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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND FICTION IN THE WORKS OF COLETTE: AN INSIGHT

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Abstract:

Madam Colette was perhaps the most controversial female writer of French literature. During her most productive years as a novelist Colette has written extensively on the themes of childhood, love, marital life. Passionate and tumultuous, her writings were largely based on her own experiences of three successive marriages. Colette attempted to find answers to the troubled life by observing the simplest of things; a spider on its web, one pussy stretching out in the lawn, perfumes of the summer wind, the first rays of the sun which she describes in a subtle and sensual way. The presence of autobiography and fiction in her novels where 'I' and the 'she' of her successive heroines became the 'me' of Colette, expresses her freedom of existence and to define her own aesthetics. The novelist as such has succeeded in maintaining the critical uncertainty around her work. But this ambiguity may contain valuable information on the genesis, development, and training of her writing. Colette admits to the autobiographical nature of her works and acknowledges presenting fragments of her love life. Conventionally colette works are distinguished into two important genres; the novels written in the first person and when the author distances herself from her heroines and also blurs the boundaries between her imaginations and her collections of memories.

KEYWORDS:

Author, Colette, French, Legend .

INTRODUCTION :

Sidonie Gabrielle Colette (1873-1954) popularly known as Madam Colette was perhaps the most controversial female writer of French literature. Born in Burgundy, not far from Paris, Colette celebrated her life in the kingdom of her childhood and her homeland where the magical beauty of the forests, the mountains, the flowers charmed the tender mind.

During her most productive years as a novelist Colette has written extensively on the themes of childhood, love, marital life. Passionate and tumultuous, her writings were largely based on her own experiences of three successive marriages with Willy (who worked with her in the Claudine series), Henry de Jouvenel and Maurice Goudekot. Colette analyzed with energy and passion the world of adolescenc, in *Le blé en herbe* (Colette, 1923), , jealousy in *La Chatte* (Colette, 1933) and *Duo* (Colette, 1930), the turbulent life of couples in *Cheri* (Colette,1920) and *La fin de Cheri* (Colette, 1926). Rich in her unique style of poetry, where sensations are reborn and transformed by the extreme beauty of the words chosen, and their combinations, Colette shares her experiences of "impure world" where she plunged, despite the

valuable lesson of her adorable and pure mother Sido on whom her Sido is based (Colette, 1930). Willingly provocative, Colette did not hesitate to describe her life and love, as was evident in her writings in *L'Envers du Music Hall* (Colette, 1913).

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2. COLETTE WITHIN HER WORKS

The works of Colette often refer to her life. Each of the colettienne heroines is somehow the alter ego of the writer. Projecting her own image in fiction, the author goes beyond the canons of narrative composition. Autobiographical reflection demonstrates the fictitious nature of reality, with the vision of the writer colored by her personal experiences. Making her life the raw material of her work, blurring the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, she undoubtedly left a distinct mark in the history of French literature.

For most authors, writing answers to a distant and irrepressible need to transform into words, their feelings, their emotions, their opinions, their revolt, and their experience. Throughout her career Colette has repeatedly stated that she had never wanted to become a professional writer: "No, I did not write. In my youth, I never, never wanted to write". It was her first husband, Henry Gauthier Villars, aka Willy, who had bared this latent talent in Colette. But soon she came out of the shadows of her much older husband as she carved a niche for herself. After being recognized as a woman of letters, she had consolidated her journalism career with her second husband, Henry de Jouvenel, editor of the daily *Le Matin*. With the help of her third companion, Maurice Goudekot she produced her texts, working to ensure her place in posterity. Colette admitted, not without vanity, that her lack of imagination, has hardly stopped her talking about herself in the guise of fiction. Perhaps this gives rise to an autobiographical cycle inaugurated by *La Maison de Claudine* (Colette 1922), pursued by *Sido* (Colette, 1929), and the more complex and falsely romantic *La Naissance du jour* (Colette, 1928). Critics have been largely unanimous that Colette's work is almost entirely autobiographical. This paper seeks to analyze the autobiographical elements in the works of the young Colette, in the period between 1900 to 1929.

3. FACTS AND FICTION

Baladier (1993: 86), attresses on absolute distinction between autobiography and fiction in Colette's novels; the former based on truth and total subjectivity, and the later pinged on invention and its objectification. So to talk about Colette of fiction and autobiography, is to try to identify the irreplaceable testimony of a woman who was able to express her 'I' frankly. The whole cycle of *Claudine* (1900-1903) takes the form of fictional newspaper. Behind the 'I' in *Claudine à l'école* or *Claudine at school* (Colette, 1900) lies a teenager who tells stories of her life on a daily basis. The heroine becomes more intimate when she observes nature. It retains all the freshness and irreverence of a young girl, leaving aside the narrative fragments added under the influence of Willy. The re-creation of 'I' of the *Claudine* novels incorporates all the experiences of Colette starting from her teenage years and which gradually became 'me' after her arrival in Paris. The author of this volume does not look like a girl, but she makes the portrait seems not an exact copy of a teenage girl Gabrielle. *Claudine à l'école* is an example of the innocence in writing of the author while the later *Claudine* novels show the writer working on her technique. In *Claudine à Paris* or *Claudine in Paris* (Colette, 1901), Colette revokes her past experiences at the time of writing.

