

Shades of Gray: Sonia Johnson's Life through Letters and Autobiography

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THE U.S. WOMEN'S MOVEMENT of the 1970s focused on several issues, with passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) at the forefront. In the middle of this battle stood Sonia Johnson, a Ph.D. in education, teacher, wife, mother of four, and up until the late 1970s a devoted member of the Mormon church. Hardly the markings of a rebel. In 1979, however, Sonia Johnson was excommunicated from the church because of her vocal condemnation of the church's opposition to the ERA. Less than three years later she published her autobiography, *From Housewife to Heretic*, which painted a picture of a woman who beginning almost as a child developed a growing disdain for the church. However, her personal letters before her excommunication recall a different story. An examination of her autobiography and letters—however contradictory—reflects Sonia Johnson's pressing concerns at the time of each writing.

In 1963 Betty Friedan released her best-seller, *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan argued that American women, particularly suburban housewives, suffered from deep discontent in the 1950s. She asserted that in the post-World War II era journalists, educators, advertisers, and social scientists lured women into the home with unrealistic expectations for the future and promises of rewards that never materialized. Friedan labeled this ideology "the feminine mystique." This constrictive "image" held that women could fulfill their potential only by being sexually passive, being dominated by men, and being a mother. *The Feminine Mystique* affected many American women. Thousands testified that the book expressed exactly what they were feeling—it named their problems and altered their lives.¹ Sonia Ann Harris (later Johnson), one of the thou-

1. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 16-19 (page references are to the 1974 edition).

sands of women afflicted with “the problem that has no name,” spent the first forty-two years of her life coming to terms with her “problem” and finding a way to conquer it.

Sonia turned twenty-seven the year Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. Born into a prominent Mormon family on 27 February 1936 in Malad City, Idaho, Sonia grew up reading the glossy American magazines and Mormon prescriptive literature targeted at young women like herself. She spent her childhood in southeastern Idaho until her family moved to Logan, Utah, in 1948. Raised a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sonia grew up surrounded by people stressing the importance of marriage and family. The same year *The Feminine Mystique* was published, Mormon marriage manuals, such as *The Art of Homemaking*, called a clean and happy household a “cathedral to God.”² Although Sonia eventually came to blows with her church and traditional conceptions of wife and mother, the first forty-two years of her life closely resembled the Mormon and American ideals of femininity. Many women of the 1950s, both Mormon and non-Mormon, lived as part of Friedan’s *Mystique* and strived to become perfect homemakers, wives, and mothers.

By the close of the 1950s the average marrying age of women in America dropped to twenty years; 14 million girls married by age seventeen. The proportion of women attending college compared to men fell from 47 percent in 1920 to 35 percent in 1958. By the mid-1950s 60 percent of female college attendees dropped out to marry. At the end of the decade the American birthrate surpassed India’s. Women’s magazines urged women to enroll in courses on marriage; counselors provided advice to high school girls on how to find a man and make a marriage last. The suburban housewife image advertised in popular magazines became the ideal for young women.³

The teachings of the Mormon church encouraged marriage and discouraged divorce in the 1950s; research comparing Mormons to non-LDS Americans indicate that Mormons married younger and more frequently than other Americans. The Mormon birthrate paralleled the nation’s from 1900 to 1970, remaining consistently higher but exhibiting the same rises and dips. For example, Utah’s birthrate in 1970 climbed to twenty-seven births per 1,000 population, while the national birthrate was fourteen per 1,000. Chastity before marriage was higher for Mormons than other Americans: 78 percent. Mormons also married earlier than non-members; Mormon males married over a year earlier than other men, and Mormon females married slightly earlier than other women in America. Addition-

2. Daryl V. Hoole, *The Art of Homemaking* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1963), 11.

3. Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 16-19.

ally, LDS church members were less likely than other white Americans to remain unmarried.⁴

Magazines in the 1950s told women how to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers. Advice abounded on how to catch and keep a man, breast-feed children, and handle toilet training, sibling rivalry, and adolescent rebellion. Mormon literature correlated with other publications around the nation aimed at women. Mormon manuals, however, stressed the importance of religion as well as femininity. A chapter on personal appearance and grooming from one manual, for example, emphasized the significance of looking good while changing diapers, cooking, or cleaning. "There is nothing prettier than the daughter of God who looks well-groomed all the time."⁵ These sentiments were common in Mormon advice manuals of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

Sonia Johnson recounted her life in 1982 in *From Housewife to Heretic*. In these memoirs she provides brief glimpses of her childhood years, her parents and siblings, her schooling, her marriage, her children, and her travels around the world. The majority of the book, however, focuses on her support of the ERA and her subsequent excommunication from the Mormon church. In addition to her memoirs, Sonia left other records detailing her past. In these personal letters—now housed at the University of Utah's Marriott Library—she presents a more complete picture of her life before her excommunication.

