



The Inimitable Colette: Life and Times

*Rounak Mahtab

* Faculty in French, Foreign Language Programme, EDC, Cotton College, Assam

ABSTRACT

*Madame Colette was maybe the greatest, and certainly the most loved French female writer whose appeal had transcended time and space. All her novels were grounded on her experiences in life that largely confined to the pains and pleasures of love, which were characterised by vivid descriptions of sensuality. Post 1920 the writings of Colette took two distinct trends. While her *Chéri* and *La Fin de Chéri* were grounded on the ecstasies and pain of tender love and the subsequent disillusionment, the second vein was inspired by the rural setting of her happy childhood which found expression in *La Maison de Claudine* and *Sido*. In her later years, her writings matured into an entirely different genre exploring the tranquillity of mother-daughter bond and the harmony of nature.*

Keywords : Colette, French, Writer, Autobiographical

1. Introduction

Madame Colette was maybe the greatest, and certainly the most loved French female writer whose appeal had transcended time and space. All her novels were grounded on her experiences in life that largely confined to the pains and pleasures of love, which were characterised by vivid descriptions of sensuality. Her fifty or so novels and a large collection of short stories were dominated by empowering themes of female sexuality in the chauvinistic male dominated world where she lived, loved, and wrote. The enormous love and respect accorded to Colette can be gauged from the fact that perhaps she remains the only contemporary female writer who is universally referred to only by her surname.

2. The Young Colette

Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette was born to Jules-Joseph Colette and Adèle Eugénie Sidonie in the Burgundian village of Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye, Yonne, in France. Her father, a war hero and mother who was a warm, amiable personality provided Colette a normal and happy childhood in a rural setting that became the landscape in many of her latter novels.

When she was 20, Colette married Henri Gauthier-Villars, popularly Willy, who was older to her by 15 years. A writer and music critic by profession, Willy was a self-acknowledged bisexual philanderer and was widely perceived to be an imposter. Unready for Willy and for the bohemian Paris, Colette was thrust into a vastly unfamiliar environment where her talent for writing talents became visible to her husband. While locking her up in her room to induce her to write, Willy usurped the authorship, as the first of her books were published in the form of the *Claudine* Series. The four "*Claudine*" novels, *Claudine à l'école* (Willy et Colette, 1900), *Claudine à Paris* (Willy et Colette, 1900), *Claudine en ménage* (Willy et Colette, 1902), and *Claudine s'en va* (Willy et Colette, 1903) which depicted the adventures of a young girl, were often scandalous and largely drew upon Colette's exposure to the highly permissive Parisian society and also on her rather conservative upbringing in the country. Highly popular by themselves the four novels inspired musical stage plays, *Claudine toilettes*, and *Claudine cigars*. However, Willy appropriated all the earnings generated by the books and from the plays that were adapted from them, leaving Colette penniless. Disenchanted and pushed to the limit, Colette left Willy in 1906.

Struggling to stay afloat, Colette started performing in the music halls in Paris and in the process became romanti-

cally involved with a rich lesbian called Missy². During that time, they started a riot by kissing onstage in a play in *Moulin Rouge* which forced the show to shut down. While continuing her relationship with Missy for five years, Colette had off and on affairs with the Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio and with the automobile tycoon Auguste Herriot while at the same time penning two novels; *La Vagabond* (Colette, 1910) and *L'envers du music-hall* (Colette, 1913).

3. The Transformation, Parenthood and Incest

Colette tied the knot for the second time with Henri de Jouvenel des Ursins, who edited *Le Matin*. Beginning with modest contributions of short stories and theatre chronicles to *Le Matin*, she eventually assumed a more important role by becoming its literary editor. The two consummated their union with a daughter, Colette de Jouvenel. However, Colette proved to be an indifferent mother and her daughter was largely forsaken to be raised by the nanny, as she made her rare visits⁴.

During the war she converted her husband's St. Malo estate into a hospital and concentrated her energy into caring for the wounded. Her war efforts found recognition when she was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour in 1920.

