Confronting the Role of Powerful Female Characters When Paired with Males having Artistic Aspirations as Depicted in ‘Here at the End of the World We Learn to Dance’ (2008) by Lloyd Jones

Mr. Abhaysinh Vitthalrao Deshmukh  
Asst. Prof. Dept. of English  
S.B.D.M. Atpadi

Abstract:

‘Here at the End of the World We Learn to Dance’ is a very powerful novel by well-known modernist writer Lloyd Jones who has won both critical and popular acclaim through his Mister Pip which won the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for Overall Best Book Award in 2007 which was also shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize in the same year. ‘Here at the End of the World We Learn to Dance’ (2002) is a thrilling and sensuous tale of love set in rural New Zealand during the final days of the World War I to Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Sydney (Australia). The plot is split in its setting and complicated in time scheme. ‘Tango’, Argentine Tango, to be precise, works as a forced metaphor to bring about the developments in the story. ‘Argentine Tango’ is a musical genre of simple quadruple meter and binary musical form. Lloyd Jones makes the most of this sensual dance form to portray a story of two powerful female characters that make use of their femininity and skills in ‘tango’ throughout this one way journey called life.

Key Words: Artist, Aspiration, Tango, Male, Female etc…

An artist is a person engaged in one or more of any of a broad spectrum of activities related to creating art, practicing the art and/or demonstrating an art. A person with artistic bent of mind, in this way, aspires to become and to be known as an artist. But when we assess ‘artist’ as a person, a human being living in the society and aspiring to be a great artist, at the same time playing various roles he/she ought to as an active member of that society, it becomes more complicated to be judgmental and assess the artist and the man together.

It has had been a common practice in literature, mainly by male authors to depict female characters as weak, submissive, unrealistic and in this way, inferior to their male counterparts therein. This had been a common practice with Charles Dickens and Arther Miller to name a few. But, when we turn our attention to more realistic authors, male writers in this case, like James Joyce and Lloyd Jones we meet with fully developed, independent and judgmental female characters that exercise their will and wish over so called male protagonists.

‘Here at the End of the World we Learn to Dance’ is a moving sensuous tell by Lloyd Jones. It is a novel about love, marriages (both intact and annulled), artistic aspirations, sacrifices, adultery, faithfulness, forgiving, failures, sex, WWI, and above all finding out at the end that all that matters in the end is ‘life goes on’. Argentine Tango is the central theme, the all pervasive element that brings all the above mentioned elements in the compact plot with complicated time-scheme.

‘Tango’, a dance form that originated in the 1890s along the river Plote, the natural
border between Argentina and Uruguay. ‘Tango’ is a very sensuous dance form in which two dancing partners, a male and a female, dance in open or close embrace when they lead or follow the partner. Argentine Tango even more sensuous where the dancing partners dance in close embrace connected chest-to-chest or thigh-to-thigh position. It is said that dancing Tango is to ‘meet’ the partner, but dancing Argentine Tango is to ‘feel’ the partner.

Paul Schmidt, an English piano tuner and music-store entrepreneur of German origin with German sounding name is a good ‘tango’ dancer. During the WWI days Paul is on one of his routine visit to Little River where he falls prey to anti-German hysteria and is forced to take shelter in a cave with Louis Cunningham and two other local guys Billy Pohl and Henry Graham. To pass time Paul teaches Louis and others ‘Argentine Tango’ a dance form that develops and simultaneously depend on interpersonal relationship between the two dancing partners. While dancing in the remote, hidden cave there, apparently ‘at the end of the world’ develops a love triangle situation between Paul Schmidt – Louis Cunningham – Billy Pohl. Paul who is a thorough gentleman and comparatively weaker character with artist aspirations gives in to the pressure of the situation and one day leaves Louis in the cave with Billy. After many years when Billy and Louis are, though not happily together, married Paul re-enters their life through letters and Louis who is stronger character of the two leaves to add her first love and ‘tango’ into her life, one more time. Louis shows enormous self control and powerful will when she takes this decision with Billy’s permission. Rosa, yet another strong willed woman with whose life most of the story is connected is the most powerful, dominating, self-supported and thus basically a round character developed by Lloyd Jones. Rosa, who is the granddaughter of Paul Schmidt, owns a restaurant ‘La Chacra’ in Wellington N.Z. where Lionel a student of ‘Economic History’ works as a part time dish-washer. Rosa is very much impressed by her grandfather’s ‘Argentine Tango’ and his unfulfilled love story in the cave and Buenos Aires. One day late at night Rosa just waves hand out to Lionel who is 17 years younger than her and says “I need to dance”.

Everything is not happening and going in the marriage of Rosa and Ivan. When Rosa starts dancing ‘tango’ with Lionel late in the nights she, virtually, creates her own cave in ‘La Chacra’ and her own love story with Lionel. Here they dance ‘Argentine Tango’ together for years forgetting the world outside and as it is but natural in the situation like this, they develop a very intimate relationship that includes full blown sex. It is Rosa who is the boss in the day time ‘La Chacra’ and it is none else than Rosa who is the boss at the late night ‘La Chacra’ when she and Lionel dance ‘Argentine Tango’ together. When Ivan re-enters into their life Rosa without any hesitation detaches herself from Lionel and makes him aware of the long avoided responsibility of his farm and family.

Chrissie- another lady love in the life of Lionel is his childhood friend and is apparently in love with him while he’s been mad for Rosa. She is just than into him and is also the choice for him of his family. She
patiently waits for Lionel over the years and when he finally returns acts like a powerful female and makes him express his love for her. Chrissie is depicted as contrary to Rosa who is equally confident in herself but more calm and clever that marks her as a more powerful female character.

Other female characters like Paul’s widow who is not even named properly in the novel stays devoted to her unfaithful but loving husband. She shows very positive aspect of womanly character that makes Paul stay with her lifelong.

Jean and Megan, Lionel’s mother and elder sister are the same strong females that determines the role other male characters are expected to play. They forgive Lionel even without uttering a single word.

Lloyd Jones’ treatment to ‘Tango’, Argentine Tango to be precise and what it does with the lives and interpersonal relations of the two dancing partners is worth reading. Argentine Tango is a dance form which was developed in Argentina and Uruguay by the working-class people and laborers. In this very intimate dance form ‘the leader’ and ‘the follower’ dance to physically and emotionally connected to each other. Two love stories that Lloyd Jones develops in this novel, one between Paul Schmidt and Louis Cunningham and the other between Rosa and Lionel, starts in the embrace for ‘tango’. In both the love stories it is the female that takes the initiative in accepting the presence of love, taking hard decisions and even calling it over between them when it becomes really necessary. Thus, this is a fine story; rather a subtle one telling what happens when strong willed women meets with men with artistic aspirations.

References: