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Michèle Roberts's *Flesh and Blood* as an Example of *Écriture Feminine*

Abstract

The essay offers an analysis of *Flesh and Blood*, a novel by Michèle Roberts, first published in 1994. It discusses the book from the vantage point of French feminist criticism, especially *écriture féminine*, as well as gynocritics. The theory serves as a reference point for a better understanding of the novel's structure, language and plot. In the opening paragraphs, the essay delineates the main premises of *écriture féminine*, a French feminist theory represented primarily by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, and gynocritics, a concept developed by the American feminist scholar Elaine Showalter. It then moves on to portray *Flesh and Blood* as an example of *écriture féminine*, analysing the aspects of the novel that mirror the theories of the French feminist critics: characters, motifs, structure, formal ploys and language.

Keywords: Michèle Roberts, *Flesh and Blood*, *écriture féminine*, gynocritics, feminist criticism, French feminism, women's writing

The following essay belongs to a larger project that focuses on the narratological experimentalism of Michèle Roberts's prose fiction through the lens of feminist criticism. The text analyses *Flesh and Blood* (1994) from the vantage point of French feminist criticism as an example of *écriture féminine*. However, to provide a more thorough analysis of the novel, I also refer to ideas within American gynocritics, which constitutes a complement to the French theory. Roberts's writing is often read alongside feminist theories, as she herself acknowledges her fascination with French feminism. In an interview with Patricia Bastida Rodríguez, the author claims that she does not perceive her writing as merely an "illustration of theory," but rather as "working together with it" (Roberts, "On Women" 96). Therefore, the reading applied here will use theory as a reference point to understand the novel better and to analyse its structure, language and plot more thoroughly.

The term *écriture féminine* might be translated as "women's writing" or, literally, as "feminine writing." It was coined by Hélène Cixous, who, together with Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, is seen as a leading proponent of the concept (Burzyńska 402). *Écriture féminine* refers to a style of writing whose distinctive elements include indeterminacy, inconsistency, sensuousness and corporeality. This kind of writing is believed to have its source in the unconscious, and, as such, enables the expression of the untold. An analogous theory, which originated in the United States, is gynocritics (or gynocriticism) introduced by Elaine Showalter in the late 1970s. This criticism arose



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as an opposition to earlier revisionist strains in feminist scholarship, which tended to investigate misogynistic practises in existing literary discourse, and to read female writing alongside the male-dominated canon. In her seminal essay, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” (1981), Showalter expresses the need to abandon “the feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanizing, or even attacking male critical theory” (183) as it prevents the emergence of perspectives which would appeal to female experiences. Her view, in other words, is that the development of feminist scholarship is restrained by adhering to androcentric models. Instead, she advocates a shift of focus that would allow feminist criticism to explore women’s literature in all its aspects: “the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition” (184–85). To define such a revolutionary critical discourse, Showalter coins the term “gynocritics.” The fundamental question which gynocritics poses is the question of distinctiveness of women’s writing. According to Showalter, there are currently four “models of difference” that theories of women’s writing draw upon: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural (186).

Biological criticism emphasises the inseparability of the body and writing. Although Showalter points to certain threats such theories may pose, including a return to essentialism (187–88), some French critics argue that biological differences constitute the source of writing. In her landmark manifesto, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), Hélène Cixous states: “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” (880). Thus, for Cixous, the body constitutes the source of the unconscious, and the unconscious seems to be the source of women’s writing. Moreover, she claims that writing “her self” will enable women to undergo a process of liberation and, on the individual level, help them reclaim their bodies. She states that female bodies were confiscated and used as a token of oppression, that women were taught to deny their corporeality and ignore their bodily needs. In her view, such deprivation is tantamount to deprivation of speech. She writes: “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (880). Therefore, a woman whose body is disciplined is mute.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous suggests a link between the corporeal aspect of women’s writing and the linguistic one. The area of linguistics is also crucial in the second model of differentiating the qualities of women’s writing proposed by Showalter. This model foregrounds such questions as: whether men and women use language differently, whether those differences can be conceptualised, and, finally, whether activities such as speaking, reading and writing are gender marked (Showalter 190). Cixous seems to leave no room for doubts in this regard as she states: “I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as *marked* writing” (879). As she explains, writing has been claimed by men and used solely for their advantage, not only depriving women of their turn to speak, but also appropriating this space to perpetuate the repression of women. She believes the manoeuvre to be particularly detrimental as fiction has the potential of disguising it as something innocuous or even appealing. What makes it even more irremissible is the fact that writing can change the dynamics in the fight for liberating the female voice, inasmuch as it can be “a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (879).

