

## 1970s Feminist Fiction

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### Introduction

The 1970s is a period that is remembered in Britain as a byword for social and cultural crisis, characterised by territorial disintegration abroad, economic mismanagement and decline at home, and political embarrassment for the Right and Left alike, as the country faced a series of debilitating strikes, shortages and crises. However, some saw it as a chance for a new beginning; for feminists the 1970s offered an opportunity to change society for the better. Looking back on the 1970s, Marsha Rowe, the first editor of *Spare Rib*, founded in 1972, stated: 'We made our own world' (Daly 1). In the course of this chapter, I explore the world of 1970s British Feminist fiction which, while not as well-known and widespread as US feminist literature, was nevertheless dynamic and iconoclastic. There was a close and dialectical relation between politics, theory and literature: the Women's Liberation Movement fed directly into women's writing through consciousness-raising groups, writing workshops, conferences, reading groups, magazines, and publishing houses. In fact, the 1970s saw the creation of a new feminist counter-public sphere, arguably something that had not experienced in Britain in such a radical way since the time of the suffragettes. While the decade saw a continuation of the radical work of 1960s writers such as Doris Lessing, it also gave rise to a new sense of collective endeavour and of writing as part of a larger, shared political project in which women writers saw themselves not as isolated, exceptional figures, but as part of sisterhood 'writing for their lives'. Major British writers, in particular Angela Carter and Fay Weldon, established their writing careers in the period. In addition a large group of women writers emerged including Emma Tennant, Sara Maitland, Zoë Fairbairns, and Michèle Roberts who paved the way for the next generation of women writers in the 1980s which included Jeanette Winterson, Rose Tremain, and Pat Barker. This chapter explores their work in the context of the social changes and movements which in many ways inspired it. I start with a consideration of key political and cultural events, most notably

the women's liberation movement, and the establishment of feminist publishing in the UK. Next, I consider the development of UK feminist criticism and theory in relation to Rita Felski's notion of the feminist counter-public sphere. The main body of the chapter examines the characteristics of the feminist text as it developed in concert with the feminist second wave in the 1960s and 70s. I discuss some of the primary texts of the period, commenting on the emergence of particular writers, genres, and styles of writing, identifying key themes, and providing close readings of three exemplary 1970s feminist texts. Finally, I draw some conclusions about the feminist writing produced in the decade. My approach is motivated by the belief that the texts produced cannot be meaningfully understood as a series of individual contributions even when the writer concerned is relatively divorced from political concerns. My contention is that all writing has a relation to social and cultural contexts and is produced out of and in dialogue with that wider context.

### **Political and Cultural Contexts**

The 1970s coincides with the flowering of British second-wave feminism, which represented a thoroughgoing challenge to the widespread discrimination faced by women in employment, tax and social security laws, in family law, and in social convention and expectation. Angela Carter, writing about the summer of 1968, stated that 'I can date to that time [...] my own questioning of the nature of my reality as a *woman*' (Carter 'Notes' 70). The Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) lasted a decade from 1968-1978 and cut across the seventies, highlighting in one way how artificial and arbitrary are the boundaries imposed by the notion of the 'decade'. The movement was built around networks of local women's groups, which met to offer advice and support to women, a forum for discussion and debate about women's lives, and analysis of women's social roles and relationships, known as 'consciousness-raising'. It is important, however, not to present an overly monolithic account of the feminist counter-public sphere. As Selina Todd comments, "The Women's Liberation Movement" is a deceptively coherent term, covering a diverse range of localised activity and a proliferation of political and social movements'. (62). One of the earliest networks of women's groups

was the Women's Liberation Workshop formed in London and Bristol in 1969, which published its own newsletter, *Shrew*. An early edition of *Shrew* reported on the first National Women's Liberation conference, which took place at Ruskin College, Oxford on 27-8 February and 1 March 1970 with the aim of examining and challenging the causes of women's inequality. Among its organisers and participants were some of the feminist intellectuals and activists, such as Juliet Mitchell, Sheila Rowbotham and Sally Alexander, who shaped British feminist studies in the 1970s. As a result of the conference, four basic WLM demands were agreed: equal pay for equal work; equal educational and job opportunities; free contraception and abortion on demand; and free 24-hour nurseries. Direct action was an important part of feminist activism of the decade, which witnessed a number of high-profile events. Foremost amongst these was the demonstration in November 1970 against the Miss World Competition at the Albert Hall in London, which was inspired by similar events in the US. Demonstrators carried placards with eye-catching, witty slogans such as 'Miss-fortune demands equal pay for women' and 'We're not beautiful, we're not ugly, we're angry' (British Library 'Dreamers' 1). Among the Miss World demonstrators were many feminist writers and activists including Lynne Segal, Sheila Rowbotham, Susie Orbach and Fay Weldon. Weldon had been invited to be in the audience for Miss World and was put in the 'pro' section by organisers but remembers: 'I suddenly felt total revulsion and walked from one section to another. I was a mother, married with two young children, and had a job, I was seen as a woman who was perfectly happy ... when you could see it was actually terrible' (Cadwalladr 4).

