

(Post)Feminism, Transnationalism, the Maternal Body, and Michèle Roberts

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Ayako Mizuo,
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Abstract: In her paper "(Post)Feminism, Transnationalism, the Maternal Body, and Michèle Roberts," Ayako Mizuo argues that the question and problematics of feminism have diversified over the last few decades. Diverse and competing voices have been, nonetheless, incorporated into the paradigm of an equality and difference sexual dichotomy. Further, recent discussions about feminism suggest the problematization of gender differences. Consequently, exponents of postfeminism are compelled to ask what comes next? Mizuo urges that the issue of the tangibility of the body acquires a particular relevance within this context and that thus the ultimate question is how the site of the maternal body may be negotiated. Michèle Roberts is identified as one of the key British women authors writing (on) the body. Roberts's novel *Fair Exchange* is said to illustrate the problem of the future of feminism by tracing its historical origins and prospects. In focusing on the question of representations of the maternal body through maternal metaphors, Mizuo discusses the ways in which Roberts negotiates the site of the maternal body beyond the boundaries of time and nation and towards the global and transnational.

Ayako MIZUO

(Post)Feminism, Transnationalism, the Maternal Body, and Michèle Roberts

Discussions on feminism and the subsequent and counter-term postfeminism have diversified over the last few decades. Early feminism demanded equality between the sexes which, inevitably, resulted in the emphasis of gender dichotomy: male superiority versus female inferiority. Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the founders of modern feminism, argued for the subversion of this patriarchal hierarchy in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman in the time of Enlightenment* (1792). In the Dedication of her book, Wollstonecraft writes, "Consider -- I address you as a legislator -- whether, when men contend for their freedom, and to be allowed to judge for themselves respecting their own happiness, it be not inconsistent and unjust to subjugate women, even though you firmly believe that you are acting in the manner best calculated to promote their happiness?" (87). In contrast to this demand for equality, proponents of (post)feminism argue for the need to recognize sexual difference. Luce Irigaray argues in *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference* (1993) that sexualization may be the key to solving women's repressed position under patriarchy, thus in fact denouncing the de-sexualized approach to gender issues. Irigaray suggests that "equality between men and women cannot be achieved without a theory of gender as sexed and a rewriting of the rights and obligations of each sex, qua different, in social rights and obligations" (13). Emphasizing the irreducibility of the feminine, Irigaray attempts to establish the feminine not in relation to man but in relation to woman herself.

Both feminist and postfeminist discussions have been established under the paradigm of the dichotomy of sexual equality and difference; however, recent feminist discussion has inevitably been entrapped into the discussion of "difference." It is argued that the perspectives of the location of feminine space vary and that the semiotic places of the feminine (Kristeva) ultimately result in inarticulation when in opposition to the symbolic, patriarchal space. Contrary to this, Irigaray's concept of sexual difference places the feminine within the symbolic. At this turning point between one century and the next, the question which recent postfeminism puts is, "What comes next?" In other words, what lies outside the paradigm of equality/difference? There seems no possibility of moving forward since the feminist and postfeminist discussions have already accounted for both of these determinants. Responding to the question, Susan Stanford Friedman proposes the idea of flexible identity by using geographical metaphors. In *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (1998), Friedman asks, "What is beyond gender?" Friedman's argument embarks on this question by "negotiat(ing) beyond the conventional boundaries" (4). Friedman defines the space of 'beyond' as "not ... insist(ing) that categories like gender and difference should be abandoned but rather ... suggest(ing) that they need to be supplemented" (10). Instead of taking an exclusive way, that is, taking either a view of equality or of difference, Friedman argues that we need to take all possibilities into account. In this sense, "negotiation" is the key word through which Friedman seeks to break out from the stagnant situation of contemporary feminist discussion. As a result of the situation of negotiation, Friedman argues that her discussion entails, unavoidably, disorientation, contradiction, and friction. She emphasizes that a new direction of feminism lies in "an embrace of contradiction, dislocation, and change" (4) and pursues the location of feminism through transnational and transhistorical views. She writes that "feminism needs to be understood in a global context, both historicized and geopoliticized to take into account its different formations and their interrelationships everywhere" (5). Friedman, in fact, defamiliarizes the paradigmatic dichotomy in which the discussion of difference has become fixed and her geographical metaphors are associated with flexible but nonetheless tangible identities. While seeing gender as one of the axes of identity formation, Friedman does not argue for the representation of the body; however, with the issue of the tangibility of the body in mind, Friedman posits the question as to how the site of the maternal body is negotiated. Importantly, with the approach of the global context and interdisciplinarity implicit in the approach, Friedman's notions are parallel to several basic notions found in the discipline of comparative literature and comparative cultural studies as exemplified in work published in the present journal, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*).

