.

Another separation between the mother and Emily takes place when she is again sent to her father's family. This exchange process suddenly has a new direction since the narrator brings into Emily's life a "new daddy," (Olsen, 2013: 8) which, though a happier turn in the mother's life, makes Emily's life more difficult and complicated. After Emily's return, with added responsibilities of other children and a husband, the narrator is still engulfed in making a living. Although no longer a single mother, she is still trying to manage with the extra burdens of a new family. As the oldest child, who stands on the margins of this new family, Emily pays the biggest price. How much damage she has done to Emily is so apparent in the old man's

gentle words, one of her neighbors: "You should smile at Emily more when you look at her" (Olsen, 2013: 8). The inner response of her is again like this: "What was in my face when I looked at her? I loved her. There were all the acts of love." Upon this comment, however, she later points out that she smiled at other children more, which Emily has received no such affection even from her.

After Emily is back home to live her new family, mother and her husband Bill, the narrator remembers, some nights she goes out with her husband, leaving Emily alone at home. They justify this, thinking and telling her that "she was old enough" (Olsen, 2013: 8). Emily never protests, but everything about her speaks her fear and loneliness. She throws the clock on the floor not to hear its sound. During one of the nights, she calls for her mother three times but she does not answer. Emily's sense of loneliness and isolation increases with the birth of her sister, Susan. After her new baby, with her divided responsibilities the narrator neglects Emily further, failing to pay enough attention to Emily even if she is ill, though she is always there to get up when the baby needs care at nights. She feels a little guilty for not sitting with Emily by saying this deceptive line: "twice, only twice when I have to get up for Susan anyhow" (Olsen, 2013: 8). Later she exactly remembers what she says, "twice, only twice," not many times. Emily becomes hostile to Susan because she thinks she gets all the attention of their mother. The mother again confesses that she sees in Susan the gorgeous looks of "Shirley Temple," the angelic child actress of the time, but in Emily, only the father who had left them. She expresses her inability to pay equally loving concern to Emily: "that poisonous feeling between [Emily and Susan], that terrible balancing of hurts and needs I had to do between the two, and did so badly, those earlier years" (Olsen, 2013: 11).

Finally she finds the correct definition for Emily when she is ironing, "she was lost, she was a drop." Standing before an ironing board, the narrator, as an experienced mother of five now, tries to find some excuses for her past about Emily. She thinks that "'I was working, there were four smaller ones' ... there was not time for her. She had to help be a mother, and housekeeper, and shopper" (Olsen, 2013: 12).

Under such circumstances because she is expected to grow before her time, Emily's school life suffers; therefore, she often finds excuses not to go to school. As

the narrator contemplates as she irons, she is interrupted by her youngest baby, Ronnie, and recalls the heavy demands of motherhood and how she failed to meet them as Emily's mother: "Ronnie is calling. He is wet and I change him. ... That time of motherhood is almost behind me ... the child cry, the child call" (Olsen, 2013: 11).

The story as a whole involves a mother's inner dialogue with herself trying to make sense of the present behavior of her daughter. Extending back and forth to the events in her past and present, the clash and clamor of the narrator's private thoughts take place merely as she stands in front of an ironing board in silence. At the conclusion of the story, the narrator comes to terms with the fact that what Emily becomes is the outcome of the life she has had.

The problems faced by the narrator and her daughter Emily in their interlocked lives stem from their being left outside the exchange system, that validates women only as far as they have use value. Although this system imprisons women, it provides no space for their existence. Therefore, being outside it often does not equal freedom from the responsibilities and burdens of the female roles. Rather, their expendability is confirmed once they are left as beings unattached to a male figure. Therefore, especially, the women of lower classes find it imperative to be attached to the system. After her husband leaves the narrator, she loses her value as an item of exchange among men. Without a father, the life of a mother and her daughter turns into a nightmare. When the mother marries another man, everything then recovers to normal for the narrator. However, for Emily, normalcy is never recovered, for with her father's desertion she has lost the power and authority that will enable her exchange in the system. Without being a part of this exchange, a girl or a woman cannot find an entry into the system that will validate her.

Behind the dramatic story of the narrator's life experience, a silent story contributes to the collective historical development of patriarchal order. A young mother's survival without a husband in the Depression years and her obligatory separations from her daughter come to an end when she becomes a part of the system by having a new husband. The exchange of women is a game played by men to exclude the odd ones out:

Although women were expected to contribute to the families in which they lived, "unattached" women—divorced, deserted, separated,

widowed or single—had no one from whom they could claim support. Responsibility and sacrifice were expected and taken for granted, but reciprocal support was not necessarily forthcoming. (Helmbold, 1987: 646)

The story told so far shows many similarities with Olsen's experience. She was a mother of a teenage girl and younger children. She became mother when she was nineteen, after which time she found herself trying to survive with her daughter. Olsen's own separation from her daughter and having a new partner correlate to the conditions of the narrator in the story. In fact, as the discussions below will indicate, "I Stand Here Ironing" is the most autobiographical story of all the stories in the collection. Olsen's choice of the mother as the narrator provides us with an intensity of a life experience with the result that even the readers who might have the tendency to criticize the negligence of a mother hostilely will feel sympathy for her. In other words, even the lack of attention and affection which accompanies the narrator's treatment of Emily are presented side by side with the inside story of the lack of choices the narrator has. The success of this narrative approach can be seen in the dialogue below. The addressee whose sympathy and understanding the narrator seeks is the reader as well as Emily's teacher when she voices her helplessness in the raising of her daughter:

You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside me, beyond me.

And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. (Olsen, 2013: 5)

She does not want to go back in time because the events of the past hurt and cause her to see her life as the punishment of being without the control of a man, a case postulated as "anarchy" by Levi-Strauss (quoted in Irigaray, 1985: 170). It is at this point that her memories are interrupted by Ronnie reminding her of her duty as a mother. That little *man* warns her to get back to her job, not letting her even think of her past in her silent time. When Ronnie falls asleep, the mother again returns to her thoughts, but this time with the recognition of her daughter Emily's very existence: "In this and other ways she leaves her seal, I say aloud. And startle at my saying it. What do I mean? What did I start to gather together, to try and make coherent?" (Olsen, 2013: 12). Telling her and her daughter's story is the narrator's effort to make sense of making coherent the chaos of their years without a male figure who

would ease their entry into the system of exchange and give them value. Yet what she can make coherent is only her own chaos, not her daughter's. Emily has to create her own value. The final lines of the story in which she addresses the school officer testify to the narrator's wish and hope that Emily will be able to rise out of the tangle she has found herself: "Only help her to know—help make it so there is cause for her to know—that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron" (Olsen, 2013: 14).

