

## **The Rediscovery of the Feminine Space in Peter Goldsworthy's *Honk If You are Jesus***

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The idea of space is quite complex and multi-dimensional. The concept of space may be defined by its dictionary meaning which refers to it as a “continuous expanse in which things exist and move.” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 1164). Alternatively, it designates “an empty or potentially empty expanse among things.” (Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 8206). Again, F. M. Cornford, in his essay *The Invention of Space*, argues that boundless and all-encompassing space was invented in Greece during the fifth century B. C. It developed along with the development of Greek geometry. Later, during the Middle Ages, the idea of space came up in different writings and was also mentioned in the Newtonian conception of motion. (Cornford, 215-235).

It is true that space as a concept occupies an important position within the subject of Geography and Geographers have also identified several types of spaces. Thus we may find that there can be such divisions of space as absolute, abstract, social etc. (Encyclopedia of Human Geography, 441-442). But there are still other important types of spaces such as aboriginal space, cultural space, personal or private space, mental or psychological space and so on. The Australian novelist Peter Goldsworthy's novel *Honk if You are Jesus* which was published in 1992 is a curious mixture of science fiction, romance and religion. It is, in fact, the only novel of the author where we find that there is a female first person narrator, Dr. Mara Fox, who is a doctor in a hospital in Adelaide. She is single, living with her mother and living her life very much bound by routine work at the hospital. But her uneventful life is disturbed when she gets a call from her classmate Richard Pfitzer to join the famous Hollis Schultz Medical University in Queensland's Gold Coast as a Professor of Reproductive Medicine. There she is also given the freedom to handpick her team and a huge amount is offered to her as her research money as well. After much deliberation, Dr. Fox flies over

to Queensland and finally assumes charge. In doing so, she, for the first time, dares to move out of her circumscribed existence, both professionally and personally. She takes a big risk in resigning from a secure job and taking up a new challenge in unfamiliar surroundings.

At the beginning of Part two of the novel, Mara moves into her “fully furnished” apartment. (55) She only brings books and dresses from her home in Adelaide to her new living space. Her working space, the Department of Reproductive Medicine is located on the fifth floor of the University though in the early stages of her joining she finds almost no teaching responsibility and her work relating to gynecological matters. She is thus able to explore her working space thoroughly and assess for herself the nature of the cases which are placed before her Department. She does not perform abortions here as she did back in the hospital in Adelaide as abortions are strictly forbidden here.

At this time, she gets to use the instrument for endoscope, made of flexible fibre-optics. Mara starts to use this instrument on patients as well as herself and soon becomes an expert in using it for the purpose of extracting the human ovum and also recording the process of ovulation and fertilization as well. She slowly masters the art of guiding the instrument into her own body and photographing the process of ovulation and, later, harvesting her own ova. Thus, she is able to experiment with her own body and witness the interior of her own biological space and a process which is extremely personal in nature.

Thus Part Two of the novel begins with Dr. Fox being accorded a free access to choose equipment like a new endoscope which was made available to her immediately on her arrival and with which she starts to explore the innermost parts of the bodies of others and often her own. Thus gradually she learns to capture the ovulation process and harvest her own eggs as well. She assumes control of her own life and is happy about the way things were shaping up. But soon she is introduced to the new Professor of Genetics, William Scanlon who joins the university from Stanford University. At the very first meeting with Scanlon, Dr. Fox is impressed and attracted to the man for his ingenuity and simplicity. She finds something school boyish about his attitude and appearance

which appeals to her. This and her knowledge that it was Scanlon who had been instrumental in resurrecting the extinct dodo doubles her interest in him. It is finally decided that Scanlon and Mara would work together in trying the same principles on long dead human beings.

At about this time, Mara meets the famous geneticist William Scanlon who has been working at Stanford University and had been the mastermind behind the revival of the extinct dodo, working on a little bit of genetic material. Mara is very surprised to find him in this University in Australia but soon learns from him of another project that he is interested in-the revival of the Tasmanian tiger, an animal which was native to the country. Thus Scanlon shares with them this secret, though inadvertently! During her conversation with Scanlon, Mara feels a bit surprised to find herself liking him and sharing an emotional space with him. So, she declares her unfamiliar feelings in the following terms:

I laughed, a little surprised at myself. I couldn't remember when I had warmed to someone so quickly. Or warmed to a mind so quickly- a mind that seemed to roam where it liked, unfettered. (70)

Within a very short time of meeting Scanlon, Mara feels a sort of intimacy with him, with a new mode of "abbreviated conversation" that is established between the two of them, leading to a sharing of an altogether new communicative space with which her classmate Pfitzner cannot catch up. She therefore carries on conversing with Scanlon as with an old friend, creating a comfortable emotional space with him. At this meeting over lunch, Scanlon and Mara discuss the possibility of resurrecting human beings from earlier times by using techniques very similar to that used to bring back the dodos. At length it is decided that Mara and Scanlon will work together on this project. Mara is disturbed to find Scanlon showing interest in her and she, in turn, finds herself attracted towards him, more than she likes.

