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Book Review

Slammerkin by Emma Donoghue. Harvest edition. Harcourt: Virago Press, 2002. 352 pages. 14 USD. Available from: Virago Press, Time Warner Books UK, Brettenham House, Lancaster Place, London WC2E 7EN.

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As with many contemporary novels attempting to bring a variety of cultural, historical, political and personal accounts together, Emma Donoghue's Slammerkin, *"a loose dress for a loose woman,"* is a good example of fiction that aims to connect together different patches in a personal-political discourse. Donoghue is a contemporary Irish writer of nine books, *Slammerkin* being her fourth. Covering important issues from political to personal life, Donoghue's *Slammerkin* gives a portrait of the 18th-century England and Wales, and centers upon the tragic life of the protagonist, Mary Saunders. The novel can be considered a political and historical document for its detailed descriptions of the life in the back streets of the 18th-century England, as well as a personal narrative for its emphasis on the accounts of the real-life story of Mary Saunders, a fourteen-year-old prostitute, who was executed in 1764 for killing her mistress. Moreover, the novel precisely underlines the position of women in the patriarchal community with reference to institutions such as marriage, motherhood, prostitution, education, religion, class and family. Thus, *Slammerkin* successfully interweaves political, cultural and historical issues in a personal narrative through a dialogic language which allows a play of multiple points of view.

The heart of the book consists of the real-life story of Mary Saunders in two separate chapters, entitled as London and Monmouth. The prologue, beginning *in medias res*, introduces the reader to Mary in prison, where she is waiting for her execution. The second part of the novel begins with Mary's new life in her late mother's town, Monmouth, Wales, where she tries to find a job first as a maid, then as a needle-worker in a conservative family household. It is ironic that through needlework, which she once hated as her

mother's occupation, Mary begins a self-quest and the embroidery she produces becomes as sign of her individual autonomy, self-esteem, and creativity. As the essential metaphor of the novel, needlework is indeed a universal symbol for the articulation of the feminine. It allows women to enter into the public spheres of life, as well as to enter each other's individual worlds, as exemplified in the case of other female characters in the novel. For instance, the teachings of Doll, Mary's fellow-prostitute, disrupt the hegemony of the masculine order, which maintains the submission, subordination and exploitation of women. That is to say, needlework provides a niche for female existence and female discourse in the patriarchal domain.

Nevertheless, the tragic ending of the novel underlines the victimization of women in the patriarchal society. No matter how strongly the tragic heroine struggles to stay alive, her empowerment is challenged, and she eventually surrenders to male authority.

Incorporating a broad selection of themes and perspectives, such as the subordination of women, conformism vs. non-conformism, marriage, slavery and prostitution as the institutions of patriarchy and also addressing the issues of race, gender and class, Emma Donoghue's Slammerkin is uniformly well-written to appeal to a wide public, including scholars of cultural studies.