Chapter 5

W(h)ither Friendship?

Willa Cather enjoyed great sororal bonds with many women and this has been documented from the many letters they exchanged. Though provisions in Cather’s will limit reproduction of the contents of these letters, and both Edith Lewis and Willa Cather destroyed many, they reveal a closeness and dependence seldom viewed in any of Cather’s other relationships.

Her first playmate after the family moved into Red Cloud was Mary Miner who brought her a bottle of perfume in a red plush slipper as a welcoming gift. Cather was also friends with Mary’s elder sister, Carrie Miner, who would often visit her at home and the two girls would spend hours in Willa’s Rose Bower arguing many matters (Bonham 22). As children the Cathers and the Miners organized dramatic productions. One such production was *Beauty and the Beast* where Margie Miner was Beauty, Mary Miner the Beast, and Willa Cather in a man’s suit and hat, wearing a moustache, was the father (Bonham 24). “Cather said in later years that every one of the fictional mothers she created contained a little bit of Mama Miner but that Mrs. Harling was so exact a copy as to be a snapshot” (Robinson 32).

At Lincoln, she became friendly with the Geres (Charles H. Gere was editor of the *State Journal* – the newspaper that carried Cather’s essay on Thomas Carlyle) who had three daughters. Mariel Gere, the eldest, invited Cather home but told her
mother that she would be bringing home someone rather masculine (Robinson 33). It was Mrs. Gere who later persuaded Cather to grow her hair and wear skirts.

In American campus life, up to the late nineteenth century it was very common for women to have intense relations of friendship with other women. This was called 'smashing' and it was quite acceptable for girls to pursue the object of their attention with gifts and declarations till they were smashed, says Sheila Jeffreys³. “The adolescent crush was so common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that it was known by many different slang words besides crush: “rave”, “spoon”, "posh" (for passion), “smash”, “gonage” (for gone on) or “flame”. The phenomenon of “smashing” in the new women’s colleges of New England was identical in its nature to the English schoolgirls’ raves.”⁴

Cather’s earliest friendship with Louise Pound may be included in the frame of a campus 'smashing' and reveals her first intense feeling for another girl against which many feminist critics have viewed her burgeoning lesbianism.

Louise Pound was a couple of years her senior at college and “was a brilliant student, talented musician, outstanding athlete and campus leader”⁵. Louise’s father, Stephen Bosworth Pound, was a highly respected Judge and one who was also involved in the civic affairs of the State. For close to two years Willa was intensely devoted to Louise to whom she presented a copy of the Rubaiyat, her favourite book. But the intensity was all on her side. Louise did visit Red Cloud in the summer of
1893 (Robinson 59) but it was a short visit and after that the friendship broke down irrevocably due to Willa’s article in the *Hesperian* where she mounted an indirect but rather thinly-veiled and virulent attack on Roscoe Pound, Louise’s brother. The Pounds were outraged and refused to have anything to do with Cather, a decision Louise abided by. In later years, a friendship of sorts was re-established but it was, at best, perfunctory on the part of Louise, though Willa continued to respond warmly to her friend.

The next close friendship was that between Willa Cather and Dorothy Canfield Fisher, which began in 1891 when James H. Canfield (Dorothy’s father) was the Chancellor of the University of Nebraska. This friendship continued all through the lives of these two spirited and independent women. The two were friends despite the six-year difference in their ages (Robinson 43; Madigan 1). They had entered a fiction contest together during their university days and had won the first prize with their story, *The Fear That Walks by Noonday*. Their friendship was also the focus of attention during their student days at the University. Even after many years had passed their former classmates would easily recall how the two would always be spotted together “especially since they made a very odd pair – the sweet-tempered friendly Dorothy, a universal favourite, and the brusque, stand-offish Willa” (Robinson 44). The intense friendship was not without problems and was interspersed by phases of separation brought on by mutual misunderstandings, but was finally recovered and reconciled, usually, as is borne out by their correspondence, through the efforts of Willa Cather. Mark Madigan’s (1990) essay reveals the story of this relationship in great detail against the backdrop of the estrangement created by the
representation of Miss Evelyn Osborne’s facial scar by Cather in her short story, *The Profile*, and the naming of Willa Cather’s short story *Flavia and her Artists* after Dorothy’s mother. Miss Osborne was Dorothy’s fellow graduate student and her friend too. Dorothy tried to intervene and stop the publication of the story but since the matter was already in the press nothing could be done. A series of correspondence between the two friends throw light on the reason for the estrangement and the later resolution (Madigan).

