



## Short Review Paper

# Gender Issues in Carol Bolt's *Icetime*

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## Abstract

*A socially committed dramatist, Carol Bolt is known for her political, women's and children's plays. Bolt was a writer with clear feminist leanings and was always conscious of her social responsibility. The creative writings of Carol Bolt reveal some significant gender issues under the garb of dramatic art. The feminist believed that in order to understand women's position in the world, one has to understand the system of patriarchy. In a patriarchal social setup, masculinity is associated with superiority whereas femininity is linked with inferiority. Icetime is a feminist play, by Bolt's definition in which female leads. Through this play, Bolt motivates women to struggle for the sake of justice against the traditional values.*

**Keywords:** Femininity, Feminist, Masculinity, Patriarchal.

## Introduction

Virginia Woolf once wrote: Great works of art are not single and solitary births; they are the out come of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice<sup>1</sup>.

Society and literature are interrelated. The readers are able to see the social reality reflected in literature. This results in the various ways in which the men and women in the society are organizing themselves. Not only this, but their inter personal relationships and perception of socio-cultural reality are also reflected. The attitude of male authors towards both the men and the women are portrayed in their works which eventually shows the attitude of the characters, male and female to one another highlighting the gender relationship, as well as the author's attitude towards these relationships. Literature, in this way, offers the best possibility of exposing the politics of gender.

One of the significant developments of the 80s in English Canadian literature has been the emergence of a strong feminist voice. The women playwrights in Canada have consciously or unconsciously focused on their appearance on literature in general and drama in particular. Thus, breaking all the myths and barriers. Canada, during this decade, witnessed not only writing of plays by women which have made them visible on the stage, but they have also become the subject matter of dramatic texts. The feminist movement has provided a strong impetus to women's writing and working in the theatre.

However the task for early feminist playwrights has not been an easy one. On the one hand they are contended with cultural imperialism while on the other, they confront an interior patriarchy and its false universalizing of a masculine ethos.

Canadian feminists shunned the traditions and rules of both colonial as well as patriarchal society. There was a definite desire to express their own sensibilities and define their own identities outside, those put forward by male writers. They were clearly fed up to being ignored by the cultural mainstream and of having their primary life concerns dismissed as peripheral to the "real world" (male, colonial). As a result of this dual concern, the 1970s-80s saw a spate of feminist drama that tackled both the nationalist and feminist agendas, albeit in varying degrees. As women and as Canadians these playwrights have been part of the movement to end the passivity and the silence of the colonized and the oppressed.

## Breaking the Myth of Gender

Carol Bolt decided to work for theatre in those days when the Canadian theatre was still under infancy and the facilities to stage a play were in amateur conditions. Writing about the conditions of Canadian stage, Robertson Davies writes<sup>1</sup>

What is the Canadian play house? Nine times out of ten it is a school hall, smelling of chalk and kids, and decorated in the early concrete style. The stage is a small raised room at one end. And I mean room. If you step into the wings suddenly you will fracture your nose against the wall. There is no place for storing scenery, no place for the actors to dress and the lighting are designed to warm the stage but not to illuminate it.

Write your plays, then, for such a stage. Do not demand any procession of elephants, or dances by the maidens of the caliph's harem. Keep away from sunsets and storms at sea. Place as many scenes as you can in cellars and kindred spots. And don't have more than three characters on the stage at one time, or the weakest of them is sure to be nudged into the audience<sup>2</sup>.

Carol Bolt is one of the leading playwrights in Canada, who has reached the readers and viewers in strikingly new ways. *Icetime* was an entirely new type of play, written by her in 1986. The play was commissioned by 'Theatre on the Move' in the same year, where it proved out to be a huge success. *Icetime* is a feminist play. It is the story of a twelve year old girl Justine Blainey, who had a great fascination to play hockey. But, she was not allowed to do so at the Metropolitan Toronto Hockey League (MTHL), just because she was a girl. However, Justine struggles till the end and wins her right to play. Carol Bolt has composed her adventure in the form of a play to create amusement and entertainment for the audience. She writes, "Justine isn't a superhero... she is not smarter than any one else, or prettier, or even that she plays the world's best hockey. She plays good hockey. She wants to play better hockey. She just wants to play the best hockey she can, for as long as she can"<sup>3</sup>.