The most salient issue raised by linguistic feminist theories, however, is the idea of women creating a language of their own.¹ This concept is particularly prevalent among French feminists. Cixous claims that a female language can be found within the body:

¹ As Showalter states in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” the concept of creating a women’s language dates back to ancient times and has its origins in folklore and myths (191–92).

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word “silence,” the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word “impossible” and writes it as “the end.” (886)

Therefore, from the vantage point of French feminist theory, female corporeality and language are inseparable: “women are body. More body, hence more writing” (Cixous 886). This is reflected in Roberts’s writing where bodily matters are a recurrent motif. In fact, the author openly acknowledges that she wants to “rescue the body and cherish it and love it and touch it and smell it and make it into language” (“January Talks”). Feminist critics also believe that having a language of their own will enable women to break the silence they have been exiled into. They also argue that such a language will liberate women from using speech, which—being male-oriented or, as Cixous puts it, “governed by the phallus” (881)—is unable to inscribe either their selves or their experiences. Another advocate of *écriture féminine*, Monique Wittig, expresses this idea even more emphatically: “The women say, the language you speak poisons your glottis tongue palate lips. They say, the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you. They say, the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated” (114). For Wittig, such phallogocentric language presents reality from the male perspective and, consequently, maintains the discriminative practises against women.

The third model of difference discussed by Showalter is psychoanalytic feminist criticism, which assumes that the distinctive qualities of women’s writing stem from the author’s psyche and the relation between gender and writing (193). Such theories simultaneously draw on and challenge the phallogocentric psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan. French feminist critics, in particular, frequently refer to Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, such as, for example, his three stages of human development. Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray reinterpret Lacan’s ideas by refuting these which they believe to be the source of female oppression. They disagree, for instance, with Lacan’s thought of imposing on women male-oriented language and the symbolic order. They also counter the symbolic figure of the father with that of the mother (Burzyńska 418–19). The relationship between mother and daughter is of particular interest to Irigaray, who is the author of a concept she refers to as “the bodily encounter with the mother.” In a lecture delivered in Montreal in 1981, Irigaray elaborates upon the significance of the maternal and juxtaposes it with the figure of the father. She unequivocally states that the mother is essential to maintaining social order and fulfilling both individual and collective desires, though her own desires are constantly suppressed by the law of the father. Later, Irigaray enters into a dispute over the Freudian concept of the primal killing of the father as she points to an even more archaic murder, namely that of the mother, which imposes a certain order in a community. Thus, Irigaray’s claim is that it is the primal matricide that underlies the functioning of society and culture (36). As a result, she claims, both society and culture are to a considerable extent phallogocentric, attempting to exclude the mother: “The father forbids the bodily encounter with the mother” (39). Irigaray’s plea is not to commit this matricide again (since the mother has already been sacrificed once, at the beginning of our culture), but, instead, to bring her back to life, to let her into society, and to protect her from the law of the father (43). What is particularly interesting in Irigaray’s perception is how she intertwines the maternal with the concept of women’s language and the corporeal:

We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationships with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language [*langage*]

which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language [*langue*] attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal. (43)

Hence, Irigaray combines multiple aspects which are of interest to feminist criticism and constructs her own psychoanalytical theory, which stands in opposition to the traditional, phallogocentric theories of Freud and Lacan. She refutes the absolute power of the patriarchal father and revives the glory of the mother.