In 1901, Willa Cather met Isabelle McClung, the daughter of a Pittsburgh judge and there developed a great friendship between these two who were otherwise quite unlike in many ways. Isabelle McClung, the Judge’s daughter, was rich and beautiful. She was a kind of patroness to the young author, giving her a place to work in, introduced her to other artists and writers, and offered her constant encouragement. Isabelle was not an artist herself, but was drawn to Cather’s artistic bent of mind and the two shared a rapport for many years to come. Initially she was instrumental in providing Cather with the much needed “room of one’s own” – a pre-requisite for artistic creativity (Robinson 45). Isabelle invited Cather to come and live in the McClung Mansion, much to Cather’s delight. Isabelle’s family, though they were fond of Cather, were a little sceptical about this living arrangement but agreed to the demands of their very independent-minded daughter.

Another long-time associate and friend, eight years younger than Willa Cather, was Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. They had met when Sergeant had brought a manuscript to the office of *McClure’s Magazine* hoping to get it published. When she
first met Cather she was surprised by her youthful figure and she found “no trace of
the reforming feminist…” (Robinson 164). From the first meeting and over the next
ten years, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant was one of Cather’s very close friends, with
whom she could talk of “things that really mattered to her” (Robinson 164). That
Willa Cather had allowed “Dear Elsie” into her close circle of friends is borne out by
the fact that she wanted to take Elizabeth to meet Mrs. Annie Fields, wife of the
publisher James T. Fields. Some estrangement crept into this friendship too, due
mainly to the differing political ideologies of the two women. Sergeant was politically
committed; “she became a reporter for the New Republic, a war correspondent and an
ardent New Dealer – it wasn’t possible to keep their opposing viewpoints from
interfering with their friendship” (Robinson 166). The estrangement was due to
differing ideologies but their old affection continued to act as a bond till Cather’s
death. It is significant to note, as Robinson has shown (165-166), that at one point in
1913, when Edith Lewis was away, Willa had met Elsie on her return from Europe
and brought her home. Both Edith Lewis and Elizabeth Sergeant are reticent about
each other. While Lewis does not mention Sergeant in her book, Sergeant, on her part,
makes very few references to Lewis.

As observed by her various biographers, Willa Cather was, despite the image
put forward to the world by her of one who loved being solitary and withdrawn,
actually quite the opposite. Though she could be withdrawn, she was not a solitary
person - hence her decision to share an apartment with Edith Lewis, who went on to
spend almost forty years with her, assumes great significance.
“I first met Willa Cather in the summer of 1903. I had come home, having just graduated from a [sic] Eastern college, to Lincoln, Nebraska, where I was born and brought up. Willa Cather was spending that summer with her family in Red Cloud. On her way back to her teaching job in Pittsburgh, she stopped off for a few days in Lincoln to visit Sarah Harris, the editor of the *Lincoln Courier*, and it was at Miss Harris’ house that I first met her,” reminisces Edith Lewis.

One cannot over-emphasize the place Edith Lewis, Cather’s lifelong companion, had in sustaining the author’s creativity through patches of emotional turbulence as well as the physical ailments that Cather suffered from time to time. From Lewis, we come to know that it was around 1909 “after she [Cather] returned from her first London trip that Willa Cather and I took a small and not very comfortable apartment together on Washington Place just off Washington Square” (74). This was their first domestic set up, their ménage –a-deux.

It was only after a visit to the south-west with her brother Douglas Cather and a trip home to Red Cloud, Willa came back to New York and moved into the famous apartment at 5 Bank Street in Greenwich Village. This she would be sharing with Edith Lewis who had chosen it (Bonham 63). “The fifteen years she was to live at 5 Bank Street were to be Willa Cather’s best working years” (Bonham 63).

