Privileging Female Voices and Breaking Taboos: Michèle Roberts's *The Looking Glass*

Belonging to "a generation of British women writers profoundly affected by the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s" (Hanson 2000, 229), Michèle Roberts (born in 1949) is certainly one of the most important feminist writers in Britain today. Ever since she started publishing poetry, short stories and novels in the 1970s, in the wake of the Women's Liberation Movement, her works have consistently addressed a range of "themes that can be seen as 'feminist' – female sexuality, the narrow bounds within which male society can limit femininity, religion’s (and especially Catholicism’s) definitions of womanhood and the often troubling bonds that link mothers and daughters" (Rennison 2005, 137). More than anything else it is perhaps the outspoken exploration of various facets of female sexuality and of female desire throughout her literary works that has turned Roberts into a writer who can be seen as contributing to a radical feminization of fiction. This focus is already apparent in her first novels, and it has continued to shape the works written by Roberts in the course of the last fifteen years. By addressing female desire and "the complex interrelationships between love, sexuality and writing" (Rennison 2005, 139) in explicit and unconventional ways, Roberts seeks to include an area of female experience in her fiction that has often been neglected in literary texts, even in works by other women writers pursuing a feminist agenda. Emma Parker (2006, 326), for instance, claims that "[t]he extent to which Roberts engages with sex in her work and the candor with which she does so marks her as exceptional amongst British women writers.”


Roberts’s writing is clearly informed by feminist thinking and, more specifically, by notions of femininity that are reminiscent of French Feminism. In her works one regularly encounters images and ideas that show striking parallels to gender concepts developed in the writings of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. In an interview with Patricia Bastida Rodríguez (2003, 96), Roberts herself talks about her interest in French Feminism, explaining that for her this branch of feminist thinking

1 On the impact feminist thinking has had on Roberts's works, cf. also Renate Haas, who argues that Roberts's "literary activities grew out of the women's movement. She started with poetry and short stories and concerned herself intensively with questions of women's writing before publishing her first novel. She was, for instance, poetry editor of *Spare Rib* and, together with Zoë Fairbairns, Valerie Miner, Sara Maitland and Micheline Wandor, attempted to create a truly collective feminist fiction, which also included theoretical essays, with *Tales I Tell My Mother*" (1997, 83).


3 For readings of Roberts’s novels within the framework of French Feminism, cf. for instance Falcus (2003).
"is about nurturance in some strange way; it returns you, I think, to wateriness and to things changing and being very fluid." In Roberts’s novel *The Looking Glass* (2000), the sea and its eternal movement are closely linked with femininity, as will be shown below. Moreover, in this novel the protagonist Geneviève at one point articulates the idea of a distinct ‘women's time,’ i.e. a subjective perception of time that is associated with the rhythm that is unique to the female body:

Farmers and gardeners here in the country [rural France, M.G.] had one way of thinking about time; the yearly cycle of seasons of growth, ripeness and decay. Women, in addition, had their own time, like a layer on top, which was not quite the same. You wheeled through life and death every month, not just once a year. (*LG*, 60)

As the passage quoted above exemplifies, Roberts's novels seek to explore – and even celebrate – specifically female experience in manifold ways.

The impression of a feminization of fiction that is evoked by Roberts's novels arguably does not only result from the range of topics her texts address, however. Beyond voicing female concerns and articulating female desire that is otherwise suppressed by patriarchal structures, Robert's work "contains examples of interesting experimentation with narrative form, which [...] is closely related to the content of her novels," as Ruth E. Page (2003, 46) points out. Thus, in Robert's fiction feminization clearly involves the structural level as well as the story level. Privileging female perspectives and in particular women's voices is certainly one of the structural features contributing to a feminization in Robert's novels. More specifically, the strategy of rewriting traditional stories from a female perspective, which plays a prominent role throughout Robert's works, is indicative of a feminization motivated by gender politics.

