

## Sexuality and Eroticism - Keys to Self-presentation in Women Autofiction Writers

**Abstract:** Images of women are without any doubt very interesting to study in any form of art and literature is no exception. In the contemporary literary world, women writers have become a strong voice of truth about subconscious and sexuality. Women writers explore these tabooed issues much deeper and in a more raw way that men writers do. When we talk about images of women, the ones, given by women writers are definitely more realistic and when these images are self-portraits or autofictional portraits, they become even more interesting and intriguing.

This presentation will examine how sexuality is used as a way of self-presentation in fiction. The research will be based on autofictional novels of three women writers from two different cultures (French and Japanese). The choice of the material ("Autofiction" by Hitomi Kanehara, "The Sexual Life of Catherine M." by Catherine Millet and "The Possession" by Annie Ernaux) is induced by the fact that main themes of these novels are sexual obsessions and open confessions on this subject. These writers chose a very daring way to show their sexual portraits and how sexuality is crucial in their personalities and lives. While Kanehara and Annie Ernaux reveal how the fear of losing the men they love and the jealousy towards other woman take over their lives, Millet tell us about her various sexual experiences in a tranquil, almost neutral way. It is their refined language and remarkable writing skills that place their works in the rank of high literature, especially, Millet's novel which could easily become pornography in less skilled writer's hands. Their writing does not try to find symbols or tropes for sexual organs, acts, fantasies or to describe lovemaking as something romantic. Direct, open narratives bring the readers to exploring and facing their own sexuality and eroticism.

**Key words:** sexuality, eroticism, obsession, taboo, Millet, Kanehara, Ernaux, autofiction, autobiography.

Human sexuality, as natural and essential as it might be, has never been a simple subject to discuss. Regardless its indivisibility from life and the daily round of humans, sex is perhaps the most tabooed and restricted issue in most cultures. Considering its power and importance, it comes to no surprise that most religions, social or political systems have tried to put rules on sexual thinking and activity. In fact, what we think of sex and how we perceive our sexuality is mostly formed and defined by the information we have been provided from the society. This starts from early childhood and continues throughout our lives.

Bhattacharyya argues... 'sexuality is made through the networks of social power; sexual choices are constrained by economics... social pressure, habit, convention, and expectation. Yet... sexuality retains this possibility of play and magic – a space where dreams can be negotiated if not fully realized.'<sup>1</sup>

Depending on traditions, religion, political system and social standards, the level of sexual freedom varies but in any case, the individuals who do not follow the norms, are always looked at differently, judged or even punished.

When it comes to female sexuality, the matter becomes far more complex and hence, interesting. Women have always been seen as symbols of fertility and givers of life and this symbol inevitably comprises sex. However, many cultures have repressed female sexuality to maximum when a woman is taken away almost every function but being a wife and a mother. In other cultures, in spite of freedom and rights of women as equals to men, sexuality is still the area where the situation is not quite the same as for men.

This presentation examines how sexuality is used as a way of self-presentation in autofiction. The research is based on novels by three women writers from two different cultures (French and Japanese). The choice of the material ("Autofiction" by Hitomi Kanehara, "The Sexual Life of Catherine M." by Catherine Millet, "The Possession" by Annie Ernaux) is induced by the fact that their main themes are sexual obsessions and open confessions on this subject. These writers chose a very daring way to show their sexual portraits and how sexuality is crucial for their personality.

Autofiction appeared in the beginning of 20th century and was primarily related to male writers, as Shirley Jordan points out, "*treating as secondary the substantial range of experimentation by new women writers that constitute some of the autofiction's most distinctive practice.*"<sup>2</sup> I want to argue that when sexuality is concerned, women autofiction writers explore tabooed issues in a much deeper and rawer way than men do and an autofiction as a form is a right tool in their hand as it allows them the freedom of reexamining, reevaluating, reinventing the events, experiences that make them who they are.

