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Struggling, Stupendous Female Artistic Aspirations[1]

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Abstract

Women's struggles to express themselves artistically, whether in the visual arts or in literature, has never been easy. This writing evaluates women's creative efforts, from Virginia Woolf's fictional Judith Shakespeare, to the playwrights Aphra Behn and Elizabeth Inchbald, whose plays scarcely outlived their own era. In the twentieth century, Woolf shows Lily Briscoe painting despite discouragement, and Margaret Atwood and A.S. Byatt's female characters describe similar artistic struggles to achieve success. The real-life efforts of Sylvia Plath show her creating through the traumas of her life, while Frida Kahlo undertakes a parallel struggle to create her amazing paintings through dreadful pain. These two consummate artists, Plath and Kahlo, immortalize woman's agonizing self-expression in their verbal and visual portraits, overcoming considerable obstacles. This work presents the historical toils and fictional accounts of women artists in their attempts at artistic self-expression, proving that such efforts come at a high cost to the artist even to this day.

Keywords: *women artist, expression of love, life, pain, women's achievement, women's struggle.*

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Kadınların Sanattaki Mücadelesi ve Uzun Soluklu Arzuları

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Öz

Virginia Woolf'un Judith Shakespeare ile ilgili kurmaca anlatısında da görüldüğü gibi görsel sanatlarda ve yazın alanında kadın sanatçılar yüzyıllar boyu kendilerini ifade etmekte zorlanmışlardır. Bu durum kadın oyun yazarlarının kendi zamanlarının ötesine nadiren geçebildiği bir dönemde, Aphra Behn ve Elizabeth Inchbald ile değişmiştir. Woolf'in Lily Briscoe'nun aşağılanmaya karşı resim yapma çabasının yarattığı hayal kırıklığını anlatır, ve Margaret Atwood ve A.S. Byatt romanlarında kadın sanatçıların başarıya yönelik çabaları karşısında süregelen önyargıları göstermektedir. Sylvia Plath şiirini ve nesrini hayatın mutluluklarından ve acılarından yaratmıştır. Plath'ın edebiyatla yaptığını Frida Kahlo görsel sanatlarda gerçekleştirmiştir. Kendi acılarını yansıttığı olağanüstü oto-portrelerinde bu açıkça görülmektedir. Bu iki sanatçı, Plath ve Kahlo, kendi mutluluklarını tasvir ederken bile kadının acısını yansıtarak, yarattıkları çarpıcı sözlü ve görsel anlatılarla ölümsüzleştirmişlerdir. Her ne kadar kadın sanatçılar özgür olma ve kendilerini ifade etmede ilerleme kaydetmiş olsalar da, kadın sanatçının kendini ifade etme çabası çoğu zaman ona pahalıya mal olmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler*: kadın sanatçılar, aşk, hayat, acı ifadesi, kadınların başarıları, kadın mücadelesi.*

Introduction

This paper presents the artistic aspirations and achievements of women who attempt to express themselves through literary and visual works of art, against tremendous obstacles, as reflected in their own writings and recorded in the stories of women through the last centuries. The position of woman as an aspiring writer or painter has clearly improved. Yet by no means all the obstacles have been removed from the path of aspiring creative artists. Writing offers a more accessible form of self-expression for women from the time of Sappho the poet onwards, since, as Woolf points out, writing materials are more accessible than expensive paints and canvases, or costly musical instruments, not to mention the obstacles in the way of learning the professional skills of painting or playing an instrument. However, many obstacles have been placed in the way of women throughout history, which is only just beginning to relate more of *herstory*. This writing presents the torturous journey of women artists who have struggled for self-expression, aspiring to write "the marvelous text of her self" (Cixous 2001: 395), through anguish, suffering and her own life blood, against the indifference not only of the world but frequently of their own fellow women.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1928) Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) recounts how women have been glorified in the literature of men and "burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time—Clytemnestra, Antigone, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Phèdre, Cressida, Rosalind, Desdemona, the Duchess of Malfi […] Millamant, Clarissa, Becky Sharp, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary, Madame de Guermantes" (Woolf, 1928: 44), while actual women have at the same time been "locked up, beaten and flung about the room" (1928: 45). Trapped in the debilitating retorts of men diminishing women's achievements, Woolf reports complacent male dismissals of women's aspirations to write, seeing the "best woman [as] intellectually the inferior of the worst man" (1928: 55). Woolf relates how Nick Greene thinks "a woman acting put him in mind of a dog dancing" (56); the implication is that a stable boy would do better than a woman (55); one supposes that these men have never imagined a woman other than as he experiences her wrapped in his sheets, where he the master may define her; as body, or actually as a human being, possessed of a mind, personality and soul. Woolf creates an imaginary Judith Shakespeare, the talented girl who like her brother "had the quickest fancy … for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre … the birds that sang in the hedge were not more musical than she was" (1928: 49). But when she let herself down from the window and sped to London to find work in the theatre: "Men laughed in her face […] poodles dancing and women acting. He hinted—you can imagine what" (49). The end of her story is tragic; the actor-manager Nick Greene takes "pity on her, which results in her finding herself with child by that gentleman and so—who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?—killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the

omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle" (49-50), because she could not even be buried respectably in a graveyard, the situation Ophelia narrowly escapes, since her death is similarly *doubtfu*l (Hamlet 5, 1: 208).