Finally, the fourth model discussed by Showalter, the culture-based theory, can be seen as including all these models, as it touches upon ideas of female corporeality, language and psyche, and analyses them from the standpoint of their social contexts (197). Unlike the previous models, cultural feminism acknowledges such determinants as class, race, nationality, and history to be equally important as gender. Still, it sees gender as the factor that connects women from different backgrounds. As Showalter points out: “women’s culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space” (197). In Western culture, women have always been marginalised and put in the position of the Other. The dominant androcentric culture muted women and exiled them to the margin, leaving them a limited space which they could call their own. This space, in Cixous’s theory, is referred to as “the Dark Continent” (884). Like other feminist critics, Cixous wants this space to be the locus of women’s difference, a place where they could speak and write in their own language.

Feminist theory has not managed to avoid criticism, and the two main accusations it currently faces are connected with its tendency towards essentialism and gender isolationism. The latter accusation, centred around the idea that feminist criticism forces women writers into a ghetto, may perhaps explain why two esteemed nineteenth-century authors, Mary Ann Evans (better known as George Eliot) and Louisa May Alcott (whose early texts were written under the pseudonym of A.M. Barnard), seemed to dislike the concept of “women’s writing.” They refused to be pigeonholed solely on the grounds of their gender, as it automatically categorised them as “the other.” Similarly, although she accepts being referred to as a woman writer, Michèle Roberts refutes the essentialist notion that, being a woman, she writes differently from a man (“Michèle Roberts”).

In fact, *écriture féminine* offers an interesting perspective to writers of both genders.² What the theory rejects is not men in general, but the forms which were invented by them and traditionally associated with male writing. This kind of writing has not only been a source of female oppression, but it has also denied equal status to women writers. Thus, following Cixous’s ideas, women’s writing rejects reason and male-centred discourse that is focused on the masculine viewpoint which has so far dominated Western literature. Instead, it embraces writing that appeals to the unconscious.

Michèle Roberts’s work has demonstrated interest in women’s writing on numerous occasions. This is perhaps most explicitly illustrated in her 1987 novel, *The Book of Mrs Noah*. The narrative concerns a group of women writers called Sybils, who set up a writing group and embark on an imaginary ark. Mrs Noah’s ark constitutes the female space, Cixous’s Dark Continent, where the Sybils tell their stories. In her own witty way, Roberts describes the various obstacles women writers have been struggling with, echoing Cixous’s point that there is no such thing as a universal woman. She introduces the character of Gaffer, who symbolises God the Father and the male writer, thus embodying the ultimate patriarchal being who denies Sybils their ability to write:

² For example, James Joyce is one of the male writers considered to have practised *écriture féminine*. For more details, see Childers and Hentzi 93.

Women writers, well, they're like leaky wombs, aren't they, letting out the odd streams of verbiage, the odd undisciplined shriek. They don't *create*. They just spill things out of that great empty space inside. It's babies they hold, not books. It's only frustrated neurotic women who write, women who can't have children, or who are scared of their normal feminine fulfilment ... But I'm convinced you can write properly only when you rise above your bodies and forget them, when you get to the proper height from which you can survey the whole human race and speak for it, when you become, yes, androgynous. (Roberts, *Book 56*)

In this highly humorous passage, Roberts addresses various reasons behind discriminatory practises against women writers. By using humour, she immediately discredits detrimental, misogynistic preconceptions, which is exactly what feminist critics have been striving to do. *The Book of Mrs Noah* is a tale of women writers, female spaces and *écriture féminine*.³

Another work which concerns women as storytellers is *Flesh and Blood*. To demonstrate how Michèle Roberts's writing does inscribe into the premises of *écriture féminine*, this particular novel will be analysed, with the primary focus on its structure, language, characters and plot.