Edith Lewis, also on the staff of *McClure’s*, was a colleague, friend and ultimately her companion for life. They had much in common and were well suited.
Younger than Cather by several years, Edith was “a plain and unpretentious woman with a keen mind and a lively sense of fun” who “loved to travel, enjoyed music and had simple tastes” (Robinson 154).

“Although parts of them [many books] were written in other places, chiefly Jaffrey and Grand Manan”, Miss Lewis wrote, “they all came back to Bank Street. It was there they had their home. Those years from 1912 to 1927 were for her years of absorbing and delightful experiment and discovery. All the time she was steadily developing her powers as an artist and I think the consciousness of this gave her the deepest contentment” (Bonham 101).

Lillian Faderman\textsuperscript{8} has pointed out that while intense friendships between women were quite acceptable in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a change in society’s response to such same-sex bonding occurred towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The change may have been because of the changed psychosocial position of women in the ‘New Woman’ concept. Women had more job opportunities and could easily choose not to marry and settle down, much like what their mothers had done in the earlier generation. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975)\textsuperscript{9} offers reasons for the validity of these friendships, either in college or outside, as a necessity for support and nurturance.

“The diaries and letters of young women of the late eighteenth century (particularly those of the well-to-do, which are the accessible documents for that
period) record extensive social life in which both sexes shared, but also suggest a pattern of reliance on female friendship for emotional expression and security.”

Carrol Smith-Rosenberg, says that “from at least the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century, a female world of varied and yet highly structured relationships appears to have been an essential aspect of American life. These relationships ranged from the supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women. It was a world in which men made but a shadowy appearance” (1-2). This helps to rationalise the existence of numerous letters that women wrote to their same-sex friends which expressed mutual affection and also revealed a level of dependence on each other that was both individual as well as psycho-social. The relationships of women continued all through their lives, through marriage child-bearing and rearing and household duties.

But, as Smith-Rosenberg observes, these relations were never viewed in a “dichotomized” world of normal and deviant (8) but that “emotionally and cognitively their heterosocial and their homosocial worlds were complementary”.

Nancy F. Cott forwards the view “the sex role division of the eighteenth century impelled women toward friendship and sisterhood toward one another for two corollary reasons” (169). These two reasons, according to Cott, were the fact that women were associated with “caring” and the “heart” so they would indulge in
reciprocal friendships with women who would understand them; and secondly, men were rational, hence superior, so would be unable to be friends with the women. Apart from the intense letters that these eighteenth century women wrote to each other, they also expressed the love they felt for one another in their diaries. What emerges is the notion that these same sex relationships were a source of emotional support as well as security for them.

But while nineteenth century America did not stigmatize these women’s friendships, twentieth century American society raised certain taboos that would marginalize a relationship that had hitherto been seen as a positive circle of support and security. Sheila Jeffreys (111) argues that this stigmatization of “strong emotional expression between women” in the early twentieth century was a response to social and economic circumstances which were a real threat to man’s domination of women. The writings of the sexologists and contemporary medical journals managed to pathologise and portray as deviant such homosocial bonds which may or may not have been homosexual. The stigmatization was possible, as feminist historians have pointed out because around the First World War women themselves were divided on the issue of alternate sexuality (Jeffreys 100). As Jeffreys shows, those who were involved in “passionate relationships with their own sex did not want to draw attention to it lest it invalidate their political stand on the issue of gender and enfranchisement. This, along with the writings of sexologists like Havelock Ellis (Sexual Inversion, 1897), says Faderman, played a major role in discouraging love between women (quoted in Jeffreys 111).
At this juncture it would be viable to look at a parallel in the context of early twentieth century Bengali literature where, too, we come across a somewhat similar phenomenon of special sororal bonds or “Soi Patano” which loosely translated would read as making of special friends. I refer to Tagore’s Chokher Bali, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay’s Mouriphol and Anurupa Devi’s Mrinmoyee. In Bandyopadhyay’s short story, Mouriphol, we come across the term “chalo kichhu patai” (let us establish a close friendship) and the two women share a sororal bond which gives one the strength to face life. These friendships may not have been sexual but the sorority was important as a source of agency/action. This is clear in Anurupa Devi’s story Mrinmoyee.