The characteristics of Robert's works outlined so far are clearly reflected in *The Looking Glass*. This novel, which is set in rural France in the years before the beginning of the First World War, juxtaposes the voices of five different female first-person narrators, whose narratives are informed by their shared endeavour to negotiate their position as well as their identity in a patriarchal society. Among these five female narrators, one voice is singled out, that of the young servant Geneviève, who functions as narrator in no fewer than five of the novel's nine chapters. Moreover, Geneviève is the narrator in the first as well as in the final chapter and thus, quite literally, has the first and the last word in the novel. The fact that Geneviève's voice is the predominant one throughout *The Looking Glass* is all the more significant because she is a character who can be regarded as a victim of double marginalisation: firstly, as a woman in the time before the First World War, i.e. a number of years before women were even granted the right to vote, and, secondly, in terms of her social status, as a young woman who, born as an illegitimate child, was raised in an orphanage and later on has to make a living as a servant.

At first sight, in true patriarchal fashion, the link between the central female characters seems to be provided by a man, namely the fictitious writer Gérard Colbert (who is based on the two authors Gustave Flaubert and Stéphane Mallarmé), with whom four of the five female characters are in love in some way or another; Geneviève is Gérard's cook as well as his lover for a short period of time; Isabelle, who is married, has an affair with Gérard, but is left by him after her husband's death; Marie-Louise is Gérard's niece, who admires his famous uncle and tries to keep his memory 'clean' after his death; Millicent is Marie-Louise's English governess, whose
love for Gérard apparently remains unrequited.⁴ A closer look reveals that Gérard is by no means the only link between these female characters, however. In fact, they are connected on a more abstract level by means of references to a mythological figure which provides a key to understanding the women's nature and their experience, as will be shown below. Beyond that, the rivalry between the women does not prevent female bonding, which becomes particularly apparent in a scene in which the women discuss their relationship with Gérard in a manner that suggests an open and surprisingly nonchalant way of dealing with sexual relationships, which resembles the manner in which Gérard deals with women and which certainly is a far cry from romantic clichés (cf. LG, 264-267).

Exploring Female Desire

The emphasis on female desire is already apparent on the stylistic level throughout Roberts's novels. One of the hallmark features of her writing in general is a preference for a highly sensuous imagery (cf. Rennison 2005, 138); she "revels in the sensuality of language and the sound of words," as Parker (2006, 329) puts it – a pleasure that is obviously shared by her female protagonists (cf. 329). Sensuous imagery is one of the features of Roberts's fiction making an articulation of desire and pleasure possible in the first place. The writer herself once referred to her writing style as "voluptuous and imagistic" (Roberts in García Sánchez 2005, 144). One of several areas in which this "voluptuous and imagistic" style becomes apparent are references to the preparation and consumption of food, since Roberts celebrates "pleasure that includes but exceeds that experienced in sex" (Parker 2006, 329). The description of desire in general and of sexual desire in particular is often clad in a very sensuous, florid language. Yet references to sensory impressions also mostly tend to be very vivid, appealing to the reader's imagination, as the following short description illustrates: "Almond green, eau-de-Nil, apple green: I didn't know what the colour was called. Sometimes I smelled it: freshly cut grass, new peas, absinthe, thé à la menthe, the juice of emeralds, sage" (LG, 269). Like her earlier novels, The Looking Glass is "filled with the sensuous appreciation of the physical world so characteristic of Michèle Roberts's prose. Roberts and her characters lavish attention upon the tangible and the material" (Rennison 2005, 139). The writing style and imagery one encounters in Roberts's novels contribute to the impression of a feminization of her fiction. This is due in particular to the fact that the style serves to suggest a specifically female perception of the world.

As has been pointed out above, the exploration of various facets of female sexuality is one of the central themes of Roberts's works. In all of her novels "Roberts breaks sexual taboos and affirms female passions and pleasures" (Parker 2006, 325) by depicting a powerful and assertive image of female sexuality, but also by providing room for transgressive and illicit forms of desire. Since her debut novel, Roberts has regularly broken taboos with respect to the representation of female sexuality, for instance by boldly spelling out incestuous and semi-incestuous desires on the part of female characters (e.g. in her novel In the Red Kitchen, 1990). Although female desire

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⁴ Susanne Gruss argues that the character of the governess "who develops a romantic crush on her employer [...] is probably inspired by literary depictions of governesses falling in love with their bosses, as in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847)" (2009, 184). There are a number of parallels between The Looking Glass and Jane Eyre, which support this hypothesis, as Gruss (2009, 184-185) points out.
in Roberts's works often violates social norms and conventions, it is shown to be both natural and powerful, surfacing despite social restrictions and sanctions. Roberts clearly seeks to correct "[t]he myth that women are asexual or less sexual than men [which] has been one of the most effective means of repressing female sexuality" (Parker 2006, 342-343). In other words, breaking taboos constitutes an essential facet of the depiction of female sexuality in Roberts's works because female sexuality is first and foremost regulated by patriarchal power structures in society, or, as Parker puts it, "[b]ecause Roberts never loses sight of the fact that sex is political and that sexuality is constructed in the context of patriarchy, her representation of her characters' erotic lives simultaneously reveals and challenges hierarchies of power" (2006, 330).