Flesh and Blood, first published in 1994, tells the eternal story of a relationship between a mother and daughter, especially revolving around the separation from one another. It consists of several narratives, and although there seems to be no coherence between these stories, they all touch upon the same theme of being separated from the mother. Some narratives approach the theme more straightforwardly (for instance, by featuring a literal disappearance of the mother in the narrative of Rosa), whereas others treat the concept of separation more metaphorically, for example, as a rejection of an emotional bond, or an attempt to develop a relationship with God the Mother (portrayed in chapters "Eugénie" and "Federigo," respectively). The impossibility to remain inseparable seems to be the source of all human distress in the novel. The fact that mother and daughter are initially one being, who is then torn apart through the act of birth, seems to shape not only their future relationship, but their whole lives. The mutual dissatisfaction of becoming separate beings causes them to antagonise, and the narrative turns into "an elegy for the mother I lost, when the skin that bound us ripped away, our separate skins tore off and we were miserable being two beings so different she couldn't like me being so unlike herself" (Roberts 173). Unless mended, the antagonistic relationship between mother and daughter will continuously leave a mark on their lives. This exploration of the rift in the relationship between mother and daughter can easily be linked to Irigaray's concept of matricide as the foundation of both society and culture.

The story of mother and daughter seems to be the most primal of all stories. The universality of the concept of mother-daughter separation is enforced by the fact that the narratives take the reader through different epochs, places, spaces and genres, with the key component remaining invariable. In the opening chapter, the reader is introduced to a character who has just confessed to having murdered her mother. Thus, the reader's initial assumption might be that the novel is a contemporary detective story. Only after gaining the complete picture of the narrative, that is to say, after combining all the pieces and filling in the ruptures, it becomes apparent that the murder was of a symbolic kind, or, as Sarah Falcus puts it, "a literal interpretation of the psychoanalytic paradigm of separation" (130).

Each of the multiple narratives in *Flesh and Blood* consists of two chapters, and only after becoming familiar with both of them, the reader gains the whole perspective, as the pairs of chapters usually provide the reader with complementary insights. For example, in Chapter Three, the reader meets George Mannot, an English painter who, in a later chapter that returns to this particular

³ For an insightful reading of *The Book of Mrs Noah*, see Falcus 73–87.

narrative, turns out to be a woman who, on failing to create a satisfying bond with her mother, develops an alternate personality and becomes split into George/Georgina. Thus, in order to make sense of the story, the reader needs to put its two pieces together.

With each chapter, the reader is taken on a journey through different times and spaces, and the further we go, the more fragmented the stories become. The narratives are set in contemporary England, a French province of the nineteenth century, Italy of the Inquisition, as well as in fictional and mythical places, such as Paradise. As the story progresses, it becomes more obscure and less integrated until it reaches its climax, which is the chapter titled “Anon.” From this point forward, the novel becomes more optimistic and its meaning becomes clearer. As time and space change, so do the characters and the narrative perspective. From adults to children, from the bourgeoisie to peasants, from mothers to daughters, the perspectives switch, providing the reader with more insight into the characters’ thoughts and feelings.

In her writing, Roberts frequently focuses on female characters. In *Flesh and Blood*, the reader meets sibyls, mother goddesses, abbesses, nuns, priestesses, housewives, mothers, daughters and midwives. This selection of characters enables the author to present a variety of female perspectives and portray different aspects of femininity. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous makes a statement that female experience has yet to be thoroughly depicted in literature. In fact, she claims that “with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity” (878).⁴ The question remains, however, how to do it properly. Cixous does not provide a straightforward answer to this question, as she believes women’s imagination to be inexhaustible. *Flesh and Blood* explores various dimensions of femininity, often within one character. When the reader is first introduced to the character of Fred, her gender is not explicit. The reader is deliberately misled and caught in the trap of stereotypical thinking imposed by societal norms and expectations. In fact, cultural preconceptions might lead to the conclusion that Fred is a man: the reader learns her name on the opening page, but the name is usually given to men, and there are no signals which could make the reader think otherwise. In fact, as Falcus points out, the text itself seems to encourage such an assumption, presenting Fred as masculine and out of place in a typically feminine space, a clothes shop, which resembles her mother’s wardrobe (153). According to Falcus, the symbolic matricide, which is referred to at the very beginning of the narrative, is an inevitable course of events, since murdering the mother is necessary to assert the daughter’s development (153). While in the shop, Fred changes her men’s clothes, which she had worn to escape from her parents’ house, and puts on a feminine dress. This marks her transformation from the state of denial into acceptance of the feminine. As Falcus puts it, “[l]eaving behind (murdering) the mother allows Fred to take on a new identity, as in the psychoanalytic model where the movement to symbolic identity is predicated on the loss of the maternal body” (153).