In Mouriphol, the relationship is between two women from two sub-cultures – one from an affluent, educated, urban milieu and the other, the protagonist of the short story, Susheela, from the rural countryside. The ‘friendship’ between the two, though established (‘patai’) by the young wife from Kolkata, thereby denoting her agency in self-fulfillment, has more resonance in the life of barren Susheela. To Susheela, her new-found friend “mouriphol” offers her love and affection, briefly when they meet on a journey to a temple, a place of religious significance, and later through letters. The letters, in their bright colours and fragrance, bring the only solace to Susheela in her bleak and barren conjugal life and monotonous domesticity. In the end, when Susheela hallucinates in the throes of a death-inducing fever subsequent to a physical thrashing that she receives from her husband for alleged non-compliance, she is found explaining her behavior to her “mouriphol”. So, as in life, so in death,
the protagonist wants to relate to only this entity that gave her a human identity instead of merely treating her as an object of lust or a machine for domestic chores.

*Mrinmoyee* begins with the line “*Soi, boli o Soi!*”¹² (Special Friend, where are you, Special Friend!) and the speaker, a relaxed, attractive and happy woman enters someone’s house. The ease of entrance indicates the familiarity of the speaker to the inner parts of the household or the “*andarmahal*”, as well as reveals the relationship. Next we are introduced to the eponymous heroine who is presented in front of a mirror, in the middle of her toilette. She is surprised to see the speaker and refers to her as “*moner katha*” or “my innermost thoughts”.

It is important to note that it was the convention as in heterosexual so in homosexual relations to have special names to indicate the closeness of the special bond. But what is interesting to note here is that it was usual to have names of flowers, rivers etc., but here the special name expressly speaks of “my inner thoughts”. In the exchange of words and gestures an element of physicality is noticed in the manner in which the friend appreciates her friend’s beauty and touches her cheeks at every opportunity, yet both women seem to seek an emotional bond away from the world of men. One finds similarities in this relationship with the “smashes” referred to by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and others among women in the late nineteenth century.
The reference to Bengali literature seemed valid because the concept of women only friendships in the family circle/school environment or ‘smashed’ friendships in campuses of America seemed to be echoed in the “soi patano” of Bengali culture. While in the West the women had already stepped out into the world, in the latter case, being denied the “world” yet, it was within the “home” where an alternative psychosocial existence was being worked out. It is possible to argue, as feminist critics in America have shown (Jeffreys 111) that feminists steered clear of the sexuality element of the needs of women in order to focus on gender and equality as their goals were more political rather than the personal. Thus, we see that the sudden stigmatization in America foregrounds the fact that the feminist struggle at that point in their history was more for identity/gender and not about sexuality. But in India, especially in Bengal, the question of enfranchisement did not occur at all at that historical context as the colonial set-up precluded the foregrounding of gender. It was more about race than about gender or sexuality. In Bengal under colonial rule women did not actively seek enfranchisement as a separate group. They were involved in the political struggle together with men and the issues of gender equality and enfranchisement were therefore not linked.

During a discussion with Professor Alok Roy, a noted academician and critic from Kolkata, it emerged that these “soi” relationships were also highly sexual. These “soi” friendships may or may not have had sexual overtones but a commonality in all cases was the strength derived from the soraral bond which enabled these women to cope with life lived under the shadow of patriarchy.
Willa Cather’s women are, however, denied the comfort, nurturance and emotional solace of the sororal network though she, herself, was blessed with meaningful same-sex friendships all through her life. In college she developed what in contemporary terms would be designated as a “smashing” or crush on Louise Pound. Later her friendship with the Judge’s daughter, Isabelle McClung, gave her both her first “room of [her] own” in her professional life and a life-long association. Third, her constant companion, Edith Lewis, shared her life for forty long years. Whether one accepts Cather’s innate and “inchoate” lesbianism or not, one has to accept the fact that these sororal bonds gave Cather initially “a room of one’s own” literally, as also close relationships of sharing.

