

Man Woman Relationship in Matt Cohen's *Emotional Arithmetic*

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Abstract: Matt Cohen, the Canadian writer, who writes a modernist outlook, realistically takes into consideration the Ontario ethos of Canada. He particularly deals with the family structure of patriarchal nature in which the legacy is transformed from one's father to his eldest son. Naturally in this structure women are marginalized, they are the 'outsiders' who are brought in for the sake of the contribution of the family line. Besides, women are mostly used by the men for the gratification of their sexual desires. Matt Cohen handles man woman relationships as one of the major themes in his novels and mainly explores extramarital relationships, where both men and women are aggressive. In the present paper, the attempt has been made to explore the same in *Emotional Arithmetic*. Though Melanie is married to David, she is not faithful to him. She has her extramarital relationship with Christopher Lewis, her earlier lover. On the other hand, including David, other male characters in the novel also have their extramarital relations with other female characters. Benjamin, son of Melanie Winters, is not faithful to his wife. He has affair with Julia Delphanso, a young nurse to his mother.

Keywords: ethos, patriarchal, man woman/ extramarital relationships.

Born in 1942 at Montreal and raised in Kingston, Ontario (Canada), Matt Cohen published his first novel *Korsoniloff* in 1969, at the age of twenty six. During his writing career he published thirty four books. He has worked in a variety of genres. He has written a radio play and two television plays; he has done sporadic book reviewing. He also wrote an ironic poetry. But mainly he is known as a writer of fiction, and this has been his real literary vocation. He has written total fourteen novels. Diagnosed with lung cancer, he kept on writing till the end. In the last month of his life he won the prestigious \$ 10000 Governor General's Award for his novel *Elizabeth and After* and died soon after in December, 1999. Matt Cohen, the Canadian writer, who writes a modernist outlook, realistically takes into consideration the Ontario ethos of Canada. He particularly deals with the family structure of patriarchal nature in which the legacy is transformed from one's father to his eldest son. Naturally in this structure women are marginalized, they are the 'outsiders' who are brought in for the sake of the contribution of the family line. Besides, women are mostly used by the men for the gratification of their sexual desires. Matt Cohen handles man woman relationships as one of the major themes in his novels and mainly

explores extramarital relationships, where both men and women are aggressive. He handles the same theme in his *Emotional Arithmetic* which is the third Jewish novel. In the present paper, the attempt has been made to explore this theme in the novel. Though Melanie is married to David, she is not faithful to him. She has her extramarital relationship with Christopher Lewis, her earlier lover. Christopher Lewis, Jacob Bronski and Melanie have spent their earlier days together at Drancy, the camp for the Jews in France. Now after many years Christopher comes to Canada on the farm of David and it reminds Melanie her relations with him. When Christopher and Melanie go to town for shopping in her car she imagines “how it might feel if Christopher were her lover and they were driving away from the farm forever and into the sunset” (EA 105). It is a different experience to Melanie to be with Christopher in her car. It is enough for her just to be close to him, her arm and shoulder brushing against him every time she shifts gears and turns. “Lover” is the word Melanie used to describe her various men.

Christopher, who is drunk and alone in the loft of the farm, is typing his last will and testament. Melanie secretly comes to see him at night and they make love there. The novelist narrates:

Christopher's breathing had deepened and slowed. She kissed his forehead. Strange to be naked in this loft. Stranger yet to be naked with Christopher. Though it had almost happened at the wedding, in his hotel room. . . . [Melanie] amazing to discover herself this way with Christopher; this universe, this Christopher-and-her universe must have been waiting for them all these years; . . . She was crying, not sobbing but just leaking tears, inside and out. “I have to be with you”, she managed to say, knowing it was absolutely true; she had to be with Christopher now, would die without him – had to be with him in his body, this room, this night. (EA 172-74)

