

The Theme of Sexuality in Matt Cohen's *Wooden Hunters*

S.Y. Hongekar
Lecturer, Vivekanand College, Kolhapur.

Born in 1942 at Montreal and raised in Kingston, Ontario (Canada), Matt Cohen published his first novel *Korsoniloff* in 1969, at the age of 26. During his writing career he published 34 books, including novels, short stories, poetry and books for children. Diagnosed with lung cancer, he keeps on writing till the end. In the last month of his life he won the prestigious \$10,000 Governor General's Award for his novel '*Elizabeth and After*' and died soon after in December, 1999.

The theme of sexuality forms a major concern in the novels of Matt Cohen. *Wooden Hunters* (1975) which is set on an island off the coast of British Columbia, also deals with the theme of sexuality. There is a single town with changing population according to seasons. During the summer with tourists and fishing, it goes up to 600, but in the winter it is barely half of it. There is a lake near the ocean called Indian Lake. In the town C.W. Smith from Montana has his hotel and he works for the welfare of loggers. Loggers come to this place for their commercial interests and destroy the forest as well as the old culture of the natives. As a result natives are against them and they struggle for the retention of their culture.

Laurel Hobson, a young and beautiful woman, is the central character of the novel. She is the urban fugitive. When she first comes to this island six years ago, she meets Johnny Tulip, who is the piano player at C.W. Smith's hotel and she has her love affair with him. After

her sliding down the cliff and having injury to her spine, she is admitted to the hospital at Vancouver. When she recovers, from her injuries she finds the middle class life so tasteless that she returns to the island. She takes over an abandoned cabin and learns to become a ruthless hunter. Now she forgets her past and starts a new life. She meets Calvin, a young man and falls in his love. Though she becomes the lover of Calvin, Johnny Tulip remains her best friend. The three of them spend most of their time in the hotel of C.W. Smith. They together fight against the loggers.

C.W. Smith, the hotel manager, has his wife in the city away from him and he has kept Mary Gall, Johnny Tulip's sister, as his mistress and waitress in his hotel. On the other hand she has her love affair with 'the boy' who is C.W. Smith's servant. The boy joins the natives against his master CW. Smith, and murders him in his own hotel and he himself also sacrifices his life in the fight.

The Novel is a study of the dope, drink, and sex against a background of remarkable violence and the exploitation of the natives. Laurel Hobson comes to the island six years ago along with her friend Louise, as Laurel's parents die in a car accident. Three days after their arrival to the island Johnny finds them "sitting in their tent and in the rain, unable to start a fire"¹ and brings them to his home. He is forty one years old and still a bachelor staying in his mother's house. Laurel and Louise live there for a week and the last night Laurel gives up her virginity to Johnny. The description goes on as follows'

He unzipped the sleeping bag and slid his hand between her legs. It was unexpected. His hand was calloused and rough, felt like sandpaper against her skin....

"Hurry up". She pulled him into the sleeping bag, on top of her. His pants were open and half pulled down. She could feel the buckle of his belt biting into her knees. Nothing else. Johnny Tulip smelled like beer and tobacco and cedar smoke.²

Their affair continues till she slides down the cliff and breaks her spine. After her recovery in the hospital at Vancouver, from her fatal injuries, she returns to the island forgetting her past. "The breaking and knitting of her spine seems to symbolize the remaking of her personality,..³

Now she falls in love with Calvin, a young man of her age, on the island. Calvin has seen her first as "dangerous and sharp, a crazy woman running through the woods with her knife, her bottle, her taped-up rifle",⁴ As she believes firmly in her love with Calvin, she stops taking pills purposely and becomes pregnant. During this period her first lover, Johnny Tulip, who is of her father's age, remains her good friend. As Laurel had her sexual relation with Johnny Tulip six years ago, Calvin also had sexual relation with a woman. He himself tells this to Laurel:

"Five years ago", Calvin said. He had been living with a woman then too, a woman who worked as a receptionist for an eye doctor. After a couple of months she had packed her suitcase and left. Then he had gotten a postcard from her saying she had runaway with the doctor,⁵

Johnny Tulip also has sexual relations with the missionary's wife before he met Laurel. There is no morality, no social restraint to the

sexual relations in the society. Sexuality is free and anyone can go with anybody. Laurel tells Calvin about her friend Louise that Louise is the first girl she knows whoever goes to bed with anyone at her age. When they were in grade ten, Louise slept with a man because he offered her five dollars.

C.W. Smith is an American who sells out his small feed business in Montana and moves to this island. He has been in the air force and has the experience of war. He becomes the owner of the hotel at the north end of the island, where he accommodates the loggers and the fishermen. He serves both Indians and whites without discrimination. His wife Gladys is an expensive wife, who lives away from him at Montana. She keeps long haired cats for contests and sends him pictures of the cats winning prizes. In the painful absence of his wife he consoles himself with his waitresses! Even he tries to yield Laurel Hobson when she was working in his hotel but she teaches him a lesson. One day at closing time when Laurel passes C.W., he reaches out for her. Setting down her tray on the nearest table, she stops and throws her arms around his neck and says:

"Oh C.W.," Laurel said. "You are too much". She dropped to her knees in front of him and clasped her hands at his belt and pulled down his grey and black striped trousers and his red flowered boxer shorts. "I brought you a present", Laurel said. She reached into her blouse and pulled out a picture with bits of tape at the edges. She stuck the picture to where his shirt-tail hung down below his vest and between his knees.⁶

After this incidence he never thinks about Laurel and keeps Mary Gail, Johnny Tulip's sister, as his mistress and waitress in the hotel. On the other hand, Mary Gail has her affairs with a number of lovers and being unmarried she has a child that does not survive. She lives with C.W. Smith but at the same time she has her secret love affair with the boy, who is a mechanic and a driver of C.W. Smith's hearse.

C.W. is interested in Mary Gail and has given her a ring and wants her to marry him. But according to Mary, marriage is a crazy thing, and above, all she doesn't like him anymore because "He's so old. He's got hair on his chest and he has bad dreams all night."⁷ Mary Gail and Laurel sleep together at night when Laurel is living in Johnny's house. Laurel feels that Mary Gail's jeans are hot, her thighs and belly burning through the denim, igniting the sudden and overwhelming odour of every man who has slept with her. Here Laurel and Mary Gail's lesbian relations are exposed and the theme of lesbianism is also mentioned in the novel.

References:

1. Matt Cohen, *Wooden Hunters* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p. 45.
2. Ibid; p. 48.
3. George Woodcock, *Matt Cohen and His Works* (Toronto: ECW Press, n.d.), p.33
4. Matt Cohen, *Wooden Hunters*, op. cit., p. 196.
5. Ibid., pp. 107-08.
6. Ibid., p.26.
7. Ibid., p. 160.