It is commonly acknowledged that truth is a relative concept and in the art the truth about oneself is often better said using fiction. Same can be applied to sexuality. It cannot be described or defined by facts and acts. Hence, autofiction is a better-fitted way of talking about issues such as sexual desire, jealousy, possessiveness, paranoia, abuse, rape, revenge, the issues that take the main place in the works of Ernaux, Millet, and Kanehara.

As everything that makes a person who he/she is takes roots in the childhood, while discussing the issue of sexuality in autofiction, we must start by exploring the presentation of the childhood in writers works. Self-images that autofiction women writers provide often contain powerful information about childhood.

Millet starts the novel with her comprehension of sexual relationships as a child. Millet, like many girls, had created the image of herself as a married mother, a commonly accepted image that society puts in girls heads since they are very little: "*I could envisage in more concrete terms my life as a married young woman, and therefore the presence of children.*"<sup>3</sup> Family concept is something people try to keep safe and holy, especially in the kind of catholic milieu Millet and Ernaux were brought up. However, this concept might not be as clear for children as it is for the adults. Young Catherine's questions:

Could a woman have several husbands at the same time, or only one after the other? In which case, how long did she have to stay married to each one before she could change? What would be an 'acceptable' number of husbands...? How would I go about when I grew up?<sup>4</sup>

were usually ignored because she was considered too immature to discuss such matters. Her understanding of family, husband or husbands, children remained blurred like it happens in most children's cases. For her sex was not separate from marriage and in spite of rich sexual experience she got already at young age, she says: "*Until the idea of this book came to me I had never really thought about my sexuality very much.....*"<sup>5</sup> Based on this statement it is easy to argue that writing an autofiction is a way for an author to review and analyze her experiences.

In Kanehara's case childhood-adolescence sexual experiences are more brutal. If Millet's childhood wonderings about family relationships did not prevent her from having a satisfying sexual life, Kanehara's character's sexual experiences damage her so severely that she is not able to live a healthy life even with her beloved husband.

These writers choose to draw self-portraits, or, more precisely, self-fictions, by making sexuality the impulse, provoking their actions. There are several sex-related issues that are especially distinguished in the novels studied in this paper and I chose to discuss the self-presentations of the authors through these issues.

To start with Annie Ernaux, these issues are jealousy and obsession. Ernaux writes about the feelings that most women would be ashamed to experience and that they would most definitely try to hide.

With Ernaux the most 'shameful', painful and humiliating experiences become main characteristics of her self-portrait. I will cite Pascal Sardin:

If female sexuality is not the most important of her concerns, it is high up on her agenda, and its —exposing partakes in her political writing. Ernaux wants to appropriate the —right to write without shame; she wants to express female desire and pleasure as well as physical and moral pain as experienced by the writer... physical pain due to an illegal abortion, and moral pain linked to passion and jealousy.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Possession*, (original title *L'Occupation* means the occupation) Ernaux presents herself as a woman who is completely possessed by the idea of a new woman touching and adoring the body-parts of her ex-lover like she herself used to. The whole relationship with this man is based on sex and physical contact. Love and connection come from sexual pleasure. She does not mourn lost love or opportunity of creating a family with the loved one, like most women would do. Quite the opposite, the relationship ends because she does not want to give up her freedom.

It is known that Ernaux really experienced mental and emotional instability after her complicated relationship with Philippe Vilain which could have inspired her to write this novel even though there are no direct references given in it. Writing this novel, as writing, in general, does not serve the purpose of exposing private life but rather exploring the certain state of mind and by exhibiting it in the most open and shameless way, turning private into something anybody can relate to:

...today I feel no embarrassment whatsoever ... about exposing and exploring my obsession. I am simply forcing myself to describe the appearance and behavior of this jealousy which took root in me, to transform the individual and intimate into a sensible, intelligible substance that unknown persons, irrelevant at the moment I am writing, might make their own. It is no longer *my* desire, *my* jealousy, in these pages – it is *of* desire, *of* jealousy; I am working in invisible things.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned, Ernaux's exploration of her situation after the breakup is based on understanding her desires and needs which are mostly sexual and physical. She is not afraid to say that the meaning of her relationship with W. and to a great extent, the meaning of her life during that relationship, was having possession of his penis and losing this possession leads her to total emotional disorder, to an almost paranoid obsession. "...there is nothing to wish for but this, to have my hand wrapped around this man's cock."<sup>8</sup> The fact is that the image that bothers the writer most is not romantic moments or lovemaking of W. with the other woman but imagining his sexual organ on her belly. She becomes possessed by the woman who replaced her and this feeling opens new emotions, imaginations in her. Her mind is so occupied by this woman as if she "could enter and exit (her) head at will."<sup>9</sup>

Annie Ernaux raises the questions of jealousy, revenge, harassment. These issues are considered as something negative, something one can easily be judged and shamed for. People usually pretend to not understand why someone would fall as low as to take a revenge on another. But if we try to be very honest, we will find how easy and perfectly human it is to want to hurt the one who hurt us. Ernaux's pain makes her realize that all those words, metaphors, expressions related to love, jealousy, desire that have become clichés and, therefore, are targets of irony and mockery, actually have real, genuine meaning for the people who experience them. From the confession of her thoughts and intentions, we understand the point of view of people who kill because of jealousy, who do insanely irrational things like sticking needles in voodoo dolls, stalking their former lovers. Ernaux understands how "the right to eliminate the man or woman who has taken over your body and your mind"<sup>10</sup> may seem legal in such state:

My suffering, at base, was about not being able to kill her..... The idea of making dolls out of bread dough and pricking them with pins no longer seemed so ridiculous to me.... The act of writing, here, is perhaps not so different from that of sticking needles.<sup>11</sup>

We can see from Ernaux's self-presentation, that for her sexuality is the key to understanding the most important truth about herself. Putting sex above love, admitting the jealousy, possession, obsession, desire of revenge and justifying these feelings and acts that are normally suppressed, she explores the deepest and darkest sides of her personality. Even more, she considers this period of life and this suffering that is induced from sexual basis, far more important and essential than other, more successful and socially fitted periods of her life:

...it even seemed to me that having gone through the phases of school and of relentless work, marriage, and reproduction; having more or less paid my debt to society; I was finally devoting myself to what was essential and had been lost from view since adolescence.<sup>12</sup>

The problem of jealousy, obsession, and suffering is present in Hitomi Kanehara's "Autofiction". Once again, the cause of these feelings is love and unrealised sexual desires. All of this brings the main character to hysterical state.

The term *hysteria* was introduced by Hippocrates. "The Greeks and Romans called almost all female complaints *hysteria* and believed the cause of all these female maladies to be a wandering uterus."<sup>13</sup> Although recent studies argue otherwise, the fact remains that for centuries, even in closer past, female complaints, especially sexual desires, were labeled hysteria. Scientists explain this as male fear of female sexuality and attempt to suppress it.

Hitomi Kanehara goes around the issues like unfulfilled sexual needs, men's attitude toward the female expression of sexual desire, their attempt to dominate women. Typical understanding of hysteria come up often in the novel. Kanehara shows in an interesting way how a woman who has been told continuously that her active and, in men's point of view, excessive sexual needs are the sign of illness and cannot be taken seriously.

Kanehara's novel is called *Autofiction* and the main character can be seen as a fictionalized portrait of the author. The character herself is a writer and she is asked to write an autofiction: "I'd like you to write a work of autofiction... A work of fiction that gets the reader suspecting that it's actually an autobiography."<sup>14</sup> But even before the character starts writing it, we read a fictional version of her honeymoon travel and of the moment of jealousy in the airplane, which contains an explicit picture of her husband having sex with a stewardess in the lavatory: "He might be lifting her skirt right at this moment. He could be thrusting his fingers into her hot flesh... I bet his cock is already rubbing up inside her pussy."<sup>15</sup> Of course, this is only her imagination but nevertheless, it affects her emotional state.