It took two hundred years to revert the fate of Woolf's Judith Shakespeare, who failed to achieve her desire to act or write in London. Elizabeth Simpson Inchbald's *herstory* (1753-1821) shows this playwright and novelist, although nowadays we scarcely know her name. Born into a large farmer's family near Norwich, "beautiful but hampered by an impediment in her speech" (Inchbald, 1967: xxxi), she makes an unsuccessful application to the manager of the Norwich acting company where her brother is already acting. Undaunted, she visits London at the age of eighteen, meeting the older Joseph Inchbald there, and the next year she "leaves secretly for London, to get a place in a theatrical company. Experiences convince her that she needs a protector [and she] marries Joseph Inchbald", making her theatrical debut "as Cordelia to Inchbald's Lear". We note here that marriage is the decisive factor enabling Inchbald's success, where Shakespeare's putative sister wretchedly failed her solo attempt to write two hundred years earlier, but also that Inchbald independently refuses to remarry after her husband's death. "Had Elizabeth Inchbald's husband lived longer—and had she had children—she might not have given us the volume of writing that she did; and once widowed she was adamant that she wanted to write, to be independent, and that she would not marry again despite the many offers that she received" (Spender, 1986: 174-5). Inchbald went on to write a number of successful farces and tragedies, including Lovers' Vows (1798), as well as novels like A Simple Tale (1791). On the advice of her confessor she burned her Memoirs before her death, instead of taking the thousand pounds she had been offered for them; what wouldn't we give for the insights and experiences afforded by those memoirs now. Inchbald died in respectable retirement in 1821 with a considerable fortune. The fruits of her single-handed pen enabled her to comfortably out-earned famous writers like the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen, even if not surpassing the higher monetary earnings of George Eliot, who was well-off at the time of her death in 1880.

Inchbald's story follows the pattern of the earlier Aphra Behn (1640-89), playwright and author, who also sensibly determined to marry before embarking on her career. She "had seventeen plays produced in seventeen years. She wrote thirteen *novels* (thirty years before Daniel Defoe wrote Robinson Crusoe, generally termed the first novel)" (qtd. in Spender, 1986: 51). Aphra Behn's novel Oroonoko: The History of the Royal Slave, (1688) while not a light read for the modern reader, blazes a trail in both fiction and also colonial writing with her tragic account of an amazing African prince. This work should be placed alongside Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness as making a strong indictment of slavery and colonialism two hundred years before Conrad. Dale Spender notes that while Walter Allen briefly includes Aphra Behn in his work on the novel, he doubts her claim of this being a real story, in other words he criticizes her as an imaginative writer because she uses her

imagination (Spender, 1986: 61). Allen actually describes Behn's Oroonoko as "invalidated … not so much [through] its author's failure in art as our greatly increased knowledge" (Allen, 1954 :35), a truly twisted castigation of a woman's creative work. As Joanna Russ indicates in "Anomalousness", female writers have consistently been excluded from anthologies, a mere five to eight percent achieving publication; when another name is added to the core of representative female writers, a previous one is struck off the list, leaving the total figure at the same percentage, Russ writes in 1983. Thus Aphra Behn, Anne Bradstreet, Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, are never all included in collections together, waiting their turn alongside maybe less groundbreaking male writers (Russ, 1993: 194-95).

Inchbald enjoyed fourteen successful years of writing for the stage, including the "brilliantly successful" (Inchbald, 1967: xxxii) The Mogul Tale of 1786. One wonders what happened to the work of these two highly successful playwrights, Behn and Inchbald, whose plays are rarely seen on our stages today. Their writings, whether racy or realistic, show their characters strikingly from a female point of view, since: "it was the men who were being measured by women's standards" (Spender, 1986: 53). Virginia Woolf doesn't mention Elizabeth Inchbald in A Room of One's Own, but Jane Austen (1775-1817) makes the work of her contemporary, Inchbald, the writer of Lovers' Vows (adapted from *The Love Child* or *The Natural Child* of August von Kotzebue, played at Covent Garden in 1798), an intertext to her novel Mansfield Park. The climactic action of Austen's novel centres on the rehearsals of Lovers' Vows, which controversially entwine the characters in flirtatious play-acting. The Bertram sisters, one of them married, flirt with the attractive Henry Crawford and John Yates. As might be guessed from the translation of the original German, *The Love Child*, the material of this play contains seduction, illegitimacy, and passionate declarations of illicit love, which involve the Bertram brothers, Tom and Edmund, in heated discussion regarding the suitability of this play for the decorum of the ladies of the house, especially their sisters. The moral Edmund's objections are over-ruled by his brother due to his emotional susceptibility to the lively Mary Crawford, and the play's performance is only stalled by the unexpected return of their father, which does not prevent the subsequent elopement of Henry Crawford with the married Bertram sister, after Fanny Price's persistent refusal of him. The witty Jane Austen, who makes oblique references to illegitimacy in her novels as a distraction from the course of true love, doesn't even mention the name of the playwright in her novel. The discussion of the play Lovers' Vows' debatable moral suitability is highlighted through the characters Edmund, who is reluctant to act, and Fanny, who refuses to act altogether. Austen apparently chose this contemporary play to critique the controversial, risqué nature of the play's material on the inhabitants of the house. This emphasizes another reason for the relegation of famous playwrights like Aphra Behn and Elizabeth Inchbald to the footnotes of history, beside male prejudice or even their feeling threatened by women writers, which is on account of the dubious

morality of their racy writings. However, this has not prevented male writers' plays of a similar nature, like William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) or Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), from being performed to our day. Aphra Behn's plays like *The Rover* (1677), while highly popular in her own time, were gradually subjected to serious castigation for the loose morality demonstrated in their scenes. It is less clear from this distance why, a playwright herself of somewhat controversial morality, Elizabeth Inchbald did not include any of Aphra Behn's plays in her drama collection, The British Theatre (1806). Inchbald failed to ratify Behn's works by inclusion in her collection, while Jane Austen wrote disapprovingly of Inchbald's scandalous play. This suggests that women have often been no friend to their fellow women in helping them to break into the overwhelmingly male canon which authenticates English works of art, against the prejudices of men who are reluctant to acknowledge the second sex. Joanna Russ' study proves how the number of women writers included in the literary canon has persistently and scandalously remained at less than eight percent.

A brief look at another art form shows the efforts of Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896), a pianist and composer like her more famous husband Richard Schumann, although her compositions are far less well-known. When these two won a court injunction allowing them to marry against the decided opposition of her father, who is quoted as saying: "My daughter is a musician" (Landis, 2000: 283), she began to bear a child every year, until thirteen years later, after ten pregnancies, she had born eight children, of whom five survived (2000: 292). One wonders at the drain on the creative energy of this amazing woman, tossed between the constant ebb and flow of the new lives beating below her heart, maternity surely restricting her musical compositions, although she managed to continue her piano performances. Women have so often divided their energies between heart and mind. They have rarely managed to write successfully while also bearing children, at least until the mid-twentieth century and decent birth control, as Spender also notes in her study (1986: 174-75).