In the next chapter, titled “Freddy,” the reader gains a fuller picture of the character, as they follow young Freddy on her way to puberty. Her identity is not yet fully established, and she struggles to come to terms with her femininity. This is particularly emphasised when she starts menstruating:

When I took off my wet things I found there was blood coming from between my legs ... Some girls called it a curse. It would have to be kept a secret from my sensitive and fastidious father. I knew all about it from the magazines and from the dour hints my mother had let drop. But I’d assumed it couldn’t possibly happen to me. (15)

⁴ As one of the exceptions, Cixous mentions Colette, who has been a major source of inspiration for Michèle Roberts, as the author herself admits in an interview with Linda Richards (“January Talks”).

This fragment indicates that in spite of her knowledge of female anatomy, Freddy finds it impossible that her own body should ever menstruate. It might suggest that the character is in denial of her own femininity. Moreover, the passage shows the adults' attitudes towards the physical changes of a female body. The father unequivocally separates himself from any engagement in the matter, whereas the mother depicts the menstrual cycle as something ominous and unwelcome: "I do call that a bad sign, I didn't start till I was much older" (15). Thus, the only source of information Freddy can refer to are women's magazines, which offer an unrealistic image of womanhood. Apart from this, her environment presents few depictions of women which could have a positive influence on a young girl who is still struggling to define herself. Apart from the magazines, Freddy only has access to Old Masters' female nudes and pornography. In fact, the only genuine image of a woman, which is the image of her own mother, is out of reach. As Falcus remarks, Freddy's mother literally denies her daughter access to the maternal body, when she closes the bathroom door behind her (157). Deprived of access to the maternal body, Freddy turns to religion in her search of an ideal woman. Copying her mother's behaviour, she builds up a shrine for the Virgin Mary, using her mother's everyday objects as relics. According to Falcus, this is Freddy's attempt to relate to the denied maternal body. Moreover, as the critic goes on to argue, the girl confuses her own mother with the mother of God, and turns her "into an ideal object" (158). Nevertheless, this highlights the failure of communication between the mother and daughter. This inability to communicate resonates with Irigaray's claim that women need to invent a language that expresses the archaic relationship with the maternal body.

Due to the cyclical structure of the novel, the reader revisits Freddy's narrative in sections devoted to her as "Frederica." In her final story, which also serves as the closing chapter, the character eventually reconciles with her mother, as she is expecting a daughter of her own. The reconciliation is symbolic and yet it liberates Frederica and allows her to finally accept herself as a woman. The process of developing the character's identity is also reflected in the names. When she strives to hide her identity as a woman, she uses a man's name, Fred. The second name she is known under, Freddy, indicates immaturity and indeterminacy, as it is a diminutive that can be used by both men and women (even though, given the previous chapter, the reader is most likely to assume it to be a diminutive of Fred). Finally, in the last chapter, she is presented as Frederica, and the use of her full, unequivocally female name indicates her emotional maturity and acceptance of her self.

The novel offers a whole spectrum of distinctive female characters who represent different aspects of femininity. There are, for instance, Eugénie and Rosa, girls who stand for yet indeterminate gender identity. Deprived of a relationship with her mother, Eugénie is schooled in a convent, which leaves her with a heavily distorted one-dimensional image of womanhood. She is then forced to be married to a substantially older and violent man whose dominant position will suppress any development of her own identity. Rosa, on the other hand, feels compelled to assume the maternal role after her mother's disappearance. She takes care of her young siblings, dresses in her mother's clothes, and even develops a fear of becoming her father's sex object. She loses her own identity and regains it only after her mother's miraculous return. The mothers also seem conflicted in performing their maternal function. Freddy's mother, Louise, is torn between blaming herself and blaming her daughter for their inability to communicate. However, perhaps the most intriguing exploration of female identity is presented in the continuation of Eugénie's narrative, titled "Marie-Jeanne." As a result of her enforced separation from her daughter, Marie-Jeanne's identity splits: "We found we were two in that small room in the nuns' jail, just as the child got born. We tore in two" (149). Being unable to reconcile with the loss, Marie-Jeanne falls into madness. Even after she finds Eugénie and assumes the role of her mother, the psychological damage remains irreversible.

