



Female Oppression and Violence in Sara Paretsky's *OverBoard*

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Abstract: History of literature has witnessed the struggle of female characters throughout the ages. Women are portrayed as emotional, weak and subordinate in the society, which is dominated and ruled by Patriarchy. Even today in modern times, most of the writers are men. The excursion of females in literature is suppressed, dominated and oppressed. When women writers started to write about their own suffering in their works, they concentrated on female and feminine emotions, which have been recorded very less in history. The novel *OverBoard* written by Sara Paretsky is female-oriented detective fiction, possessing a female protagonist, that exposes the suffering and oppression of female characters. The present paper throws light on how female characters like Jane, Silvia and others are oppressed by men and society in Paretsky's latest novel *OverBoard* in the Warshawski series.

Keywords - Vicitimization, violence, female oppression, male dominance.

Women throughout their life have become the subject of male dominance. Oppression and violence are the other face of the coin called 'male dominance'. This is very much recorded in the literature as it is a mirror to society. In English literature, since the beginning, from Chaucer's age to the Modern age, different writers (especially males) have portrayed women differently, as *The Routledge Companion in Feminism and Post feminism* states, "...this patriarchal paradigm, women become everything men are not (or do not want to be seen to be): where men are regarded as strong, women are weak; where men are rational, they are emotional; where men are active, they are passive; and so on." (*The Routledge Companion*, iv). This issue became more effective when the concepts like 'self' (man) and 'other' (woman) evolved. It is proven that female oppression originates because of her 'otherness'. The patriarchal family becomes one of the major institutions where the oppression of women begins. According to *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, Oppression is an "unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power." (*Merriam Webster*, 450) and sometimes this oppression of women turns into violence and makes the life of women a miserable one. Women are the victims of this oppression and violence from birth to death, it is an undetachable and unseen companion of every woman from their cradle to grave. One can see the oppression and violence suffered by women in every stage of their life. In the stage of prebirth- selective sex abortion; in infancy- female infanticide, physical and mental abuse; in girlhood- child marriage, child prostitution; in adolescence- sexual harassment, rape, etc.; in reproductive-dowry abuse and murder, marital rapes; in old age- abuse by children and others.

Women in literature, are portrayed as emotional, weak, and subordinate but men as strong and capable of doing anything and everything. Breaking this stereotype women writers try to express female issues with concern as a part of their writing. This act of writing, by women, for women, got its velocity in the 19th century when the theory 'Feminism' was propagated. 'Feminism' tried to establish a sexless society. According to Pramod K Nayar, "The inequalities between men and women are not natural but social, not pre-

obtained but created by men so that they can retain power.” (Nayar, 83) The ultimate purpose of every feminist endeavour, including feminist literary criticism and feminist theory, is to bring about a change in the world by advancing gender equality. In literature, female are often depicted as struggling characters for their position in a patriarchal society. Works like *Room of One's Own* and *The Second Sex* work are the torch which shows the path to the upcoming writers to write in this field. Detective fiction did not remain unaffected by this movement. All the earlier women detectives were created by male writers only, but for the first time, Anna Katherine Green introduced the female detective Amelia Butterworth in her work *The Affair Next Door* (1897). This tradition went on flourishing, as *A Companion to Crime Fiction* states, “As female detective fiction passed from Victorian originators through twentieth-century godmothers of crime such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and P. D. James and onto rebellious goddaughters like Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton and Patricia Cornwell, a female and feminist vision of crime became a clear norm”. (*A Companion to Crime Fiction*, 258) American female crime writers like Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky have introduced female protagonists who experienced oppression and suffering in their works. *A Companion to Crime Fiction* states, “The central concern of feminist crime fiction remains violence against women. Women are victims: captured, raped, murdered, butchered..., in emphasizing violence against women, feminist detective fiction makes gendered protest.” (*A Companion to Crime Fiction*, 268)

Sara Paretsky has created V.I. Warshawski, the strongest woman detective in the ‘Warshawski series’. She was born in the year 1947 in Ames, Iowa. She obtained a bachelor's degree in Political Science and a PhD in History from the University of Chicago in 1969. She started her writing career in 1982. Her debut novel was *Indemnity Only*. In this novel, she introduced the world-famous and heroic female detective character V.I. Warshawski, who is famously known as Vic. Paretsky went on to write novels featuring Warshawski as the protagonist of her novels, by the year 2022, she had written more than two dozen novels in the series. She won the ‘Cartier Dimond Dagger’ award in 2002 for lifetime achievement from the Crime Writers Association, as well as the ‘Grand Master’ award in 2011 by Mystery Writers of America.

The present paper makes an attempt to study female oppression and violence in Sara Paretsky’s novel *OverBoard*. This is her latest novel published in 2022 in the Warshawski series.