On 6 March 1971, 4000 marched through London on the First International Women's Day March where a petition with the movement's demands was handed to the prime minister. In 1974 the Women's Aid Federation was formed to provide support and refuge to women and children experiencing domestic violence. Among the feminist campaigns for improving women's social and economic status, was the Wages for Housework Campaign, which demanded a government wage for any woman who looked after children at home, to give her financial independence from her husband (Dalla Costa and James 24-5). A controversial proposal, it divided feminists, some of whom

campaigned against it on the grounds that it would confirm women in their subservient roles. In mainstream politics, the Labour Government made a commitment to introduce Child Benefit, a payment for mothers in acknowledgement of the work they did. However, the government's decision in 1976 to pay the benefit to the main breadwinner rather than to the woman led to a public outcry from the women's movement and numerous other groups on the Left and Right of the political spectrum. Eventually, the Government capitulated and Child Benefit, paid directly to mothers, was introduced in 1977. By the end of the decade, many WLM demands had been met in a series of laws, which introduced greater equality for women: the Equal Pay Act of 1970 granted equal wages for men and women doing the same work; the Sex Discrimination Act, which outlawed sexual discrimination in the workplace was passed in 1975; and the Domestic Violence Act of 1976 enabled women to obtain a court order to exclude violent partners. Accounts of the period foreground the energy generated by the movement; according to Sue Crockford, an activist and film-maker: 'It was an amazing buzz. I think it was one of those rare times in your own history when you know you're there at an occasion that's historically important' (Women in London 1).

Alongside such events and campaigns, an unprecedented development in feminist publishing extended the influence and impact of the WLM. Over the course of a few years, a number of independent feminist publishing houses were established: Virago Press in 1973, Onlywomen Press in 1974, and the Women's Press in 1978. Britain's first feminist academic journal, *Feminist Review*, was launched in 1979. By the end of the decade, 'feminism' had become a broad cultural politics, which included independent publishing houses and academic journals. As Zoë Fairbairns states: 'New opportunities were opening for women all the time, and there was a thriving feminist culture in the worlds of writing, art, publishing, music and dance as well as politics [...] It was an exciting time to be a young and activist woman' ('1984' 3). Indeed, according to the feminist critic Rita Felski, 'The women's movement has offered one of the most dynamic examples of a counter-ideology in recent years to have generated an oppositional public arena for the articulation of women's needs in critical opposition the values of a male-defined society' 166). Her concept of the feminist counter-public

sphere, derived from the theories of Jürgen Habermas, incorporates cultural and ideological interventions as well as explicitly political practices:

[T]he feminist public sphere also constitutes a discursive arena which disseminates its arguments outward through such public channels of communication as books, journals, the mass media, and the education system. This gradual expansion of feminist values from their roots in the women's movement throughout society as a whole is a necessary corollary of feminism's claim to embody a catalyst of social and cultural change. (167)

A prominent example of the dissemination of feminist discourse at the time is the magazine *Spare Rib*. Launched by Rosie Boycott and Marsha Rowe in 1972 and initially edited by Rowe, it aimed to provide an alternative to traditional women's magazines, challenge conventional images of femininity, and explore the ideas of the emerging women's movement. The magazine's first issue sold out after which it sold approximately 20,000 copies monthly; notably, the newsagent W.H. Smith refused to stock it (Todd 61). Despite its relatively modest sales, as Rowe states, 'it had a powerful effect and each copy was read by lots of women' (Daly 1). According to Selina Todd:

The significance of *Spare Rib* was that it suggested that women's pleasure was an area that feminism should engage with; it offered women a space to explore the potentialities of the relationship between the feminine fantasy embodied in the fashion model, and the reality of women's lives: work, family, sex, bodies. (77)

In its attempt to appeal to a wide range of readers, not simply self-defined feminists, the magazine drew on heterogeneous viewpoints and produced multiple, often contradictory, messages as a result. Rather than providing a single theorisation of women's oppression, the magazine offered a public and collective sounding board for women dissatisfied with existing gender relations and looking for

alternative forms of social and personal life. As Rowe states: 'I found my voice by writing *Spare Rib* and a lot of women were doing the same thing' (Daly 3). Its constantly articulated themes of sexual inequality, the social construction of female identity, and the sexual objectification of women were also issues being explored in 1970s' feminist fiction.

Feminist theoretical discourse also proliferated in the 1970s. Key works include Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), which became an international 'bestseller' and catapulted its author to media notoriety; Eva Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970); Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex* (1976); the 1977 reissue of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929); Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978); and Amrit Wilson's *Finding a Voice* (1978), the first published work of Black feminist criticism in the UK. Women's writing and women's studies courses also emerged in the decade in the adult and higher education sectors although the first full-fledged academic women's studies course was not introduced into the UK until 1980 when the MA in Women's Studies was established at the University of Kent, Canterbury. In addition, a number of US academics, including Elaine Showalter, wrote influential studies of the strong tradition of British feminist writing from the nineteenth century onwards. Many of these texts have created a lasting legacy but the most striking feature of the list as a whole is the preponderance of Marxist, Marxian and/or socialist feminist perspectives, especially in the first half of the decade; in particular, the work of feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham and that of feminist sociologists, Ann Oakley, Lynne Segal and Elizabeth Wilson stands out as significant. In my deliberate exclusion from the list of the majority of North American theory and criticism, the very materialist basis of British feminism in the period may be seen, suggesting that it was much less willing than US feminism to repudiate Marxism as an explanatory theory. Indeed, it could be argued that UK feminism was motivated by the attempt to reinvent Marxian socialism in the light of radical feminist insights about women's position in patriarchy, a claim that is also compatible with fiction of the time as we shall see.