Carol Bolt was fully aware of the changes taking place in the society. Women had grown intolerant of their exploitation and victimizations by men and revolted against their marginalizations. They had started questioning about the sexual politics and were struggling to dethrone the myth of femininity. Such kind of awakening and self realization was gradually leading to social revolution. *Icetime* is a witness to that change. The play is based on the real life incident of Carol Bolt's life.

In an interview with Cynthia Zimmerman, Bolt says: "Last year, I wrote a play about Justine Blainey, the little girl who wanted to play MTHL hockey and went to the Supreme Court of Canada to win the chance. I don't think that could have happened twelve years ago. Nor would the average young girl have been that aware of her rights then..."<sup>4</sup>.

Women grew intolerant of patriarchal oppression whose victims they had been ever since Eve tasted the forbidden fruit. The biased system of patriarchy had to be changed to define their potential. They sought new definitions and hence tried to redefine themselves according to how they viewed themselves. With this significant social change, came the change in images of women in literature and one could find, women characters involved in activities which were not expected of 'a proper lady' or 'angel of the house'. Justine Blainey (heroine of *Icetime*) is a true example of this change.

In the opening scene of the play, Justine introduces herself, "My name is Justine Blainey. I love hockey. And all I want to do is play hockey, the best hockey I can"<sup>3</sup>. Justine loved the game of Hockey. Although, for a woman to indulge in sports was considered to be a kind of abnormality; a subversive or a neurotic act but, she had a fascination for this game. Bitsy, her friend, warns her that hockey is a sweaty game and suggests her to adopt figure skating, which is graceful. Since, figure skating is beneficial for maintaining the beauty of women, every girl is supposed to learn it, whether it is according to her taste or not. However Justine remembers that she was acquainted with the game of hockey, when she was six years old. Blainey had tried

to learn figure skating also, but she found it boring and so left it. When David and Jason (her brothers) used to play hockey, she remained there along with her mother, and father to watch the game. Justine's father was also an admirer of hockey. He used to assert that hockey is like life. A friend of Justine, enters the stage and dissuades her to play hockey. Bitsy says:

BITSY. My Mom says sports is just aggression.

JASON. What's wrong with that?

BITSY. She says we have sports and the stock market and the nuclear arms race and it's all the same thing<sup>3</sup>.

Carol Bolt through Blainey condemns all types of social systems which are political as well as private which deny individual freedom and contribute to psychological fragmentation and alienation. The struggle of the women protagonist of Bolt consists chiefly in breaking this circle of passivity. Jason, a friend of David, was also against Justine's participation in hockey. He was of the opinion that hockey is a serious game and therefore not meant for girls. He says:

JASON. What are you and Justine going to do this winter, Bitsy? I mean, when David and I are playing hockey?

BITSY. Justine's and playing hockey

JASON. Tell Justine she can't play MTHL.

David: Why can't she?

JASON. Because MTHL is serious stuff. And Justine isn't serious... I guess the girls have got important stuff to do, like fix-their hair or something.

JUSTINE. I warn you, Jason, you're dead meat, Go and count your chest hair<sup>3</sup>.

Although Bitsy and Justine are two female characters in the same play, they have different attitude towards life. Carol Bolt, has beautifully used songs to give shape to their thoughts:

BITSY. Girls all know that

Girls just want to have fun

They want to go to the virgin Island.

Lie lit the pool

Drinking Shirley temples<sup>3</sup>.

Justine, on the other hand, is a different type of girl. Her interests extend beyond the ordinary fun of lying at the pool and drinking Shirley Temples. She expresses her longings in the song.

