



Female Characters in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom The Bell Tolls*

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Abstract

This paper is a study of the powerful female protagonists portrayed in the three important novels of Ernest Hemingway, one of the most celebrated American writers of the 20th Century. These female characters are Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and Pilar and Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). The paper argues that these women characters were not bothered about the prevailing social norms. By delving deep into the characters of Hemingway's women, this research provides some insight to understand the psyche of these enigmatic characters who became immortal in the realm of American Literature.

Key Words : protagonists, social norms, enigmatic, psyche, immorts

Introduction

This paper is an in-depth analysis of the four powerful female characters in Ernest Hemingway's three important novels: *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). These characters are Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*, Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*, Pilar and Maria in *Far Whom the Bell Tolls*. Ernest Hemingway, the most celebrated American writer of the 20th Century has given ample space to female characters in his novels and short stories. Contrary to Hemingway's masochistic image, most of his female characters are the women of indomitable will. Unlike their male counterparts, these women are not weak and vulnerable, rather, they are emotionally strong, and carry a voice of their own. They take their own decisions and have the courage to execute them.

Hemingway's female protagonists fall into two categories. On the one hand they are dominant and demanding, and on the other, they are submissive and docile. Brett Ashley and Pilar fall into the first category as they are not bothered about the prevailing societal norms. The men folk around them are dependent on them for their existence and survival. There is no existential crisis for these female characters. On the other hand, Catherine Barkley and Maria are the doting women whose world revolves around their men.

Brett Ashley

Brett Ashley is the female protagonist in Hemingway's first critically acclaimed novel *The Sun Also Rises* published in the year 1926. Brett wears her hair short, drinks and smokes in public without any inhibition. Brett Ashley is a part of the 'Lost Generation' that came into existence after the First World War. The young people of that generation had no focus and meaning in life except instant gratification. One of Hemingway's most enigmatic female characters, Brett is both strong and vulnerable. Reynolds, a critic of Hemingway's novels, has called Brett the epitome of the modern women of the mid-1920s: "the stylish, uninhibited young woman who drank and smoked in public, devalued sexual innocence, married but did not want children, and considered divorce no social stigma" (Reynolds, 58). Brett is described as "damned goodlooking. She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy's. She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht, and you missed none of it with that wool jersey" (*The Sun Also Rises*, 23). Roger Whitlow points out that her "masculine" behaviour has led many critics to call Brett Ashley one of Hemingway's "bitch women" (Whitlow, 50-1). Furthermore, "Brett's bitchiness is also characterized by her remark when she gives up the bullfighter Pedro Romero and claims that she is glad she's chosen not to be a bitch (Whitlow, 51). Romero wants her to change, to

become "more womanly" by growing her hair long (The Sun Also Rises, 242). Instinctively, Brett knows she would not be able to succeed with Romero.

However, Brett cannot be considered only a bitch who is always in search of a sexual adventure. Brett's fiancé, Mike Campbell is aware that there is more to Brett's psyche than merely an insatiable hunger for sex. Campbell provides insight into Brett's behaviour when he talks to Jake Barnes about problems in Brett's second marriage: "Ashley, chap she got the title from, was a sailor, you know. Ninth baronet. When he came home, he wouldn't sleep in a bed. Always made Brett sleep on the floor. Finally, when he got bad, he used to tell her he'd kill her. Always slept with a loaded service revolver. Brett used to take the shells out when he'd gone to sleep" (*The Sun Also Rises*, 203). Two failed marriages and the loss of "her own true love" during World War I (The Sun Also Rises, 39) have left her emotionally drained and exhausted to consider herself worthy for a meaningful relationship.

Brett transfers her inability to make an emotional connection into the ability to make a physical one--at least temporarily. During the moments of extreme weariness, she can admit her feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment. After deciding not to go with Pedro Romero, Brett tells Jake that the satisfaction she feels is "sort of what we have instead of God" (*The Sun Also Rises*, 245). Based on the emptiness and barrenness in the life of the expatriates, Hemingway brings home the fact that Brett's understanding of the futility of life as reflected in her quest for something meaningful. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* captures the existential disillusionment of the Lost Generation after the First World War. (Haley, 2024).