In Roberts's novels desire is often shown to be highly complex, defying attempts to account for desire in a straightforward manner. In *The Looking Glass*, the young woman Geneviève is drawn into an erotic triangle involving her employer's husband. Parker argues that erotic triangles in Roberts's *The Mistressclass* "endorse male hegemony by positioning women as rivals" (2006, 345). The same mechanism seems to be operating in *The Looking Glass*. After having spent the first years of her life in an orphanage, Geneviève develops intense feelings for her first employer, the widow Madame Patin. Having been deprived of a mother, Geneviève seems to project her desire for motherly love, which is "the first and most absolute love in anyone's life according to Roberts" (Brassard 2001, 246), onto Madame Patin. Geneviève regards her as a role model; she loves listening to her stories and cherishes the rare moments of physical contact with her. When Madame Patin eventually remarries, however, the bond between her and Geneviève is threatened by an intruder. After a brief stage of revolt, Geneviève's feelings appear to be partially transferred onto her employer's new husband, who exploits the girl's helplessness, however. The candour that is characteristic of the depiction of female sexuality in Roberts's works in general can be seen in *The Looking Glass*, for instance, when the young girl Geneviève is shown to enjoy the sight of her clitoris in a mirror: "I [...] was curious. So I lifted my skirts, and bunched them about my waist, wriggled my drawers down about my ankles, brought my knees up on either side of me and spread my legs wide. I thought I looked just like a dahlia, so neat and furled and pink" (*LG*, 94-95).

The comparison with a flower, a dahlia, which is employed by the narrator in this passage, invites the reader to visualise what is described. Moreover, the image suggests that the young girl clearly enjoys looking at herself – a pleasure that is immediately punished, however. Her employer's husband attempts to rape her, thus claiming the privilege of the male gaze and, beyond that, the right to own the female body.

**Defining Femininity by Rewriting Myths and Fairy Tales**

Rewriting has often been hailed as one of the prime strategies of narrative empowerment in stories told by women – a strategy also used regularly by Roberts, since, as Sarah Falcus puts it, "[t]he 'reclaiming of history' is integral to much of Michèle Roberts's work, as she recontextualizes, reconfigures, and rewrites myth,
biblical scripture, apocryphal texts, and historical figures" (2003, 237). In the 1980s, for instance, Roberts published two novels that constitute what Nick Rennison has referred to as "joyously imaginative reworkings of biblical stories" (2005, 138): The Wild Girl (1984), a novel featuring a gospel told from the perspective of Mary Magdalene, who is shown as "the starting-point of a female Christian teaching tradition" (Haas 1997, 84), and The Book of Mrs Noah (1987), which rewrites the biblical story of Noah's Ark from a feminist point of view, mixing references to contemporary reality freely with a range of female biblical and mythological figures, who are united by the experience of suffering from the patriarchal suppression of femininity in all of its forms.

In The Looking Glass, Roberts again makes use of feminist rewriting. First of all, the novel can be seen as a rewriting of Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary (cf. Falcus 2002, Parker 2006 and Gruss 2009). In Madame Bovary the patriarchal suppression of female desire and female voices is reiterated in many ways, whereas The Looking Glass exclusively features female voices boldly putting forward their views. The novel also addresses the power of (re)telling stories on a more basic level, though. Already on the first pages, storytelling is presented as a strategy for seeking revenge and for defining one's place in society. Geneviève declares that she "became the orphans' storyteller" (LG, 9), fabricating "[f]antasies of revenge, of wild adventure, of exquisite pleasures in fairyland" (LG, 9) – something that gives her at least a certain status and power in the orphanage. The subversive potential of storytelling is reinforced by the fact that the nuns who are in charge of the orphanage are clearly determined to curb the girl's imagination.

