

Oblomov as a woman

It may sound like an observation from half a century ago, but in my country, the Netherlands, sexism is still deeply ingrained, also where literature is concerned. I can give so many examples that to begin with I will choose them from very close to home, from my own life. Again and again I see that when a new book of mine appears or I publish something else, men can scarcely hide their discomfort. Or what to call that odd convoluted state of mind?

When I made my debut, with a novel about a wild, very enterprising young Dutch woman, a close acquaintance and contemporary couldn't refrain from saying to me: 'What an ugly picture of you on the back of the book, it's just awful. Of course I'm not going to read it.' Ten years later this man published his own first book, a collection of philosophical essays. He sent it to me with a dedication in the front, in which he thanked me for the stimulating and encouraging words I had once said to him, and without which his book might never have been written. The impulse came up to write him back that 'of course I wasn't going to read' his book, but that wasn't true, I did read it and it turned out that I even liked it. I let him know it, too, because this much should be clear: one shouldn't answer discomfort with discomfort. I am convinced that a laconic, preferably humorous, attitude is wisest in these cases.

Should I also tell the story of that other friend, who was enjoying a dinner I had prepared for him? Meanwhile he informed me that my writing would never amount to anything unless I cut my hair and started wearing other clothes. Afterward I was even crazy enough to walk around in business suits for a while, jackets and pants. After all, clothes are a language too, even if a person's appearance tells you zero about the quality of his or her work.

And then friend number three, who was also having a meal at my house, and who, chewing and sipping, began to deliver a litany of the supposed defects in my last novel. He didn't understand that my publisher had been willing to publish this book. After a quarter of an hour in which he was skinning my book alive, his voice rising all the while, and I sat quaking over my plate, my husband literally had to put him out the door. Please note that this was a personal 'friend', not a reviewer, and not someone who didn't know me, who didn't know that there are very different things going on inside my head than you might suspect from looking at me from outside. I have never experienced this kind of thing with women friends.

To avoid the appearance of frustration I should really stop giving examples at this point, but I can't refrain from giving a last one. In the summer of 2000 I was a participant in a big train journey across Europe, the Literature Express, together with a hundred other writers. Only twenty-two of those hundred writers were women, but that's only by the by. The initiator and organizer of the journey was a German from Berlin. When I had to be in Berlin a year later I naturally went to visit this man. He had read two texts of mine in his own language, an excerpt from a novel and a short story, both with a dark atmosphere and pretty heavy subject matter. After we had greeted each other and exchanged some news, he asked what I had done in the past year.

'I wrote a book,' I replied.

'A children's book, right?' was his immediate inquiry.

*

I don't exclude the possibility that it is me. I may be the kind of person with a perverse tendency to surround herself with incurable macho's, who knows. I do make one mistake: I still haven't managed to develop a selective memory. I shouldn't have remembered these incidents at all. Instead I should have thought of the readings I give here and there in the Netherlands, sometimes in libraries, sometimes at reading groups or in bookstores. The audience at these readings almost always consists of women, when there is a man amongst them he really stands out. It would seem that it is mostly women who are willing to take a profound interest in books and discuss them with each other and with the author. Research also shows that this is the case: in the Netherlands it is largely women over forty who take the time for literature. And not only are women on the up and up as readers but also in publishing, as jury members, on editorial boards, as reviewers, not to mention as authors. More than twenty years ago a study was published on women visual artists in the Netherlands which might as well have been on women writers. I have not forgotten the title, meant ironically: 'Great hobby you have'. Fortunately, a title like that couldn't have been conceived in 2002.

But there is a long way to go before sexism will really be extracted by the root. Let me stick to figures and facts. In the Netherlands, literary prizes are continually being awarded. We also have prizes which aren't awarded but 'won', as if writers were athletes and the quality of a book could be measured objectively. For this kind of prizes the nominations are announced well in advance, so that the sponsor's name can be heard as many times as possible and the press gets a chance to speculate about the winner. Every year I make a tally of the number of women and men among the nominees, and every time the result is wretched. Women are in the minority on this kind of list, even when there is a majority of women on the jury. The last time a spectacle had been organized around one of these sports prizes, in May of this year, I counted, for the first time, an equal numbers of female and male nominees. The jury showed itself particularly pleased about it, repeatedly the 'politically correctness' of the choice was emphasized. But of course the winner was another man.

For whoever thinks, so, it's all right there in the Netherlands since recently, I have another example. Not quite two years ago the editors of one of our political weeklies came up with a new section for the book supplement. The section was called 'To Timbuctoo' and was about the books that writers would take with them to Timbuctoo if they had to live there for an extended period of time. To Tim-book-too, it wasn't terribly original. But it was interesting, in a way not intended by the originators. For twenty-five weeks I cut out the section To Timbuctoo, twenty-five times a different Dutch writer was given the space to write something. He or she enumerated the books that would be in a suitcase to be taken into exile in the distant African destination. Of the writers invited, eighteen were men and seven women. Together these people named 172 books. I counted them and re-counted them: of these 172 books, 153 were written by men. Put differently, of the 172 chosen books, only 19 were written by women.

I analyzed the figures according to other criteria as well. Of the 48 books named by women writers, 36 were written by men and 12 by women. So in general women, at least women writers, like books by men more than books by members of their own sex. Among the 124 books named by male authors, there were even fewer written by women, namely the tremendous figure of 7. And even the figure 7 is doctored, for what transpired was that of the 7 chosen books by women, 3 had a male protagonist. It's obvious: most men scarcely feel the need to enter imaginatively into the mental universe of a woman, unless it is a character created by a man, like Madame Bovary. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was named several times by men as a cherished book.