Catherine Barkeley

Catherine Barkley is the lead female character in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). She is both: submissive and dominating. Hemingway wrote *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) to capture his experiences as an ambulance driver during the First World War. Even though Catherine submits herself to Henry, she always maintains her individuality. She didn't accept Henry's advances immediately. Instinctively, she knew that Henry's approach towards her was not serious. Catherine never wanted to go for a relationship where there was no commitment. Besides, she had not come out from the trauma caused by the death of her boyfriend. She remained singularly devoted, first to her dead fiancé, and then to Henry. Once she takes decision to go with Henry, there was no looking back. She is not even scared of her impending death. At the end, she dies while giving birth to a child.

Catherine's individuality goes beyond the accepted sexual behaviour of a woman of the time. Catherine engages in sex with Henry even though they were not legally married. Even after becoming pregnant, she didn't think of marriage. She didn't believe in the concept of traditional marriage. For her, they are married in their hearts and that is enough. She, vehemently, talks about her conviction in the following lines: "Don't talk as though you had to make an honest woman of me, darling. I'm a very honest woman" (*A Farewell to Arms*, 115-16).

Lockridge points out that Catherine often dominates Henry in their verbal exchanges. When they first meet, Catherine asks, "Do we have to go on and talk this way?" (*A Farewell to Arms*, 18). Catherine frequently refers to Henry as a "boy", and repeatedly consoles him: Her approach towards Henry is very supportive when she replies to Henry about being a deserter, "Darling, please be sensible. It's not deserting from the army, It's only the Italian army" (Farewell 251). Lockridge concludes: "Catherine frequently displays wit, intelligence, cool irony, and, facing death, she displays dignity and courage" (Lockbridge,171-2).

Despite the pain the previous romantic commitment has caused her, Catherine reaffirms her faith in life and decides to begin a new life. Peter Hays sums up his admiration for Catherine eloquently: "She maturely decides to make a commitment, to love someone who she knows does not love her, and to take full responsibility for her actions throughout, including the pregnancy that occurs. In the dance of their relationship, Catherine leads, and leads so subtly that Henry never perceives her guidance as more than concern for him. Regardless of her previous loss, she commits herself to love, the highest form of comradeship in Hemingway's code. Catherine Barkley, then, fits in the frame of Hemingway's existential hero." (Hays, 1942)

Pilar and Maria

Pilar and Maria are the two important female characters in Hemingway's much more ambitious work *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Pilar is a huge, ugly peasant woman of masculine appearance. She is the gypsy *mujer* of Pablo, but in course of time, the fire had died between the two. Pablo had lost interest in the ongoing guerrilla war and had no interest in the ideals earlier they had cherished. He was more interested in robbing the train than blowing the bridge.. Pablo had developed the mindset of a capitalist. Pablo's thinking and behaviour pattern had distanced him from Pilar. On the other hand, Pilar is focussed and determined to serve the cause she had stood for. She stands for the republican cause, and her goal was to

protect the guerillas and support Robert Jordan in his mission of bridge explosion. "I am for the Republic," she says in her showdown with Pablo, "and the Republic is the bridge." (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 14)

Pilar possesses the power of para rational forces. She has an ability to read the future. When she first saw, Robert Jordan, she was scared, and didn't speak anything. She saw death written on the face of Robert Jordan. When Pilar noticed Maria's attraction for Robert, she wholeheartedly supported the union between the two. When Robert and Maria performed sex in the forest under the open sky, Pilar asked if the earth had moved when they were having sex. And when Maria shook her head in affirmation, Pilar announced that the relationship between Robert and Maria had divine sanction.

And listen, *Inglis*, she said and smiled at him. "Did the earth move?"
 Yes, God-damn you. It moved.
 Pilar laughed and laughed and stood looking at Robert Jordan laughing." (P.160)

She knew that Robert will die within a few days as she had noticed death lurking behind him, nevertheless, she supported the relationship between the Robert and Maria. Pilar speaks of the beauty and healing, power of romantic love when she describes her time in Valencia with her bullfighter, Finito (Bell, 85-6). We made love in the room with the strip wood blinds hanging over the balcony and a breeze through the opening of the top of the door which turned on hinges." (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, P.81). However, Pilar's wisdom goes beyond her life experience as she is a seer, a mystic. She reads Robert Jordan's death in his palm soon after meeting him (Bell, 33). Pilar knows that many guerillas will be killed in the process of blowing the bridge.