The tide against women's self-expression is gradually turning by the time of Virginia Woolf in the twentieth century, although Woolf bemoans the negligible female literary heritage in A Room of One's Own. She suggests that women writers, like men, are dependent on a line of predecessors: "without those forerunners, Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe, or Marlowe without Chaucer, or Chaucer without those forgotten poets" (Woolf, 1928: 66). She states that Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter [….] All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously, but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds (1928: 66); burial in this ecclesiastical location is an authentication of success in England. But the famous four women writers whom Woolf marks as

exceptionally breaking through to success, Austen, the Brontë sisters and Eliot, are such utterly incongruous characters, they offered each other more criticism than support. Charlotte Brontë rejected Jane Austen's world as a "carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers" (Showalter, 1977: 84). George Eliot protested against Jane Eyre's sacrifice of love with Mr Rochester due to "a diabolical law which chains a man body and soul to a putrefying carcase" (1977: 102). Criticizing Jane's refusal to live in sin with Rochester, she fails to note how much of Jane's self-sacrifice in leaving Rochester was in fact a self-assertion through which Jane retains her own integrity, as she declares, in asserting her independence of Rochester's illegitimate offer: "I care for myself" (Brontë, 1996: 356). Naturally Eliot's precarious situation in living with George Lewes outside of marriage would have made her sensitive on this delicate issue.

Woolf expresses empathy for female writers and artists in her novel, To the Lighthouse (1927), against the overriding put-down of the obnoxious Charles Tansley which reverberates throughout this novel: "Women can't write! Women can't paint!" (Woolf, 1927: 48). Mrs Ramsay diminishes the artistic efforts of Lily Briscoe, feeling that an insignificant woman like Lily with her puckered Chinese face would never marry, and would thereby miss the best and most worthwhile experience of life. It was of slight importance what Lily did, but it would be a good idea if she could marry someone like the widower William Bankes. Lily manages to ignore this advice, which could have turned to pressure if Mrs Ramsay had lived, preferring instead to remain friends with William, visiting places like Hampton Court with him, and asserting her independence against any strident assumptions of a women's need to marry. Even if Lily is unambitious for her painting, which she assumes will be relegated to the attics, nonetheless she cares about her artistic work, and seriously considers how for example the tree should be aligned, retaining her calm by "hold[ing] fast to that" (1927: 81). She steps back to get the scene into perspective, as the tricky business of painting leads one "on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea" (160). Finally achieving her desired balance in her artistic creation, she lays down her brush at the end of the novel, stating that "It is finished … I have had my vision" (1927: 192), at the very moment when Mr Ramsay and his children reach the lighthouse, thus successfully completing her painting by the novel's end.

Women's Artistic Struggle to Achieve Success in Margaret Atwood and A.S. Byatt

Does female artistic endeavour become any easier after Virginia Woolf's time? Woolf asserts that while people don't care if men are artists or not, they actually deride women for their efforts. Men have expressed themselves in pain: "Mighty poets in their misery dead" (Woolf, 1928: 53), while for women the "difficulties are infinitely more formidable" (1928: 54), making artistic success very difficult. A generation or so later, Margaret Atwood's Surfacing

(1972) presents her unnamed narrator as an artist, while the men around her regard only themselves as genuine artists. Her husband/ lover cuttingly puts down her attempt to be a real artist; who ever heard of a woman artist, he derides? Instead he encourages her to develop her skills in commercial art, enabling her to earn a decent living illustrating fairy tales, even if her agent or publisher censors the more terrifying aspects of her work, since it is the parents who veto her work if she does not make it mild or bland enough. Her lover Joe bristles with complexes regarding his work, remaining sensitive to her refusal of his marriage proposal. When she states that she's not good enough, he retorts that she obviously doesn't think him good enough. Whenever they argue, or she brings home another contract for illustrating a book, he throws another mutilated pot, whose "only function is to uphold Joe's unvoiced claim to superior artistic seriousness: every time I sell a poster design or get a new commission he mangles another pot" (1982: 541). Joe clearly carries a large chip of professional insufficiency on his shoulders, in his emotional confusion of his personal relationship with his lover and his artistic competence.

Atwood's later work, *Cat's Eye* (1988), presents the narrator Elaine Risley as artist/ painter returning to Toronto, her old home town, for a retrospective of her work. Elaine prefers to use the term "painter, because it's more like a valid job…. An artist is a tawdry, lazy sort of thing to be (Atwood, 1988: 15). Like the protagonist of Surfacing, Elaine starts in commercial art through the necessity of making a living, while developing her skills in unfashionable methods such as using egg tempera, and becoming "fascinated by the effects of glass, and of other light-reflecting surfaces" (1988: 347); such experimentation with reflections in glass releases her work from the laws of nature. She frequently works secretly, expressing the "misery, and enchantment" (1988: 14) of her life, because her artist lover Jon derides her realistic work as mere illustration. When they marry as a result of her pregnancy, he complains if she paints through the night and goes to work groggy the next day (1988: 350). He doesn't exactly advise her to stop painting altogether; we may remember the musician Clara Schumann's artistic burial in child-bearing. This also reverberates with Esther's remark in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, when her boyfriend Buddy tells her she wouldn't continue to wish to be a poet when she got married. Esther felt that maybe "it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state (Plath, 1963: 90). Yet Jon's view of Elaine's paintings as irrelevant (Atwood, 1988: 366) actually frees her to paint whatever she wants, because her painting is so utterly insignificant. When she slams pots in the kitchen, Jon tells another painter: "She's mad because she's a woman" to which she retorts: "I'm mad because you're an asshole" (1988: 366). Jon disdains her flat art and prefers his own constructions (1988: 362), but in the end he is the one who ends up unable to achieve his potential, while she gains fame enough to enjoy a retrospective.