In her writing, Roberts often presents characters who have been deprived of their own voice, as it has been considered irrelevant. This idea of not acknowledging someone's voice is not a novelty for women's writers and women in general, as it can easily echo the cultural muting of women in patriarchal societies. As Cixous puts it, "[m]uffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts" (886). Roberts gives voice to the unvoiced, thus offering them an opportunity to tell their stories. She acknowledges to be "interested in trying to find and invent voices and stories of people who haven't been seen as important" ("Michèle Roberts"). From the standpoint of feminist criticism, the author makes room for female voices by giving them a chance to express themselves and make an appearance in both history and literature.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous rejects the concept of a universal woman, claiming that no two women are identical, as they all experience the world in their own way (876). This may suggest she opposes Showalter, who emphasises the importance of collective experience which women writers share (197). Nevertheless, the ideas of the two critics are not mutually exclusive. When Showalter acknowledges common experiences which bind women together, she does not refute the fact that these experiences may be expressed differently. Thus, the number of stories women can produce is infinite. Femininity is impossible to categorise, and so is the feminine practise of writing. According to Cixous, "this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" (883). Cixous compares the practice to "a flow," "an outburst" and "a stream" (876), and shows it as lacking any restrictions or limitations. She characterises it as fluid and limitless, in opposition to the rigid frames and strict rules favoured by the Western canon, claiming that women "burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames" (876).

Interestingly, Roberts makes use of analogous metaphors in exploring women's experiences. In the narrative about Félicité, this is how the author describes a sexual encounter: "She lost consciousness of everything but George's hand and eyes, she surged forward in a great flow, the heat and sweetness tunnelled through her, she was the beach, she was the underground river, she was La Fontaine erupting with a loud cry then thrown back on the pebbles" (53). The female orgasm is compared to a "flow," an "underground river," and "La Fontaine erupting," foregrounding the fluidity and ineffability of the female experience. The limitlessness and impalpability of women's writing resonates in this passage, emphasising the indeterminacy of female sexuality and, consequently, femininity itself. Significantly, it is a lesbian encounter, since, as the reader later discovers, George Mannot is actually a woman. As such, it can be linked to Irigaray's view that women are indissolubly connected with homosexuality, inasmuch as their initial bodily encounter is that with the maternal body, whereas their first love is the love of the mother (39). Irigaray believes that love between women is necessary for their liberation from the phallus, encouraging women to discover their sexual identity. To achieve this, she argues, women need to become aware of a model of pleasure that is both different from the one offered by the phallic order and more compatible with their bodies and gender. This idea resonates in the passage quoted above, since, although she is not aware of her lover's true identity, Félicité does notice that this experience is different from what she is used to in sexual encounters: "It didn't hurt, which surprised her, it didn't hurt at all. The ache she had felt earlier was now being taken care of" (52). This scene is later juxtaposed with a violent act of rape which is inflicted on Félicité by her fiancé. The juxtaposition of these two encounters seems to support Irigaray's claim that the phallic model of pleasure has been imposed on women, distorting their sexual identity.

