



The Effect of Literature and Relationships on Self-identification by Women Authors

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Human relationships are the connections and at times, the bonds people share not just among themselves but with their own selves as well and without such relationships humans would cease to exist. Just as oxygen, food, and shelter are the basic necessities for the survival of humans, in the same breath it can be said that an absence of relationships would make the human life lose its very meaning. Relationships define the way in which people are connected and have dealings with themselves and with each other and people who lack relationships in their life form the dregs of society. Relationships are a major sustaining factor of the human civilization and at its most fundamental level, literature tries to describe and explain the experiences of these very relationships. Through its exploration of human relationships literature—be it in any language—helps us to resolve our debate about who we are and what we should do, thereby connecting us with ideas of permanent and universal interest.

In my view human relationships form the very heart of literature and the more detailed and honest portrayal of relationships is there, the more beautiful and captivating literature turns out to be. The creations of innumerable authors revolve around these relationships and Lesley McDowell is one such literary artist. In her book *Between the Sheets: Nine 20th Century Women Writers and Their Famous Literary Partnerships* Lesley makes a searching examination of the lives of nine twentieth-century women writers. In this book by unraveling before us the relationships of certain women writers with their literary counterparts Lesley dives deep into their relationships with their own selves as well the connections or relationships they shared with their literary partners, thereby helping us to understand the role those relationships played in shaping the very personalities of these writers.

Relationships, I repeat, are a major sustaining factor of human civilization and with a woman this holds true all the more. Needless to say, woman being a supremely emotional being,

human relationships encompass her entire life. More than oxygen, I would say, a woman breathes relationships and when she finds a description of the same in the literature she creates or reads, it begins a process of catharsis inside her which leads her to understand herself and eventually the world around her.

The term *literary women* refers to not only the women authors; rather it also includes all the female readers with a wide range of literary interests who, collectively, with all the multifarious variety of relationships they are entangled in, provide a major inspiration for literature. Now, this feels very lofty and presents such women on the side of the angels. After all, women by creating literature seem to do a great service to humanity. But is this completely and actually true? In this process of creating literature is she really able to distinguish herself from others? How much is she able to contribute to her own self, her own identity? Her identity not just as an author or reader as regards literature; rather her identity as a woman, a plain woman with her pure and innocent desires. The book *Between the Sheets: Nine 20th Century Women Writers and Their Famous Literary Partnerships* explores the sacrifices various women writers made, willingly or unwillingly, in their literary liaisons— at times successful or at times failed—to carve out a seat for themselves in the panorama of literature.

I believe that the literary worth of women—ever since they started reading and then creating literature—till the early twentieth century has been underestimated. The society remained biased towards the creations of women writers, regarding their work as beautiful and pleasing in an artistic way, rather than being very serious or full of information. On the other hand, the works of male writers—be it of any kind—were always regarded worth their weight in gold and consequently secured their places in the sun. But the women writers had to always fight for recognition and acceptance. And it was to earn approval of the society and establish themselves as authors that the women writers were inclined to form relationships with male writers. But the question is how much did these women writers gain by their literary liaisons and how much did they lose or was it a win-win situation for both the parties involved? It seems to me that the women writers of the early twentieth century didn't have absolute faith in their literary abilities and therefore to prove that they were skilled in the particular activity of writing and to win the respect of other people the women writers such as Elizabeth Smart (1913-1986), Sylvia Plath (1932 -1963), Jean Rhys (1890 - 1979) , Katherine Mansfield (1888 - 1963), Alice Walker—and the list is endless—sought the help and support of and in fact completely depended on their male literary counterparts. For such women writers, literature was the base and literary liaisons the superstructure of their lives. But they gained their identity as an author at the cost of their identity as a woman and at times at the cost of their life, as in the case of Sylvia Plath. The price these women writers paid was heavy. But although these women chose their own fate or victimization, the society of the times they lived in and the male writers they associated with can't be dismissed off their share in the fate of these writers.