Elaine's first exhibition is shared by four women, called F(OUR) FOR ALL. While "great art transcends gender" (1988: 367), Elaine believes it has largely

been executed by "men admiring one another", with women seen as "a sideline, a sort of freakish exception" (1988: 367). The other women of her foursome work in fabric, including outrageous materials like (unused) tampons spelling out WHAT IS LUV? Or UP YOUR/ MAN/IFESTO (1988: 367). Elaine's work falls under the description of still life or figurative art. (1988: 370), and includes multiple paintings of the religious Mrs Smeath whom she shows with hairy legs, thick waist and potato face, "her one large breast sectioned to show her heart. Her heart is the heart of a dying turtle: reptilian, dark-red, diseased" (1988: 372); rather like Frida Kahlo's painting, The Two Fridas. This is referred to as "woman as anticheescake …. Why should it always be young, beautiful women? It's good to see the aging female body treated with compassion" (1988: 368), although Elaine's compassion here is debatable. This judgmental mother of her friend had allowed Elaine's friends to torment and torture her as a child, saying it was her fault (1988: 358); "It's God's punishment … It serves you right" (1988: 193) she derided. A protestor throwing a bottle of ink at one of Elaine's paintings is reported in the paper as: *Feathers Fly at Feminist Fracas* or *Hen Fighting*, as a result of which Elaine is treated with respect: "paintings that can get bottles of ink thrown at them, that can inspire such outraged violence, such uproar and display, must have an odd revolutionary power. I will seem audacious, and brave. Some dimension of heroism has been added to me" (1988: 374), she asserts. The local paper reports these women's work as "abrasive," "aggressive" and "shrill", calling Elaine's work "naive surrealism with a twist of feminist lemon" (1988: 375); she is certainly expressing herself, even with a vengeance.

Elaine's artistic retrospective gains this crotchety painter recognition. Atwood presents the traumas of her life specularly; she shows her parents making lunch on their camp fire. When young, this life bored her, but now she grieves her parents' loss: "Home, I think. But it's nowhere I can go back to" (1988: 399). She paints her scientist brother flying from the terrorist hijackers who gratuitously murder him. In *The Three Muses* Elaine transfigures three people who were kind to her; her father's Pakistani research assistant who is unable to succeed academically, the Jewish neighbor for whom she babysat until traumatized into fear that she might harm her child, and her Scottish teacher who asked her why she blacked out her drawing with scribble. Elaine plays God with these ordinary people who had been in exile from their own lives by apotheosizing them into her muses. *Cat's Eye* presents Elaine's partial portrait, with pier glass reflecting the three little girls who tormented her, this cat's eye symbol of her mirror images which sums up her entire life. Another painting shows the Virgin Mary rescuing Elaine when she is driven down into the ravine by the other girls. *The Virgin of Lost Things*, this Madonna stands over the bridge, a cat's eye marble appearing as her bleeding heart. Elaine declares her work is "preserving something from time, salvaging something; like those painters, centuries ago, who thought they were bringing Heaven to earth, the revelations of God, the eternal stars, only to have their slabs of wood and plaster stolen, mislaid, burnt, hacked to pieces, destroyed

by rot and mildew" (1988: 431). She feels she has successfully made her imprint on the artistic world, despite the bitter and fraught nature of her journey.

In the same novel Susie is an unsuccessful artist, subject to the abortion she self-inflicts after her affair with their art teacher Josef, himself in troubled exile from Europe. She telephones Elaine for help, and Elaine can never forget the sight of her blood everywhere. Susie remains frozen from this trauma which terminates her painting career, as well as any chance of her ever bearing children (1988: 342). This echoes Sylvia Plath's account of Esther Greenwood in The Bell Jar, whose sexual initiation leads to copious haemorrhaging; Kendall describes this as potentially fatal, "punishing another of her choices" (Kendall, 2001: 58). Joan helps Esther evade death by taking her into hospital, but she herself does not long survive this vicarious experience, and is found where she has hanged herself from a tree, in whatever unbearable excess of her own anguish.

Byatt's story *Art Work* in *The Matisse Stories* (1993) focuses on an artistic family, Debbie and Robin Dennison. The breadwinner Debbie is the design editor of the magazine, A Woman's Place, working from a cramped office or study at home, while her husband Robin enjoys possession of the entire third floor, where he can create any type of light he wishes; he gives up teaching as the money it brings in is insignificant, making his efforts scarcely worthwhile. Debbie longs to return to illustrating children's books with wood-engravings, and actually "hated Robin because he never once mentioned the unmade wood-engravings" (Byatt, 1993: 54) which she had had to give up to earn a living. She is working from home while waiting for the doctor to visit her sick son, while Robin actually distracts her from her duties by complaining to her about their cleaning lady, Mrs Brown.

Mrs Brown their Guyanese Irish cleaning lady and Debbie call each other "Mrs Brown" and "Mrs Dennison", while Debbie regards her, if "not Debbie's friend, she is the closest person to Debbie on earth, excluding perhaps the immediate family" (1993: 41). Debbie placates Robin's imperious complaints about Mrs Brown, in her desperate need to retain home help, while Robin deigns to lecture their cleaner regarding the colourful fetish objects in his studio. Despite his insufficient talent as a neo-realist painter, he is clearly the privileged party in this marriage, while he is shown as insecurely not knowing if "his hatred of Mrs Brown is a deflected resentment of his helplessness in the capable hands of his wife, breadwinner and life-manager" (1993: 58), who is beautiful, clean and orderly, while the other woman is chaotic, wild and "filth" (1993: 58). The family knows little about Mrs Brown, apart from the extravagant hand-made gifts she offers them, which they scarcely know what to do with.