In this respect, the Marxist Feminist Literary Collective is indicative of the British feminist counter-sphere in the decade. It began as an informal network of women students and teachers in adult

and higher education, which met in London from 1975-77. It comprised of a reading group, which focussed on classic Marxist texts and new French theories (which were distributed in translation). The Collective is best known for their collaborative essay, 'Women's Writing: *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, *Aurora Leigh*' (1978), which has become a key and much anthologised document in socialist-feminist literary criticism. Originally written for the Sociology of Literature Conference at the University of Essex in 1977, it was delivered polyphonically in a line of 9 women across the lecture room. The Collective represented an attempt to move beyond the 'images of women' criticism that dominated 1970s feminist theory, especially in the US, which they subject to a Marxist-feminist critique. Appropriating the work of Pierre Macherey, the Collective attends to the 'not-said' of the text as much as to what is explicitly represented and ideologically permitted, and reads the contradictions of the text as symptomatic of the inscription of gender difference:

Any rigorous Machereyan analysis must account for the ideology of gender as it is written into or out of texts by either sex. Women writers, moreover, in response to their cultural exclusion, have developed a relatively autonomous, clandestine tradition of their own. (Rice and Waugh 170)

The fact that they argue for the specificity of women's writing demonstrates their debt to gynocentric works such as Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1978) and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977). The Collective applies a Lacanian analysis to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), which previously had been read in terms of bourgeois class mobility or as feminist triumph, and concludes that the novel is both more and less radical than these readings suggest:

*Jane Eyre* does not attempt to rupture the dominant kinship structures. The ending of the novel affirms those very structures. The feminism of the novel resides in its 'not-said', its attempt to inscribe women as sexual subjects within this system. (Rice and Waugh 174)

While working at a more self-consciously theoretical level than magazines such as *Spare Rib*, the Collective was engaged in similar questions about the relationship between the personal and the political, the relationship between gender and class, and the suitability of adapting 'male' theories to female subjects. Like magazine publishing, academic feminist criticism in the 1970s was part of a feminist counter-public sphere which sought to analyse and contest patriarchal attitudes and assumptions.

### **Defining the Feminist Text**

The 1970s is perhaps the first period in history in which women wrote books as part of a collective, if diverse, feminist enterprise. As Rita Felski acknowledges, the feminist counter-public sphere comprised a critical mass of oppositional voices that allowed for the co-presence of multiple, even contradictory, discourses. But how did 1970s feminist fiction compare to the tradition of women's writing in Britain developed since the late eighteenth century? In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), Rita Felski argues that

[t]he defining feature of the feminist text is a recognition and rejection of the ideological basis of the traditional script of heterosexual romance characterized by female passivity, dependence, and subordination, and an attempt to develop an alternative narrative and symbolic framework within which female identity can be located. (129)

In other words, feminist fictions eschew the plot and trajectory previously followed by the majority of women's texts and texts about women. They offer a decisive break with the marriage plot and an alternative to the two resolutions offered in the woman's novel of the preceding two centuries -- namely, marriage or, not infrequently, death -- even though opportunities for women in the immediate post-war years were seen as scarcely less limited than fictional ones with the alternatives being



marriage and self-denial or spinsterhood and social stigma. Felski associates this literary shift with the social changes that began to happen from the 1960s onwards:

As ideologies of female identity have changed, so too has the nature of women's plots. Thus the last twenty years have seen the emergence of a distinctive new narrative structure for women, tracing a process of *separation* as the essential condition for any path to self-knowledge. (124)

Significantly, the integration of women into patriarchal kinship structures is replaced by separation. Whereas earlier, especially modernist, women's novels may have called into question the marriage plot and undertaken a degree of psychological separation, it is only in the decades since the 1960s that this has been articulated so insistently in terms of a discourse of women's rights and an explicit exploration of alternatives to the status quo. As a result, feminist texts are frequently characterized by open-endedness, suggesting that they both evade traditional closure and gesture towards 'utopian' alternatives 'beyond the page'.

In terms of modes, one might expect social realism to dominate the years when WLM was prominent. In fact, the feminist novel takes a wide variety of forms in the 1970s including the Bildungsroman, the novel of self-discovery, the novel of ideas (utopia/dystopia), social(ist) realism, (post)modernist experimentalism, and comic metafiction and fantasy. There is a marked emphasis on confessional modes, 'psychoanalytical' approaches, and a political patchwork of voices. Literary confessionalism is clearly congruent with the feminist practice of consciousness-raising. According to Patricia Waugh:

Consciousness-raising, confessional writing, and the quest to find new forms in which to explore women's experience, were practiced in conjunction with a Marxist-feminist analysis of economic oppression and an existential critique of liberal exclusion and separation of the public and private. Confession was part of an attempt to forge, for the very first time, the political solidarity of a woman-

centred culture organized to subvert the patriarchal structures (political and economic) of the liberal state. (200)

The self-discovery narrative becomes a key if not dominant mode of the period as a means of exploring the relationship between 'subjectivity' and the objective conditions of women's lives. It differs from the Bildungsroman in that it does not necessarily involve a move out into social world but represents a kind of psychological and mythic journey of self-discovery. The genre is often accused of formal and ideological conservatism, and of bourgeois individualism but, as Felski argues, forcibly challenging the post-structuralist equation of radical form and content, this would be to misunderstand its function in the context of feminism:

The feminist self-discovery narrative is not interested in the issue of the fictionality of literary representation as such, but seeks to negate the cultural authority of one version of women's experience in order to put alternative versions in its place. While rejecting the atomized individualism of the bourgeois literary tradition, it proceeds from the assumption that autonomous selfhood is not an outmoded fiction but still a pressing political concern. (151)

As Felski suggests, women writers of the 1970s did not feel the need to celebrate the postmodern dissolution of identity in the way that some men did. As Waugh observes, just as the WLM got underway, the postmodern critique of representation, identity and grand narratives challenged its very basis in the collectivity of women and female authorship, thus complicating the optimism of early confessional modes (198). However, it would be wrong to characterise 1970s feminist writers as predominately realists averse to experimentation and indifferent to questions of 'fictionality'. Indeed, as my research suggests, there is a surprising amount of formal experimentalism in 1970s fiction, both by more mainstream, literary writers such as Figs, Weldon, Carter and Tennant whose work is formally innovative using modernist and postmodernist techniques to deconstruct myths of the

feminine; and by writers such as Michèle Roberts and Sara Maitland who emerged from feminist writers' groups and also experiment with form and voice.