Cather herself is recorded as feeling that it was unfair that the friendships between women were deemed “unnatural” by society and yet continues to be silent on this aspect. Critics have ascribed this phenomenon to her ambivalence regarding the question of same-sex friendships (O’Brien 126). O’Brien acknowledges the fact that the “most prominent absence” in her work are the emotional bonds between women that were central to her life (127). But it hardly seems right to simply ignore this “absence” without analyzing the reason behind it. Even if one accepts the view that she knew “she could not name them to a twentieth century audience” (O’Brien 137) that alone does not seem to adequately answer the question of the absence of close sororal bonds, since the radical change in American society’s response to women’s friendships was not unknown to her. She must have been aware of a similar bond between her mentor and senior writer, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mrs. Annie Fields, wife of the publisher James T. Fields. In fact it was Jewett’s advice to her that
had sent her on the road home to write her novels dealing with the prairie and
Nebraska leaving aside her pale Jamesian imitations. Though Jewett’s and Cather’s
was a very brief friendship (Jewett died in 1909), it was that between a “mentor and
literary inheritor” (O’Brien 355). That later in the twentieth century, editors wanted
the same letters between Jewett and Mrs. Fields to be censored reflects this social
change, a fact which would not have escaped Cather’s notice. To ascribe her
ambivalence to the mere demands of either the publisher or the reader and their
expectations seems to denude the feisty writer of much of her great charm. Though
“concealment” does seem to be her strategy of expression she seems to direct the
reader to decipher meaning from the unsaid words. If “she was not self-consciously
seeking to place herself in a lesbian poetic tradition” (O’Brien 259) by speaking
eloquently “of the thing not named” she would not be hiding it either. Then it
becomes difficult to accept without query the absence of the strong women–only
friendships in her fiction.

It seems possible that Cather was actually commenting, through avoidance, on
the failures of sorority, either her own or of others that she had witnessed or
experienced. Though biographical details of the first few years of Cather’s childhood
are not very easy to access, the picture that emerges is of a daughter left free to roam
the countryside alone for long periods when the mother was ill. This could have been
a failure of the first sororal bond between mother-daughter, when the daughter felt
alone.
The only ‘friend’ that the Cathers literally took along with them during their move westwards from Virginia was Margie, who spent all her life with them, first on the Divide and then in Red Cloud, Nebraska. In fact the “family group that moved West in 1883 included the parents and their four children (Willa, Roscoe, Douglass, and Jessica), Rachel Boak, Virginia Cather’s niece Bess Seymour, and Marjorie Anderson, daughter of Back Creek storyteller Mary Ann Anderson” (O’Brien 60). Margie was a simple girl and exploitation of such girls on plantations and mills, later reflected in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, was not uncommon or rare. Margie travelled with the Cathers at the insistence of her mother so obviously there was some reason why she had to move with the Cathers while her mother stayed back.

Alexandra of *O Pioneers!*, Thea of *The Song Of The Lark*, Marian of *A Lost Lady*, Sapphira of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are all alone. Interestingly they all are attached to older men or young lads. Cecile Auclaire of *Shadows on the Rock*, moreover, finds it disconcerting to be spending two days with girls of her own age and makes excuses to come back home where she is the only girl among a couple of adult men and Pierre.

In *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra is presented as a solitary figure who runs her homestead and looks after her brothers. What most critics highlight is the picture of Alexandra against the plough, drawing attention to the sexual connotations of the frame. But though Marie Shabata is a neighbor and a friend, the two do not share any sororal bonding. In fact, it seems quite surprising that though she has seen Marie grow up, she does not really understand her. Only in one incident is there any closeness
between these two women. One wonders whether Marie’s tragedy could have been averted had Alexandra been more of a confidante. The Shabatas lived at the end of the same pathway that was once home to Alexandra’s friend, Carl. When Carl comes back to visit Alexandra, they both use the same path to visit the Shabatas. It is interesting to note Alexandra’s observation “you see we have kept up the old path, Carl. It has been so nice for me to feel that there was a friend at the other end of it again.” (OP 62) to which Carl responds “All the same, I hope it hasn’t been quite the same”. Alexandra’s answer that "she [Marie] was a companion, someone I can talk quite frankly”, seems to be quite untrue because, had there been conscious communication between Marie and Alexandra then she would have been aware of the impending tragedy. Emil’s observation on Marie’s behavior could very well have been about Alexandra too because he says “You don’t help things by pretending” (OP 73). The scene between Alexandra, Carl and Marie was charged with something more than just neighbourly courtesy and Marie’s intense restlessness should have alerted all which somehow makes it seem as if Alexandra was also ‘pretending’ and ignoring – side-stepping the issue of sexuality altogether. It is possible to read in Marie’s relationship with Alexandra a parallel of campus ‘smashing’ that is not allowed to develop into a fully blown “smash”.