Michèle Roberts is one of the key British women writers who are writing "on the body" in that her writing is always connected with the maternal body and she recognizes that fiction is more often than not linked with an autobiographical dimension. In *Food, Sex, & God: On Inspiration and Writing* (1998), she proposes that autobiography is not only recording the facts but also discovering what one has been lost in the unconscious through the use of artistic imagination. Thus, in Roberts's notion of artistic imagination writing is associated with one's identity as a woman and in that, especially, maternal loss. Roberts writes, "I was surprised by how everything I wrote went back to maternal loss, maternal absence, and now dares to re-image maternal presence, fullness" (21). As such, Roberts's artistic imagination is always placed in a sexualized context. For Roberts, language is the representation of what is absent in the subconscious -- "a kind of birth into absence" (20) in her words -- and this absence is something maternal including the context of the sexual and the gendered. Fictional writing for Roberts is, therefore, the physical act of filling in the absence to inscribe the recovery of the maternal body. She writes, "Writing feels like pulling something out of my insides; I've made it inside, now must draw it out, put it out" (200). By being associated with the image of a mother delivering a baby, Roberts's writing practice is a physical representation of a return to maternal origin or the recovery of the maternal body. The notion of maternal loss is associated with bodilessness. However, it is through her language with the recognition of maternal loss that results in physicality. Reflected by her transnational and hybrid background -- half-French and half-British -- Roberts and her writing are examples of and represent the question of boundaries. Going back to the origin of feminism in the time of Enlightenment, Roberts's novel *Fair Exchange* illustrates what Friedman theorizes as the transnational and transhistorical context for the future of feminism. The story is about two women at the turning point between the eighteenth and nineteenth century -- the English woman Jemima Boote, who is thought to be modeled on Mary Wollstonecraft, and the French woman Annette, who is thought to be modeled on William Wordsworth's lover Annette Vallon. Roberts writes in the "Author's Note" that this novel was inspired by Wordsworth's love affair with Annette at the beginning of the French Revolution, and the story seems to be parallel to the biographical facts of Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft. In other words, the novel seems to be a fictional form of two historical romances: an English poet William Saygood and Annette, and Jemima and an American Paul Gilbert. Yet, there are two major qualities that distinguish Roberts's creation of the characters from those biographical facts. The first is how the story is narrated. The story is narrated as a deathbed confession of Louise, a French peasant who has been a servant of Annette's family. The other point is that Roberts makes the crucial connection between these two literary figures through the literal exchange of Jemima's and Annette's babies. Roberts presents this connection as a sensational disclosure. Thus, it can be argued that through these two qualities Roberts inscribes the recovery of the maternal body, her writerly philosophy.

In what follows, by focusing on Jemima's and Annette's representations of the maternal body through maternal metaphors in *Fair Exchange*, I explore the ways in which Roberts negotiates the site of the maternal body beyond the boundaries of time and nation. In her novel, Roberts challenges how the site of the maternal body as tangible is textually negotiated. The title indicates the literal exchanges of the characters -- Jemima and Paul, with whom she has a daughter, and Annette and William, the father of her daughter. An "exchange" also suggests the patriarchal perspective of women simply as the commodity. By associating the title with the early feminist notion of the feminine, Roberts asks: can "fair exchange" be possible? *Fair Exchange* also questions the readers' views. The title might convince the reader that Roberts reinforces the readers' view of early feminism: the view that the early feminist argument for sexual equality is away from the body. However, I would argue that, by deliberately using such a controversial word, namely "exchange" for the title, Roberts destabilizes the readers' view of the material effects of early feminism. Further, Roberts dramatizes the anxiety about the maternal body through the contrast between Jemima and Annette. Jemima appears to embody the corporeality of early feminism by taking part in the movement towards sexual equality. Although she is ready to represent the body, this body is not necessarily female. Jemima's pursuit for sexual equality shapes her view of the maternal body as trouble. When William tells Jemima that "the French place a high value on moth-