In fact, rather than categorizing feminist fiction in terms of whether it is either 'social-political' or 'psychological-personal' in nature and making value judgements on this basis, Felski argues that feminist fiction works to collapse binaries and dualisms that characterise Leftist as well as bourgeois thinking:

The importance of subjectivity, identity, and narrative in feminist fiction in turn raises a number of more general questions about the politics of literature and the insufficiency of sterile dichotomies—of realism versus experimentalism, identity versus negativity, tradition versus modernity—which have long structured oppositional thinking about cultural practices and in which the second term is unconditionally privileged over the first. The example of feminist literature suggests that the cultural needs of subordinate groups cannot be adequately grasped by continuing to think in terms of such antithetical dualisms<sup>7</sup>. (152)

Felski's view of literature as serving or meeting the *needs* of women as a subordinate group might be regarded as overly functionalist here. The complex relationship between form, content, authorship and audience reception cannot be adequately or fully grasped by the notion of needs. But as she suggests, in the simultaneously social and experimental practice of consciousness-raising, all aspects of women's lives, cutting across the personal and political, were subject to discussion, exploration and analysis in texts of the period.

### **A Decade of Women's Writing: some key texts**

There was already an established group of women writers by 1970, published by mainstream presses, which included Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, and Iris Murdoch -- to whose work Waugh gives the name 'Cautious Feminism' (192). Muriel Spark's novels from the early 1970s --*The*

*Driver's Seat* (1970), *Not to Disturb* (1971), and *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973) -- treat a number of themes including the impediments to female authorship, the illusions of romantic love, and the relationship between power and myth. Iris Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970) and *The Black Prince* (1973) use a range of metafictional devices and exploit several genres—thriller, romance, comedy--to explore the nature of deception and the relationship between truth, art and love. Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) is in many ways an exemplary feminist Bildungsroman, in which female self-discovery is depicted as a process of confrontation with the social world. The protagonist, Kate Brown, abandons her middle-class life as housewife, gets a job and has an extramarital affair, before moving to London to consider the feminine stereotypes that have governed her life. In *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), Lessing uses the dystopian genre to depict a post-nuclear future in which sociobiological ideas about sex and gender come to the fore. These writers represent the first generation of post-war women writers, which is characterised by self-reflection on the problem of the woman writer. Collectively, they undertake an interrogation of grand narratives to show how they are lacking from a woman's point of view. Waugh argues that Lessing's use of the self-reflexive personal mode is one of the ways that 'women writers have tried to expand and explore a semiotic feminine subjectivity without abandoning the category of "women's experience" and the concept of an authorial voice' (Waugh 204), and sees this mode being utilised by feminist writers throughout the period and up to the present day.

Secondly, there was a group of distinctly feminist writers emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including Angela Carter, Fay Weldon, and Eva Figes. Weldon's early novel, *Down Among the Women* (1971), presents a feminist critique of the situation of women, especially the domestic drudgery of their roles as wives and mothers. In her later *Female Friends* (1975), Weldon explores the rivalries and antagonisms among women, depicting divisions between married and unmarried women, mothers and child-free women. Angela Carter's surrealist fantasy *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) explores the rival claims of (masculine) fascistic reason and (feminine) irrational desire, deconstructing both and arguing for the need to reconnect desire and affect.

According to Waugh, Carter ultimately resists a thoroughgoing postmodernism and retains a commitment to the experience of the body (Waugh 195). *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), according to Carter's own account in 'Notes from the Frontline', represents an 'anti-mythic' text, which she calls, in line with the times and with tongue only partly in cheek, a 'feminist tract about the social creation of femininity' (71). This summary, whether ironic or not, could stand as an apt description of many 1970s feminist texts. In parodic style, the novel exploits the distinction between biological sex and culturally constructed gender that it is the premise of post-Beauvoir second-wave feminism. Significantly, it attacks myths of femininity promulgated by feminism itself as much as by patriarchy.

Thirdly, there was a younger generation of feminist writers who emerged after 1975: Emma Tennant, Michèle Roberts, Zoë Fairbairns and, just outside the decade, Anna Wilson. Tennant's *Hotel de Dream* (1976) is a comic fantasy in which femininity represents the repressed unconscious of the patriarchal order. *The Bad Sister* (1978) takes the form of a Gothic fantasy, examining the meanings of sister and sisterhood, and showing them to be sites of conflict and contradiction. Waugh identifies both these generations with a phase of explicitly 'writing as a woman', which involves a 'quest to reconcile the collective and the personal voice' (192), and explores the meaning of the slogan 'the personal is the political'. She sees the dominant themes of the feminist middle period of post-war writing as 'identity, experience and female authorship' (197). While 'commentators often argue for sharp distinctions between a pre-1968 and a post-1978 generation of women writers, with the latter far more alert to the instabilities of the very category woman' (Waugh 197), notions of feminine identity are interrogated by women writers in the whole period.