The household equilibrium is shattered when a reporter, Shona McRury, visits to view Robin's work, suggesting he is artistically moribound, while discussing Debbie's article on women's art with her, including undignified female things (1993: 69); tampons, women's interior cavities, or children's materials, which shed light on their lives. Mrs Brown the cleaning lady

mysteriously catches up with Shona in the street after she leaves. Subsequently visiting a feminist installation, Debbie there discovers a cavern "transformed into a kind of soft, even squashy, brilliantly coloured Aladdin's Cave" (1993: 77) with tapestries and rugs which turn out to have faces and eyes, cobwebs inhabited by spiders and flies. A pouffe with skirts and breasts turns out to be a sort of Diana of Ephesus, another piece is a lizard with a look of rock-pools. The mistress piece is a dragon and Princess Saba, Perseus and Andromeda, seen between another Diana figure or Botticelli Venus. The artist's name is "Sheba Brown … 1975-1990" (1993: 81); their Mrs Brown's photo looking something between "the Mona Lisa and a Benin bronze". Caught between admiration and panic, Debbie observes: "Sheba Brown's apparently inexhaustible and profligate energy of colourful invention. She feels a kind of subdued energy which carries with it an invigorating sting, and also thinks of the feel of the wooden blocks she used to cut" (1993: 82). This working class woman successfully manages to create her artifacts from the materials of domestic paraphernalia, while Debbie remains bound down by her husband and cramped circumstances into restricted artistic self-expression.

The formidable female artist, Sheba Brown, whose troublesome husband had been moved on by the police, refreshingly carries no "chip on her shoulder, she simply makes everything absurd and surprisingly beautiful with an excess of inventive wit" (1993: 83). Debbie doesn't know how to inform her husband of their cleaner's prowess, but her son calls them to the telly to see the "exhibition of things like Muppets with that gallery-lady who came here, do come and look, Daddy, they're bizarre" (1993: 85), as they determine to visit Mrs Brown's squashy sculptures, whether from courtesy or to see what she has 'filched', like the old ties Robin has thrown out. Mrs Brown brings a replacement the next day rather than deserting her employers without a backward glance, and enjoys Jamie's excitement about her "stupiferous" faces, while Debbie realizes that if they had actually been friends, Mrs Brown might have shared her work with her, rather than waiting for a visiting woman from a gallery. As Mrs Brown takes off into her creative future, Debbie manages to return to working on her desired wood-engravings and illustrating fairy tales. Robin also branches out from his moribund work into inspired flames and limbs of *Kali the Destroyer*, apparently in admiration of Sheba Brown; they agree that his new work has definitely progressed, inspired by his women folk.

Another story of Byatt's, *Body Art* in *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003), proffers the achievements of the indigent and anaemic artist Daisy Whimple, who falls off a ladder in hospital while making their Christmas decorations. Homeless and in precarious health, after having undergone a botched abortion that apparently made her infertile, Daisy manages to *nest* or squat in the hospital until she is discovered by the gynaecologist Damian, who offers her a bed for a few days. Visiting a decommissioned church, Damian discovers Daisy's amazing installation of the goddess Kali, like an Arcimboldo portrait, made from the *scrounged* or *stolen* archive materials which Daisy took from the hospital.

This installation illustrates the female situation of birth, life and death, including a birthing chair in which the head appears as a Vanitas, her four arms made of prostheses. Her "earrings were preserved fetuses"; she wears the traditional "necklace of tiny skulls—apes', rats, humans'—and a girdle of dead men's hands" (2003: 104) representing Kali. This work of art is signed "with a flower-shape, a daisy, composed of a circle of exquisite tiny ivory women round what, on inspection, could be seen to be a yellow contraceptive sponge" (2003: 104); her own daisy signature. These *scrounged* works are indignantly reclaimed by Damian as stolen from the hospital; she calls it *borrowed*. This work of art clearly presents "real pain, a real sense of human harm, and threats to the female body" (2003: 106); the press calls it: "Shocking Artwork 'Borrowed' from Gruesome Hospital Relics" (2003: 107).

Daisy struggles to express her physical, female pain artistically, she also rather miraculously becomes pregnant as a result of Damian's hospitality, and is overruled by him into continuing her pregnancy to term, while he investigates ways of caring for the resulting child. Undergoing considerable pain and anguish, Daisy finally manages to bear her little girl through a dreadfully complex and near-fatal birth. The next day shows her transformed, shedding tears as she breast feeds her daughter in astounded adoration, this little girl whom she had never expected to have or intended to keep. She describes falling in love with her daughter: "But when I saw her, that was love, that was it, I know what it is" (2003:124) as, again passing through the travails of the goddess Kali of death and destruction, she mounts into the ecstasy of victory over death into love.

Sylvia Plath's and Frida Kahlo's Consummately Painful Artistry

Kahlo in the Bell Jar by Meg Dreyer (2017)[2]

Such historical and fictional accounts of women's efforts towards self-expression can be evaluated alongside the poetic self-expression of Sylvia Plath, as well as the paintings of Frida Kahlo, who similarly struggled to express themselves through the pain and obstacles they faced in life. Some of the feelings of Byatt's character Daisy Whimple in having a daughter is expressed in Plath's single radio play, *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices*. The third voice here describes the experience of the mother who has a daughter but gives her up to adoption:

> I wasn't ready.
> I had no reverence.
> I thought I could deny the consequence
> But it was too late for that. It was too late, and the face
> Went on shaping itself with love, as if I was ready. (1981: 178)

Nevertheless, this "red, terrible girl" is furiously crying out for her mother's love:

> Her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats.
> It is by these hooks that she climbs to my notice.
> She is crying at the dark, or at the stars. (182)

The mother evades the child's hooks of love and gives her up, asserting her own freedom, while nonetheless remaining haunted by this experience:

> It is so beautiful to have no attachments!
> I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss? (186) she asks poignantly.