What is significant is that though Cather does not dwell on women’s same-sex bonding, she is not averse to writing about Emil and Amedee “who had ridden and wrestled and larked together since they were lads of twelve” (OP 75). Was it that women’s sexuality had painful references that Cather would want to suppress and thereby ignore? Lesbian critics harp on Cather’s avoidance of social
Ostracism/literary banishment for this seemingly inexplicable silence on sororal bonding but that the intrepid author, who could frighten a judge at the age of five would be tamed by just societal disapproval seems a little difficult to accept. In fact, terming Marie her ‘little friend’, Alexandra manages to foreground, ironically, how distant the friends were since Marie felt she “could not go to Alexandra for sympathy” (OP 114) hence denoting a failure of sorority.

_O Pioneer!_ ends with the idea the “when friends marry they are safe,” a line that will echo in _Shadows on the Rock_ when Pierre and Cecile marry. So marriage, a heterosexual union is made into an asexual bond that overcomes fear, reminding the reader that sexuality brings in its wake fear and is best avoided. Then it is not heterosexual bonding that the writer is averse to, as the feminist critics would have us believe (O’Brien) but all kinds of sexuality _per se_.

Ironically in _The Song of the Lark_, an early chapter is called “Friends of Childhood”, where none of the friends are either children or women. In a persuasively argued essay Nancy Gobatto\(^\text{14}\) forwards the view that Thea’s development as an artist and her personality could have been the result of veiled childhood trauma. We are presented with Thea who is a loner except for friends like Dr. Archie, the local doctor who was a friend of the family and had easy access to the interior of the house, Professor Wunsch, her piano teacher, Ray Harsanyi, who will actually take Thea onto the path of singing stardom and Fred Ottenburg, her friend who would rescue her from all predicaments. Gobatto, through a close textual analysis with psychological insight, is of the opinion that Dr. Archie “fits the typical profile of the regressed
paedophile” (129-34). Even in the case of her first music teacher, Harsanyi, who puts his left hand to her throat and was thinking “no one had even felt this voice vibrate before”, the tactile sensation and subtle sexual pulse is difficult to ignore. Then he thinks about “her big mouth, the wide jaw and chin” which all signify her latent passion. The repeated touching and long-drawn out observations seem not entirely related to the teacher-taught relationship and some element of inappropriateness cannot be entirely ruled out. Later they both share a “secret’ which is never mentioned. The thing not named could be this inappropriate closeness between teacher and taught too.

The other women in the novel are all either low on intellect, morals or affection, including the sister. Only the mother-daughter bond, at some points, shows a same-sex friendship. Whether in Moonstone or in Chicago, Thea is surrounded by these “male” friends. Except Ray Kennedy, who dies a tragic death through an accident, the rest have been presented with questionable masculinities from the traditional point of view.