Sonia's portrayal of events in her letters sometimes parallels her book's account. In her autobiography, however, she skips most of her early years in favor of retelling the history of her battle for the ERA and rejection from the church. Although the excommunication undoubtedly weighed heavily on her mind at the time of her writing—it had happened only two and one-half years before publication—more interesting are the years previous to her excommunication. The letters record the pressures of a wife and mother living in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and the ways in which Sonia dealt with these pressures. At various points the letters contradict the book, and readers should bear in mind that Sonia retold these events after a public excommunication and painful divorce. To

4. Tim B. Heaton, Kristen L. Goodman, and Thomas B. Holman, "In Search of a Peculiar People: Are Mormon Families Really Different?" in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 94; and Marybeth Raynes, "Mormon Marriages in an American Context," in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 238, 240, 241.

5. Carol Clark, *A Singular Life: Perspectives for the Single Woman* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974), 18. Although the title of this book may lead some readers to believe it is aimed at single women, it is actually intended as a guide for young women on how to find a man to marry.

regard either the book or letters as completely true or false undermines the complexity of Sonia's life. It is more useful to view her writings as neither black nor white, false nor true, but as a continuous spectrum of shades of gray.

In 1954 Sonia graduated from Logan High School. A year later she entered Utah State University as an English major and earned a B.A. degree in 1958. While at Utah State, she met her future husband, Richard Johnson ("Rick" in her letters and autobiography), in a psychology class. At the time of their meeting in mid-1958, Sonia found Rick to be "a wild gentle Easterner" and passed him over as a potential spouse because he was not Mormon. Rick joined the church that October and Sonia began to consider marriage. They did not marry immediately, however, since the church required a full year of membership before permitting a temple marriage, a sign of worthiness available only to faithful members.⁶ For this reason, she and Rick avoided discussing marriage as an immediate possibility.

By 1959 Sonia and Rick were still not engaged and their relationship had become rocky because of Rick's reluctance to commit; this hesitation led Sonia almost to abandon the relationship. According to her autobiography, Sonia felt a mounting desperation to marry. "So there I was, 23 years old, a college graduate with one year of graduate work, and no engagement ring." In tune with the times, Sonia "kept her courting cards tight against [her] chest" and never revealed her concern and embarrassment at being a twenty-three-year-old unmarried Mormon woman.⁷ After many tumultuous months, Sonia and Rick resolved their difficulties and pledged themselves to each other. On 21 August 1959 Sonia and Rick married in a non-temple ceremony in Logan.⁸

Sonia described the 1950s as a time when society placed "enormous and unnatural weight" on marriage and felt that 1950s marriages "were pressure cookers." The 1950s of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* closely resemble the 1950s Sonia recalls in *From Housewife to Heretic*. As badly as Sonia wanted marriage, however, she waited to marry Rick because he was the only male "nonsexist enough not to bore me to death."⁹ This view of Rick expressed in Sonia's autobiography clashes with the Rick she presents in other parts of the book. On the next page, for example, So-

6. Sonia Johnson, *From Housewife to Heretic* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981; reprint, Albuquerque: Wildfire Books, 1989), 23, 28 (page references are to the 1989 edition); Heaton, Goodman, and Holman, "Peculiar People," 94.

7. Johnson, *Housewife*, 30-31.

8. *Ibid.*, 37-38. Due to Ida and Alvin Harris's "high connections in the church," Sonia received approval for a temple marriage despite Rick's short membership in the church. In *From Housewife to Heretic*, however, Sonia wrote that "The Holy Ghost" cautioned her not to marry Rick in the temple. Her parents, although unhappy, supported her decision.

9. *Ibid.*, 32, 34, 109.

nia recounts her divorce and tells of Rick's emotional mistreatment of her and his sexist behavior during their twenty-year marriage. Some may view this discrepancy as hypocritical, others as the natural reaction of a woman reeling from a bitter divorce.