In 1920s Paris was abuzz with Colette's scandalous affair with her sixteen years stepson: the incredibly handsome Bertrand de Jouvenel, her husband's son by his first marriage. Although short-lived, this liaison had a lasting impact on later writings of Colette where the younger man had an enduring presence. She revisited that affair in the two wonderful post-war novels *Chéri* (Colette, 1920) and *La Fin de Chéri* (Colette, 1926), where the main protagonist was a beautiful but sexually inexperienced young man who is both adored and rejected by the mature and experienced heroine.

This phase of her life marked the transformation of Colette from a young writer trying to draw attention with scandalous and sensational writing into a distinguished and cherished author. Post 1920 the writings of Colette took two distinct trends. While her *Chéri* (1920) and *La Fin de Chéri* (1926) were grounded on the ecstasies and pain of tender love and the subsequent disillusionment, the second vein was inspired by the rural setting of her happy childhood which found expression in *La Maison de Claudine* (Colette, 1922) and *Sido* (Colette, 1930)

4. Maturity, Contentment, and Pinnacle

By 1930 the writings of Colette reflected her growing maturity and the tranquillity within herself. In 1934 Colette divorced de Jouvenel and the following year married the writer Maurice Goudekot. In his memoirs *Près de Colette* (Goudekot, 1956), Goudekot indicated that the marriage resulted in much happiness and contentment. The stature of Colette over the years continued to grow as was evidenced by the honour bestowed upon her. In the male dominated Europe of those years Colette was made a member of the Belgian Royal Academy in 1935. Subsequently in 1945 she was offered membership in the French Académie Goncourt (1945) and was made a grand officer of the Legion of Honour; all honours rarely granted to women.

By 1949 Colette was immobilised with severe arthritis and had to remain confined to her Paris apartment mostly with her pet cats for company. The legend passed away in 3rd August, 1954 to the distraught of her hundreds of admirers. Despite being refused a Catholic burial because of her unorthodox lifestyle, Colette was accorded a state funeral that was graced by a sea of humanity.

5. The Legend and her Bequest

Colette was considered by many to be the greatest woman writer in French who could go deep into the psyche of her female characters as they played their part as young, eager virginal debutantes, as desperate husband seekers, or even as ageing and discarded wives and mistresses. In her novels, she was able to exquisitely portray the sensuality of the characters and the relationship in which they were bound. Colette subtly and yet not so subtly described the carnal pleasures of the numerous liaisons in her plots, which in many instances even scandalised the relatively bohemian Paris society.

In her initial phase as a writer Colette was enamoured by grey tales of love, and the disappointments, disillusionments, and the struggle associated with it. Colette depicted the conflict

between independent identity and unconditional love in her novels such as *Le Blé En Herbe* (Colette, 1923), *La Seconde* (Colette, 1929) and *La Chatte* (Colette, 1933). Here most of the protagonists came from the society's periphery in the form of prostitutes, gigolos, lesbians, bisexuals and mistresses. In her later years her writings matured into an entirely different genre exploring the tranquillity of mother-daughter bond and the harmony of nature. *La Maison De Claudine* (Colette, 1922) revisited her childhood whereas *La Naissance Du Jour* (Colette, 1928) and *Sido* (Colette, 1929) portrayed Colette's rural background and her bonding with her mother. By the time she passed away, Colette had authored around fifty books with a fair number of them containing strong autobiographical elements.

Notes

1. After divorcing Willy in 1910, Colette managed to regain the copyright of the four novels after a long-drawn-out legal battle.
2. Missy and Colette acted together in the infamous play *Rêve d'Égypte* in which Missy played an archaeologist and Colette a beautiful mummy. Missy who was the niece of Napoleon III, the Marquise de Belboeuf, later faced poverty and destitution and eventually committed suicide in 1944.
3. *La Vagabonde* reflected Colette's swinging life in the French music hall weaving together the on and off stage stories of the diverge characters which frequented these institutions.
4. The neglected childhood took its toll, as Bel-Gazou became an untamed, boisterous and disturbed young woman sexually experimenting with both the sexes.
5. Colette met her last husband, Maurice Goudekot, in 1925. A Jew by birth, Goudekot got great support from Colette when he became bankrupt during the great depression. She also gave him refuge when the Germans persecuted him during the Second World War. In 1935 at the age of 62, Colette married him, 17 years her junior.

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