2.2. "HEY SAILOR, WHAT SHIP?": MEN WITHOUT WOMEN

Whitey, an unmarried man, is the main character of the story "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" He is an old friend of a married couple Lennie and Helen who love him despite his difficult past and drinking problem. Olsen's story is about one of his visits to this family in San Francisco. His close relationship with them originates from his saving Lennie's life in a strike in 1934. The man chosen in this story is a person who has lived all his life with men at sea, having relations with women only as prostitutes. As a matter of fact, Whitey lacks his patriarchal *plaything* to get benefit from: a woman. As such he differs dramatically from Olsen's other male figures whose lives are unthinkable without women. Therefore, this is Olsen's portrayal of a man without a woman to exchange; outside the system of exchange, a man is thus condemned to a desperate loneliness. Representing what happens to a man if he is somehow excluded from the system based on an exchange of women, Whitey demonstrates the other, male side of the coin. Since he is excluded from the system of exchange, he feels he has to ease his way into the life of the family in his visits with his heroic stories and some presents. But these are not sufficient for him to be a permanent and genuine part of exchange, for even the precocious teenage daughter of the family Jennie feels his lack of a wife and resulting exclusion and blames this lack on his drunkenness. Interestingly, Jennie's opinion of Whitey changes from childhood adoration to spite as she is getting ready to be old enough to be exchanged. Just as there are women who are not good enough to be wedded, there are likewise men of such kind. Thus these men and women are pushed to an illicit and despised exchange of women called prostitution.

In fact, as Helen explains to Jennie, Whitey desires to be part of a family. As an outsider who wants to enter the game, he has a keen eye for the details of Helen's and Lennie's family and notices the hardships better than the insiders. For example, Whitey's awareness of Helen's domestic troubles is remarkable. From the orderly shapes of the cups on the shelf to the uncleanness and untidiness of the house to the tired expression on Helen's face, he can detect even when he is drunk "... the hand that understands how much a scrubbed floor, or a washed dish, or a child taken care of for a while, can mean" (Olsen, 2013: 34). While he sympathizes with Helen and understands the hardness of her domestic responsibilities, his attribution of the untidiness of the house to Helen, and not to Lennie is noteworthy. Olsen takes the situation to another level because in Whitey's mind, these domestic issues are related to women's work. Despite his exclusion, he dreams of a house where a woman is responsible for domestic order.

In one of the scenes, Whitey reveals his intention for having children. Olsen includes this emotional scene to show that what it means for a man to have children is completely different from what it does for a woman whose life is consumed by children, a reality Whitey hardly ever considers at all. He gets only a glimpse of how being a wife and mothering children destroy a woman's life when the little daughter of the family sleeps on his lap: "It is destroying, dissolving him utterly, this helpless warmth against him, this feel of a child—lost country to him and unattainable" (Olsen, 2013: 21). It is then and there that he knows that he will never have a wife and a baby. While marriage locks Olsen's women in, being free from those responsibilities gives man like Whitey freedom from patriarchal order.

Whitey's freedom is not without problems, though. As a single sailor who has heavy drinking problems, he is not a desirable husband. Although in the system of exchange women's desire is not taken into consideration, Whitey wishes to be desired and wanted by a woman, but he knows that this will never happen. In fact, Whitey rejects the power that the patriarchal system of exchange gives him; he imagines a system in which no one has the power to exchange another person, one in which reciprocity is the rule. Yet the only female who wishes to have Whitey as a husband is the four-year-old Jeannie, who enjoys the story he tells her every time he visits them:

He had told the story so often, as often as anyone would listen, whenever he felt good, and always as he told it, the same shy happiness would wing through him, how when she was four, she had crawled into bed beside him one morning, announcing triumphantly to her mother: I'm married to Whitey now, I don't have to sleep by myself anymore. (Olsen, 2013: 28)

The affection Jeannie feels for Whitey only when she is four years old is significant: It demonstrates that Jeannie feels that even at that age her value depends on being attached to a man. Yet when she is older, her affection turns to spite, for she realizes that he has no defined role within the patriarchal system. Jeannie has been taught to be a perfect object of the exchange system since she was born; therefore, she knows who can function in the system and who cannot. She exactly knows that Whitey as such is never eligible to enter into the system. Whitey also knows that he will never have a wife and a baby contrary to what he says when he bounces the little girl:

*What is life
Without a wife (bounce)
And a home (bounce bounce)
Without a baby? (Olsen, 2013: 26)*

Whitey is a threat to the stereotypical patriarchal man since he prefers alcohol to domestic male behavior. The case of Whitey shows some similarities to that of Tracy in *Yonnondio*. He is described as such: "All right for Tracy to talk, all right, he didn't have a wife and kids hangin round his neck like an anchor" (Olsen, 1974: 88-89). As unmarried men, both Tracy and Whitey stay outside the system of exchange and thus free from the responsibilities that this system puts on the shoulders of men. Therefore, others envy both men for their freedom, but they miss the point that Whitey and Tracy refuse to be parts of it because what they want is a partner in a relationship based on reciprocity, not an object they will exchange.

2.3. "O YES": FORCES BEYOND THE FAMILY

The third story called "O Yes" mainly concerns the daughter of Lennie and Helen and her relationship with a black girl called Parry. Olsen again turns the readers' attention to some questions of problematic motherhood which has no answers. In traditional sense, a mother should only focus on raising children as an imperative of patriarchy. As a mother, Helen's role involves raising children fitting

their social, economic and racial conditions. Helen is the product of some invisible powers which make her see her husband as representative of patriarchy. Helen here is not the victim of her husband's oppression; however, she unintentionally serves the society within the patriarchal frames. Helen acts through consent rather than physical force and punishment.

Her voluntary contribution to the system can be explained by the help of Foucault's theory of power. Foucault's power relations are concerned with all relationships in society, from husbands and wives to countries and countries. These relationships are in fact related to power and knowledge, which are used as a form of social control. Since the family in this story is a micro level representation of society, Helen's perception of her roles is a good example of the relationship mentioned. Foucault states that knowledge is power:

Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of "the truth" but has the power to *make itself true*. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, "becomes true." Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations." (Foucault, 1995: 27)

Therefore, Helen unquestionably surrenders the domination of orders of the patriarchy. Her gained knowledge about being a woman and wife is the path to follow in patriarchal power relations. Even if her husband is far better than other husbands of Olsen's stories, her knowledge secretly shapes her behavior in an expected way.