Moreover, The Looking Glass contains a number of references to the genre of the fairy tale, i.e. a genre that "has always been associated with women" (Gruss 2009, 195), and uses these references as a starting point for a feminist rewriting. Despite being associated with women as storytellers, traditional fairy tales tend to perpetuate images of women that have been moulded by patriarchal structures, more often than not juxtaposing the innocent beautiful girl waiting patiently for her prince on the one hand and the evil witch, who is punished for daring to be an agent rather than a passive object, on the other hand. It is perhaps this somewhat paradoxical relationship of the fairy tale to femininity as well as the potential of fairy tales to project powerful, archetypical images that have induced a number of female writers to

5 Cf. Patricia Bastida Rodríguez, who argues that Roberts often links "female subjectivity […] with the rewriting of Biblical sources or criticism of Christianity and of the patriarchal bias of traditional history, by which she attempts to vindicate women's social and historical position in Western culture" (2003, 93).

6 The Looking Glass provides a rewriting of Flaubert's Madame Bovary with a happy ending, as Gruss points out: "[...] Isabelle can be read as a (feminist) rewriting of Flaubert's Madame Bovary (1856) [...] . Although Isabelle and Emma [Bovary] share certain characteristics (their frustration and thirst for a more adventurous life are quenched with an affair), Isabelle has a great advantage: she is informed about her literary predecessor's fate (she secretly read Madame Bovary at school), and can decide 'on a better fate for myself. I chose a happy ending, not a tragic one' (LG, 184). In contrast to Flaubert's Emma, pragmatic Isabelle is also able to support herself with her job as a dress- and hat maker and proves reckless enough to prostitute herself when she needs money and/or physical comfort after her husband's death" (2009, 188).

7 Cf.: "The nuns always warned against storytelling and daydreaming, which they said meant lying, an escape from truth. To me it was the opposite. Those bright pictures were the most real thing" (LG, 10).

experiment with rewritings of fairy tales. Angela Carter, A.S. Byatt and Margaret Atwood are among those women writers who have provided postmodern rewritings of fairy tales, criticising, among other things, the reduction of female roles to binary opposites typical of many traditional fairy tales.

In *The Looking Glass* a short fairy tale about a mermaid (*LG*, 24-25), i.e. about a figure that has intrigued a number of female writers in recent decades, is embedded in Geneviève's narrative. The story is first told to Geneviève by her employer Madame Patin, who apparently remembers many fairy tales and local legends from her childhood and enjoys passing them on to the young woman who helps her in the household. This constellation suggests that storytelling is an essentially female pastime. The story as told to Geneviève by Madame Patin certainly does not qualify as a feminist retelling, however; instead, it clearly reflects a patriarchal bias. The mermaid in the story, who is described as "half-woman, and half-fish, a beauty who was also a monster" (*LG*, 24), is a *femme fatale*, a projection of male fantasies and fears, thus echoing one of the female stereotypes one encounters in many fairy tales. With her "long golden hair, green eyes, and cold white arms" (*LG*, 24), the mermaid in Madame Patin’s story obviously corresponds to prototypical images of mermaids, who "can conveniently be identified by long hair, comb and mirror and are often described as figures of intense narcissism" (Gruss 2009, 215). The mermaid in Madame Patin’s narrative uses her appearance and her singing as well as, potentielly, her supernatural powers in order to lure fishermen into the deep waters where they drown. When one young man breaks free from the spell cast by the mermaid, however, the temptress is killed by this man in a very cruel fashion indicating an assessment of the mermaid as a creature that is more fish than woman: "He cut her throat with his knife. She jerked and thrashed, then died. The wide wound gushed red, the blood flowing over her as though it dressed her in a red vest. Still streaming blood, she was hung up in the church porch for all the world to see" (*LG*, 25).

The mermaid is punished by an agent of the patriarchal order for being a temptress; in addition, her corpse is publicly displayed to celebrate the victory of patriarchal society. The reference to the “church porch” in this context clearly serves as a reminder of the role traditionally played by the Church in maintaining patriarchal power structures, an issue that is regularly addressed in Roberts’s novels. While Madame Patin’s story certainly lends itself to a feminist interpretation along the lines sketched above, the punishment, which is accepted unflinchingly by the female storyteller, provides an undeniably patriarchal bias to her version of the story. The fact that Madame Patin does not make any attempt at retelling or at least criticising the tale suggests that she largely subscribes to the patriarchal order — an impression that is later on reinforced by the choices she makes in her life.