In terms of my fourth group, black women writers in the 1970s, one name stands out – Buchi Emecheta, who had a substantial number of UK publications following emigration from her native Nigeria. Emecheta's *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) are autobiographical novels which foreground the destructive effects of racism and colonialism while exploring her experience as a female migrant bringing up several children in an alien and hostile country. Her novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) records the impact on female selfhood of the loss of the mother. Unlike in many

white feminist texts, the mother is not rejected or reviled; on the contrary, the loss of the mother makes it difficult for the protagonist to form a sense of female identity. *A Question of Silence* (1974) by the South African Bessie Head should also be mentioned, along with a notable publication by the Indian writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *Heat and Dust* (1975), which was made into a successful film in the 1980s. One of the few mainstream texts produced by a non-white writer in the period, it explores the sexual status of women across cultures and through time, providing a pessimistic assessment of the fate of women in a world determined by patriarchal structures. There was a distinct lack of black British feminist texts in the decade; much more activity occurred in the US with writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Gloria Naylor coming to prominence. Black and Asian women's writing did not appear to reach a critical mass in the UK until 1980s, partly under the impetus of GLC funding for Arts and writers's groups and partly because of the groundswell of black feminism. As John McLeod argues in this volume, the 1970s was a distinctly pessimistic period in terms of black literary representation.

The same can be said of explicitly lesbian writing; there is no equivalent of US writers like Lisa Alther or of the comic lesbian novel at this time in the UK. (Britain would have to wait until 1985 and Jeanette Winterson for that.) Anna Wilson's *Cactus* (1980), published by the radical feminist Onlywomen Press just outside the period, is a wholly original novel, distinct from other feminist texts of the period. It represents an exploration of changing constructions of lesbian identity across two historical periods, following the concerns of two lesbian couples: Eleanor and Bea, an isolated couple living in the 1940s and 50s, and Dee and Ann, who are part of the 1970s lesbian feminist movement. While the former relationship breaks down in the face of social obstacles, the latter benefits from the support of a collective movement. In many ways it exemplifies US lesbian-feminist Adrienne Rich's concept of 'lesbian continuum', combining a critique of compulsory heterosexuality with representation of the bonds between women. It is a poignant, poetically crafted text, which combines feminist politics with psychological subtlety and depth.

While Waugh identifies the postmodern engagement with difference and performance as characterizing feminist fiction from the 1980s onwards, as self-reflexive uncertainty replaces the earlier faith in forms of confessional writing, she identifies an ongoing resistance to monolithic identity in women's writing whether this is imposed from outside by patriarchy or from within by feminist ideology itself. Indeed, much of the more mainstream feminist fiction of the 70s by Weldon, Carter and Tennant is characterized by the adoption of positions critical of, if not antithetical to, those of the dominant feminist politics of the time.

### **Key Themes in 1970s Feminist Fiction**

The major themes treated in 1970s feminist fiction may thus be summarized as follows: women's unequal position within patriarchy; female selfhood and identity; reproduction and motherhood; women's community; body politics; mother-daughter relations; (hetero)sexuality and lesbianism; women's work; and the woman writer. While class emerges as an issue to some extent, 'race' is relatively absent as a topic for fictional treatment. According to Paulina Palmer, the themes treated in feminist fiction are largely radical feminist rather than socialist feminist in character (Palmer 3). Given the previously discussed preponderance of socialist-feminist theory in the UK feminist public sphere, this is a very interesting point. The issues of identity, motherhood, and sexuality rather than work, class and economic relations are uppermost in fiction of the period. There are exceptions such as Zoë Fairbairns' *Benefits* (1979) as I discuss below. However, rather than presenting such fiction according to such typologies, I would argue that many of the psychological and psychoanalytic fictions of British feminist writers are informed by socialist and Marxian perspectives. The women writers involved in the group that produced *Tales I Tell My Mother* (1978), including Michèle Roberts, Zoë Fairbairns, Sara Maitland and Michelene Wandor, all come from a socialist background and integrate class issues to a much greater extent than comparable US fictions.

A key aim of the fiction was to explore 'woman's consciousness in a man's world' as Sheila Rowbotham's 1973 work put it or, as construed by French feminists, woman's place in the

phallogocentric Symbolic Order. The work of Kristeva and Cixous, as my discussion of the Marxist-Feminist Literary Collective showed, was being read in new translations and fed into the writers' and readers' groups of the period (a groundbreaking collection of writings, *New French Feminisms*, was published in English translation in 1981, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron). The central theme of Eva Figes's *Days* (1974) is woman's marginal position in a male-dominated world and as such it coincides with the work of the French feminist writers and critics who were elaborating their theories of *écriture féminine*, the semiotic, and women's time in the mid-1970s. The novel's nameless narrator reconstructs her life and explores her relationship to her mother, grandmother, daughter, and to men. *Days* depicts in a minimalist, modernist style the cycle of betrayal and repression that characterises patriarchal family life and in particular mother-daughter relations. The novel charts the cyclical narrative of female oppression and collusion as a version of 'herstory'. Only women enter the narrative frame, which represents the space of the marginal and the repressed. Both the life lived and the style in which it is represented is spare. As the novel begins, the nameless narrator is lying paralysed in a hospital bed. Neither we, nor apparently she, knows who she is or why she is there:

In this room there is not much for me to know. It is small, rectangular. In the days I have already spent here I have noted everything there is. I doubt whether there is anything left which I have not taken into account. And since I have nothing to occupy my mind, since I lie here incapable, I have also measured the walls and detected minor flaws: a long hair-crack in the ceiling and, round the lightswitch, a dark penumbra no doubt caused by the many hands which have rubbed against the wall whilst turning the light on and off. (8)