In most of her novels, Paretsky portrayed women characters as strong but in some novels women as weak, rich, poor, oppressed and treated in human as an object rather than human beings.

The plot of the novel *OverBoard* revolves around the suspicious girl who is found by the detective Warshawski in between the rocks on her way back to home from the evening walk. Warshawski’s dog Mitch chases madly and leads Warshawski to discover a girl who is barely breathing on the hillside of Lake Michigan. It is hard for Warshawski to understand the word ‘Nagy’ which the girl utters after gaining her consciousness. Then, Warshawski brings that girl to the hospital, though she was identified as Jane Doe, a 15-year-old girl by the Chicago Police, Warshawski still has a strong doubt about whether it is her real name or not. Soon after, Jane Doe disappeared from the hospital. Warshawski unravels the set of mysteries that revolve around Jane Doe by uncovering ugliness and conspiracy preying by Chicago Local Mobsters and powerbrokers who intend to kill Jane Doe.

As the readers of Paretsky know, Chicago Cops are not good friends of Warshawski. Especially in this thrilling Novel *OverBoard*, Lieutenant Scott Coney trails Warshawski and tortures her in the name of enquiries. In fact, they even plant Voice Trackers in her apartment in order to know her moves. Warshawski is amazed, to notice that not only the Chicago police department is spending so many resources on the Jane Doe case, but also to witness, the Brokers and Mobsters of Chicago showing their intense interest in the Jane Doe Case. This makes Warshawski more suspicious.

Brad Litvak a 16-year-old boy, visits Warshawski’s apartment. He gives an account of his mother Ashleigh who has an affair with some guy and about his father Donny. Brad is concerned about his father who recently bailed and asks Warshawski to look into his father Donny, as Brad believes that someone is threatening his father to pursue a criminal act and Brad is afraid that his father may end up again in jail.

At this time Warshawski has two teenagers, whose lives are in danger. Warshawski assumes that the case of Jane and Brad might be interconnected and before she comes to the conclusion after a lot of debates with her inner thoughts, her apartment as well as her office premises have been searched by Lieutenant Scott Coney and even she comes to know that her cellphone is being tapped. Warshawski is surprised to learn that she is completely under the surveillance of Chicago Cops.

The interference of Chicago Cops in her life makes Warshawski resolve the case of Jane Doe and unravel the mystery around it. Warshawski decides, “I will be a more zealous investigator if I can figure out a way to get rid of the bull’s-eyes that Coney’s painting on my head.” (*OverBoard*, 318) Thus, she invades the Zigler Mansion to gather more information regarding the case, where Ashleigh Litvak is seen with her

boyfriend Tud Duda a local mobster, through Tud Duda Corky Ranaghan the broker setting up for Ashleigh to run the real estate operation. They are using her to steal a skyrocket (the magical instrument which helps to identify the prospects of real estate) which was invented by her husband's brother Raggi, they offered Ashleigh, a new project for which she may be the owner. Then, Warshawski is attacked by punks in order to elude capture, she jumps into a river and it is where she finds Jane Doe in a tender house which is beside the bank of the river and it is of Jane's grandfather's. Warshwaski hears Jane's pathetic story and how her uncle Augustus and aunt Lacey troubled and tortured her and her grandmother Silvia Zigler. Warshawski tries to keep Jane in a safe place from all the dangers caused by brokers and mobsters.

Silvia Zigler is the owner of the Zigler mansion, and she has two children, Emma and Augustus. Her son Augustus is a businessman who has seen ups and downs in his profession, at present he is at a great loss and in order to come out of this loss he needs money. Which he can get by selling the mansion as well as its title to the real estate broker Corky Ranaghan. He thinks that it is an easier way than anything else because the mansion is under the ownership of his mother Silvia an old woman and nobody is there to look after her except her granddaughter Julia. But, "Silvia never forgave her son. She spent a lot of money on legal fees...to make sure Augustus could never inherit...and she put everything in trust for Julia." (*OverBoard*, 293) Silvia has made a will in the name of Julia, kept the WILL paper in the lockbox and handed it over to her advocate Istvan Reito, she also instructs him that he should take care of it and that the key to the box is in a safe place and the key itself will find its way to him when the situation comes. Augustus does not hesitate to bring his thoughts into action, he thinks that he can convince his mother easily but when both his mother and niece do not agree to this it does not take much time for him to make a plan to hurt his own mother Silvia who is an old and Julia who is a minor. From now onwards, throughout the novel readers can witness the violence and oppression against the major women characters like Slivia Zigler and Julia Zigler including the detective Warshawski and the minor characters like Ashleigh, Emma, and Ariadne Blanchard, Donna Ilona Parient.