While Madame Patin’s story perpetuates patriarchal patterns, Geneviève’s reaction to the story introduces a feminist point of view. Reflecting on the depiction of the mermaid, the girl is led to wonder about female sexuality:

> Did the mermaid have that secret nameless opening between her legs like ordinary women? That was what I wanted to know, but could not say so, since there wasn’t a word for it, and anyway it was filthy even to think about it let alone try to refer to it out

9 Roberts refers to mermaids in her novels *The Visitation* (1983) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987). A.S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990) likewise examines the implications of the figure of the mermaid from a feminist perspective.
loud. Did men fear mermaids because of drowning or because they couldn't make love to them? Or both? The tale was baffling and did not tell. It kept its mouth shut, just like the mermaid, who could not talk. She had a mouth but could only use it for wordless singing or kissing. (*LG*, 25-26)

Since Geneviève is a largely uneducated girl, her reaction is an intuitive one. Nevertheless, by drawing attention to the gaps in the fairy tale, Geneviève articulates ideas characteristic of feminist criticism and feminist rewriting, which is rooted in the protest against women being turned into mute objects of masculine projections. As Geneviève observes, the obvious blind spot of the story is female sexuality. Moreover, her comment on the fairy tale contains several references to muteness. First of all, the story "kept its mouth shut," leaving significant gaps that are indicative of patriarchal control over stories told within an essentially patriarchal society. Secondly, the mermaid is mute, using her mouth for kissing or voiceless singing, but not for uttering her own point of view; this alludes to the traditional suppression of female voices and specifically to the fact that female desire may be taboo, while women are simultaneously turned into eminently sexualised objects. Thirdly, Geneviève is kept silent by social conventions regulating references to female sexuality. All three forms of muteness thus are indicative of a patriarchal prohibition governing the ways in which women may address their sexuality.

Madame Patin's stories about mermaids, about "enchantresses and witches and wicked queens who had funds of exalted and magical knowledge, who cursed people in hatred and ruined their lives" (*LG*, 27) frighten Geneviève. Yet they simultaneously inspire a deep-felt sense of bonding with the demonised women, a feeling which for her turns out to be difficult to pin down at first: "[t]hey were as mysterious as a foreign language I couldn't comprehend or translate and yet they spoke to my bones" (*LG*, 27). Geneviève's reaction suggests that the level on which the demonised women appeal to her is not part of the linguistic, patriarchal domain. Instead, the fact that water is the mermaid's natural element is reminiscent of the notion that femininity is associated with fluidity by French feminists, as mentioned above (cf. Gruss 2009, 217).

The image of the mermaid serves as a leitmotif in the novel (cf. Gruss 2009, 222) and even creates links between different female characters. In the first part of the novel, which features Geneviève as the narrator, the image of the mermaid is introduced and plays a central role, given the fact that the protagonist feels a certain affinity to the creature that boldly defies the laws of patriarchy and is punished for her disobedience. The second part, which consists of Millicent's diary entries, begins with water imagery that is reminiscent of the image of a (swimming) mermaid: "To me the river seems alive, like an animal. Flexing its long back, muscly and rippled, writhing across the plain like some great serpent swum in from the sea and now uncoiling itself; thrashing past forests" (*LG*, 96).

Later on, Millicent is again associated with water, with the sea to be precise, for which she feels a strong affinity, which suggests that she might be another woman with mermaid-like qualities. The image of the mermaid thus creates a link between the French servant-girl Geneviève and the English governess Millicent.

In *The Looking Glass* the mermaid turns out to be a somewhat ambivalent figure, though, being associated with the defiance of patriarchal rules, with the sea as a realm promising pleasure and freedom but likewise with death. After all, the mermaid in the
story causes death and is punished by being killed. The ambivalent meaning of the figure of the mermaid is additionally emphasised by the fact that, at least for Geneviève, mermaid-like qualities are intimately linked with a certain self-destructive streak in her nature. Geneviève is tempted twice to commit suicide by drowning herself in the sea, which in these moments is described as welcoming by her. Geneviève almost seems to feel pulled towards the sea, turning the prospect of drowning into an act of returning home. When she contemplates drowning herself for the second time, she even plans to take the unhappy child Marie-Louise with her and imagines that drowning means finding one’s true (female) identity: “[…] the sea would hold us in its arms and rock us like a cradle. We would lie down together in the water and be transformed by it and take on our true mermaid shapes again and then nothing more could hurt Marie-Louise; she would be safe for evermore” (LG, 251).