In My Antonia, the sororal bond is replaced by Antonia, the central protagonist, and Jim Burden, the narrator. The first time Jim and Antonia meet, we are presented with a curious name-game where Antonia, for the first time, encounters the naming of objects. If, as convention dictates, naming is man’s prerogative, then in this little incident we are exposed to the playing out of the patriarchal role. The scene ends with Mr. Shimerda requesting Jim to “teach” his Antonia, again a patriarchal prerogative. Here, of course, gender and class coalesce to dictate the norm. Gradually
the lessons provide the two with a friendship bond, reminiscent of the college-campus bonds because “Tony could tell me [Jim] almost anything” (MA 516). But with the other girls of the neighbourhood, Tony is always guarded, never too friendly. Lena Lingard is the other woman protagonist, and her social and professional progression is in direct contrast to Antonia. While Antonia starts as a ‘good girl’, suffers socially through a ‘wrong choice’, comes home in shame, overcomes hurdles to establish herself as an archetypal “mother”, Lena’s growth moves on a feminist trajectory. Lena goes off to work, learns a trade, indulges indiscriminately in flirting but is not shamed into contrition by life at any point. Critics like Janis Stout (1990) have pointed out how Cather says more by what she leaves “unsaid” and in this respect it is possible to accept that using Lena as a direct counterpoint to Antonia does draw forth her ideas of the centrality of women’s agency. Lena is the “new” daughter who wants to take her mother out of the ‘sod’ house (MA 620). Lena remembers “home as a place where there were always too many children, a cross man, and work piling up around a sick woman” (MA 646). In fact, the contrast between the two girls is perfectly voiced by Widow Steavens – “My Antonia, that had so much good in her, had come home disgraced. And that Lena Lingard, that was always a bad one, say what you will, had turned out so well, and was coming home here every summer in her silk and satins and doing so much for her mother” (MA 659). If Antonia’s story reflects certain conventionalities, Lena’s undercut those to point towards a new direction of woman power. But what stagnates Antonia’s story is the addition of the possessive “My” to the title and her name. Antonia is always somebody’s “daughter, mother, sweetheart or anything a woman can be to a man”. So the sororal bond between Antonia and Lena can never be established because Lena is always on the other side of the fence, imbued in her own sexuality and not willing to compromise on that.
Another interesting point seems to be the naming of the “hired girls” – if Lena reminds us of Magdalena, the presence of the three Marys, all Bohemians, does make certain Biblical overtones explicit. The female world is divided between the “good” and virtuous Antonia and the sexually aware and active Lena, the three Marys, the four Danish girls whose stories run parallel to the moral fall and rise of Antonia Shimerda. The only scene where all the girls meet over a lunch basket highlights the chasm that separates them. While all the girls, in sisterhood, share the stories of their childhood and inner longings, only Antonia is silent till she requests Jim to narrate a story she had heard before. This foregrounds her strong bond with Jim, her private space and proclaims, albeit in silence, to the world that this is “her” Jim. Even if we were to accept the reversal of the appellation, one wonders why at the end Antonia speaks of Jim and her father in the same context. “You’re here, like my father. So I won’t be lonesome” (MA 664). Previously Lena had referred to husbands and fathers when she had said “Men are all right for friends, but as soon as you marry them they turn into old fathers, even the wild ones” (MA 646).

In Marian Forester’s life, too, there is a dearth of women friends. In A Lost Lady, the only full portraiture of a woman is the lady surrounded by young boys, rapacious men and gentlemanly cripples. Apart from the peripheral presence of shadowy grandmothers or neighbouring wives, who are never presented centrestage, no woman appears in the novel at all. Janis Stout puts forth the view that Cather developed a hidden rhetoric which relied on implication and selection (66-111). If that be so, than this denial of friendship seems to be also intentional or may reflect the author’s lack of dependence on the so-called strength of these sororal networks.
Would it be too much of an extended reading between the lines if we, as readers, feel that at some point she may have felt let-down by a sororal bond? This may have been in her early childhood and by her mother or a person of authority in the household who had failed to protect a young girl, not necessarily herself. In the Virginia household, where people would constantly drop in, she may have witnessed some incident of a sexually exploitative nature that left a deep impact on her psyche. So that in later life she could not let her fictional characters share all their thoughts with someone else.

In *Shadows in the Rock*, Cecile refuses to extend her stay with friends of her own peer group but prefers to come home to a lonely household comprising her father and Pierre.

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, the lack of communication between mother and daughter highlights, as yet, another facet of this scepticism that Cather shows in any sorority. Sapphira and her daughter occupy farthest points on a continuance of women and agency. While Sapphira is the owner of the mill, a point of authority, her daughter is ideologically independent of her and does foil her mother’s evil machinations to destroy another woman. In this tug of war of power, the one who emerges triumphant is Nancy, the slave who runs to freedom. Nancy does turn to Rachel for help who in turn asks her father but is unable to approach her mother who was the chief instigator of the near-rape that Nancy suffers.
Wharton and Cather are commonly considered hostile to other women writers observes Deborah Williams\(^{16}\) and one of the reasons offered by her [Williams] is the historical context when these two writers achieve recognition in the literary marketplace (2). This hostility, feels Williams, was part of a strategy adopted by Cather and Wharton in order to be considered as serious writers and not as women writers (14).