The room is at once her world, her prison and, indeed, a metaphorical coffin. Gradually, the narrator becomes accustomed to her surroundings and she begins to reconstruct the history of betrayal, disillusion, and marginalisation that has brought her to this point. It emerges that this history is a



highly gendered one in which her mother, her grandmother and possibly, her own daughter, are trapped. From the textual fragments, we ascertain that as a child her mother was abandoned by her father; her mother had a breakdown, was hospitalised just as she now is, but refused ever to acknowledge or come to terms with her desertion. The narrator is forced to care for her brother and put her own needs second. On her mother's return, she takes on her care. In the meantime, her brother grows up, graduates, gets a well-paid job and moves away to start his own family. The narrator remains at home locked in a cycle of repression and silence. She is courted by a young doctor and is even encouraged by her mother to accept him on the basis that beggars can't be choosers, but defeated by circumstances, she lets the relationship peter out. Although she gets a secretarial job, she discovers that she is pregnant and returns to her mother's home to bring the baby up whereupon her mother takes control, reproducing her own mothering. The narrator goes back to work but by the time she returns home her daughter is asleep in bed. Her sense of desperation and the painful exchanges between mother and daughter are vividly depicted as is the irony of her response to the fiancé's assertion that she has her own life to lead: 'He was quite wrong about it: I never had my own life to lead. It has always belonged to other people' (79-80).

The narrator's story is a representative one of how a young girl becomes a woman and, in de Beauvoir's terms, 'the second sex'. The novel explores women's collusion with male abuses of power, with the ways in which women compound their own oppression by upholding traditional notions of male privilege. As Palmer states, the narrator's adult paralysis is a consequence of the 'immobilizing effect to which the destructive aspects of the mother-daughter bond can give rise' (118). As the novel progresses the narrator's identity begins to merge with that of her mother in a cyclical, repetitive narrative exemplifying the notion of women's time theorized by Julia Kristeva in her 1979 essay of that name. In the following extract, the voices of mother and daughter across the generations are interspersed and represented in the first and third person simultaneously in a radical form of female dialogism:

She (I) came into the room and kissed me (her) on the cheek, bending down over the bed. Her face felt fresh and cool from the winter evening outside. (Her warm face felt dry, almost desiccated to my touch.) How are you, mother? I felt my age: looking at her. She was looking youthful, her face flushed from the cold air, and smart, in the dark blue coat I had bought several weeks ago. (I always wanted to look nice.) And she was breathing hard as though she had been running, down the long corridors and up the stairs. Whew, she said, I'm puffed. I was afraid I'd be late. (I pulled up the chair and sat down to get my breath back. Now I saw that she was looking dreadful... (Figs 96)

Perhaps surprisingly, given the consistent bleakness of tone, the novel concludes on a note of ambivalent hope with the narrator finally getting out of bed and moving to the chair on the other side of the room, but the reader is left unsure whether she will be able to resolve her maternal ambivalence, find a measure of autonomy and begin her life again.

*Days* represents a bleak, and radical feminist-inspired, assessment of women's symbolic placement. It is an extraordinary text that is influenced by the existentialist nihilism of both Kafka and Beckett to depict the alienation of woman within the phallogentric symbolic order. Continuing the anti-realist tradition of European modernism, it demonstrates Figs' commitment to modernist experiment and anti-realism in its foregrounding of stream of consciousness, metafictional techniques, and epistemological uncertainty. Indeed, to some extent, the novel challenges Felski's view of feminist literature as privileging the confessional mode; *Days* represents an anti-confessional text, in the narrator's inability or refusal to illuminate her situation.

A common assumption about feminist fiction in the 1970s is that women writers did not write as mothers and eschew motherhood for literary creation. As Palmer points out, the figure of the mother was vilified in 1960s cultural discourse, especially by radical psychology, as the symbolic representation of repressive bourgeois society, a model feminists inherited in the 1970s (113). As part of that counter-culture, it was unexceptional for feminists to blame the mother who was seen as a tool of patriarchy by a succession of angry daughters. In this respect, the negative representation of

motherhood seen in *Days* is characteristic of fiction of the period. Arguably, it took the best part of the decade to work through that maternal ambivalence to a more generous representation of the mother. The shift to a more positive representation in which matrilineage enables rather than constrains women's creativity occurs towards the end of the period and in the 1980s, although as may be seen in *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, the monstrous mother is still a powerful motif in the mid-80s.

Nevertheless, some feminist writers may be seen to explore the contradictions and ambivalence of mothering from the perspective of the mother herself, and some writers make this a central theme. For example, the work of Michèle Roberts, influenced by French feminisms, explored the subversive possibilities of the pre-oedipal bond, positing the maternal as a form of resistance to patriarchy regardless of the biological act (Roberts herself is not a mother, incidentally). Roberts's first published novel, *A Piece of the Night* (1978), was one of the first to be published by the newly established Women's Press in 1978. It is dedicated to the women writers group that Roberts was a part of in the 1970s, including Wandor, Fairbairns, Maitland and Valerie Miner. All these writers contributed to the collection *Tales I Tell my Mother* and went on to explore aspects of women's movement informed by the feminist methodology of consciousness-raising, albeit in very different ways. While Fairbairns chose a social realist novel of ideas in *Benefits*, Roberts writes a psychoanalytically inflected, poetic text to explore female identity and collectivity.