Geneviève hopes that the sea will become a home, a mother for her as well as for Marie-Louise. Thus, again, two female characters are linked by the image of the mermaid in the passage quoted above. Beyond that, the biblical figure of Eve, i.e. the archetypical incarnation of femininity, is associated with mermaid-like qualities, which reinforces the idea that the figure of the mermaid is intimately linked with notions of femininity on a very general level in The Looking Glass. The following depiction of Eve as a mermaid summarises much of what is encompassed by the figure of the mermaid in Roberts’s novel:

Eve swam gaily above my head, floating on her side, one hand waving at me in greeting and the other pointing towards the apple on the tree. Her little breasts were half veiled by the spreading tendrils of her hair, while below the waist her body was invisible, caught in tangles of greenery like seaweed. Her good hand welcomed me and her bad hand stretched out to grasp the forbidden fruit. Her smile was arch, knowing. (LG, 250)

Swimming “gaily” the mermaid/Eve here seems to be an expression of female pleasure; her appearance is a mixture of seductive exposure and modest veiling of her nakedness. Moreover, she is the archetype of female curiosity – something that Geneviève is punished for in the looking glass scene referred to above. Ultimately, neither Eve nor the mermaid can be captured by means of simple dichotomies of good vs. bad, human vs. animal, etc. Roberts provides a feminist rewriting of a fairy-tale figure that grants the mermaid (read: the woman who defies patriarchal rules) the chance of a happy ending. Given the morbid overtones associated with the mermaid at least in certain passages of the novel, the fact that Geneviève finally ceases to identify with mermaid-like qualities does not necessarily have to be seen exclusively as an indication of loss and resignation. Instead, one could argue that the protagonist has left behind her childhood and has passed a rite of initiation into grown-up life – a step that is typically also dealt with in traditional fairy tales. The illness of the protagonist which occurs immediately before her identification with the mermaid is finally shed can thus be regarded as a crisis which is the prerequisite for a new start in life.

In terms of its narrative structure, The Looking Glass privileges female perspectives by juxtaposing different female narrators; moreover, as was pointed out above, oral storytelling is associated with women in this novel. The story of the mermaid

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10 Cf. Gruss: “[f]ish or woman, dangerous seductress or innocent spirit, beautiful nymph or man-eating monster, symbol of the double existence of female nature – it is impossible to pin the mermaid down to one of these poles” (2009, 215).
thus is associated first of all with female characters as well as a female storyteller. Yet Gérard is ultimately the one who writes this story down (and publishes it) – and thus is much more likely to be publicly acknowledged as an author(ity). He appropriates the story of the mermaid for a volume of poetry, his masterpiece *Men and Mermaids*. This can be seen as an act of claiming a female narrative for the written, male tradition (cf. Gruss 2009, 186). In other words, instead of being recognised as an author, Geneviève is reduced to the traditional female role of the ‘muse.’

**Conclusion**

As the discussion of *The Looking Glass* has shown, Roberts has achieved a feminization of her fiction on various levels. Similar to other women writers, she consistently addresses a range of issues directly relevant to various aspects of women’s lives. Yet in terms of the explicit depiction of female desires and female sexuality Roberts arguably goes a step further than many other (female and male) writers. On the level of narrative structure, Roberts has consistently privileged female perspectives and voices and has made extensive use of feminist rewriting, presenting for instance female figures from fairy tales, such as the mermaid in *The Looking Glass*, in a highly complex and at times ambiguous fashion. Beyond that, Roberts’s sensuous writing style and the imagery consistently used by her contribute to a feminization of her novels. This is particularly apparent in the ‘echoes’ of French Feminism one can often identify in Roberts’s imagery, including the emphasis on water imagery or the allusion to a distinct women’s time. Since the 1990s a number of other British women writers, including Pat Barker and Jeanette Winterson, have become increasingly interested in exploring masculinities and have investigated the implications of the constructed nature of gender identities. Roberts, however, continues to explore concepts of femininity that show an almost essentialist streak and that have obviously been informed by French Feminism rather than by Judith Butler’s influential reconceptualisation of gender identities.

**Works Cited**


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