In the beginning, Augustus and his wife Lacey hate Silvia and they are very rude to her when she disagrees to hand over the property, a selfish act for the property leads to the oppression of a female. So, Silvia and Julia suffer at the hands of Augustus. At first, Augustus tries to kill Slivia by pushing her down from stairs, "he wants her dead" (*OverBoard*,215) at that time Julia has gone out of the mansion when she learns that her uncle Augustus is coming to have a conversation with his mother, "I went off on my bike that day because I knew they were coming, I hate being around them. They want our house, they hate my Nagyi and they are rude to her." (*OverBoard*,215) When she comes back to the mansion she sees Slivia (her Nagyi) lying on the floor, barely breathing. Immediately Julia calls for an ambulance, at that moment her uncle Augustus comes and pretends as if he has come now. Fortunately, Silvia survives but with a broken hip. Augustus says to the Judge that his mother Siliva can not live on her own and she needs a companion in order to take care of her because even Julia is too small for that purpose. Thus, Augustus makes sure that Silvia gets admitted to the hospital St. Helenai, where his wife Lacey works so that they could easily execute their plans of killing without any hustle.

Keeping the thought in mind that Augustus is the one who tried to kill her grandmother, Julia refuses to live with him and she decides to stay in her old house which is on Goose Island. But, somehow Augustus gets the legal paper of that Island house and tries to kill Julia by, "power to turn off the gas and the electricity in the house, and of course, the house turned into an iceberg" (*OverBoard*, 216) Julia's body is frozen, it makes her to struggle to survive in that condition. Because Julia is underage, the family court judge makes Julia to move in with her uncle and aunt and when she shifts with them, "they want me sign some form, something they got from a lawyer, saying if she dies I'll give up my right to the house."(*OverBoard*, 216) When Julia tries to defend herself, they lock her up in the basement where she spends a few days in a dark as well as a less ventilated room. By torturing her mentally like this they intend Julia to tell them about the lockbox where Siliva hid her mansion papers.

It is hard for Lacey to keep an eye on Julia and she can't live with her anymore. So, she gives an idea to Augustus to forge her name as well as her signature on the paper in which Augustus is a master. But, their lawyer is good at finding these forgeries because of Augustus's history in his childhood, when he stole Siliva's cheques, credit cards and forged her signature many times. Julia is a brave kid, she attempts a daring escape by burning the basement door but caught by her uncle Augustus and she is admitted to the hospital because of the the wounds caused by the fire. Besides Julia does not stop thinking about meeting Slivia and requests the hospital crew in regard to this but she is cheated by the hospital crew and they inform about this to her uncle Augustus. Then he becomes very angry and drags Julia out of the hospital but Juila slips away from him and catches the moving truck and disappears and later she climbs the solitary rocks and loses her consciousness, that is where Warshawski finds Julia.

This accident meeting between Julia and Warshawski becomes a boon to Julia and a bane to Warshawski because Julia gets proper and the safest shelter, whereas it puts Warshawski's life in danger when she starts digging into Julia's life. Further, Chicago cops try to keep Warshawski away because they do not like her interference in Julia's case. For that reason, Mr. Scott Coney, the lieutenant himself comes all around as a hurdle in Warshawski's happy and smooth-running life. He is so ugly in his first meeting with Warshawski, "He hit me, so quickly that I couldn't duck from his hand." (*OverBoard*, 67) Warshawski couldn't fight back only because he is a Lieutenant.

Lieutenant Scott Coney visits Warshawski's apartment for the second time, and he has a search warrant for her apartment as well as her office premises and along with a warrant to take her into custody if she objects. But right away they both start to argue and this leads Coney to be angry and he slaps across Warshawski's face, it shows the Police's ill-treatment towards a female detective and how easily she is targeted. Then the assistant cops of Coney slam the door immediately in order to hide the fact of manhandling the woman, "that the cops were inside and violence they didn't want to be in the cross fire." (*OverBoard*,110) Warshawski starts to scream that the cops are hurting her and her neighbour Mr. Contreras, who comes to help her, "Coney's henchmen grabbed my arms and half dragged me up the stairs. I didn't resist but kept screaming for help" (*OverBoard*, 110) then they take her to the police Home Square for more enquires and for a cavity check. At the police station in the name of investigation, her interior parts are explored by them, further, they assault Warshawski and treat her badly. They start to watch her every single move after her release by keeping a voice tracker on her vehicle, phone and even in her apartment the recorders are planted inside the bed lamp and her piano.