In her Chapters in a *Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (2007), Judith Kroll asserts that the poetry of Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) establishes her status as a major poet, rather than her being merely a member of the confessional school of verse. Kroll worked out the mythological system which Plath incorporates into her poetry, of "The White Goddess [as] the Moon-muse of poetry who oversees life, death, and rebirth; the goddess who mourns the dying god—he may be her consort … or her son" (Kroll, 2007: xviii), in their dance of life and death. But while Plath writes her poetry in mythic terms, she also presents the personal experiences of her own and women's lives concurrently with her struggles for artistic success. Both Plath's poetry and novel thinly disguise her personal anguish as her dreams of marriage and family crumble to dust when she is painfully deserted by her faithless husband. Her poem *Purdah* expresses the anguish of Clytemnestra waiting for the faithless Agamemnon's return as she determines his execution in return for his having sacrificed her daughter Iphigenia to death:

> And at his next step
> I shall unloose
>
> I shall unloose
> From the small jeweled

Doll he guards like a heart

The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes. (1981: 243-244)

Clytemnestra fatally pursues her husband with this destiny, although what transpires in Plath's life is not the execution of the betraying Agamemnon, but rather it is herself whom she self-slaughters. Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) is another female artist who wins through to self-expression through personal trauma. She starts painting to relieve her boredom when confined to bed after the terrible tramway accident she underwent. Her mother fixed an easel over her bed, and the canopy with its mirror enabled the self-portraits that become Kahlo's painterly motif. She says: "I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best" (Kettenmann, 2003: 18). Carlos Fuentes sees Kahlo as "an Aztec goddess, perhaps Coatlicue, the mother deity wrapped in her skirt of serpents, exhibiting her own lacerated, bloody hands the way other women sport a brooch [… and] Tlazolteotl, the goddess of both impurity and purity in the Indian pantheon, the feminine vulture who must devour filth in order to cleanse the universe" (Fuentes, 1995: 7); "Pantheistic, earth-mother, Coatlicue and Lady of Elche, cleansing-vulture manner of love" (1995: 20). Kahlo knew that "the ancient masks of Teotihuacan, beautifully wrought in mosaic, were meant to cover the faces of the dead, so as to make the corpses presentable in their trip to paradise" (1995: 23). Fuentes reports how Kahlo arrays her broken body splendidly: "like a broken Cleopatra, hiding her tortured body, her shriveled leg, her broken foot, her orthopedic corsets, under the spectacular finery of the peasant women of Mexico … the laces, the ribbons, the skirts, the rustling petticoats, the braids, the moonlike headdresses opening up her face like the wings of a dark butterfly: Frida Kahlo, showing us all that suffering could not wither, nor sickness stale, her infinite variety" (1995: 8), like the divine queen, Cleopatra. Her painting The Broken Column (1944) shows her body ripped apart, the shattered column of her spine within, her torso held together with bands suggesting the steel corset she wore when her backbone was shattered, nails piercing her entire body and painful tears starting from her eyes. The "yawning cleft in her flesh is taken up in the furrows scarring the bleak, fissured landscape behind" (2003: 67), metonymously representing the dreadful pains of her life. Her Medusa stare beams out at the viewer in asserting her presence in all her portraits; physically torn apart, she is apotheosized into a consummate goddess, whether of her own Mexico, or like Cleopatra, of Egypt, as my writing claims for the divine Cleopatra: "Antony and Cleopatra; Gorgon or Mars, Whore of Goddess, according to directly claimed evidence or indirect assertion" (Alban, 2014).

Pursuit is the first poem Plath writes after meeting Ted Hughes, indicating the aggression within their relationship from its start. Her journal relates: "when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face" (Plath, 2000: 212). She

embraces the predatory nature of this relationship even as Ted ruthlessly stalks her down with the reputation of being "the biggest seducer in Cambridge" (2000: 213):

> There is a panther stalks me down:
> One day I'll have my death of him;
>
> Insatiate, he ransacks the land
> Condemned by our ancestral fault,
> Crying: blood, let blood be spilt;
> Meat must glut his mouths' raw wound.
>
> I hurl my heart to halt his pace,
> To quench his thirst I squander blood;
> He eats, and still his need seeks food,
> Compels a total sacrifice.
>
> The panther's tread is on the stairs,
> Coming up and up the stairs. (1981: 22-23)

The effect on Kahlo of the love of her life is as devastating as that of Hughes on Plath; Kahlo calls the two accidents of her life: "the streetcar accident, and Diego Rivera" (Fuentes, 1995: 20); like Plath she embraces her amorous fate. Similar to Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights, Frida declares that: "I am him … from the most primitive and ancient cells … at every moment he is my child, my child born every moment, daily from my self" (Fuentes, 1995: 20; emphasis added); without a child of her own, she often presents Diego infantile in her arms in her paintings. *The Love Embrace of the Universe*, the *Earth (Mexico)*, Myself, *Diego and Señor Xolotl* (1949) shows her holding Diego in her arms, as they sit in the embrace of the earth goddess Cihuacoatl, while she is held in the arms of the universe containing moon and sun, with Mexican nature springing from these embraces, creating a cosmic schema of loving support. But Kahlo did not restrict her love to only one person:

> Love was the great celebration, the great union, the sacred event, and Frida's love letters to Alejandro Gomez Arias seem as if written by Catherine Earnshaw to Heathcliff in a Mexican Wuthering Heights, where great romantic passion is driven by the necessity to reunite the whole of creation: 'Deep down, you understand me, you know I adore you. You are not only something that is mine, you are me myself' (1995: 21; emphasis added).

Plath experienced both the joys and sufferings of mothering, and her *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices* shows pain, whether in referring to the born child, or the grief of the lost child, as she interprets the situation of three women in a maternity ward. The first voice of the woman who has a son is "simply astonished at fertility" (1981: 176), even as it carries her into anguished emotion:

> There is no miracle more cruel than this.
> I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves.
> I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work.
> Dark tunnel, through which hurtle the visitations,
> The visitations, the manifestations, the startled faces.
> I am the center of an atrocity.
> What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?
> Can such innocence kill and kill? It milks my life" (1981: 180).