*A Piece of the Night* is noteworthy not least for its ambitious attempt to encompass psychological and political themes and to unite socialist and radical feminist interests. The novel explores psychic processes, the semiotic realm and mother-daughter relations as well as depicting feminist collectivity, alternatives to heterosexuality, and attempts to reorganise family life. It charts the protagonist Julie's attempt to bring her daughter up in a women's household, her lesbian relationship with another woman, and her return home to look after her sick mother. The novel explores the mother-daughter relationship and motherhood as an institution along the lines of the US feminist Adrienne Rich. As Palmer comments, the novel highlights the 1970s' debates about

motherhood and the polarised attitudes that existed (95). It contrasts the attitudes of two generations of women: Julie, the daughter, sees feminism as a supportive and positive force in women's lives, while her mother Claire sees it as a threat to everything her generation values:

- Feminism's about mothers, Julie says despairingly: it's about backing them up—
- You could have fooled me, Claire says with great bitterness: as far as I can see, you hate everything that I believe in. (Roberts 91)

The novel is stylistically innovative and ambitious, at times approximating a Cixousian *écriture féminine*, the identification of femininity with an experimental, fluid form of writing as in Figs's *Days*. It is full of references to contemporary feminist theory and is clearly setting out to work through these artistically. It is also an apprentice work, which is arguably sometimes weighed down by its theoretical precepts as, for example, in the description of Julie performing a version of desirable femininity, which exemplifies John Berger's influential 1972 analysis of the way which 'men act and women appear' (45):

Julie is never for a second free of the consciousness of what she looks like. She moves along the streets holding out to male passers-by photographs of herself taken from the most flattering angle, she spends hours despairingly contemplating her face and body in the mirror; her work suffers, she does not see other people but sees them seeing her. She does not know what it is to live inside her own skin, to look out from her body and forget it sometimes. Her body bombards her from every advertising poster and hoarding; long, lean, supple, golden, it simply *is*: passive, therefore enticing. She is a travesty of her body. She is laid out on a marble slab, chopped up and sold to the male public. She does not know where she resides when she looks at the sections of body spread out in front of her: head, tits, legs, cunt, bum. (Roberts 68)

Here, the use of free indirect discourse presents Julie as subject and object simultaneously. Julie's process of consciousness-raising leads her to reject traditional constructions of the feminine and to explore marginal and repressed identities of madwoman, whore, and lesbian, which lead to conflict with her mother. In an allusion to theories of the monstrous feminine such as Cixous's 1976 essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', and the motif of the 'madwoman in the attic' theorised in Gilbert and Gubar's 1979 critical study, Roberts represents the monstrous images of femininity that Julie appropriates and performs:

Nobody dares to name me woman, for I am dangerous and powerful. I can make others go mad too, just by desiring them. I cause storms and migraines, I turn milk sour, I am both the ruined harvest and the shameful blood that sickens cattle. I am the witch whom you call your crazy daughter. You tell me I am mad; I tell myself that, every time I weep, my face blotched red, every time I scream to touch the silk of your breast and lay my head there. (Roberts 108)

In the course of the novel Julie brings her daughter Bertha up in a lesbian feminist household and discovers the challenges and value of women's community. Roberts does not seek to idealize women's community; rather, she portrays both the difficulties faced, such as financial insecurity, and the benefits of mutual support. As Palmer comments, the novel is premised on the lesbian feminist theory that 'patriarchal culture is built upon the disruption of attachments between both mothers and daughters, and women in general' (117). Significantly, *A Piece of the Night* ends with a scene of feminist consciousness-raising, which reaffirms the value of women's community:

Tell me about your past, Julie begins to urge other women, and they to urge her. The women sit in circles talking. They are passing telegrams along battle-lines, telling each other stories that will not put them to sleep, recognising allies under the disguise of femininity, no longer smuggling

ammunition over back garden walls, no longer corpses in the church and mouths of men. (Roberts 186)

Julie accepts that she will have to work with Ben in struggle over the care of their daughter Bertha just as she will have to negotiate a place for her mother, friends and lovers in her life. The novel is important in giving motherhood a symbolic place within feminism while providing a critique of the institution within patriarchy. In the earlier *Days* this isn't achieved; the daughter-narrator remains alienated from her own mother and the mothering role.

Feminists utilized literature as a way of voicing and working through contradictions and paradoxes in women's lives. One reason that issues of female identity feature more prominently than those of 'work', even in the fiction of socialist British writers, is that the novel arguably lends itself better to the treatment of individual psychology than broad social and political themes. Waugh argues that the political rights discourse of feminism was not easily compatible with the fictional articulation of 'human' needs such as love and affection (Waugh 197). Even in the seventies therefore, feminist fiction is dominated by questions of identity rather than politics – 'who am I?' rather than 'what is to be done?' Nevertheless, the 1970s is characterised by the symbolic attempt to overcome this dichotomy; one particularly interesting example of this attempt is Zoë Fairbairns's *Benefits*, which explores the difficult relationship between work and motherhood, and dramatizes contemporary debates concerning paying mothers for the work they do. *Benefits* was published in 1979 in the new Virago fiction series and dedicated to the same women writers' group of which Roberts was part. In writing the novel, Fairbairns

set out to make fiction of sexual politics, to explore and dramatise sexual politics—of course it is no coincidence that a feminist press should choose to publish it, because those were the issues that interested them too. ('1984' 8)

Unlike *Days* and *A Piece of the Night*, *Benefits* is a realist ‘novel of ideas’, a key genre in feminist fiction. Ideologically engaged, and committed to women’s activism, it works out a specific political issue: what would happen to you, me and the woman next door if women were paid to be mothers? As previously discussed, The Wages for Housework campaign was based on the theory that as women’s work is outside the capitalist economy it cannot be afforded a value, therefore it should be brought into the capitalist system and seen as productive labour. In a lecture to commemorate George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which *Benefits* reworks, Fairbairns describes how the motivation to write her own novel came out of her enthusiastic yet ambivalent response to this political issue:

It was a controversial campaign, even within the women’s movement. Some feminists supported it, believing as I did that financial independence was a necessary precondition for equality; but others took the view that if you pay women to stay at home to look after children it will confirm them in that role and then they will never get away. Oddly enough, I found that argument as convincing as the other one. In the Wages for Housework debate, I was on both sides. Being on both sides is not a very comfortable position to be in ideologically, but it is the perfect posture from which to write a novel. (‘1984’ 3)

In her fictional working out of the issue, human emotions are shown to complicate the straightforward application of theory, which comes up against the problem of women’s work as a ‘labour of love’; it cannot be easily quantified. However, as the women’s movement insisted, housework is not outside the capitalist and patriarchal system; it props it up and, as in Figs’ *Days*, Fairbairns explores domesticity as a form of female alienation. She fictionalises the debate from both sides, ultimately showing the deleterious effects of paying women for their domestic labour. The text reflects the socialist feminist critique of both Marxism as gender-blind and radical feminism as eliding divisions between women. Like Orwell before her, Fairbairns presents a realistic representation of a dystopian social world, in her case depicting the lived experiences of the women’s liberation

movement. The following extract could indeed have come from her lecture, so journalistic is it in tone and presentation:

Women active in what was then known as the women's liberation movement have other reasons for remembering that summer. One of the major demands of that movement was for a woman's right to abortion on demand. It seemed axiomatic that women could not advance without full control of their fertility [...] And throughout that summer, a Select Committee of MPs, under pressure from organised anti-feminists, was considering ways of making abortions even more difficult to obtain, particularly for those women who sought them merely because they did not wish to be pregnant. The women's liberationists' response to these efforts was to commit themselves, this gleaming summer, to vigorous grassroots campaigning... (*Benefits* 5)

Fairbairns has been criticised on aesthetic grounds (see Palmer), yet the novel skilfully weaves political ideology and character development just as Orwell did in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The novel adopts a 'patchwork approach, following the different characters as they negotiate contradictions of family life, class and work over several decades. In Orwellian vein it also presents a fore-warning of the deleterious consequences of women ceding control of their fertility and decision-making to men or of pursuing an agenda of promoting motherhood as the exemplary feminist issue:

All mothers, regardless of race, marital state or domestic competence would be eligible for the weekly payment, so long as they stayed at home and looked after children under 16. In calling the payment simply Benefit, no risk was run of confusing it with other benefits, for these were all abolished. They were unnecessary. The explosion of job opportunities that would result from the economic upturn and women leaving work, would ensure that no man need be unemployed; Benefit mothers would not need social security or income supplements; and, as for sickness and old age, people who wished to be



insured could make private arrangements. Motherhood, on the other hand, was not a misfortune to be insured against; it was a national service to be paid for. (Fairbairns *Benefits* 56)

As the author herself comments, her dystopian vision proved remarkably accurate in some respects, most notably its prediction of 1980s Thatcherite family values and the ‘Back to Basics’ campaign of the 1990s – but not in others. While women’s double burden and relative maternal poverty remain a feature of the twenty-first century, the idea that women could or should be removed entirely from the workplace seems a distant if not fantastic one. As Fairbairns notes, rather the opposite has happened with ‘staying at home’ seen as not really pulling your weight despite the hardship of childcare (‘1984’ 7). Of the three novels considered in detail here, Fairbairns’ text is the one that now seems the most dated largely because, in its realist register and topical material, it is the one most tied to its historical moment of production. It does, however, succeed in fulfilling the function ascribed by Felski to feminist literature of addressing a collective readership and speaking vividly and immediately to the desires and contradictions in women’s lives.

## **Conclusion**

In her essay on post-war women’s writing, Patricia Waugh persuasively argues ‘a case for underlying continuities in British women’s fiction since even before the emergence of the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s’, insisting that it is wrong to divorce the fiction of the late 1960s and 70s from what came before and afterwards (191). With this point in mind, I would argue that 1970s feminist fiction exhibits both continuities and discontinuities with previous and following decades. It treats similar themes of gender inequality, the problematization of female identity, and the critique of marriage and motherhood, seen historically in women’s writing. It also utilises a similar variety of modes and styles as writing before and since the decade: social realism, (post)modernist experiment, and fantasy. Where I would argue it did differ significantly was in the production of this work as ‘feminist fiction’ as a result of the emergence of women’s publishing houses, women’s writing groups

and the feminist counter-public sphere as a whole. There was a growth in collaborative work, publishing opportunities, and in feminist reading communities. Moreover, in fiction of the 1970s there was a bold and explicit assertion of previously taboo topics such as lesbianism, the crisis in gender relations, and the feminist disruption of patriarchy. In this respect, 1970s feminist fiction was less tentative than that of the 1960s, and less fragmented than the 1980s. There was, in addition, a new focus on women's activism and movement, relations among women and 'sisterhood', and on consciousness-raising as a transformative tool. What is also significant is that there were fewer texts by black feminists and lesbian feminists than in the US at the time, or in the 1980s in the UK. While there is perhaps no absolute break between the 1960s and the 1970s, or the 1970s and 1980s, both society and feminist fiction were transformed across the period, and new generations of women writers emerged in the succeeding decades including Pat Barker, Rose Tremain and Maggie Gee (Granta Best Young British Novelists 1983); Jeanette Winterson and A.L. Kennedy (Granta list 1993); and Sarah Waters, Monica Ali and Zadie Smith (Granta list 2003). In my assessment of the 1970s as one of the most politically and aesthetically radical periods of women's writing to be seen in any decade or indeed century, I would concur with the feminist critic Gayle Greene who states: 'Feminist fiction is the most revolutionary movement in contemporary fiction – revolutionary both in that it is formally innovative and in that it helped make a social revolution' (2).

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