*

I did an informal poll in my own circles. 'What three books did you read last?' I asked a small number of men. A man of 45 replied: 'Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, Jose Saramago's *The City of the Blind*, and now I'm reading that book by ...uh...uh...Wals.'

'Wals?'

'Well, Walzer is his name I think.'

'Oh, Martin Walser. Why is it you didn't read that novel by that Dutch woman that was lying around the house recently?'

'Because I didn't think I'd like the book,' the man reported. 'She's not a woman who appeals to me.'

'So Wals does appeal to you? Do you have any idea what he looks like? And Saramago, that's your type?'

Sighs. 'A man is just a man,' he said with irritation, 'and a woman is *somebody*. A man is a person and a woman is a woman. You have to make more of an effort to read a book by a woman. You can't imagine that a woman could write about something that interests you. A man simply thinks differently from a woman. As a man you're afraid that those books talk about feelings all the time and that they're more sentimental. And yes, I'm just not used to reading books by women, from the time I was a kid. Boys' books were written by men and girls' books by women. Maybe it's also to do with the fact that it's not masculine to read a book by a woman. You don't want to be seen holding a book by a woman! You must to be a real sissy. And another thing: you're afraid of reading things you don't really want to know, such as how women see men. You never satisfy the requirements a hundred percent as a man, and then to chastise yourself by reading about it...'

'But I'm sure I've seen you with books by Agota Kristof,' I responded. 'With a book by Marlen Haushofer, with my books.' My 45-year-old interlocutor, I can tell you now, was my own husband.

'You're right. I let things pass me by. It's all prejudice.'

*

Prejudices. They're stubborn. After I published a book about my experiences with Roma gypsies in Romania, two reviews appeared on the same day. One said that I was too harsh towards the Roma, the other said I was too adoring. From that moment I've been deeply persuaded that it isn't possible to read objectively, that as a reader you can only transpose the words in a book into a mental film with the aid of experiences, ideas and prejudices you already have. One person really read a harsh book, the other an adoring one. And so it is with all books, including those written by women. The reader creates them in part himself or herself. A supposed qualitative lack can derive from the mental state of the reader as well.

I went on holiday recently. I took seven books with me. When I had laid them out in my holiday quarters, with the covers nicely displayed in a row against a white wall, I felt a slight shock. There was only one book written by a woman. It was about her deceased husband, who was a well-known poet in our country. So I'm not any better than all the others, I too prefer reading books by and about men than by and about women! Have I become butch, have I even become a man? I haven't quite yet in my external appearance, even in a jacket and pants, but very

probably I have in my way of thinking, seeing and acting.

Ever since I learned to read I've read everything that comes within range. How often have I not been at boarding school among the teenage boys and priests? How many children have I not had without bearing them or having to care for them? Countless times I've been a resistance hero or a murderer, fought in wars and courted countless women, not for their qualities but because I thought them beautiful and gentle. I've so often entered the world of male writers and their characters in my imagination that it's become second nature to me. No one ever forced me only to read books by men, I do it by my own free will. This bugs me. There are enough books by women in the stores, almost all the barriers formerly created by men have been demolished, so it can't be that.

What might be the causes? Is it that I want to know so much how men see us, women? The answer is no. I know how by now. Could it be something else, am I looking for the best method for pleasing men? No, it's not that either, I don't want to please at all, and even if I did, daily life would be the best education. Or is it something entirely different, could it be that I have come to find it more appealing to identify with a male protagonist? Here I approach the truth more closely, although as a professional woman I had thought myself past the need for identification. There are only a small number of themes in human existence which are fundamental, to me it is important whether someone treats these themes in an original way, and what style he or she uses to do so.

And yet the possibility for identification must be more important to me than I pretend. In general men are more extreme. Women, again in general, tend to have more of a consensus mentality. Oblomov is only plausible as a man, because a woman would never become as lazy as he is, she would always do something 'useful'. A woman as cunning as Chichikov in *Dead Souls* I can't imagine either, I would probably think she was a bitch, whereas Chichikov is mostly amusing. Maybe I would even be ashamed of a female Chichikov while reading. Behavior you tolerate in a man, you don't in a woman. In one of my favorite novels, *Fear* by the Brazilian Graciliano Ramos, the protagonist is obsessed by the woman who lives next to him, who is attractive but pretty stupid. Would I still think the novel as good if the protagonist were a woman obsessed by an attractive but stupid man? I suspect not. If you were to replace the names of male characters in masterpieces of world literature by female names and vice versa, you would be surprised at how humiliating those books actually are.

At the moment I'm working on several books, among which two novels. Usually I choose a strong woman as a main character, but this time there is one book with a man as the central character. A perilous enterprise. As a working title I chose *The perfect man*. I sometimes try out that title at readings. The reaction from my audience is always the same: a lowing rises up in the hall. A book like that sounds great to them, they want to know everything about it.

'Well,' I then say cautiously. 'It's about a man who isn't perfect at all.'

No more lowing. Laughter of recognition. I'm curious how my male friends will respond.

translation Alissa Leigh

Written for the Unesco Women Seminar, 68th World Pen Congress, Ohrid september 2002