The elusiveness of women's writing is reflected not only in the novel's language but also in its structure. The author herself refers to *Flesh and Blood* as her "most experimental" and "most original novel" ("Michèle Roberts"), drawing attention to its unique structure. The novel consists of fifteen chapters, each of which is named after the protagonist of a particular story. Each chapter ends in a manner suggesting a continuation of the narrative, which, however, is not picked up until the second half of the book. Thus, at the start of each new chapter, the reader's assumptions are proven wrong and their expectations are not met, as they find themselves in an apparently different narrative. Because of the sudden ruptures of the narrative, the plot is distorted and non-linear. Falcus reads the novel's nonlinear composition in the light of Kristeva's belief, expressed in "Women's Time," that cyclical and monumental temporalities relate to female subjectivity (16–17). As a result, the critic suggests a link between the novel's "cyclical and dual structure that avoids narrative closure," its concern with the maternal, and Kristeva's conviction that "women are connected to cyclical time by virtue of their reproductive capacities" (152). As Falcus argues, Kristeva's monumental time is reflected in the characters' experiences, as they are "connected across temporal and spatial boundaries in a way that suggests an eternal timescale or space" (152). The rejection of linearity seems compliant with the theory of *écriture féminine*, which discards strict rules, categories, and all the cohesive narrative techniques favoured by realist writers, embracing a freer, more unrestricted and fragmented style of writing. Each chapter of the novel offers the reader glimpses of a particular character's experiences, providing them with temporary access to their inner thoughts and feelings. However, the fragments are not randomly scattered pieces of narratives; on the contrary, they conform to a particular pattern. As a result, Falcus sees the novel as "an exploration of the imagination and the unconscious of Freddy" (129). Although such an interpretation seems plausible, I would rather read it as a tale of collective female experiences inscribed into stories of women coming from different times and spaces. This would support the argument I have made earlier that, although there is no such thing as a universal woman, all women share common experiences.

The novel's structure requires participation on the part of the reader, since it is the reader's task to recognise and follow the pattern that the narrative adheres to in order to make sense of it. Therefore, it is an active and self-conscious reader who constitutes the crucial component for the novel's existence. Michèle Roberts invites the reader to participate in a sort of a game of her own invention. The reader is presented with fragments of narratives which need to be put back together like a jigsaw puzzle. The structure of the novel is a metaphor, the meaning of which seems compliant with the meaning that is reflected in the plot, which revolves around the theme of separation from the mother: the rupture and the subsequent reconciliation. Mother and daughter become torn apart, and so does the novel. Roberts described this correspondence in the following words: "Something was broken between you, so the novel's broken" ("Michèle Roberts"). Once the reader gets through the first half of the book, they begin a journey back, going through chapters that complete previously abandoned stories in reverse order. In an interview, Roberts compares the novel's composition to a zip: "you're zipping it up as you go" ("Michèle Roberts").

Michèle Roberts's language is perhaps the most elusive and yet distinctive element of her writing: it is both lyrical and sensuous, allowing the reader to experience the narrative on an emotional level. This enables the author to render experiences seemingly impossible to express with words. Literary critics frequently refer to her language as "sensuous" and "voluptuous" (*January Talks*). According to Roberts, such language can capture human emotions and experiences, thus making the text more real to the reader. It is the kind of language which, to quote Cixous again, "does not contain" (889). Instead, "it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible" (889).

Moreover, Roberts rejects the tradition of writing that appeals solely to the mind and creates language that speaks the body. Her narratives frequently revolve around bodily pleasures and yearnings, especially sex and food, as indispensable elements of human existence. To render how some people experience the world, she uses descriptions that appeal to different senses and creates a synaesthetic effect. In *Flesh and Blood*, for instance, a description of a dress becomes a feast for the sense of touch: “Whispery touch of chiffon and gauze, of silk lining, crackle of tough buckram. It slithered over me coolly” (5). Elsewhere in the novel, to bring the idea of Paradise closer to the reader, the author appeals to their sense of smell: “Sweat sluices you as you walk. You smell the peppery scent of freshly cut grass, the spicy clove perfume of the carnations, the green breath of the pines, the aniseed tang of wild fennel, the aromatic exhalations of rosemary and thyme” (106). Through these highly poetic passages, Roberts creates evocative and yet elusive imagery of space. Using a combination of familiar scents and sounds, she captures the impenetrable space of Paradise, enabling the reader to envisage the scene and fully experience her writing.