The heinous act of Scott Conny with Warshawski continues for the third time. Warshawski's interference in the crime scene boils him and this time he trails her and overtakes her car on the road and barks, "hands in the air, down on your knees"(*OverBoard*,196) and "Coney marched over and grabbed the lapels of my blazer" (*OverBoard*, 197). This act of Coney shocks Warshawski and this event is even being recorded by some passersby, which makes Warshawski a little uncomfortable and she feels embarrassed. Coney asks his cop assistants to search her car in order to find the jacket which she has stolen from the crime scene but the assistants do not find anything, even though they have searched everything in her car including the interior parts, under the chassis and everywhere. Coney threatens Warsawaski to give the information about the jacket or else he will give an electric ride to her. After thinking so much about the interest of cops in this case, Warshawski thinks that Coney is fighting off the record with her for his own dispute which might be connected to the broker's mafia.

It becomes clear to Warshawski, that the Chicago Police are trying to keep her away from the investigation and her interference in Julia's case. But the brokers and mafia members are barging into her life many a time, this makes Warshawski to conclude that not the Chicago police even the brokers as well as mafia members are also interested in the case of Julia. At first, mafia members disguise themselves as cops and do the cavity search of a 16-year-old Brad who meets Warshawski on the day of Julia's admission to the hospital, they also enquire about Julia with him. This makes Warshawski think that Coney might be involved with the brokers and mafia members. Then for the second time, three or four members attack Warshawski when she is in the middle of investigating the Zigiler mansion, "I grabbed his ankle with both hands, jerked hard, pulled him over. The rifle went off, too close to my head, ears ringing, but I was up and running along the lip of cement between the garden and the river" (*OverBoard*,207) and she jumps into the river in order to escape from his barrage.

All the previous attempts by Scott Conny to keep Warshawski away from this case proved his failure. So, for the fourth time he becomes successful when he arrests Warshawski after the kidnap of Siliva Zigler from the rehab centre. "You've been running, Warshawski, but you can't hide, not from me. on your feet, cunt." (*OverBoard*,350) He tortures Warshawski mercilessly by clipping paper clips on her face so that it can hold her eyes to the bright light and they sprinkle pepper spray on her face. Here, Paretsky emphasizes more on the violence suffered by women. A female detective not only undergoes police torture for being a detective but also suffers inhuman treatment as a female.

Even though the novel revolves around the major characters, Paretsky exhibits oppression of minor female characters like Ashleigh, who is misused by the brokers and Tad Duda a mafia member. Tad Duda is having an affair with Ashleigh with an intention, that she may come in help to snatch the 'skyrocket' which is invented by her brother-in-law (Raggi) after knowing its importance. Therefore, they "offering to put me in charge of brand-new project that would help elderly people sell their homes so they could move into assisted living." (*OverBoard*,312) then they make her to steal the 'skyrocket' in exchange of that position. This is where she becomes a puppet in the hands of Crokey and Tad Duda.

Bribery is the means to carry out crime and violence, the brokers in order to get the support of Lacey the wife of Augustus, put forth the same plan of granting the ownership of a new real estate project, the only reason behind this act of brokers is that they want Lacey to support her husband in taking property rights from Silvia and Julia.

Ariadne Blanchard, the roommate of Julia when she is in hospital, this woman character is tortured, possibly raped and killed brutally, “her shirts hiked up, her jeans unzipped I could see her raw surgical scars, the staples black against her paler skin, ants crawling where pus had oozed from the wounds.” (*OverBoard*, 192) by the mobsters and mafia members in confusion as she looks like Julia.

Emma is one of the minor characters of the novel but the character becomes important because the entire novel revolves around her mother, daughter and brother. Augustus Zigler misused his younger sister Emma’s fiancé (a black man from Brazil) by taking money from him in order to settle his debts. But, when it comes to the repayment of the loan to his brother-in-law Augustus complains to Homeland Security that he is a drug dealer, cops do not think much about it as the man is black and they deport him. At this time Emma is five months pregnant. This is how Augustus played with Emma’s life and ultimately, she loses her life after giving birth to Julia.

Throughout the novel, the readers can witness the violence and oppression suffered by women characters due to male dominance, greed and selfish motives. Silvia and Julia are tortured and suffer at the hands of Augustus for the property, Ashleigy suffers at the hands of brokers and the mafia because they want to have a ‘skyrocket’ which they can easily get with the help of her. Lacey suffers because of the property. Emma for some personal profit and finally Warshawski as a female detective who wants to help and protect Silvia and Julia and other related suffers, at the hands of corrupt police, brokers and mafia. Though Warshawski undergoes a lot of ill-treatment and torture while resolving her cases, she is bold and daring enough to overcome all the odds and get justice for her clients.

Tough being the feminist detective writer, Sara Paretsky has created her central character Warshawski as all equivalent to men who becomes a saviour for oppressed women like Silvia and Julia. A study of the detective novel *OverBoard* shows that women even in powerful positions are not free from oppression and violence from male dominance, stereotyped and corrupt society.

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