She declares there is no undoing of this; her entire previous life is wiped out by this transformative experience:

> What did my fingers do before they held him?
> What did my heart do, with its love? (181)
> One cry. It is the hook I hang on.
> And I am a river of milk.
> I am a warm hill. (183)

Already fearing the threats and dangers which an uncertain future may bring her vulnerable child, she asks:

> How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?
> How long can I be
> Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand,
> Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?
> The voices of loneliness, the voices of sorrow
> Lap at my back ineluctably.
> How shall it soften them, this little lullaby? (185)

How does a mother take on the awful burden of protecting while also rearing her child? She ends up wishing her son to escape pain by having an ordinary, undistinguished life:

> I do not will him to be exceptional.
> It is the exception that interests the devil. (1981: 186)

Plath's "Morning Song" also poignantly expresses the power of maternal love, starting:

> Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
> The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
> Took its place among the elements. (156)

But even in this intimate experience, Plath distances herself from her mothering role, stating:

> I'm no more your mother
> Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
> Effacement at the wind's hand (157)

The child joining the family is a "New statue" which leaves the parents "stand[ing] round blankly". The child's breathing flickers all night long, and

then with *One cry* the mother stumbling from bed "cow-heavy", as the "mouth opens clean as a cat's" and the child tries a "handful of notes" which rise up "like balloons" (1981: 157). In *Nick and the Candlestick* the mother imagines an underground mine which she decorates for her child, whom she asks:

> O love, how did you get here?
> The pain
> You wake to is not yours (157).

The mother's protective love yearns to shelter her vulnerable child in the fraught adult situation he is born into:

> Love, love,
> I have hung our cave with roses,
> With soft rugs
> You are the one
> Solid the spaces lean on, envious.
> You are the baby in the barn (1981: 157).

It would be difficult to evaluate whether agony or ecstasy is expressed more poignantly in the exquisite poetry of Sylvia Plath, or the magnificent paintings of Frida Kahlo, who spent so many years in appalling physical pain. Carlos Fuentes describes Kahlo's "capacity to convoke a whole universe out of bits and fragments of her own self and out of the persistent traditions of her own culture" (1995: 15). He describes her and Rivera Diego as elephant and dove, or bull and "fragile, sensitive, crushed butterfly who forever repeated the cycle from larva to chrysalis to obsidian fairy, spreading her brilliant wings only to be pinned down, over and over, astoundingly resistant to her pain, until the name of both the suffering and the end of the suffering becomes death" (1995: 10). Stricken by polio, Kahlo carries on undefeated as Ariel, until a streetcar crashes the bus she is riding, breaking her spine, collarbone, ribs and pelvis, the handrail crashing through her vagina. She is left naked by the impact, bloody, but covered with the gold dust carried by an artisan, creating a "terrible and beautiful portrait of Frida" of "terrible beauty, changed utterly"? (1995: 12), as Fuentes references W. B. Yeats's devastating view of Ireland in his poem *Easter 1916*. Frida's exquisite beauty is expressed through a "terrifying sequence of open wounds, blood clots, miscarriages, black tears, un mar de lágrimas, indeed, a sea of tears" (1995: 15); no less than twenty-nine years of physical pain. *Tree of Hope, Keep Firm* (1946), shows Frida's scarred back as she lies on a trolley under the sun; on the other side of the painting she sits with floral crown in red, holding her orthopaedic corset and the flag bearing the painting's affirmative title. Fuentos cites Virginia Woolf in reporting the undescribable nature of pain: "You can know the thoughts of Hamlet, but you cannot truly describe a headache. For pain destroys language" (qtd. in Fuentes, 1995: 12). Frida was frequently bound to her bed:

> She is hung naked, head down, from her feet, to strengthen her spinal column. She loses her fetuses in pools of blood. She is forever surrounded

> by clots, chloroform, bandages, needles, scalpels. She is the Mexican Saint Sebastian, slinged and arrowed.... the Aztec goddesses of Birth and Earth, but even more of the flagellant deity, Xipe Totec, Our Lord of the Flayed Skin, the dualistic divinity whose skin was never his own, whether he wore that of the sacrificial victim as a macabre cloak, or whether he himself was shedding his own skin, as a serpent does, to signify a rite of renewal, even of resurrection (Fuentes, 1995: 13).

While Plath writes of the ecstasy she enjoys through her children, she also describes the anguish of ultimately being unable to provide for or protect them. "Child" tells:

> Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
> I want to fill it with color and ducks,
>
> Not this troublous
> Wringing of hands, this dark

Ceiling without a star (1981: 265) as adult grief and separation wreck the child's innocent world. We may scarcely imagine her pain as she surrenders her children to an indifferent world in her own suicide, the torture of being unable to maintain her life alone, bereft of love. Edge describes;

> The woman is perfected.
> Her dead
> Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
> The illusion of a Greek necessity as she presents
> Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
> One at each little
> Pitcher of milk, now empty.
> She has folded
> Them back into her body as petals (1981: 272).

Throughout this scene the poet shows the female moon muse and goddess watching objectively, indifferently:

> The moon has nothing to be sad about,
> Staring from her hood of bone.
> She is used to this sort of thing.
> Her blacks crackle and drag (1981: 272-273).

Kahlo represents suicide starkly, showing the actress Dorothy Hale falling from her high-rise apartment and stretched out before it, looking out appealingly at the viewer with blood around her head in *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1938/39). This picture may be gory, but it is actually no more gory than many of Kahlo's other portraits. As for offspring, Kahlo experienced neither their joy nor their anguish. Her self-portrait in the hospital bed of Detroit is entitled *Henry Ford Hospital* or *The Flying Bed* (1932), showing her lying naked on the bed at the centre of a vast plain, pregnant bellied yet bleeding, her lost foetus above her. Another painting at this time documenting *My Birth* or *Birth*

(1932) shows a female figure giving birth on a bed, as the face of her recently deceased mother who is giving birth, covered with a sheet; it is not entirely clear whether the emerging child is dead or alive, also representing the stillbirth she had recently undergone. Rivera writes: "endurance of truth, reality, cruelty and suffering. Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas … transforming personal suffering into art, not impersonal, but shared" (1995: 13). In Plath's *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices* the second voice speaks for the woman suffering a miscarriage:

> I had caught it,
> That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
> Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
>
> Am I a pulse
> That wanes and wanes, facing the cold angel?
> Is this my lover then? This death, this death? (1981: 177)
>
> I lose life after life. The dark earth drinks them.
> She is the vampire of us all (181).
>
> O so much emptiness!
> There is this cessation. This terrible cessation of everything (181).
>
> I feel it enter me, cold, alien, like an instrument.
> And that mad, hard face at the end of it, that O-mouth
> Open in its gape of perpetual grieving.
> It is she that drags the blood-black sea around
> Month after month, with its voices of failure.
> I am helpless as the sea at the end of her string.
> I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create corpses (182).