erhood. They understand the contribution women make, never fear" (48), Jemima responds, "I didn't mean only as mothers. I meant as citizens" (49). Jemima deliberately avoids the term "mother" and uses the gender-free term "citizens." In Jemima's view, the decision not to marry frees women from any social restrictions. When Annette talks to Jemima about the possibility of her getting married to Paul, Jemima says to Annette, "I don't think I want to get married. Ours is a free union, based on love" (111). Even after giving birth to Maria, Jemima is determined not to depend on Paul and to keep her feminist view of sexual equality. Roberts describes Jemima's way of life as a single mother, "If she could earn her own living, and be a nuisance to no one, she was content" (187). Annette, however, is uneasy about the female body. Having been educated in the convent -- "a kind of finishing school" (66) -- in Orléans, Annette reveals herself to be the patriarchal construction of femininity. Perceiving women's necessity of non-autonomy in speech, Annette disavows the female body under patriarchy in a different sense from Jemima. It is William who changes Annette's notion of the female body: Annette realizes that women have been silenced by society and that "women were bodies without speech" (71). William makes her recognize that the female body is not stabilized by a patriarchal society. Roberts describes Annette's thoughts, "From being simple, well-formed flesh, that she had both to hide and to display for the sake of others, it now glowed and shone, with a light that had come on from inside" (71). Patriarchy only allows Annette to "hide" the body by silencing women, but she now notices that she can "display" the body by articulation. However, Annette's recognition cannot entirely destabilize the patriarchal perception of the feminine. Her pregnant body without marriage is unacceptable under patriarchy. Thus, Annette has to lie about the details of her pregnancy to her father (76) and to literally conceal her maternal body in society. Roberts writes, Annette "wrapped herself in a light shawl, though it was so hot, to conceal her thickened shape" (68).

Jemima and Annette represent two stereotyped women in the time of early feminism: Jemima giving up the female body and Annette deprived of the female body. It is Jemima's and Annette's bodies through which Roberts negotiates the site of the maternal body. Jemima is not an exact copy of Mary Wollstonecraft, since Roberts creates the character of Miss Wollstonecraft as Jemima's teacher. Jemima finds that she is not among "those frightening unfeminine viragos" (49) as William labels Miss Wollstonecraft. It could be said that Roberts negotiates the maternal body by testing Jemima's maternal self under the patriarchal perception of exchange. Through William's confession, the reader learns that Paul swaps Jemima's baby, Maria, with Annette's baby, Caroline, to test "the perfectibility of man, how much a revolution could change human beings, whether human nature could actually be reformed by politics? (230). William says that Paul had said, "Fair exchange was no robbery" (230). The reader can easily perceive that Paul's experiment cannot be applied to human beings and thus it is not the babies whom Roberts tests in the novel but the mothers of these babies. By the literal exchange of the babies, Roberts questions whether the site of the maternal body is negotiable. Roberts's response to this question is positive and she illustrates the transnational and transhistorical negotiability of the maternal body through language of both articulation and inarticulation (maternal metaphors). In the novel, this exchange ends up with the death of Annette, one of the mothers, and of Maria, the baby whom Jemima was raising. Thus, Caroline, the other baby whom Annette was raising, is left with her biological mother Jemima. In such a circumstance, Roberts demonstrates that the maternal body which Annette represents can be negotiated in the sense that Friedman uses the term. Roberts refuses the privileging of either equality/difference or essentialist/constructionist perspectives. She presents in the text the idea that both perspectives are possible. By giving all possibilities equal weight, Roberts attempts to find the space beyond. After Annette's death caused by childbirth, Caroline keeps Annette alive in her mind. It is Annette's maternal presence which transforms Jemima's maternal self. The exchange trick, which Paul has carried out, brings emotional influences to both Jemima and Caroline: "both of them bewildered and hurt, both full of questions and both angry" (237). Roberts writes, Caroline has "discovered that Annette was not completely lost to her. She was there, intact and undamaged, in her memory, even as she was etched there by lines of absence" (237). Caroline recognizes that she has two mothers, Annette and Jemima, one having raised her and the other a biological mother. Through this situation, Roberts corroborates her perception of both of the possi-

bilities. As a biological mother, Jemima's maternal relationship with Caroline represents the essentialist while Annette's represents the constructionist. Also, Roberts uses the metaphor of childbirth to convey the physicality of the maternal body in the novel. During pregnancy, Annette asks Amalie, the mother of the maid Louise, "Does having a baby hurt very much? I'm frightened I won't be able to stand the pain" (91). Amalie tells Annette, "You stand it because you have to ... and because you know there's an end to it. You get the baby in the end. You go through it with the baby, for the baby, it's like a tunnel, and then you come out of the other end, into the sun-light, with the baby, and you forget about the pain" (91). "A tunnel" represents the strong physical link between a mother and a baby. As described through Amalie's experience, this description of childbirth is physical, entailing the sense of physical pain. The childbirth is the very representation of maternal strength. Louise helps Annette's and Jemima's deliveries. By describing Louise washing in the river, Roberts suggests the physicality of childbirth. Roberts begins the chapter by writing, "The small girl made her way down to the bank of the river, where the *lavoir* was" (116). "The small girl" could be identified with a newborn baby. The girl's making her way to the bank echoes the baby's coming out of the mother's womb. By the "heavily bloodstained" (116) sheets which Louise is washing, the reader learns that Annette and Jemima have just given birth. Roberts describes how Louise "pushed the sheets with her strong arms repeatedly into the river water, lifted them, flattened them down again, forcing the water through the cloth, over and over, to soak and rinse away the blood" (116). The description of the movement of Louise's arms is associated with a baby's movement of pushing herself out of the maternal body.