After marrying, Rick went back to Utah State University to finish his M.A. in psychology. Sonia, instead of returning to school, took a job as a bookkeeper to "put him through." This decision did not stem from Rick's insistence on Sonia's being an ideal housewife, but was her own choice. In fact, Rick resented Sonia "wasting" her intellect on a bookkeeping job and encouraged her to continue her schooling.¹⁰

After Rick graduated, the couple left for Apia, Western Samoa, to teach for the LDS church. After a year and a half in Samoa, the couple moved to Minnesota so Rick could begin work on a Ph.D. in educational psychology. Sonia again planned to work in a menial job, but this time Rick insisted she return to school. During this period Sonia sent letters to her family depicting her happily grading freshmen essays, cooking soup, keeping house, letting Rick "bother with the finances," and doing church work. In her memoirs, however, she recalls a frightened woman worried about receiving a master's degree, having to prove herself in an adult world, and possibly failing. Because of her fear of failure, she became pregnant with her first child to avoid dealing with her dread.¹¹

During her pregnancy her letters focused mostly on sewing, eating, cooking, cleaning, washing, and ironing. Writing mainly to her mother, she discussed her hair, makeup, and clothing almost to the complete neglect of all else and only occasionally mentioned Rick. Sonia informed her mother over and over how well she dressed and how enjoyable she found pregnancy. Sonia closely resembled the "happy housewife heroine" of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*.¹²

After nine months Sonia went into a painful thirty-six-hour labor which almost killed her; she recounted this experience in *From Housewife to Heretic*. Rick, teaching summer school in Utah, arrived in Minnesota and insisted that doctors inject an intravenous chemical into his wife to finally induce delivery. Sonia recalled her doctors' disregard of her pain. In her book she describes this experience as critical in the development of her feminist ideology. Interestingly, none of her subsequent letters regarding pre- and post-natal care mentions this criticism of the medical profession; in fact, Sonia has nothing but praise for American doctors in her letters. The doctors in foreign countries, however, receive harsh criti-

10. *Ibid.*, 39.

11. *Ibid.*, 41, 42; Sonia Johnson to Ida and Alvin Harris, undated, Sonia Johnson Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

12. Sonia Johnson to Ida Harris, 22 Mar. 1963; Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 33-68.

cism.¹³

When Rick finished his Ph.D., the couple moved to New Jersey. Rick taught psychology and Sonia earned an M.A. in education at Rutgers University and then began work on a Ph.D. While at Rutgers, Sonia and Rick decided to have another baby. For the first few months of motherhood Sonia felt depressed. "I wondered guiltily . . . about motherhood's being the totally fulfilling activity the church and society assured me it was."¹⁴ In retrospect, Sonia confessed that she never wanted children, but external pressures from these two groups forced her to believe that she would remain only half a person without babies. Her letters, however, show a different interpretation of the importance of motherhood for her.

In *From Housewife to Heretic* Sonia vaguely remembers becoming pregnant with her daughter Kari "sometime during her doctoral coursework." She implies that neither she nor Rick planned for the baby. In her letters, on the other hand, she confesses her plans for a "big parenthood orgy" and the proposed date for the conception of their second child. A few weeks later, in another letter to her mother, Sonia complains about her lack of proper spring season attire; instead of buying a new spring wardrobe, "I guess I'll save money and have a baby." Sonia gave birth to Kari on 25 June 1965; that same day Sonia also "gave birth" to her dissertation.¹⁵ At age twenty-nine she had a Ph.D. and two children.

A few months after Kari's birth, Sonia and Rick moved to Lagos, Nigeria, to teach for two years. Sonia fails to mention this part of her life in her book. The letters from this time show a joyful Sonia with an insatiable desire to travel. One interesting question that emerged while the family was in Nigeria concerned birth control. Sonia began to question the church's stance against birth control and the necessity of bearing children in a world with so many starving ones already. Apparently, her exposure to the poverty and starvation around her left a lasting impression.¹⁶

In July 1967 the Johnsons moved to Palo Alto, California. Sonia gave birth to her third child, Marc, in May 1968. She recalls this time as one of the lowest points in her life. Her personal letters do not include these two years and start again in 1971 in Limbe, Malawai, where she taught English at the University of Malawai in South Central Africa. Nor does she mention these two years abroad in her autobiography. In a letter dated 5 July 1971 she expresses dissatisfaction with the Mormon church locally by calling it "too hypocritical and horrible for words." Sonia does not explain the reasons for her criticism. This condemnation, however, signified

13. Johnson, *Housewife*, 43; Sonia Johnson to Ida and Alvin Harris, 2 Jan. 1974.

14. Johnson, *Housewife*, 44.

15. *Ibid.*, 45, 46; Sonia Johnson to Ida Harris, 24 Jan. 1964; Sonia Johnson to family, 2 Mar. 1964.