But when the time came for her to present a paper before the Research Committee, Mara is surprised and a little anxious to see Hollis Schultz himself in the audience. She has a definite

feeling that she only wanted Scanlon to appreciate what she was about to show. In a daring and subtle decision, she shows them her own ovaries and her own process of ovulation of which she has taken pictures earlier. In fact she thinks that her audience would not have any clue what really they had been shown. Soon after, she is approached by Hollis Schultz and she learns for the first time that he was childless and that he and his wife Mary Beth would like to talk with her about their problem. A little later she meets Scanlon and is surprised when he tells her that he has seen through her little private joke. He offers Mara the opportunity to see his work in return and she is very much interested. Thus he tells her that he would be taking off his “intellectual clothes” and showing her something really special. (83) And keeping his word, he shows Mara a two week old foetus of a Tasmanian tiger which was growing up inside the pouch of a Tasmanian Devil. Scanlon later explains to Mara how he has managed to harvest DNA from the hide of a stuffed Tasmanian Tiger which has become extinct some time ago and inserted this DNA into the egg produced by a Tasmanian Devil.

But her biggest surprise was still to come. She learns to her surprise that Scanlon spends his leisure hours fingerprinting the many relics in the Bible Museum of the University and that he has, after a lot of hard labour, found three fingerprints which match and finally he let her hold a beaker which contained the actual genes of Christ which he had managed to harvest from an ancient relic. Naturally, Mara is both incredulous and perplexed but she had to admit that the very thing was ambitious and “an idea of outrageous hubris”. (140) But at the same time she felt a kind of inexplicable attraction towards him which ultimately leads her to get involved with him physically.

In the meantime Mary-Beth, Hollis Schultz’s wife is artificially impregnated with the X chromosome taken from Schultz’s gut cell but when Mara does an ultrasound test on her after some time, she is very much surprised to find that it is a boy she is carrying whereas she remembered how Scanlon had extracted the female half of the gene from Schultz’s gut cell. But soon after her assistant Tad explains to her how Scanlon had played a trick on them all by

transplanting the gene of Jesus that he had managed to extract from the ancient relics. Mara is confused, she at first tries to figure out how this has occurred but the emotion which overwhelmed her now was anger:

I walked home through that warm, viscid night feeling as confused as I had ever felt: half-disbelieving, half-fascinated, but wholly angry. I had permitted Scanlon to share my bed, I had stood before him, exposed in many more ways than one, yet he had hidden crucial things from me: had hidden his central purpose, had hidden, it now seemed, himself from me. (246)

This revelation prompts Mara to take serious exception to Scanlon's conduct and she deals his plan a double blow by not only administering Mary-Beth a drug which leads to a miscarriage but also takes away the remaining relics containing the DNA of Jesus, destroying one but fertilizing her own ovum with another, thereby becoming herself the new harbinger of the Second Coming, as it were. Thus, the novel ends with Mara having returned home to her mother in Adelaide, still unmarried but now pregnant. Therefore, in an essential sense, Mara, who had never felt interested in men previous to her meeting with Scanlon, rediscovers her own femininity at the unlikely age of forty eight. Thus the fact that she was going to be a mother significantly alters her status and in a sense helps her to fulfill her quintessential feminine role. It also means something else to her—the fact that she, who had been a prude maid all her life but had fallen for a much younger man, had surrendered herself to him for a certain period of time but had finally exercised her reason and will power to extricate herself successfully from the relationship. She not only does that, but along with this rediscovery of herself, she, at the same time powerfully asserts her superiority over Scanlon, the genius from Stanford University. So, in the end, Mara Fox beats him at his own game by not only thwarting his secret plan, but takes it upon herself to be a second Mother Mary. Another important aspect to note here is the fact that she as a woman makes her own decisions, making use of her body as she wants without being dictated to by anyone or being compelled to

succumb to the masculine wishes. Thus, though she has a brief emotional and sexual liaison with Scanlon, it only, in the final analysis, helps her to reinvent her feminine self. The final subversion and checkmating of Scanlon's plan becomes for Mara a triumph, an achievement in many different ways. So Peter Goldsworthy in this novel tells the story from the woman's viewpoint and by showing her progress from someone who was oblivious of her own quality and potentiality to one who eventually carves out for herself a destiny that would perhaps have a bearing on the history of mankind. The novel then depicts a lady doctor's journey towards self-discovery and her ingenuity to use herself for bringing about a tremendous change in the society of which she is a member. So, at the end of the novel, Dr. Mara Fox finds her own feminine space and shapes not only her own destiny but perhaps also for millions of others.

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