Significantly, language also works to convey the physicality of the maternal body. As Roberts emphasizes in her essay *Food, Sex & God*, language is always connected with materiality in her fictional writing practice. In *Fair Exchange*, Roberts materializes the maternal body through French and English, languages which in her context are beyond geographical boundaries. For Jemima, French is the foreign language which retrieves her past. Jemima talks with Caroline in French, "feeling reconnected through speech to so many of the important events of her past, to a place where she had suffered and yet also been so happy" (237). Besides, for Jemima, French is the language which constructs Jemima's maternal self since it is Annette's native language: "Speaking French did more than keep the past alive. It brought it vividly into the present, so that at one and the same time Jemima was the woman of forty with grey threads in her hair and the hopeful girl plunged into the thick of the beginning of the Revolution and trying to make sense of it all" (237). Thus, French entails materiality for Jemima, especially of the maternal body, by being connected with Annette. Likewise, for Caroline, French is also the language which retrieves Annette and textualizes the physicality of the maternal body in addition to the fact that French is Caroline's native language. Caroline talks of her emotional pain in English because "expressing herself in a foreign language was so difficult that less emotion spilled through" (238). As such, Roberts uses language, which has been an embodiment of patriarchy, to dramatize the physicality of the maternal body in such a historic context of patriarchy. By dramatizing the physicality of the maternal body which Annette embodies through maternal metaphors and the language, Roberts undermines the incorporeal image of the feminine in the time of Enlightenment. In addition to the transhistorical aspect, Roberts shows the diversity of transnational aspects; that the discussion of race is not always appropriated in the dichotomous paradigm. In spite of her setting -- English and French -- in *Fair Exchange*, Roberts never suggests any hierarchical ranking between them. Despite the implication of the title *Fair Exchange*, Roberts overturns the reader's presumption of the notion of the feminine in the late-eighteenth century by inscribing the physicality of the maternal body. Instead of focusing on the "difference," Roberts's transnational and transhistorical representation of the maternal body in *Fair Exchange* opens up the question of the future of feminism which, as I have argued, Friedman theorizes in *Mappings*.

Thinking back over the history of women's writing practice, in the 1930s Virginia Woolf argued that women ought to unveil physicality against the incorporeal image of the feminine which patriarchy had constructed. In an essay "Professions for Women," based on her lecture to the National Society for Women's Service on 21 January 1931, Woolf discloses the difficulty of "telling the truth about my own experiences as a body" and continues by saying that "I doubt that any woman has

solved it yet" (105). I would argue that Roberts has achieved this in *Fair Exchange* not only through Annette's and Jemima's representations of the maternal body but also through the narrative of this novel. The novel opens with Louise wishing to confess the "wicked and unusual crime" (3) which she committed eighteen years previously. The crime is to have helped Paul swap the babies as William says later, Paul "got the servant girl, what was her name, Louise, to swap them in their cradles, on the day he arrived, in the evening of the day they were born" (230). This incident, as I have argued, causes the disclosure of the defamiliarization of the site of the maternal body. At the end of the novel, Louise recovers from illness because "telling the story had calmed her down" (245). Roberts concludes, "Telling the story was as important as what was in it. [Louise] needed an audience" (246). In a sense, Louise expresses the truth about the maternal body. In discussing Roberts's politics, Clare Hanson writes that "one of the most important things which Roberts's fiction does is to move out from the subjective preoccupation with the mother which marks the work of many earlier twentieth-century writers, most notably Virginia Woolf" (231). The similarity between the setting of this novel and Roberts's biological background might give the reader the impression that her fiction is personal and autobiographical. However, by revisiting the origin of feminism through transnational and transhistorical views in *Fair Exchange*, Roberts has come to terms with the question of "negotiating" the site of the maternal body in fiction. In *Fair Exchange*, Roberts moves into the new space of thinking beyond dichotomies and this is a remarkable start to move feminism to the global and transnational.

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