16. Sonia Johnson to family, 20 Nov. 1965; and letter postmarked 12 Sept. 1966.

not a break with the LDS church, but a renewed interest in the Mormon religion; her displeasure with the local church provided the impetus for forming a family Sunday school group in her home with a small group of friends.¹⁷

In July 1972, after returning to California for a few months, the Johnsons relocated to Korea where Sonia taught English to servicemen as a visiting professor at Seoul University. She reflects on this experience in her memoirs as the happiest time of her married life because she "was freed from the bondage of housework" by two live-in Korean housekeepers. However, she does not mention Rick's depression, talk of suicide, and the possibility of admitting him to a mental institution. She tells her mother of these events in a July 1973 letter, adding notably that she "never felt so contented, so capable, so sure of the Lord's care in my whole life."¹⁸

Sonia remembers this time as important in her continuing conversion to feminism. Although the letters describe the cheap price of fashionable clothes and Sonia's concern with the length of her hair, she expresses a growing frustration with the anti-intellectual nature of church lessons for women. Sonia reveals to her mother that she is "pretty fed up with that kind of condescension." This, however, indicates a desire for the church to reflect some of her own interests, not a break with the doctrines of the church. In fact, in May 1973 Sonia wrote a letter to her parents in which she appears more religious than ever and talks of the "corruption" in American society. She prays for a "speedy millennium" to destroy "all evil" where nothing remains on earth except "righteousness."¹⁹

While in Korea, Sonia became pregnant again. Her memoirs reveal her and Rick's unhappiness at the prospect of a fourth child. In a letter to her mother, however, she divulges her secret that she is pregnant and her pleasure with the possibility of another baby. After a year and a half in Korea, the Johnsons moved to Western Malaysia to live on a beach and "escape the madding crowd" of the working world. While in Malaysia Sonia gave birth to her fourth and last child, Noel. In her memoirs she recollects the six months in Malaysia as a depressing time that left her despairing for the future.²⁰ Unfortunately, Sonia's personal papers contain no correspondence from this period.

After six months in Malaysia, the Johnsons moved back to California. The book remains sketchy on details for this year. The letters to her parents emphasize her involvement in church activities and her children's progress in learning the Mormon gospel. In July 1975 Sonia participated

17. Sonia Johnson to Ida, Alvin, and Mark Harris, 5 July 1971.

18. Johnson, *Housewife*, 53; Sonia Johnson to Ida Harris, 11 July 1973.

19. Sonia Johnson to Ida and Alvin Harris, 14 Nov. 1972, 2 May 1973.

20. Sonia Johnson to Ida Harris, 11 July 1973; Johnson, *Housewife*, 54.

in a panel meeting on women and the church. She commented on the remarks of church president Spencer W. Kimball, whose views regarding women represented her own at the time. He criticized "women liberationists" as encouraging streaking, pornography, homosexuality, abortion, birth control, "veneration of the orgasm," adultery, and divorce. He proposed that Mormons "should have large families" and that the purpose of sex "is to bear children. It isn't just for the fun of it."²¹

In 1976 Sonia, Rick, and their four children moved again, this time to Sterling Park, Virginia, where her trouble with the church began. In Virginia Sonia met several Mormon feminists and her complete and irreversible conversion to feminism started, as described in her memoirs. She felt the church ignored women's concerns and she vented her increasing rage on her husband. Although her letters convey her unhappiness in Virginia, she makes little mention of her dissatisfaction with the church or her husband. In fact, in a letter sent in August 1977 to her daughter Kari—while staying with her grandparents in Logan—Sonia expresses her increased love of and satisfaction with Rick.²²

The letters to her parents end for several months and pick up again early in 1978 with Sonia describing her participation in a pro-ERA march in Richmond, Virginia. By this time she vowed never to attend another Relief Society meeting of the Mormon church. At the same time Rick moved to Liberia to escape the pressures of work and church. Sonia conveys her feeling of loneliness and despair in both her letters to him and in her autobiography. The letters, in particular, express her feelings of abandonment and her mounting rejection of the church: "I feel almost all my feelings of loyalty and caring centered on women, pulled away from male gods and institutions."²³ (This statement foreshadowed her future decision to live a life free from men in a small lesbian commune in New Mexico.²⁴) In August 1978 Sonia testified before the Senate Constitutional Rights Subcommittee on the church's stance against the ERA. She did not leave any personal letters from this time in her collection; her increased participation in political rallies and organization of pro-ERA Mormons probably curtailed her casual letter-writing.