It clearly indicates that Melanie is interested in Christopher and it is her tendency to enjoy her extramarital relations with others. On the other hand, other male characters in the novel also have their extramarital relations with other female characters. Benjamin, son of Melanie Winters, is not faithful to his wife. Though Benjamin's wife, Helen, is loyal to him and even he has a son called Timmy, he is not loyal to her. He has affair with Julia Delphanso, a young nurse to his mother at Heritage Acres where his mother is under treatment for a year. Benjamin often visits her mother and whenever possible is making love with Julia. He always wants to be there for Julia. Once, Benjamin comes in the apartment of Julia and standing in the middle of the living room he is trembling may be with fear or desire. He is sure that his sex with Julia will break apart his life, but he wants it. When David is admitted in the hospital both Benjamin and his mother Melanie are there to look after him. In the hospital once she asks Benjamin about his life. She knows well that he has his love relations with Julia. Hence she asks him whether he is going to live his life with Julia. She tells him about his secret relation with Julia; his secret phone calls and his watching her whenever she is around. She says he is just like his father, David. It is her perfect

observation which Benjamin cannot deny. Benjamin is in the bed with his wife, Helen, and as she wants him to make love he is lying on top of her and he desires not Helen but Julia. He describes:

I was pumping away for the benefit of my legal wife but all we were doing was finding out what we already should have known that sex couldn't erase anything – except briefly and that chief among those events our sex together could not erase was my desire for Julia. (EA 185)

It clearly indicates the very licentious nature of Benjamin. Even in the bed of his wife he desires for Julia. He also has other girlfriends, as well, as Julia. Once, Benjamin and his son Timmy are rowing in a boat in the lake. Timmy takes the boat towards a long piney beach owned by some Americans. Looking at the beach, he remembers his past. Fifteen years ago he used to bring his girlfriends there. He narrates:

I would row girlfriends across the lake to the American's land and we would take off our clothes and lie in the soft beds of needles. When we were finished I would dive into the lake, rolling around in the clean water until the needles were gone and my skin was new again. (EA 200)

With this description it seems that even in his early life Benjamin was a licentious youth. It is his natural tendency to have relations with different girls and women. Levin, a Jewish smart guy from Toronto and friend to Benjamin at the medical school, Kingston, is also very much interested in sex like Benjamin. Despite all the warnings his mother gives him, Levin falls in love twenty times a day. He tells to Benjamin:

“When I sit on a bus and see an unintentional exposed bit of leg, when a happily married library worker turns her face up to me at her desk, when I look across the street even in mid-winter and notice that little dot of colour on the cheek of a member of the fairer sex– I die.”

“Levin you need to get fucked,”

“How crude you are. But I expected that”. No, Winters, sex will not cure me– it only distracts. What I am looking for is total unceasing full-body contact, twenty-four hour a day. (EA 08)

It reveals Levin's sexual attraction and his nature. Like Benjamin, his father David is also not faithful to his wife Melanie. Whenever he is away from her, every night he dreams that he is in bed with a different young woman. After her treatment at Heritage Acres, Melanie is brought to home. One day she is emptying David's suit jacket for the cleaners and she gets a thick letter in an inside pocket. They are the photographs of the women David has found to keep his company in his own trenches in France. Melanie consoles herself thinking she has married to such a man, “whose manliness extended beyond his family, beyond even the borders of his own country.” (EA 172) As it has been observed in the novel *Nadine* that Amanda, Miller's wife, when realizes that she cannot make her husband happy and cannot be faithful to him, in the same way, in the novel *Emotional Arithmetic*, David has declared a week before their marriage that Melanie need not have to be faithful to him. Because he is fifteen years older than her and he says,

One day I'll suddenly be old and you will be still young. So I am telling you, Melanie, not be discussed, that I release you unconditionally – whenever, for whatever reason – (EA 109).

It clearly indicates that sometimes the spouses are not possessive about their partners. They even allow their spouses to have relations with others. Thus the theme of man woman relationships has some complex backgrounds. Like Gabriela in *The Spanish Doctor*, Melanie too is not loyal to her husband but she is more interested in her former lover Christopher Lewis and maintains her extramarital relations. It seems that women characters are more aggressive in their extramarital relations than their men counterparts. On the other hand men characters are also aggressive in their relations with women. Here the reasons are different. Like Amanda, Benjamin, son of Melanie Winters, is also not faithful to his wife. Benjamin's wife, Helen, is loyal to him and even he has a son called Timmy but Benjamin is more interested in Julia, a nurse. Like Benjamin, his father, David is also not loyal to his wife, Melanie. He had his relations with several women in his own trenches in France. In France he develops relations with other women because he is alone and there is no other way of satisfying his desire. Thus all the men and women characters are the victims of their circumstances in which they fall in love with other men and women.

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