JUSTINE. I like cabanas

I like computers

Chocolate cookies

Tom cruise's hair

And Sidney Sheldon

.....

My ambition is to travel

Want to see the world same day<sup>3</sup>.

Bitsy in her song emphasizes that girls usually want easy life and fun. They wish to lie at the pool in the Virgin Islands and drink Shirley Temples (a variety of wine). But Justine's choices

are quite different. She likes computers, chocolates, travel extensively and see the world.

In the next scene, there is a trial for the selection of the players for hockey, and Justin, David and Jason had applied for it. After a number of trials, both David and Justine are selected by the coach of MTHL. Justine and David are cheerful and congratulate each other, while envious Jason wanders away from the group. Both David and Justine try to console him as a friend. However, Jason is unhappy not with his failure but with the success of Justine.

### Defining 'New Woman'

By giving a centre stage to Blainey and her problems, Bolt has tried to retrieve women from the misrepresentation that they have been subjected to in the traditional male dominated theatre. Bolt's aim was to make women free from all kinds of physical and mental victimization. She wanted to prove that women have the potential to handle any adverse situation in their own way, without losing their self respect.

Blainey was struggling with the orthodox mentality of the people but was happy that her dream was getting fulfilled. She had been selected in the team. But within a few days Justine receives a letter from MTHL that it is a boy's hockey league and therefore her inclusion among the players is against the rules. When David, Jason and Bitsy came to know about this news, they try to console Justine, but remain unsuccessful. Carol Bolt has a special expertise of using songs in her play. Justine sings under mental depression.

JUSTINE. It makes me mad that  
The world runs like a boys' club,  
With rules that say  
The way that we should be  
Not just the way I wear my hair  
The colours of the cloth I wear  
You want to tell me where to go  
And what to do when I get there.  
It makes me angry,  
Thinking  
All I have to do  
Is look pretty in pink  
I get so angry  
Thinking  
Nobody thinks I can think<sup>3</sup>.

The playwright, by the above song of Justine, presents some basic tenets of gender issues prevalent in many countries from a long time, which makes Justine angry. It may be mentioned here that in the beginning of the civilization, on this planet there was no distinction between a woman and a man on the social, economic and political level. During the Vedic age not only at the play ground, but also at the battle field women used to organize and lead the soldiers. Even the greatest Greek

philosopher, Plato, has forbidden to make distinction on the basis of gender. He categorically declares: "There is to be no sex barrier of any kind in this community; least of all in education- the girl shall have the same intellectual opportunities as the boy, the same chance to rise to the highest position in the state... The division of labour must be by aptitude and ability, not by sex; if a woman shows herself capable of political administration, let her rule; if a man shows himself to be capable only of washing dishes, let him fulfill the function to which Providence has assigned him."<sup>5</sup> The letter from the Metropolitan Toronto Hockey League forbidding Justine to play hockey is quite unacceptable to her. This unjust segregation makes them sad.

Justine decides to take the help of a lawyer. With the assistance of a lawyer, she presents the case against the MTHL in a court of Justice. The court, after hearing the case, gives Judgement in favour of Justine. As soon as it is known to the media, a number of news reporters and cameramen gather round her to seek this sensational information in full detail and capture variety of her photographs in different poses.

Justine has emerged out as a new woman' in the play. A woman can be deemed as 'new' woman when her basic concerns are deeper than merely seeking equality with men, asserting her own personality and insisting upon her own rights as a woman. She is 'new' when she analyses and reflects upon her position essentially as a woman in the scheme of things which includes the social, moral and spiritual fields. Justine evolved her own thinking process and fought against the taboos of the patriarchal society.

### Conclusion

Bolt has created a strong character in the form of Justine Blainey. Bolt's aim is to explode all myths and stereotypes surrounding women and represent them as an individual of flesh and blood, who feel, think and have their own desires. Justine is a strong minded, independent and a spirited lady. Her strength is not merely physical, it is an extension of her own personality.

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