The majority of *From Housewife to Heretic* covers the events that followed her congressional testimony. Her letters to her family all but end after Rick returned from Liberia. Sonia continued to protest the church's

21. Sonia Johnson to Ida and Alvin Harris, 27 June 1975; Duston Harvey, "Mormon Leader Wages Attack on Current World Sexual Revolution," *Herald Journal*, 22 Dec. 1974.

22. Sonia Johnson to Ida and Alvin Harris, 20 Dec. 1976; Sonia Johnson to Kari Johnson, 22 Aug. 1977.

23. Sonia Johnson to Richard Johnson, 1, 8, 16 Apr., 17 May, 5, 9 July 1979.

24. For additional details, see Sonia Johnson and Jade DeForest, *Out of This World: A Fictionalized True-Life Adventure* (Estancia, NM: Wildfire Books, 1993).

action against the ERA and gave several speeches condemning the church in particular and men in general. In November 1979 the church summoned Sonia to a bishop's court in Virginia, and on 5 December she received notice of her excommunication. Sonia writes in her memoirs that her connection with the church ended at this time; her letters, however, include her appealing the excommunication, but to no avail. Unlike the picture she presents in her book, Sonia pleaded with President Kimball to vindicate her and stated her love for the church and its doctrines. In the months and years that followed, her personal papers centered on legal letters protesting her excommunication and many letters from supporters and critics alike.²⁵

After Rick returned from Liberia and before her excommunication, Sonia and he divorced. Sonia writes in her autobiography that Rick tricked her into signing the divorce papers.²⁶ Unfortunately, she left no letters from this time in her personal papers.

In the years after her excommunication, Sonia chained herself to the front gates of the LDS temple in Bellevue, Washington, and local authorities threw her in jail.²⁷ In 1982 she fasted for thirty-seven days for passage of the ERA; in 1984 she ran for U.S. president as the nominee of the Citizens Party, the Consumer Party, and the Peace and Freedom Party. Currently, Sonia lives and writes in the mountains of New Mexico.

Sonia's book and letters differ in many ways. In *From Housewife to Heretic*, she expresses unhappiness with the church and claims that her questioning of church doctrines on women started at an early age. The letters, however, do not reveal this dissatisfaction until close to her excommunication. In trying to make sense of this difference, it is important to know whom Sonia intended her writings to reach. She wrote the letters mainly to her mother and father. As active members of the Mormon church, they undoubtedly held strong beliefs in the importance of marriage, child-rearing, and religion. In 1982, however, Sonia was bitter toward the church and her words reflected these sentiments. For the most part, Sonia communicated her concerns to her book's readers, many of whom were also critical of Mormonism. She saw her past through the colored lenses of the present and reinterpreted her history in accordance with her new views.

25. Johnson, *Housewife*, 351; Jeffrey Willis to Sonia Johnson, 5 Dec. 1979; Earl J. Roueche to Sonia Johnson, 24 Mar. 1980; Sonia Johnson to Spencer W. Kimball, Apr. 1980.

26. Johnson, *Housewife*, 15-21. According to Sonia's autobiography, after Rick returned to Liberia, he presented her with a "fake" divorce agreement. For Rick, the institution of marriage placed "artificial restraints" on love between a man and a woman. Sonia signed the divorce papers and Rick then informed her that the documents were genuine and legally binding. Later in her memoirs Sonia mentioned Rick's affair with another woman and theorized that this led him to pursue the divorce.

27. Johnson, *Housewife*, 15-21, 389.

The farther away Sonia placed herself from Utah and Mormons, the more hostile her writings became. This was probably because she needed to distance herself from her Mormon past, and her writings merely reflected this physical and emotional separation.²⁸ The religious beliefs Sonia Johnson held as true disintegrated with her excommunication; the changing ways in which she viewed men and religion reflected her own feelings of abandonment by both the LDS church and her husband. Accepting both forms of writing—letters and memoirs—as Sonia’s truth at various times in her life reveals the complexity of this one woman and the contradictory ways in which she viewed the world.

28. For a more complete analysis of interpreting historical reminiscences, see Clyde A. Milner, "A View from Wisdom: Four Layers of History and Regional Identity," in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 203-22.