According to Foucault, people are controlled through formal devices but most importantly by surveillance. The knowledge Helen gains about being a daughter, a wife and a mother can also be explained by being under surveillance by the elements of patriarchal power such as family members, neighbors and people in the street. She cannot escape from the controlling eyes of everyone that are omnipresent. Foucault tells about this behavior modification in his book. He introduces a seventeenth century town faced with epidemic and quarantined. The town turns into a closed area where normal rules are suspended for the sake of fighting against the plague:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are

recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and the periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (Foucault, 1995: 197)

The plague is a threat to the order. With the help of it, the authority can see, control and discipline people of the town. Power is practiced over them and people start to think this surveillance will continue all their life. Foucault introduces a device to explain all this process:

Bentham's *Panopticon* is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring. ... The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions—to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide—it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. (Foucault, 1995: 200)

Anyone in society can be placed in panopticon to gaze at everybody. Surveillance penetrates into every single moment of life while the power that does the surveillance is dispersed and therefore invisible and invincible. Being under constant surveillance causes the members of society to shape their point of view, behavior, stance, bodily movements and so on according to the interests of the observer, which is the source of knowledge and become the accepted truth. Then, this modification in consciousness and behavior is internalized by people.

In patriarchal societies, the major target of this mechanism of surveillance and its concomitant knowledge-truth production is women, whose lives are always controlled and shaped by others. Likewise, throughout her life, Helen is under surveillance by society. This power over her is permanent and leads her to form knowledge about her roles. Helen, like everyone in society, practices what she learns as “knowledge”; whether she is surrounded by people or not, she is a continuous carrier and object of knowledge because there is no place untouched and unshaped by the patriarchal knowledge.

Olsen includes in this story the more visible signifier of dividing lines in the United States, race, in addition to class, the hidden line of demarcation. Olsen says, “I wanted to write ... about race, racism as well as class; the need for community; the

selection process; separation; create young human beings and their elders in the crucible of this” (quoted in Frye, 1999: 13). Olsen demonstrates that race, as well as class, is part of patriarchal discourse based on exchange.

Helen’s duty to impose on her daughter Carol the racial and religious dogmas of her society, which she herself finds totally wrong, creates conflicts with herself. Here, Helen is a socially conscious mother but again finds herself in conflict because she reiterates racial stereotyping of blacks in her relationship with her daughter. What Helen experiences is a result of the role of motherhood in which a mother is expected to instill the codes of conduct approved by patriarchy in their daughters so that these young wives-to-be could internalize these norms. Often mothers become tools of the system of exchange, but for a mother like Helen whose social consciousness has not been erased, this task causes inner conflicts.

Helen’s daughter, Carol, has a close friendship with a black girl, Parry. Helen and Carol attend the Black Church, which can be a sign of Olsen’s intentional immersion of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. Surrounded by all these factors, Helen tries to find a way to explain the system to Carol. She is aware of Carol’s weakness before the cultural structure which separates blacks and whites. Helen turns into a conflicted mother in explaining this to her daughter.

After experiencing peer pressure at school because of the black separation, Carol begins to question why people do this. Helen tries to understand the problem Carol faces at school, but belief in the racial codes of patriarchy comes from unexpected quarters as her older sister Jeannie carelessly comments on the issue by saying that this is the fact of life:

You don’t realize a lot of things, Mother ... Grow up, Mother ... They’re in junior high, Mother. Don’t you know about junior high? How they sort? And it’s all where you’re going. Yes and Parry’s colored and Carrie’s white. And you have to watch everything, what you wear and how you wear it and who you eat lunch with and how much homework you do and how you act to the teacher and what you laugh at. (Olsen, 2013: 49)

Jeannie’s harsh insistence on her belief of the system reminds us the one she did for Whitey in “Hey Sailor, What Ship?” He was a misfit and disgrace for society in her opinion. Jeannie is an example of the forces of society which infiltrate into the formative processes of young girls even when their mothers try to resist them. She

internalizes these processes because she senses that her mother is too powerless in the face of the big structure of patriarchy.

Carol, on the other hand, is too young to have imbibed this spirit. She cannot understand why dividing lines separate her from her best friend Parry. Later in the story, Carol and Parry realize that they have been separated because of their color. When Carol attends a service at the black church, she worries about what will happen “If Eddie [Parry’s school friend] said something about being there ... if he talked to her right in front of somebody at school” (Olsen, 2013: 39). Carol once confesses to her mother that other friends will not come to her house if Parry is there. Helen is helpless before the patriarchal order like everyone. Carol’s tears cannot be dried by Helen’s comforting effort and then both become silent in the end. The sorting process of providing privileges to white people is no different from men’s dominance over women, which is a complex concept for a child whose natural sense of equality challenges the racial hierarchies in the system. The story makes clear the unnaturalness and constructedness of all sorts of social hierarchies.

2.4. “TELL ME A RIDDLE”: DEFERRED DREAMS, DEFERRED WOMEN

The last story of the collection, which occupies most of the book, was named after the work itself: “Tell Me a Riddle.” Its coverage is basically about the suppressed problems of an aged couple, Eva and David, who live in much better economic conditions than many of Olsen’s couples. Moreover, at retirement age, Eva represents a new level that elderly women occupy in the system of exchange. A cancer patient, Eva is living the last phases of her life. Therefore, it is possible to regard this story as Olsen’s take on how bourgeois environment, sickness, and old age transform the exchange system. At retirement, David has managed to provide his wife Eva with enough money and security in many respects. He has created a comfort zone with a home and retirement with pension. Even though David is far more skillful to earn money and the way he treats Eva is different from that of Jim’s treatment of Anna in *Yonnondio*, he still tends to be the prime decision-maker and ruler in the family and cannot see that Eva is not an object. Olsen tries to give the

message that even if economic conditions are improved, the patriarchal notion of wives and daughters as primarily possessions does not change.

Eva's children's reactions to her cancer are different and various. Grown up and participating in the patriarchal system, some of them reveal their real inner feelings about their mother. Instead of full emotional involvement and sincere sadness, they regard their mother's illness as an increased burden on their parts because Eva has already lost her use value in the system of exchange. Their reactions are distant as they reveal their disappointment in the timing of the illness rather than in the fact that they are actually losing their mother:

"Why now? Why now?" Wailed Hannah.

"As if when we grew up weren't enough," said Paul. (Olsen, 2013: 57)

Part of this unemotional response has its roots in the fact that Eva as a mother had become an instrument of patriarchal values in the raising of her daughters. Eva's oldest daughter—the ones like Mazie in *Yonnondio* and Emily in "I Stand Here Ironing"—are exposed to their mother's oppression and injustice, which serves the continuity of patriarchy. Ironically, the mothers do contribute to the system by becoming agents of oppression and injustice to their oldest daughters, of what their husbands, the shadows of patriarchy at home, do to them. These three daughters of Olsen's stories are the second mothers who become apprentice to their mothers, and via their mothers, their fathers' exchange objects. Frustrated under the burden patriarchy has placed on them, their mothers try to ease their lives by forcing part of their heavy responsibilities onto their shoulders. In fact the mothers justify their acts as a way of preparing their daughters' passage into womanhood, which, according to their own experiences, inevitably involves a variety of forms of oppression and hard work. Carol P. Christ expresses this problem on her *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*:

The mother-daughter relation is distorted in patriarchy because the mother must give her daughter over to men in a male-defined culture in which women are viewed as inferior. The mother must socialize her daughter to become subordinate to men, and if her daughter challenges patriarchal norms, the mother is likely to defend the patriarchal structures against her own daughter. (Christ, 1980: 285)

Thus, mothering becomes a way of initiating younger women, namely daughters, into the accepted norms of patriarchal definitions of womanhood in such a

way that the bond between the mother and daughter is totally broken and the two are irreparably alienated from each other. What Clara says about Eva is a striking expression of the hurt arising from alienation and hostility:

Pay me back, Mother, pay me back for all you took from me. Those others you crowded into your heart. The hands I needed to be for you, the heaviness, the responsibility.... I do not know you, Mother. Mother, I never knew you ... good-bye Mother who taught me to mother myself. (Olsen, 2013: 91)

Like many young women, Clara is burdened with responsibilities at an early age and becomes mature beyond her years. She earns an independence at the expense of the bond she could have had with her mother. Such daughters can never feel the satisfaction of being cared for and guided by their mothers who could have given them the most precious life lessons. Instead they feel as if they have been thrown into the world to grope for their way. Emily in “I Stand Here Ironing,” likewise, refuses her mother’s care when she approaches her daughter to see if she is alright, but Emily persuades her that she does not need her by saying “I’m alright, go back to sleep, Mother” (Olsen, 2013: 8). The same tone of alienation can be seen in the letter she wrote to her mother: “I am fine. How is the baby?” (Olsen, 2013: 9). By not wanting her mother’s help and intimacy, Emily announces her confidence. This indifference reaches its peak in Ginella of *Yonnondio*—twelve year old friend of Mazie who lives in a tent to be free from her mother. When she gets back home, her mother meets her as if she is a stranger: “‘Gertrude,’ her mother calls, ‘Gertrude. I seen you come.’” (Olsen, 1974: 183). In an environment in which even their absence is not felt beyond their use value, daughters can never develop a sense of belonging.

Olsen’s emphasis on the differences between the nominations of Ginella and Gertrude signifies the fact that Ginella’s self-nomination and hence self-image do not correspond to her mother’s nomination and image of her. Normally mothers are expected to serve as mirrors to their daughters both as role models and as mirrors reflecting back true images of their daughters in order to confirm their self-confidence and self-value. If the image reflected by the mother and the self-image of the daughter fit together, the daughter feels validated and empowered. However, once these mirrors reflect distorted images that do not fit the self-images of daughters, both the self-confidence and self-value of daughters are shaken. In fact, these daughters can never validate themselves in the eyes of their mothers who

reflect them a distorted image, one that constrains the daughters and against which they constantly struggle.

In Eva's life, it is now too late to recover these lost bonds with her daughters. Preoccupied with the decay old age and sickness have brought, she now lives in a totally different agenda. For, in her eighties, she has already become liberated from much of the hardships that accompany womanhood, such as pregnancies, childbirths, childcare, raising, feeding and nurturing a whole family. With improved economic conditions, other difficulties of the past such as making ends meet, stretching the family money as far as possible, huge loads of cleaning, cooking, organizing for a large family have left Eva's life to make it more tranquil and Eva stronger and self-confident. Aging in this respect brings to women relative freedom from being mere objects of the exchange system. If aging is accompanied with the relative comforts of life, as it often does with decreased mouths to feed and fewer expenses to make in the family, women feel much stronger to resist the male members who have reduced them to their productive and reproductive functions and taken advantage of their value as such. However, as if to balance the relative comforts it has brought her, old age also brings her a terminal disease.

The condition that leads the course of events in "Tell Me a Riddle" is Eva's approaching death, which has softened David toward her during her illness and made him treat her gently as if to compensate for his less considerate past deeds. The threat of the actual loss of wife brings out the locked-up tenderness in men who face the possibility of losing permanently the core value in their life of exchange. This tenderness can also be seen in Jim of *Yonnondio* even after raping his wife. He carries Anna to bed as she has a miscarriage and "with tremor hands he kneads the flesh above her womb till the blood stops pouring, and stillness comes" (Olsen, 1974: 109). Like Jim who takes care of the children during Anna's miscarriage, David shows, during Eva's last days, the tender partner he always had to hide behind a patriarch. Towards the end of their lives together, David and Eva hold hands as if they had always been like that.

It is ironical that it is only after a woman becomes too old to reproduce and too sick to give care that she becomes liberated from being an object of exchange to be what she wants to be. Even as she struggles against cancer, in her old age, Eva is

able to reject her role as an object of exchange. In “The Traffic in Women,” Rubin addresses women as exchange value: “Levi-Strauss sees the essence of kinship to lie in an exchange of women between men ... women= the “gift” (Rapp, 1978: 171). In Eva’s case, however, she is not a “gift” or something exchangeable any more, but another burden for the family. When she is hospitalized for her cancer, Eva is strong enough to reject the social nominations and classifications that have dominated all her life. When her personal information is required in the form, she says: “At once go and make them change. Tell them to write: Race, human; Religion, none” (Olsen, 2013: xvi). After surviving a patriarchal class-dominated world throughout her life, she does not want to be labeled by these systems apparatuses—religion, race or gender. Those lines belong to an old woman who has been freed from being a value in the system—neither a mother nor a wife, only Eva. Until the very end, she is referred to as “Ma,” “Granny” or “she”, but hardly ever Eva. After becoming Eva, she tries to resist all the injustices of her brutal past by preventing their interference into her present. Nevertheless, this resistance will hardly win her the time to enjoy her freedom.