From the moment the character Rin is asked to write an autofiction, the story starts to progress backward, from present to the past, which is quite an unlike autobiography and we start to see how and why the character is so obsessed with fear of not being loved, being cheated on and being abandoned. The portrait that Kanehara creates has nothing to do with romance and happiness. Even though she wants to believe in true love and happily ever after, she knows that reality is brutal and that even her beloved husband cannot accept her real personality. This is why she has to "mask" her inner self with clothes and "poorly applied make-up" because she knows, with or without this mask none will understand her "brilliance".<sup>16</sup> Maybe it is for this very reason that Kanehara's fictional self writes autofiction, to show what is beneath the mask, what is the reason for her hysteria. Rin is often told that her craving for sex is sick and this has become a pattern for defining her state of excitement or affection:

I think my pussy is about to have a tantrum again... Women who become paranoid that they aren't loved have a tendency to go into hysterics. In other words, they have a tendency to be like am now.<sup>17</sup>

Admitting with words that she has hysteria, only shows how other people see her. For Rin, the reason of all - the jealousy, the tendency to suicide (every time she thinks her happiness and love might be in danger, she wants to die before this though comes true), imaginations that are mixed with reality (she

has an imaginative ghost of a little boy who lives in the house. She makes herself believe in his existence so much that her life actually runs according to its rules and she feels “so close to death that she wants to die”,<sup>18</sup>), overwhelming emotionality or burning sexual desires is a lack of love and attention. She says:

Even the liveliest of conversation doesn't come close to the intimacy of physical contact. I'm a firm believer in touch... I feel I can only have a connection with the people I've touched... Without that touch – a caress or sex – love is meaningless.<sup>19</sup>

There is nothing I like more than sex. ... I've always placed great importance on it in my life.<sup>20</sup>

This last sentence is taken from the part of the novel where Rin is just 15 years old and yet she has already had quite tragic experience – an abortion. As she is forced to abort the baby, Rin wants to die. Then she finds the strength to continue living in meaningless sex.

Unlike Kanehara's character, who mostly suffers from her sexual desires, Millet describes her erotic experiences with a positive attitude. She often mentions in the interviews the content from the life she has had. It is almost in a neutral, distant way that she describes the most erotic sexual scenes as well as her thoughts on masturbation, orgasm, different places and conditions for making love, abortion. She considers sex and physical contact as essential aspects that define who she is. Through her sexual experiences and physical interactions with so many persons as well as groups during orgies, she became conscious of a number of concepts, explored and discovered her own potentials, possibilities, abilities. One example is how she came to understand the idea of space:

...I had to cover geographical distances to reach parts of myself... to learn that somewhere in a part of me that I could not see... I had an opening, a cavity that was so supple and so deep that the extension of flesh that meant a boy was a boy... could be accommodated there.<sup>21</sup>

Mille's novel is a detailed recollection of her memories of sexual intercourses. She almost never mentions love or jealousy. The image she gives of herself is a woman who does not refuse to be used by men simply because she has nothing against this:

For much of my life, I fucked naively... sleeping with men was a natural activity which didn't unduly bother me... until I was about 35, I had not imagined that my own pleasure could be the aim of a sexual encounter.<sup>22</sup>

This sounds surprising considering how open Millet is to any kind of sexual experience. However, it is exactly through these experiences that she acknowledges her ignorance in certain cases and reaches a better understanding of herself.

In the end, I want to draw attention to the language these writers use. Ernaux and, especially, Millet, in spite of the frequent use of sex-related words, are far from being pornographic or vulgar. They manage to be extremely direct, explicit and, at the same time, refined in their language. Kanehara might lack this quality but I can argue that her style fits perfectly the topic and the attitude of her novel.

These three examples illustrate how sexuality is the key to understanding and presenting the real portrait of self for female autofiction writers and how this way of self-explorations applies to different cultures.

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