Elizabeth Smart (1913-1986) was a Canadian poet and novelist. Born to a prominent family in Ontario she had begun writing at an early age, publishing her first poem at the age of ten and compiling a collection of poetry at 15. And it was while she was working with the Associated Country Women of the World that she happened across a book of poetry by George Barker (British poet and author championed by his patron T. S. Eliot), immediately falling in love not only with the poetry, but with the man himself and after meeting him, a tumultuous and lifelong relationship, which was to last for eighteen years, began between the two writers even though Barker was married at that time. After joining Barker in United States and bearing his two children, Smart produced her best-known work *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, a fictional work, largely based on Smart's affair with Barker up until that point. Just 2000 copies of this work were published in 1945, and it did not achieve popularity until a good deal later, main reason being written by a woman. Moreover, Smart's socially conscious mother Louise, not pleased with the book with the help of government officials, led a successful campaign to have the publication of the novel banned in Canada. Of those copies that made their way into the country from overseas, Louise Smart bought up as many as she could find and had them burned.

Smart shifted her career several times in order to be with Barker and even after getting fired from the Ministry of Information due to the matter contained in her novel *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* and her pregnancy, Elizabeth Smart continued her affair with George Barker and she was determined to marry him. She underwent all this at a time when illegitimacy was anathema. Throughout the relationship Barker said he would divorce his first wife Jessica (with whom he already had three children) for Smart, but this never happened and he returned Elizabeth's fidelity and commitment throughout their relationship by having affairs with several different women side by side and even bearing seven children from them. In spite of being aware of this side of the character of the chameleon poet George Barker Elizabeth Smart continued her relationship with him. In addition to this, their affair was fraught with turmoil. Barker was a heavy drinker and Smart took up the habit, which intensified when the two were together. The couple was involved in numerous fights; Barker usually flouncing off in a huff to return later in gracious manner and the cycle would start again. But none of those quarrels bred cynicism, despair or anger in Smart. In spite of his outrageous behavior Barker remained a Christ-like figure to her and with his raging appetite for wine, women and words he was a continued inspiration for Smart's writing career. After all, her love for him was based on a literary obsession that had started when she was young.

It was only later after Smart had borne Barker four children and she had become the editor of *Queen* magazine in 1963 that her physical involvement with Barker waned. Then Barker took several other lovers, some men and some women. But, as Christopher Barker (son of Elizabeth Smart and George Barker) recounts in his book *The Arms of the Infinite*, Elizabeth Smart despite being an accomplished author, always played a subservient role to the men in her life. On many occasions through the early Sixties, writers and painters such as David Gascoyne,

Paddy Kavanagh, Roberts MacBryde Paddy Swift would gather at their family home for editorial discussions about their poetry magazine, *X*. At that time Christopher Barker saw his mother racing around as the general factotum and handmaiden, playing hostess to make sure that the great and serious minds of the men present were comfortable and being taken care of. She was never asked to contribute to the magazine.

Today women's writing is a discrete area of literary studies and the position of woman within the literary marketplace is very strong. But it was not so earlier. The female novelist Juliana Baggott once stated that the "key to literary success" is to "be a man or write like one" (Baggott). How true! If not, then why there was a practice among the earlier women writers to write under male pseudonyms? In a world wrought with a history of sexism and gender inequality, female writers have hidden their true gender behind the veil of masculine pen names for centuries. And they did so either to conceal their true heritage or to conceal their true gender as they were led to believe that gender prevented their works from being taken seriously. For example Emily, Anne, and Charlotte Brontë published a collection of poetry called *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*. Charlotte explained that their decision was based on a desire to be taken seriously, saying that they "... had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice," (Kennedy). So they chose male pen names. Prominent 19th century writer Louisa May Alcott began her career under the male pen name A. M. Barnard. These are just few examples and even today, although the situation has changed considerably, but it has not changed completely. Who doesn't know J. K. Rowling, the celebrated author of the famous Harry Potter series? Even Rowling was told by her publisher that her series wouldn't be as popular among boys if it was penned by a woman. And therefore instead of using her real name Joanne Rowling she used a set of initials instead. And this example makes it amply clear that double standards still exist in the publishing industry. Rowling was working as a researcher and bilingual secretary for Amnesty International when she conceived the idea for the Harry Potter series on a delayed train from Manchester to London in 1990. Rowling was a strong lady who battled against all odds and kept on her struggle in the seven-year period that followed entailing the death of her mother, divorce from her first husband and poverty until she finished the first novel in the series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) and tasted success. But not every woman who aspires to become famous as author possesses the frame of mind as Rowling's.