From childhood to old ages, women have many obstacles to overcome. When they finish with these obstacles, they get their solitude, which they have always longed for. This is obvious when David tries to communicate with Eva who rejects listening to him by turning off her hearing-aid: “so she would not have to hear” (Olsen, 2013: 59). She knows that she has served him enough and her devaluation process has completed. She turns off her hearing-aid in order not to hear any more demands of others. Her every need as a woman was either interrupted or ignored in the past, so she does not want to worry about those that interrupted her and focuses only on herself.

Eva’s freedom to defy and reject is symbolized with a song she sings on the last days of her life:

These things shall be, or loftier race
than e’er the world hath known shall rise
with flame of freedom in their souls
and light of knowledge in their eyes
They shall be gentle, brave, and strong
to spill no drop o f blood, but dare all....
on earth and fire and sea and air
And every life (long standing cough) shall be a

Song. (Olsen, 2013: 94)

This is a song Olsen learned when she was a child, “These Things Shall Be.” As Pearlman suggests, it is a song with a unique history connecting layers of human efforts to reach freedom that look toward a hopeful future:

It expresses the essence of the aspirations, the hopes, the beliefs in the future. It is an old Socialist hymn that comes out of an old religious hymn and I learned it as a child from the Socialist Sunday School hymn book; in our time it has been adopted as a United Nations hymn and is sung by school children in some countries on Universal Human Rights Day. (Pearlman, 1989: 186)

The song connects not only religion and gender, but also the past and the present, a hope for future, in order to create a context for both Eva and her relationship with David. Eva ignores the past she has lived unlike David, who thinks the past is something worth remembering: “*that joyous certainty, that sense of mattering, of moving and being moved, of being one and indivisible with the great of the past, with all that freed, ennobled*” (Olsen, 2013: 98).

Eva’s past is not like the one David defines because what she recalls is how her life was condensed at home limited with children and housework, without any enjoyment. She reprimands David who was not even aware of the difficulties that she had to overcome as a mother and wife. Thus, like Clara, she has learnt to be by herself, earned her dearly-bought freedom while David will never be able to stand on his own two feet:

“And forty years ago when the children were morsels and there was a Circle, did you stay home with them once so I could go? Even once? You trained me well. I do not need others to enjoy. Others!” Her voice trembled. “Because you want to be there with others. Already it makes me sick to think of you always around others. Clown, grimacer, floormat, yesman, entertainer, whatever they want of you.” (Olsen, 2013: 59)

Unlike David, whose identity depends on others, Eva, not content with all these definitions that negate her as a person, in her last days, wants to be reborn as Eva only. She remembers this song so as to find hope and courage she needs now because this song is unique to her past days of the Revolution. She becomes free from patriarchal oppression to celebrate her revolution by this song as Booker explains:

Like *Yonnondio*, *Tell Me a Riddle* is particularly sensitive to the lives of working-class women and mothers who struggle with weight of household labor, child rearing, and sometimes wage labor, and who

want so much more out of life—and not only for themselves. (Booker, 2005: 531)

The song encapsulates Eva's unrealized dreams of freedom and liberty, which, in patriarchy, are constantly denied to women. After Eva is diagnosed with cancer, even without knowing what is consuming her body, she takes her time to have a look into her past. The events following the diagnosis make her remember her past, which contributes to her understanding the value of her own life. Her memories about escaping from Russia on a ship through the ocean become alive when she sees the sea on the plane to California she has boarded to see her children and grandchildren. Her feelings for her children are expressed during the journey:

The love—the passion of tending—had risen with the need like a torrent; and like a torrent drowned and immolated all else. On that torrent she had borne them to their own lives, and the riverbed was desert long years now. ... Surely that was not all, surely there was more. Still the springs, the springs were in her seeking. (Olsen, 2013: 92)

She remembers she did not have a life when she was preoccupied with her family. Now her own life has a meaning outside her family. She had served as a mother and a wife, but then, she has become useless for them. She suddenly feels that she is an individual who can travel on her own without her children and husband. As a wife and mother, she followed the orders of the patriarchal system of exchanges, and now she finally asks for her own needs. She refuses to move to a retirement house despite her husband's insistence and strategic enticements: "'For once in your life, to be free, to have everything done for you, like a queen.' ... 'No dishes, no garbage, no towel to sop, no worry what to buy, what to eat'" (Olsen, 2013: 59). However, for once in her life, she wants to live as Eva *in her own house* without any responsibilities and imperatives of being mother and wife, but memories never leave her alone. Like the mother in "I Stand Here Ironing," Eva understands that the life of a mother is shaped by external conditions beyond her control: "lives one felt, but could not longer hold nor help" (Olsen, 2013: 90). Olsen here leaves the reader alone to decide as to whether Eva's sense of freedom is real or not, because it comes to her only in her old age and with her cancer-invaded body. Even then, her memories and her past still haunt her present life.

Similarly, Olsen uses these past difficulties in her writing as well. As a feminist activist she refuses to exalt the themes assigned to women in her fiction:

traditional roles of women, including bearing and breeding children and being sex partners. In fact her fictional portrayals of women characters are a result of her own experiences of motherhood and marriage, which constrained her for years and delayed her career as a writer. As such, she writes with a first-hand experience of the entrapments of the system of exchange which, according to Irigaray, regulate women's conditions:

[A]ll the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies and all the modalities of productive work that are recognized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are men's business. The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men (when a man buys a girl, he "pays" the father or the brother, not the mother) and they always pass from one man to another. (Irigaray, 1985: 171)

Since Olsen herself could not be free from this system in her life, in her writings, she approaches them with a critical eye. Limitations in her life as a woman and a writer seem to be driven from a patriarchal context. She demonstrates how gender roles, especially motherhood imprison women and prevent their self-fulfillment as individuals. In a way, one might argue that presenting motherhood in the center of her stories means serving patriarchy since women in the stories are useless unless they become a *real* mother. Without qualities of motherhood, Eva is nothing but a worthless entity for the patriarchal system. Ironically enough, motherhood is undeniably the most crucial role for most women, especially those who from the lower economic classes who have few other qualities that define them, yet motherhood becomes a lethal weapon in the hands of patriarchal oppression. Quoting Rosenfelt Schultz supports this fact:

All of Olsen's work, in fact, testifies to her concern for women, her vision of their double oppression if they are poor or women of color, her affirmation of their creative potential, her sense of the deepest, most intractable contradiction of all: the unparalleled satisfaction and fulfillment combined with the overwhelming all-consuming burden of motherhood. (Schultz, 1997: 115-116)

Olsen is caught within a contradiction by writing about women. Her women characters cannot exist outside the conventional roles of women as wives and mothers, which the patriarchal system assigns to them. A similar contradiction is given in the beginning of the story, in which marriage is depicted both as an arena of conflict and companionship. The comparatively peaceful bond between Eva and David comes only after years of quarrels and clashes:

For forty-seven years they had been married. How deep back the stubborn, gnarled roots of the quarrel reached, no one could say—but only now, when tending to the needs of others no longer shackled them together, the roots swelled up visible, split the earth between them, and the tearing shook even to the children, long since grown (Olsen, 2013: 57).

