



A relationship of many years; love reaches out to all our brothers. He will never leave you in tears; this love lasts for a hundred years!

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“You know JK Rowling right?” “Of course, the Harry Potter writer.” Typecasting? Perhaps! Prejudice? Most definitely yes! The result - pseudonym, alias, nom de plume, pen name or whatever you may call it. But who takes the blame for the literary deception that has conned us beautifully over centuries?

Axelle Ayn Dickens

Last week, I was diligently nibbling on fresh hot chicken dim sums dipped in soya sauce sold by a kindly looking Assamese lady on the street side, and enjoying the daftness of monsoon showers that were ineffectively blocking the uncouth Delhi traffic. I was trying to find peace in the silence of the noise. And yet I couldn't help overhearing two little blighters acting as amateur critics, “And you know JK Rowling, right?” “Of course, the Harry Potter writer.” It made me stop in the middle of the second dim sum. The Harry Potter writer indeed! I wanted to scoff. But then I remembered, that of course, if Agatha Christie is the “Hercule Poirot writer”, Aamir Khan, the “realist 3 Idiots actor”, Leonardo Da Vinci the “Mona Lisa painter”, and M. Shyamalan the “Night Chronicles director”, then why not, JK Rowling, the “Harry Potter writer”.

So is it really any wonder when Ms Rowling published her new novel, a crime thriller called “The Cuckoo’s Calling” under the pseudonym “Robert Galbraith”?

And so I continued ruminating about my middle-school favourite “The Harry Potter” series over the plate of spicy dim sums. The fantasy fiction took the world by a storm so strong that it raged and overshadowed the actual potential of Rowling’s future works. This might have inspired the author to launch her crime thriller under her alter ego of “Robert Galbraith”. In the local daily that was being oil-stained under my flimsy paper plate, many journalists called this legendary literary deception a marketing stunt due to Galbraith being a powerful and alluring name, which Rowling has refuted by saying “If sales were what mattered to me most, I would have written under my own name from the start, and with the greatest fanfare.” This indeed brings us to the question why her adult novel “The Casual Vacancy” did not garner as much sales. Was it because she was a victim of public prejudice and pre-conceived notions of the critics based on Harry Potter fiction? It is believed, quite rightfully so, that her fantasy work would have undermined her other works under a new genre. In her words, “It has been wonderful to publish without hype or expectation.” Yet some say that once her actual worth has been appreciated as a pseudonymous story, the leak now ensures her future fame under original penmanship as well. However, this myth or truth about publicity is a never-ending cycle. And between my hungry stomach and delicious dim sums, there was no place for any kind of controversy.

After all, the artists over years have practiced this art to find - with as little marketing as possible - whether their work would be known for talent or by luck.

An illustrious example is Stephen

King. King was condemned to be a famous “one-book-a-year” author. To overcome this stereotype, prevent oversaturation of his market brand and judge his actual talent, he wrote under the pen name of Richard Bard. The leak and resulting successes were similar to that of Rowling’s. While pondering over this analogy, I idly began naming my remaining dim sums with the alias of famous artists like Emily Bronte “Ellis Bell”, Mary Ann Evans “George Elliot”, Samuel Langhorne Clemens “Mark Twain”, David Pilkey/Lewish Shiner “Sue Denim” and Daniel Handler’s “Lemony Snicket”. And I bit into Ellis Bell and thought about the present day scenario.

Today, perhaps the need for this deception is due to the abominable influence of the media; critics and response it generates from the public.

I recall the careers of two such noteworthy literary geniuses – Aamir Khan and M. Night Shyamalan. Aamir Khan gradually rose to the pinnacle of success as an actor and then a producer and director, from typical spicy and sappy Indian *masala*, to tragic love stories and crime thrillers like “Fanaa”, and optimistic and hope-filled realities like “Taare Zameen Par”, witty reality checks on stereotyping like “3 Idiots”

to bitter realism like “Dhobi Ghat”. Throughout his career, he remained resilient in the face of media and public pressure and the resulting image was of an “intellectually stimulating and original artist”. However the “born filmmaker” Shyamalan succumbed to the pressure. His rise began with “The Sixth Sense” and “Unbreakable” but gradually declined with “The Village”. His next film “The Lady in Water” received a negative reception largely due to prior poor reviews for “The Village”, an example of media and public prejudice. Examples of such literary artists reaffirm the need for literary deception. So dear readers, the question now is, should you take the blame for the way

JK Rowling and other such conned us in such a devious and beautiful manner? Of course not! You are as much to blame as my poor innocent George Eliot or Mark Twain is for my potbelly. Public opinion is as inevitable and fickle as the course of nature.

A creator thrives on the masses, masses thrive on his creations and the creations thrive on the reputation of the creator who in fact thrives on the media and the critics.

This cycle prompts the need for calculated building of reputation through timed public ruse. Why, take the case of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” by Harriette Beecher Stowe for instance. The book’s strong sentimental leaning, vivid poignant imagery and platitudes of philosophical emotionalism are timelessly justified by the virtue of having been portrayed by a female author. Had the book been written by a male author, it is possible that such features would have been colluded with effeminism, vulnerability and sentimentalism, and thus would have met with a less positive response. Now while I am never the one for discrimination, you may be surprised to know that various scientific and literary dissections of the art of writing have revealed a trend or distinction between male and female writing styles. The fame of writers like George Bernard Shaw, Winston Churchill and John Gresham in opposition to Nancy Drew, Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie and the Bronte sisters established a prejudiced public opinion about male writers being more informational and philosophical, while female writers being more involved and using more comments and apologies. Such insular distinctions really made me choke on my perilously cooked Lemony Snicket. This gender-based distinction is under attack by many researchers, as they believe, and so do I, that the distinction should be writer-centric as each writer has his own limits to the types of writing styles. But the mass opinion is unwavering as is evident by the Rowling’s Editor David Shelley’s surprise, who first read the novel without knowing who its true author was and said, “I never would have thought a woman wrote that.” This gender-based sentiment perhaps forced JK Rowling to use a male nom de plume to successfully be able to channel what she calls her “inner bloke”. Oh the irony!

And as I was chewing on my Sue Denim, I suppose my face must have showed some incredulity, because one of those little blighters standing next to me said, “What, never heard about JK Rowling, huh?” And I do think I said, “Of course, the Harry Potter writer.” I finally tucked in a little Ellis Bell and retreated back into my car and the annoying traffic that proved too much for my analytical mental faculties to thrive. Why, I don’t suppose you kept a count of how many dim sums I must have had either! 🍴

Afternote: This pseudonymous article is written by Akanksha Gupta, an alumna of AIS Pushp Vihar.

The legendary art of literary deception

Graphic : Pankaj Mallik



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Another name. Take a look at the real names of some popular names you've been reading for long

REAL NAME	PEN NAME
Anne Bronte	Acton Bell
CS Lewis	Clive Hamilton
Mary Ann Evans	George Eliot
Alice Sheldon	James Tiptree
Daniel Handler	Lemony Snicket
Samuel Clemens	Mark Twain