The O-mouth Plath refers to here is the moon that gazes on objectively, as in her poem *Edge*, this Medusa muse who stands by and watches as her persona is emptied, stripped of life. Her experience leaves her;

> Tasting the bitterness between my teeth.
> The incalculable malice of the everyday (1981: 184)

Childless Woman describes the womb which;

> Rattles its pod, the moon
> Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go (259).
> This body,
> This ivory
> Ungodly as a child's shriek.
> Spiderlike, I spin mirrors,
> Loyal to my image,
> Uttering nothing but blood
> Taste it, dark red!
> Gleaming with the mouths of corpses. (1981: 259)

These lines voice the agony of death triumphing over life even while celebrating painful life, as Cixous suggests in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, as she spells out "the marvelous text of her self" (2001: 395). The suffering of Kahlo was often caused by Diego Rivera, whom she continued to carry in her heart, as her obsession or third eye, despite his faithlessness, betraying her even with her own sister. *A Few Little Pricks* (1935) shows a woman murdered in jealousy, her body splattered with blood, as the murderer protests, knife in hand, "it was just a few little pricks" (Kettenmann, 2003: 39); this picture Kahlo paints as Rivera starts his affair with her own sister. When they separate, she paints *The Two Fridas* (1939) with a European and Mexican Frida sitting side by side, their hearts exposed and connected by an artery, a clamp scarcely stemming the blood flowing from the European alter ego of the Mexican woman who holds an amulet of Diego in her hand (2003: 53). Another self-image in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) sits in masculine suit, her hair which she has cropped tossed around, scissors in hand. But Frida continues to place Rivera centrally in her works, a third eye on her face, and she wins him back, even as she has her own independent affairs. Diego and I (1949) shows her with a huge Diego on her forehead, tears in her eyes: "her hair has wrapped itself around her neck and threatens to choke her" (2003: 79), as he has a further affair. Dying, she writes: "I am not sick … I am broken. But I am happy to be alive as long as I can paint" (Fuentes, 1995: 23). In a truly Mexican way she connects life and origin together with inexorable death: "We descend from death. We are all children of death. Without the dead, we would not be here, we would not be alive. Death is our companion" (1995: 23). Ultimately it is not Rivera who destroys her, but the unbearable physical pain, after her forty-seventh birthday and before their twenty-first anniversary, when, suffering from pneumonia, diagnosed with pulmonary embolism, Frida declares "I feel I am going to leave you very soon" … I hope the exit is joyful … and I hope never to come back… Frida" as she probably took her own life (qtd. in Kettelmann, 2003: 84).

In contrast to the agonies and bliss of the artists presented here, Angela Carter's character *Fevvers of Nights at the Circus* (1984) is an aerialist who joyously performs on the high wires. Fevvers takes London by storm with her aerial bird woman act as one "rising out of mankind, who will have wings and who will renew the world" (1979: 79), a female force which Apollinaire calls the New Woman. Carter like Jane Austen preferring the comic vein, her late work emulates Shakespeare in jumping over tragedy into romance, causing her final novels to ring out affirmatively. Fevvers towers over her companions, wholeheartedly embracing what Lizzie, her surrogate mother, regards as the dubious advantages of life with man, as she falls in love with Jack Walser. The joy of their reunion and sexual consummation restores her confidence and zest at the end of this novel as she joyfully informs him she had fooled him regarding being the sole intacta bird woman in the world. Fevvers rises on her Bakhtinian carnival and Cixous's subversive Medusan laughter (Gamble, 1997:

166) which spirals the globe with the dawning of the new century, asserting her belief and hope that:

> all the women will have wings the same as I.... The doll's house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed (Carter, 1984: 285).

Frida Kahlo draws a magnificent portrait of herself as a winged angel, looking like the bird woman Fevvers, in her journal, showing her powers and her vulnerability with broken wings: "Are you leaving? she asks herself. No, she answers, broken wings" (Fuentes, 1995: 269). Despite Kahlo's vulnerability, "Her humor, her language, her own very personal chutzpah, were ways of defending herself against the bastards — Defenderse de los cabrones" (1995: 22), in words similar to those Margaret Atwood uses in The Handmaid's Tale: Nolite te bastardes carborundorum: Don't let the bastards grind you down" (1985: 235).

The artists, writers and performers evaluated in this article, as seen in their real lives as well as their imaginary creations, who have gone before us, leaving their imprint on paper or canvas, have suffered and passed on, whether Aphra Behn and Elizabeth Inchbald, who managed to act and write their way to glory, or Judith Shakespeare, who perished in the attempt. Jane Austen wrote behind her squeaking door, while Charlotte Brontë describes going to the rooftops to declaim her frustrated passion, and Clara Schumann expressed her love, whether she managed to fulfil her artistic capacity or not. Margaret Atwood's artists voiced their passions; those of A.S. Byatt rose above adversity to speak in paints and other materials. Sylvia Plath and Frida Kahlo as suffering artists supremely ventured where few have trod, and while sharing their anguished tribulations with us, they scatter the triumphs of their imagination to inspire us and to enrich our lives. Inheriting a legacy of tragedy, Plath's daughter Frieda Hughes has survived to become a dynamic artist, writer and poet, with a strong urge to help others as a bereavement counsellor. None of these women's achievements have been gained lightly; many came pulsing out with their life blood, leaving us the noble duty of singing the praises of those who have opened up a richer artistic path for us to follow.

Notes

[1] I would like to dedicate this writing to my beloved daughter Gonca Alban

[2] Meg Dreyer has collaborated with Gillian M.E. Alban on the cover and illustrations of her recent, *The Medusa Gaze in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Petrifying, Maternal and Redemptive,* published in 2017 by Cambridge Scholars.

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