These lines show a deep past that has an enormous effect on Eva. Eva's life can be summarized as follows: a childhood in a poor Russian village, learning how to read with the help of a Russian girl, actively taking part in the Russian Revolution, falling in love and spending a year in prison, immigrating on a ship with David as a poor young couple, having babies and doing different jobs until the children become grownups. Finally, Eva feels free from the duties of motherhood and wifeness: "She would not exchange her solitude for anything. Never again to be forced to move to the rhythms of others" (Olsen, 2013: 60).

Ignoring her own desires for the sake of motherhood, she involuntarily maintains the system which is mainly based on this sacrifice. The system identifies her with home and its content, husband and children. This identification runs deep in women. Even after the main reason for her attachment disappears, Eva feels home as an extension of her being. When David decides to sell the house and move to a retirement house, she feels he separates Eva from her cause of being: imprisonment at home with a dream of freedom:

Given the relationship between the home and the dream, a violation to one is a violation to the other. Both wounds are regrettable. Olsen's attraction to the home—no matter how sorrowfully or frequently or regretfully she qualifies it—helps to distinguish her ardent feminism from that which would abolish the family, be it nuclear or extended, altogether. (Stimpson, 1988: 72)

Eva's commitment to her house and to her family to the end of her days testifies to the value Olsen still attaches to "home." Even though it serves as a place of confinement for young women, for older women, it becomes the only place where they feel a sense of belonging.

Only an exceptional reason lowers the intensity of the clash of the "house" and "dream," the cancer. Instead of selling the house, they go on a trip to California to see their children and grandchildren. Eva remembers being a wife, caring for one baby and holding another; but tired of years of serving the needs of children and worrying about them constantly, she cannot communicate with her grandchildren and

insists on leaving. In a way her home is the place where she extends nurturing and care to others, and once outside, she cannot become the nurturer and care giver she has been throughout her life. David, on the other hand, now has reached a stage of being able to extend his love to others without the responsibility of a breadwinner. Eva “watched the children whoop after their grandfather who knew how to tickle, chuck, lift, toss, do tricks, tell secrets, tell jokes, match riddle for riddle” (Olsen, 2013: 74). Unlike David, who has become the “fun grandpa,” she does not act in the expected way: When her grandchild says “Tell me a riddle, Grammy,” she answers drily, “I know no riddles, child” (Olsen, 2013: 74).

Eva’s answer to her granddaughter obviously does not reflect the truth. As a mother of many children, she must have told them riddles. But at present, she wishes to reconstruct a past in which she did not have to serve the needs of others. For the first time in her life, she can imagine herself as the center of her life and aligns her past to her centrality. Breaking the silence she has had all her life, she expresses herself maybe for the first time in her life. “She, who in her life had spoken but seldom and then only when necessary ... now in dying spoke incessantly” (Olsen, 2013: 88). According to David behind her new expressiveness lies her having recorded everything like a tape recorder, “trapping every song, every melody, every word read, heard, and spoken” (Olsen, 2013: 89). She begins to play all the recordings of the past to everyone around her, but she is selective about what she chooses to play to people: “she was playing back only what said nothing of him, of the children, of their intimate life together” (Olsen, 2013: 89). Like the narrator-mother in the story “I Stand Here Ironing” she manages to tell every personal thought she has kept for years, those that are solely about herself, not about the duties that define her. As she approaches death, Eva wishes to remember herself as an independent agent, a person who is not defined by and in her relations to others. She wants to be her own person with a past she rewrites and re-imagines all by herself. Since she cannot possibly change what she actually experienced, in her memory she reshapes and reinvents a past that validates her for what she is. In a way, she recreates a parallel universe in which she was not burdened with motherhood and wifedom.

Eva's story proves that duties of motherhood and being a *loving* wife are the main sources of women's oppression. They are institutions linking all society, but a constraining enemy of women's individuality. David also experiences poverty in a working class family, but gender difference makes the experience much worse for Eva. Until she loses her use and exchange value, a real familial conflict rises. She has neither found the chance to transcend the gender expectations of society, nor has she found a place outside home, which both limits and defines her. Unable to have a place outside, she desperately asks right before her death: "Where now? Not home yet? ... Where *is* my home?" (Olsen, 2013: 98).

It is apparent that the word "home" refers not only to the house Eva has but to herself, just as the patriarchal concept of "home" merges with women. This metaphor has deep and powerful effect on women as a whole. From the very beginning of the story Eva makes great effort to preserve her "home" because she accepts it as her workplace. For many years she has identified that place with herself, and now her ability to maintain it is lost because of getting old. Just as cleaning it and keeping it tidy have pre-occupied all her life, she cannot pursue her dreams outside being a wife and a mother. Even though she does not want to go back to her previous roles as they destroy her dream identity, Eva cannot find an alternative to replace her identity with home.

CONCLUSION

Olsen's protagonists often share part of her own experiences as a woman raised as the daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrant parents who were trying hard to make a new life for themselves in America, where as socialists their difficulties continued. Olsen grew up aware of the disadvantages of being poor, which led her to become active in politics, a family legacy. In addition, she both experienced and observed that even among the poor, miseries were not evenly dealt: women had to carry a heavier burden than men in poverty. Thus, her fiction blends the matters of class with those of gender. She writes about women of working classes and their relationships and conflicting emotions, failures and moments of relief.

Before revisiting the previously stated discussions based on the works of Tillie Olsen, it is more convenient to refer to her life struggle as a woman. She initially begins writing as if she is not aware of male domination in the literary market. Then the responsibilities of being a wife and a mother along with the obligation of earning money to support her family interrupt her writing career. However, when she gives all her attention to writing, her works flourish from the material conditions and experiences of oppressed women of the Depression: the collection of four stories, *Tell Me a Riddle* in 1961 and the novel *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* in 1974.