Hemingway has made Pilar one of the most enigmatic characters in the novel. Pilar's appearance looks masculinity "a woman of about fifty almost as big as Pablo, almost as wide as she was tall, in black peasant skirt and waist, with heavy wool socks on heavy legs, black rope-soled shoes and a brown face like a model for a granite monument. She had big nice-looking hands and her thick curly black hair was twisted into a knot on her neck." (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 34). Apparently, Pilar has never been physically beautiful, at least in the classical sense she herself laments, "Do you know what it is to be ugly all your life and inside to feel that you are not beautiful?" (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 91). Among all the female characters of Hemingway, Pilar is masculine and determined, and harbours no illusion.

Maria

Maria is the second important female character in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Maria is a fifteen-year-old girl found in the train robbed by the guerrillas. Maria stands for that of a submissive and docile woman who loves her man unconditionally. Maria falls in love at first sight with Robert Jordan, the American, who had come to the mountains seeking support from the guerillas for blowing the bridge. When Maria saw Robert for the first time, she kept looking at him. In the dark of the night, Maria slips into Robert's tent, and had sex with him. The character of Maria is the symbol of Hemingway's ideal woman.

Hemingway's vision of a true woman is one who will never dominate or threaten her man's existence. Maria never questioned or blamed Robert. In the entire Hemingway literature, Maria represents the true specimen of a man's woman. Like Catherine Barkley, Maria gives herself wholly to Robert Jordan, "we will be one now and there will never be a separate one" (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 263). Like that of Brett Ashley, Maria's appearance conveys a sense of androgyny: she wears "trousers" and her hair is "cut short all over her head" (Bell, 22). Throughout the novel, Maria remains a young woman, dependent upon either Robert Jordan or Pilar seeking love and guidance. After making love in the forest, Maria displays the jealousy of a woman in the following lines :

"And it is not thus for thee with others?" Maria asked him, they now walking hand in hand.
 "No. Truly."
 "Thou hast loved many others."
 "Some. But not as thee."
 "And it was not thus? Truly?"
 "It was a pleasure, but it was not thus." (*The Sun Also Rises*, P141)

Maria, somehow, repeats the same question seeking Robert's approval and his assurance that she is his best girl. Linda Patterson Miller agrees, that despite her "shattering experience," Maria is brave enough "to begin a new relationship with Robert Jordan" (Miller, 7-8).

Conclusion

Hemingway's characters are based mostly upon his own experiences- being injured on the Italian front, spending an idyllic vacation with Hadley in Austria, witnessing the difficult birth of his first son--for the events of the novel (Kert, 218-9). During his first marriage, which lasted from 1921 to 1927, Hemingway completed *The Sun Also Rises*, dedicating it to Hadley and their son. Almost immediately after his divorce from Hadley, Hemingway married Pauline Pfeiffer (Baker, 185). Hemingway wrote his second novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, while he was married to Pauline, incorporating her difficult delivery of their son Patrick into the story as part of Catherine Barkley's death scene (Kert, 219). Hemingway met his third wife, Martha Gellhorn, married in 1940, the couple stayed together until 1945, through the publication of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Kert 348, 422). Martha, a fiercely independent woman who, unlike his previous wives, made the decision to end her marriage to Hemingway (Baker, Life Story, 452).

John Killinger claims that "Hemingway divides his women into the good and the bad, according to the extent to which they complicate a man's life. Those who are simple, who participate in relationships with the heroes and yet leave the heroes as free as possible receive sympathetic treatment; those who are demanding, who constrict the liberty of the heroes, who attempt to possess men whom men can live without (Killinger,11). Hemingway's female characters display both masculine and feminine traits in their behaviour, personality and psyche. In spite of having married four times and having numerous affairs, Hemingway never attained stability in his relationship with women, and this has been depicted so intensely in his novels and short stories.

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