Paradise constitutes a particularly interesting space in *Flesh and Blood*, both linguistically and spatially. First of all, in this section of the text, there is another shift of perspective, but this time the narrative is delivered by Cherubina, an angel and a homodiegetic narrator who, at the same time, seems to be omniscient about her world as she is a native of Paradise. The place is portrayed as lost, yet sought after by certain people and “it might be traced in the secret language women use for talking to each other when they think no one in authority is listening” (104). Hence, Paradise may be read as a female sphere, Cixous’s Dark Continent, where “groups of women sit under the trees” (106). In fact, it is a passageway to experiencing the Irigarayan bodily encounter with the mother. Within Paradise there is a massage room where a maternal masseuse figure (with “silvery stretch-marks on her stomach”) awaits you and “slaps you, like wet clay, into shape” (108). This maternal figure interweaves the linguistic with the corporeal to tell, in a chapter entitled “Anon,” the most archaic story. With this narrative, *Flesh and Blood* reaches its peak, both in terms of plot and structure. “Anon” is the central chapter in the novel and the only one that does not have its counterpart and continuation. It is constructed from mere fragments of sentences and words, which is not to say that it is deprived of meaning. Falcus describes it as a narrative poem which rejects writing conventions and rules of grammar (162). What the section attempts to do is to illustrate the literal reunion of mother and daughter as they become one again: they become “mamabébé” (Roberts 109–110). The narrative can be said to originate from what Irigaray describes as “a primal womb . . . where the child was whole, the mother whole” (38). Paradise is the only space in the novel where mother and daughter seem to speak the same language, namely the “secret language of mamabébé” (Roberts 173). It is a language that expresses their unity and asserts communication between them. The name of the chapter also carries an important meaning. Anon, an abbreviation for “anonymous,” implies the universality of the story it conveys. Unlike other narratives in the novel, which are presented from the characters’ perspective, the final narrative is not attributed to any specific character narrator, as it constitutes the most primal, the most universal, of all narratives. It might be experienced by the reader on different levels of response, as it stimulates the sense of touch. It is a narrative written by tracing one’s finger on the body. I would risk the statement that the narrative is a visual experience as well as a bodily one: “On your blissful skin the hands of the masseuse play a writing game. They spell out, in fingertalk, words and phrases, they trace love messages for your shut eyes to read” (108). The language that Roberts creates in her narrative incorporates all the elements Irigaray refers to in “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother”: it speaks about the most archaic relationship with the maternal body;

it explains the bond between mother and daughter; and, finally, it does not reject the corporeal but speaks through it. In this regard, Roberts discovers the language of women.

Reading Michèle Roberts alongside French feminist criticism (especially that of *écriture féminine* and Irigarayan psychoanalysis) offers an interesting insight into her writing. It is particularly compelling in the case of *Flesh and Blood*, which may be analysed on three different levels, that is the semantic, the linguistic and the structural. The semantic level encompasses various motifs which are significant from the vantage point of French feminist criticism, the exploration of the maternal being perhaps the most prevalent. Theoretical concepts developed by Irigaray and Kristeva provide useful analytical tools, which may help the reader to understand the characters' motivations and the plot development. The novel is also concerned with female spaces, female bonding, sexual identity and femininity. Despite Cixous's belief that most literature has failed to inscribe femininity successfully, it can be argued that Roberts's writing offers one of the "few rare exceptions" (878). As for the language, Roberts introduces women characters and enables them to regain their voices. Her novel constitutes a platform for women storytellers where they can speak without any restraint. She grants them a space where they can communicate freely in a language of their own and where their voices will be heard. The language she employs is not the language of foregrounding reason—as it has been claimed by men writers—but the language of the body. It renders the body and all its experiences into the text, making it more real than any realist writing. It appeals to the sensual sphere, allowing the reader to experience the text through the senses, rather than through the intellect. Roberts says she wants to "put the body always into language" ("*January Talks*") and she succeeds. Looking at the structural solutions used in Roberts's writing, we can also see that she rejects rigid frames and categories. Instead, she creates her own original forms, which, as in the case of *Flesh and Blood*, require the reader to take an active part in the production of meaning. The innovative and unique structures escape categorising, hence vindicating Cixous's claim that women's writing is impossible to put up in frames. By creating new forms and introducing the language of the corporeal, Roberts offers her audience fresh perspectives on reading and experiencing literature. Her readers are asked to employ intuitive forms of interpretation rather than following a strict set of rules. Such an approach may result in adapting a new approach to literature of both women and men.

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