Olsen's female characters are products of the Great Depression just like herself. Women of the Great Depression, who were not the concern of male writers, turn out to be a great source for Tillie Olsen. Being interrupted for many years, bearing and raising children in the harsh economy of the era, she displays her experience to the literary arena in her works. There are striking similarities between her situation and the women of her stories. What she went through is the result of being poor, a woman, a wife, a mother in a male-dominated world.

In this thesis, a woman who writes about her experience has been analyzed within the theoretical framework of another woman. From a Marxist-feminist point of view, two of her works, *Yonnondio* and *Tell Me a Riddle* have provided me with insight to explore her women characters with the help of the feminist critic Luce Irigaray. Tillie Olsen's life struggle against the culture that tries to make her

redundant provides an excellent ground to illuminate Luce Irigaray's views of the exchange of women. This exchange is made possible only with the cooperation of women who are also the products of patriarchal norms. Thus, the women in Olsen's chosen works internalized almost all cultural assumptions about them. These assumptions are clearly expressed by Irigaray in terms of the notion of "the exchange of women" among men. Here, I have tried to expose these female experiences hidden under the patriarchal capitalist system. Thus, Olsen's stories discussed in this study are fine representations of a particular time period and its women under the ruling power of the order created by patriarchal power relations. In her *Yonnondio* and *Tell Me a Riddle*, Olsen portrays women under extremely dire conditions which render them even weaker than the men of the same classes and women of higher classes. Her main characters, mostly from her life, speak themselves through the lines of the stories to remind us of the collective practice men and sometimes older women exert on women. These collective practices manage in time to create in women new external selves that become the bearers of the system that had initially turned them to properties in a system of exchange, thus as mothers they pass onto their daughters these very values that they had once fought against. Ultimately, even the daughters of those women accept the roles their mothers assign them. Therefore, women's reproductive energy is co-opted by patriarchy not only by using their biological functions of mothering for supplying the system's demand for new work force and new mothers but also by turning them into ideological tools to help uphold and guard the system.

Olsen's novels demonstrate how, in the workings of patriarchy, motherhood's subversive potential has been so totally obscured to most of Olsen's female characters that the value attached to being a wife and a mother as properties of the members of the male gender is never questioned by women as if they are slaves. They voluntarily allow men to exploit both their body and labor. They become mothers and also wives or reproducers and producers to complete the tasks they are supposed to do. Olsen's traditional older women hardly think about their selves and accept their mothering practices as something that is very natural. Motherhood and wifehood are two discourses that have been taught to women to sustain the patriarchal system.

One of the outcomes this study has set out to demonstrate is based on a Marxist point of view. The very argument I have developed here is to get an analogy from Marx: “women as commodities.” Since Marxism explains the exchange of commodities as part of the capitalist mode of production, women, especially, of lower classes are, in a way, new commodities under the service of men in this mode of production. Luce Irigaray elaborates on this analogy by combining Marx’s notion of commodity and mode of production with Levi-Strauss’ notion of the exchange of women. While the exchange of commodities is the main motive to have wealth in a capitalist society, the exchange of women guarantees both social order and maintenance of men’s superior positions in a patriarchal society.

A major point that this study has raised in the previous chapters is related to the female body and its commodification. Women in these stories are seen as commodities which have use value and value in use. The first two female characters of concern in this sense are Anna and her daughter Mazie in *Yonnondio*. In the novel, the first to take advantage of their value is Jim, who is practically their *owner*. For Jim, Anna is *his* wife, whom he has acquired from her father, and whose production belongs to him, and mother to *his* children, the output of her reproductive capacities. Her daughter, Mazie is another commodity in hand to share with another man. Anna is consumed by Jim according to the patriarchal capitalist commodification rules. He gets her pregnant many times without a break, which makes her sexually periodically unavailable to her husband, a vicious circle for which she is punished at a variety of levels. Being a commodity, she is not considered to be a human being with limitations. But internalizing all these objectifying and commodifying policies, she not only bears her husband’s children but also the culture affiliated with him to her own daughter. Thus, the bitter part is that she treats her daughter as if she is an apprentice to be a *woman* which men desire to have.

Thus, I have discussed, motherhood as appropriated by patriarchy becomes a double edged blade to enable female reproduction to be used by patriarchal exchange and destroy female bonding and all possibilities of a female culture. Mazie, directly targeted and affected by Anna, swings between being a six-year old girl and a subordinate housewife, her siblings’ little mother. Whenever she witnesses her mother’s misery, she becomes psychologically squeezed. Her heart is torn apart for

not being able to help her mother, at the same time she loses her balance with flying ideas in her mind while trying to see the world outside. It is out of question that she needs care, affection and adult help with love, which she finds only with Mr. Coldwell. The limited time she has spent with him becomes the unique face of her life as little Mazie, who felt as free as a bird without any burden on her little shoulders. As a six-year old girl she naturally deserves to be treated as a little child.

Olsen's second work I discussed in this study is *Tell Me a Riddle*, a collection of four stories. What is in common in these stories is the silence of women and how mother-daughter relationships have turned to a smothering environment in the patriarchal system. In the first story, "I Stand Here Ironing," the unnamed narrator confesses and questions in silence. One thing which is important is that this woman, a mother, is a failure in the system of exchange. She has multiple oppressions by the system. In addition to being exchanged by men, she is abandoned with her daughter by her husband. She not only struggles with the world to survive, but ignores her daughter while she is growing up. These two unwanted results are resurrected in her monologue when she confesses what she did not, or, rather, could not do as a mother. The first failure is compensated by being a wife to a new husband. But there is no way she can compensate for the lack of attention by which she had to raise her daughter. Since her troubled daughter cannot be cured with the narrator's efforts, she has to have faith in her daughter's own abilities and time's healing powers.

The striking point to be considered here is that Mazie in *Yonnondio* and Emily in "I Stand Here Ironing" are the by-products of the exchange system of women. Their existence is totally unintended because they come into this world as the children of "wrong" mothers who fail to totally indoctrinate their daughters with patriarchal norms because both Anna and Emily's mother, for a time, are crushed by patriarchy before they are appended to it. These mothers, especially Anna, are themselves so totally broken by patriarchy that, even when they try to educate their daughters by the dictates of patriarchy, their voices are feeble. Thus, these mothers can never fully exemplify the rule of patriarchy. Mazie always wants to get out of the house which is the sacred apprenticeship center for women. Occasionally, in nature, she gets the taste of being free from the system because her would-be master, Anna,

cannot control her. In the absence of her father, her mother Anna is unable to serve patriarchy as the acting power.