Since time immemorial society has an inclination of evaluating and viewing works by male and female writers differently and unduly. Women writers such as Sylvia Plath and Alice Walker believed that several problems were inflicted on them because of their status as women. Both the authors believed that the men and even the women of their times were conspiring against them by judging their works unjustly and throughout their lives both these writers attempted to overcome those judgments in their works. These writers struggled endlessly but unsuccessfully in their works to change the responses of the society around them and open the gates to their futures. While alive Sylvia Plath was well-known and her suicide made her even

more famous. A close look at the life of Sylvia Plath, who is credited with advancing the genre of confessional poetry, reveals that her life was a constant struggle with herself as well as the world around her. Through her poetry Sylvia Plath wanted to discover herself, discover what she really wanted to do rather than just accepting as her desires and ambitions those which society had set out for her. In her several poems, for example the poem such as *Paralytic* expresses her wish to have no influence on the outside world, in the hope that it will not wish to influence her. In her poem *I am Vertical* she implies that, as a woman, she feels she would be more use dead than alive. The poem ends:

And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:

Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time for me. (Plath)

These lines imply that she did not feel that she received the attention she deserved.

But when we come to Alice Walker (1944-till date) the famous American poet and novelist, we find that now the literary scene has started changing. Her outlook on her plight is a lot more positive than that of Plath. Although she feels that women, particularly black women, are typecast and have a lot to deal with, however, as an author, her work deals not only with the problems of being a black woman, but also with the possibility of change and progression, even if it is a slow process. The poem, *On Stripping Bark from Myself*, from her collection *Good Night Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning*, embodies her ideas to an extent:

I find my own

Small person

A standing self

Against the world

An equality of wills

I finally understand (Cooper)

Apart from being a famous author and poet Alice Walker is also well-known as a womanist and an activist which signals us that now, a woman's view, her opinions are not being easily dismissed off because of her gender. Rather her very gender is now supporting her in being considered as a compassionate, understanding and supportive human being. While in college Alice Walker became interested in the U. S. Civil Rights Movement and later became involved with voter registration drives, campaigns for welfare rights, and children's programs in Mississippi.

Alice Walker believes that to bring about societal change, a person first has to change their own way of thinking. In her novel *Meridian*, one of the major issues taken up by her is that in spite of revealing themselves and progressing as competent writers black women are often seen as little more than baby-making machines. But still women authors such as Alice Walker serve as beacons of hope in the emerging literary scene of modern times.

Until now writing about war had been traditionally seen as the province of men and women had always addressed the subject indirectly because they were not allowed to go on the battlefield and see the entire action with their own eyes. But now even women are writing about the experiences of war because they are visiting war themselves. The writings of today's women authors are not only autobiographical or semi-autobiographical, rather also explores the themes of gender, violence, race, etc. Even the lesbianism themes, earlier considered a taboo by the society, are now being openly and bluntly dealt by female authors. The society of today, without any shame as a reader, is gradually opening up to the controversial life stories of female authors which are now being published without any censorship. Today the writings of women authors are gaining a wider acceptance of the society than before and when we see women authors such as Nadine Gordimer, Doris May Lessing, J. K. Rowling, Jhumpa Lahiri gaining worldwide recognition then our hearts are filled with admiration and respect for them. Their literary contributions are making quite an impact on readers and other writers alike and their works are also gaining commercial success. In short, women with their female perspectives for which they had been rebuffed earlier, are now being valued by the society.

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