These emotions, forming the bottom of the story of *Claudine*, reflect her suffering. They reveal the inner most self of the writer within herself, with her feelings. Colette often uses in her fiction a piece of ice where the heroine finds her own reflection and starts a conversation with this another "Claudine". This technique also allows her to find another space to get rid of her normal life. The mirror reveals the consciousness of a self hidden, and a transparent conversation with her double. The *Claudine* novels first appeared to be somewhat true with her frankness, her malice and her debauchery. The earliest works show a cool tone, which is characteristic of the voice of Colette. In this game of mirrors between the writer and her image insinuates a fight between the proud irreducible inflexible *Claudine* converted into a closed character, and the more human image of Colette capable of new autobiographical metamorphoses. *Les Vrilles de la Vigne* or *Tendrils of the Vine* (Colette, 1908) is the affirmation of the true identity of Colette, breaking with *Claudine*, her fictitious double. In this novel, Colette expresses her eagerness to free herself from all shackles to realize her true path.

La Vagabond or *The Wanderer* (Colette, 1910) presents a portrait of a woman injured, forced to earn her living as an artist of music hall after divorce. Through this story, where the narrator describes with

lucidity her ex-husband and his mentality, while creating a new character, Renée Néré which merges with the author. By combining autobiography and fiction, the text blurs the boundaries of the different genres of novel varying from inner monologue, to epistolary novel. In this novel the heroine presents herself as a spectator of her performance and engages the readers in this interpretative activity. Renée shows other reflections of herself in addition to her own reflections in mirrors on stage and on the written page. The narrator is an observer on the lookout vis-à-vis itself and others, always ready to correct its appearance, which is manifested by her willingness to correct her makeup. Here Colette adopts a certain strategy in concealment and deception. The 'I' which narrates is born out of sufferings experienced in the past and the changes that follow in the writer. The introduction of an 'I' other than the one that would identify herself with the persona of the writer, a 'me' internalized, and the mirror are important elements to arrive at some self-knowledge. With Renée Nérée the traits of the colettienne narratrice stabilize.

4. DISCOVERING THE SELF

In the quest for self-knowledge in *La Maison de Claudine*, Colette discovers herself through her past. The novel portrays to the reader the children and families of the novelist, the universe in which it was formed. The autobiography should not be confused either with the self-portrait or with the recollected memories. The story reveals itself as a collection of stories of childhood "memories scattered", not having the personality of the author in its entirety.

In *Sido* Colette presents the self-portrait of the child, emphasizing the happy period of her life, constituting a veritable golden age. The author speaks of herself, her preteen years. Evoking romanticized memories in a single moment of her childhood, the writer emphasizes the decisive moment in the making of her personality and her ego. By this evocation she understood where she drew her nurturing substance from; lessons received from her mother Sido. In this way, the novel *Sido* becomes a portrait of the beloved mother.

The self-portrait of her mother Sido gives way to that of the family. The assertion of the self is the act of recognition of its origins. The quest itself is part of a hereditary line, a maternal and paternal contribution. Writing compensates for the absence, the tragic continuity of life. Her use of the mirror image and that of the first-name "Colette" shows the intention of the author to be a model for her daughter. On the other hand, recognizing and transmitting her legacy, she built her ego by identifying with her parents. Childhood is the source of life, with which the act of writing tries to reconnect. We can note the ambiguity of the contents of the book, both autobiographical and fictional. It is evident that Colette knew how to manifest in her writing the rapprochement between reality and fiction, by systematizing the fictionalization of self.

La Naissance du jour or *The Break of the day* is autobiographical, since in it Colette uses her own name, in known places, surrounded by real friends. On the other hand, the book is presented as a novel by Colette, having an imaginary plot, and as a fiction the story is invented. In the epigraph addressed to the reader, she takes control and shows her concerns as an author addressing the issues of assimilation of the writer with her characters, the difficulty of self-knowledge, complexity of human nature and defining 'me'. The presence of autobiography and fiction in this novel where I and the 'she' of her successive heroines became the 'me' of Colette, expresses her freedom of existence and to develop her own aesthetics. The novelist as such has succeeded in maintaining the critical uncertainty around her work. But this ambiguity may contain valuable information on the genesis, development, and training of her writing.

5. BIOGRAPHY VIS-À-VIS INVENTION

Colette admits to the autobiographical nature of her works and acknowledges presenting fragments of her love life. But she reaffirms that these fragments are deformed and exist due to deliberate inventions. Finally, she moves towards a possible biographical truth of the invention, while seeking permission from the readers to hide herself in her works.

The cycle of *Claudine's* work opens on a representation of the child prior to the introspection, the quest for self-realization in *La Naissance du jour*, through the maternal mirror. Conventionally colettienne work are distinguished into two important genres; the novels written in the first person and when the author distances herself from her heroines and also blurs the boundaries between her imaginations and her collections of memories.

6. CONCLUSION

The main challenge of reading Colette is that despite the relative dispersion in her writing which

is ample and varied, one can trace a common thread of singular sensibility in her works. Without theorizing her approach, Colette questions the authority of the omniscient narrator and adopts a literary style that redefines generic classifications. Colette has contributed to the revival of the autobiographical novels by making her daily life the raw material of her work, as she mixed fiction with reality. Colette has always remained an enigma, creating and nurturing for herself an image full of paradoxes.

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