Likewise, what Emily becomes is clearly expressed by her mother: “she was lost, she was a drop” (Olsen, 2013: 12). The mother- narrator is busy with breadwinning instead of being a real master for her daughter because her husband leaves her, which means that they both are left outside the exchange system that validates women only as far as they have use value among men. This situation changes when she becomes a part of the system by having a new husband. Yet Emily’s formation takes place in the meantime without her mother’s surveillance and acting as a role model. This uprooted and outcast status inhibits her appendage to the exchange system.

In Olsen’s fiction, I have also observed that home, traditionally associated with the female, becomes also a prison where many women are entrapped. At the opposite end stands nature where female characters can feel liberated albeit for a short time before they go back to their shelter and prison. Squeezed between the spontaneity of childhood and the social expectations which burden her with the duties of relegated motherhood, Mazie, for example, escapes to nature. Listening to the sounds of leaves, watching the stars in the sky make her relieved, she becomes a little girl in nature, free from oppression. Likewise, Olsen provides a moment of relief to Anna when she makes her get out of the house. Because home is identified with woman, getting away from it ironically causes Anna to taste freedom for a while, free from patriarchy and its rules. As a little girl, Mazie has this chance of freedom more than her mother and is not qualified enough to be fully obedient. She questions the housework she does while her brother plays around and does nothing. Mazie makes a friend, another girl, who lives in a tent to create her own world. However, when the heat hits the city, she has to get back home to her mother in order to do the errand waiting for her. Olsen uses her poetic justice to isolate her women within the house and appears to be beaten by the patriarchal system in which she grew up.

Stepping out of the threshold for a little time, those women feel that they are not commodities of some men, but even Olsen herself could not stop being like them. Typical *female duties* prevent her from being a writer until she has nothing to do with

being a mother and a wife or a commodity of value: getting older. This similarity plays a critical role in her “Tell Me a Riddle”, the story mainly about a dying old woman Eva. Jim of *Yonnondio* briefly explains the whole argument by these sentences: “ ‘what other earthly use can a woman have, I'd like to know?’” (Olsen, 1974: 2). For lower class women, marriage means imprisonment under the harsh conditions of the capitalist system. Those women are evaluated according to their value that their men give as Jim does: “ ‘Goddam woman—what's the matter with her anyhow? Dont even have a wife that's a wife anymore’” (Olsen, 1974: 81).

Metaphorically, home is also an important place for men. As in the story of Whitey of “Hey Sailor, What Ship?” and Tracy of *Yonnondio*, in a man's life, not being married means not having a place to rule. Whitey spends all his life with men at sea, not home with a woman. This figure of the misfit of patriarchy in the story cannot be defined like the other men, so he is doomed to be excluded from the system of exchange. He is even despised by a girl, Jeannie, whose family he regularly visits. Since Jeannie has already absorbed the workings of the system, she clearly distinguishes him from a *decent* patriarchal man. Ironically, when she was four years old, before she had internalized the value system attached to men and women, in one of his visits, she wanted to marry him. But when she is a teenager, she realizes that Whitey has no defined role within the patriarchal system. Jeannie is a perfect commodity in the exchange system and she knows that she cannot be wasted by this man.

The unmarried man, Tracy, in *Yonnondio* shows yet another aspect of being a man without a woman and home. Tracy's case may at times seem enviable because he is also free from the responsibility of being a breadwinner for a family. Yet this freedom is deceptive because although he can defy his boss unlike the married men with families to feed, he loses his job in the end. Olsen demonstrates how he is cast out of the system as he desperately searches for a job in increasing poverty and even starvation. Eventually, he joins a gang, which is the result of leaving a good job. His attitude costs him much and breaks the social order. Tracy's case explains what happens if a man does not follow the rules of patriarchy and chooses to have no investment in the system. These two men cannot take part in the exchange system so they are excluded, which results in their helplessness and unhappiness.

Olsen's problematic male characters lack pre-learned discourses of the patriarchal system. Since Whitey and Tracy do not follow the socially preordained pattern, they become lost characters. Unlike them, almost all women and men win the consent of patriarchy by accepting their roles without considering and questioning.

The French philosopher Foucault explains this willing consent to the patriarchal system with the power-knowledge relationship. The women in Olsen's stories internalize what they are supposed to do as daughters, wives and mothers, just like men do. This is done by a pre-installed system of knowledge acquisition since the beginning of time. The knowledge is accepted as the truth because the ones who/which have the power want people to do so in order to sustain the order and control the society. The transformations of women's roles from daughter to wife and mother all takes place under the surveillance and ruling power of patriarchy. Either under consent or surrender, roles are accepted as knowledge.

Helen in "O Yes" cannot explain to her daughter why she has to stop her friendship with a black girl. For Helen, this is just the way things *are*. She has been taught how to be a woman within the framework of patriarchal power relations as her mother Eva had been. Throughout their marriages, both Helen's and Eva's husbands are better men than Jim of *Yonnondio*, but in their cases, patriarchal patterns that loom larger than the power of mere individuals create consent without a physical or visible force. When Eva is about to die, she begins to question all the things she did for her husband and children with her consent without being physically forced.

In this thesis, I have presented a reading of Tillie Olsen's two most acclaimed works with Luce Irigaray's theory of the exchange of women. Olsen knows that women form a significant part of the working class, and because of their gender, the oppression on the women of this class is twice as much as the oppression on the men of the same class. Capitalist system consumes working class people's labor, but women of working class are under the oppression of patriarchy as well, which consumes not only the product of their labor but their bodies. Olsen's novels lay bare the gendered way of thinking hidden behind capitalism which puts a price tag on women and turns them into objects of exchange. In fact, behind capitalism, patriarchy looms as the deeper structure underneath. Capitalism adds yet another

level to patriarchal norms, binding women in double or triple bonds. They are paid less, forced to the jobs no one wants to do, not paid for their domestic labor and most importantly used by men both physically and mentally. Women suffer not only from the class exploitation but extra burdens of being women, such as pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage, rape, and social expectations such as obedience, submissiveness, and silence. Therefore, as Irigaray suggests, patriarchy takes women as commodities to be traded among men within the exchange system of women. The bitter part of this process is that women consent and accept this system as the truth—knowledge. Tillie Olsen's contribution to feminist literature requires scholarly attention because she adds the voices of the unheard women who occupy the lowest ranks of society and who fail to identify the mechanisms that enslave them and, inadvertently and despite themselves, gain their consent.

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