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A 'Novel' Approach to Leadership Development:
Using Women's Literary Fiction to Explore Contemporary
Women's Leadership Issues

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Abstract

The central aim of this thesis is to investigate how women's literary fiction can be harnessed for the purpose of exploring contemporary women's leadership issues. This thesis argues that literary fiction is a valuable source of interdisciplinary and 'artful' consciousness-raising material for proactively addressing at the interpersonal level a wide range of critical concerns related to women's leadership experiences. Having identified a significant 'gap' in the extant literature – the underutilisation of women's novels, short-stories and plays in leadership studies – this thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach to demonstrate how literary works can be used to examine women's contemporary leadership issues.

For this research project I adopted an interpretive qualitative research paradigm informed by critical leadership studies and a multiplicity of feminist perspectives. I developed a systematic method for long listing and short listing appropriate texts and analysed selected works in response to a five-point conceptual framework of critical concerns arising from a review of the women and leadership literature. I also kept a reflective blog to track the iterative nature of the research process and to record my learning during this study.

The findings demonstrate that women's literary fiction offers a rich repository of thought-provoking illustrations of women's leadership concerns, including gender binaries, power-play, socially constructed perceptions and gendered expectations, and women's diverse range experiences as both leaders and followers. The extended analysis provides a number of in-depth examples and reflective questions, revealing myriad opportunities for critical theorising, illustrative analysis and critical reflection. Subsequently, this thesis argues that fictional stories are a viable and potentially transformative 'artful' intervention for addressing complex leadership issues concerned with gender within the context of women's leadership development programmes. My recommendations for future studies include a focus on ethical leadership, the evaluation of participant 'book club' interventions and an extension of the reading lists to include more culturally relevant New Zealand authors.

To my knowledge, there are no studies that utilise women's literary fiction for the purpose of exploring contemporary women's leadership concerns and questions. Consequently, my thesis makes an original contribution to the leadership and humanities field, as well as providing an innovative and creative product that can be used for critical and interdisciplinary approaches to women's leadership development.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Tables and Figure	vi

Chapter One - Overview

1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Significance of Study	2
1.3 Research Questions and Objectives.....	4
1.4 Researcher’s Position	4
1.5 Structure of the Thesis	6

Chapter Two - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction	9
2.2 Leadership Defined – ‘What is Leadership?’	9
2.2.1 Problematizing Leadership and Gender.....	13
2.3 Women and Leadership	13
2.3.1 The Current State of Play	14
2.3.2 Exploring the Impact of Social Constructionism and Gender on Leadership	15
2.3.3 Forming a Feminist Critique	18
2.3.4 Psychology of Prejudice: Stereotypes, Expectations and Perceptions	24
2.3.5 Do Women <i>Actually</i> Lead Differently?.....	29
2.3.6 Summary of Critical Concerns	31
2.4 Women’s Leadership Development (WLD).....	32
2.4.1 Filling the Gap: Women-Only Leadership Development Programmes	33
2.4.2 Current Trends and Approaches	36
2.4.3 A ‘Fusion’ of Disciplines: Embracing Interdisciplinary Methods	38
2.5 ‘Artful’ Approaches to Leadership Development	39

2.5.1 Enhancing Engagement	40
2.5.2 The ‘Human’ Context.....	40
2.5.3 Different ‘Artful’ Approaches and Sites of Practice	41
2.6 Chapter Summary	42

Chapter Three - Why Literary Fiction?

3.1 Introduction	44
3.2 The Transformative Power of Stories.....	44
3.3 Reviewing Frameworks, Assessing Methods & Identifying Gaps in the Literature	46
3.3.1 Developing Moral Leadership in <i>Questions of Character</i>	47
3.3.2 <i>Understanding Leadership: An Arts and Humanities Perspective</i>	48
3.3.3 Illustrative Analysis in <i>Management Lives</i>	50
3.3.4 Identifying Strong Plots through Popular Literature	52
3.4 The Invisibility of Women’s Stories and Female Perspectives	55
3.5 Chapter Summary	56

Chapter Four - Methodology

4.1 Introduction	57
4.2 My Research Philosophies	57
4.3 Application of My Critical Research Paradigm	59
4.3.1 Revisiting Ladkin’s Leadership ‘Moment’ Definition	59
4.3.2 Critical Feminist Lens	60
4.3.3 The Conceptual Framework	61
4.4 Research Methods and Tools.....	62
4.4.1 Qualitative/textual Content Analysis of Texts.....	62
4.4.2 Data Collection: Read and Interrogate	64
4.4.3 Data Analysis: Thematised, Expanded, and Summarised	64
4.5 Chapter Summary	66

Chapter Five - Choosing Stories: Boundaries and Criteria

5.1 Introduction	68
------------------------	----

5.2 Step 1: Read – Developing Initial ‘Reading Boundaries’	68
5.2.1 Observations on Genre	71
5.2.2 Where Did I Look?	73
5.3 Step 2: Interrogate – Refining the Selection Process	74
5.4 <i>The Reader’s Notebook</i> – Personal Reflective Journal	76
5.5 Chapter Summary	79

Chapter Six - Findings and Discussion

6.1 Introduction	80
6.2 The Short List	80
6.3 Step 3: Thematised	82
6.3.1 Summaries of the Short Listed Texts	82
6.4 Steps 4 and 5: Expand and Summarise.....	89
6.4.1 Concept 1: Women Engaging in Leadership Together	89
6.4.2 Concepts 2 and 3: Understanding and Navigating Socially Constructed Expectations	93
6.4.3 Concept 4: Destabilising Grand Narratives	102
6.4.4 Concept 5: Individual Women <i>Becoming</i> Leaders	106
6.5 Chapter Summary	110

Chapter Seven - Research Contributions and Recommendations for Future Research

7.1 Introduction	111
7.2 Research Contributions	111
7.3 Research Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research.....	113
7.4 Final Words	116

References.....	117
------------------------	------------

Appendix A: The Complete Set of Reflective Blog Entries	142
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List of Tables and Figures

Table 1 Leadership as a Social Process – Five Definitions	11
Figure 1 The Leadership ‘Moment’	12
Table 2 Binary Oppositions – Agentic versus Communal Traits	25
Table 3 Five Critical Concerns	32
Table 4 Summary of the Four Approaches	54
Table 5 Conceptual Framework and Corresponding Questions for Guiding Content Analysis	61
Table 6 The RITES Rubric	63
Table 7 Process, Phases and Product of Data Collection and Data Analysis	65
Table 8 Summary of Research Approach	67
Table 9 The ‘Top 50’ Long List	72
Table 10 Summary of Reading Boundaries and Selection Criteria	76
Table 11 The Short List	81
Table 12 Conceptual Framework Themes and Corresponding Short Listed Texts	88