But in two of Wharton’s novels, we do find elements of sororal bonding. In *The Age of Innocence*\(^{17}\) (1920) though May Welland and Ellen Olenska, the two cousins, form a triangle with Newland Archer yet in one incident we are presented with a close interaction that belies the surface coolness to give us the depth of understanding that the two ultimately share. “I went to see Granny, and just as I was going away Ellen came in from a walk; so I stayed and had a long talk with her. It was ages since we’d had a real talk…” (*Age Of Innocence* 190). Later some startling news is confirmed by Ellen’s “note” to May where she says “you [May] must be very good to Granny when I am gone - as good as you’ve always been to me” (*Age Of Innocence* 197) and whatever her personal feelings, we are given many instances where she wants Newland to be good to her [Ellen]. In fact this relationship reminds one of a similar situation in Tagore’s *Chokher Bali*\(^{18}\), another tale of ‘soi patano’. The naming of special friends takes on ironic overtones in this work. Naive and innocent Ashalata, oblivious of the inherent danger in introducing the sexually active widow, Binodini, to her husband, Mahendra, establishes a special friendship with her. It is Binodini who offers the name ‘chokher bali’ meaning, ironically in this context, an irritant (literally a dust particle in the eye) to designate this special friendship. This ‘soi’ bond is a
departure since initially Binod, instead of providing nurture or solace, is the reason for Asha’s despair. But the conclusion of the novel redeems Binod as a good friend.

In Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*¹⁹ (1905) we also see an amicable relationship between Lily Bart and Mrs. Judy Trenor. When admonishing Lily for having frightened off a suitor she says “If you hadn’t told me you were going in for him seriously” (*THM* 282) which presupposes a degree of closeness. So women watching out for women not only as part of a hetero-sexual triad, was something readers of Cather could have handled with elan. Another instance resolves the issue very clearly. After the traumatic incident with Gus when Lily was suffering from “this labouring anguish” (*THM* 341) and on the verge of bursting she only wanted to reach Gerty’s house even if Gerty was asleep because “the sound of the bell would penetrate every recess of her tiny apartment, and rouse her to answer her friend’s call” (*THM* 341). That night the two sleep in the same bed as Lily was in need of comfort.

Cather, in her early career did not give much credence to the writings of women and this is well documented in her biographies (O’Brien, 1987). In an essay while Cather was still in college she wrote “They [women writers] are so few, the ones who really did write worthwhile; there were the great Georges, George Eliot and George Sand and they were anything but women²⁰. In her essay “My First Novels [There were two]”²¹ she criticizes her first novel *Alexander’s Bridge* (1912) hence categorically removing from her mentorship Wharton and James. In fact apart from Sarah Orne Jewett, she does not acknowledge any woman as either precursor or peer. Cather’s friendships with other women writers or the silence surrounding it has been
termed as “sororophobia” by Helena Michie (Williams 12). Cather’s indifference or aloofness of her peers may be linked to, as Williams has shown, conventional concepts of “the masculinised vision of the artist” who is isolated and solitary (Williams 6). If her refusal of a literary sisterhood is attributed to assumptions of patriarchal yardsticks of creativity then her acceptance of personal sorority may be attributed to what Gelfant says that “Cather’s clearheaded intention was to create a design for living which would allow her solitude yet not leave her lonely. Cather chose friends who furthered or fitted into this design”22. Then her refusal of women’s bonding in her novels also may signify a failure of such bonds.

Scott Herring23 lists male bonding from Cather’s novels like that of Archbishop Jean Marie Latour and Father Valliant in Death Comes for the Archbishop, Prof. Godfrey St. Peter and his pupil, Tom Outland, from The Professor’s House, Claude Wheeler and David Gerhardt in One Of Ours and we observe that even though Cather is silent on the fact of sorority she at least accommodates homosocial fraternity. But Herring is “intrigued by how passionate male friendships in Cather’s work fail to materialize into urban homosexual subcultures” (67). In this constant silence or ellision or side-stepping, I would offer possible childhood trauma to validate my position.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


