FEMINIST LENS OF SOME BRITISH CONTEMPORARY WOMEN WRITERS

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Rezumat

Aşa cum arată şi titlul, *Feminist Lens Of Some British Contemporary Women Writers* (*Perspective feministe ale unor scriitoare contemporane britanice*), eseul aduce în discuţie reprezentări ale Feminismului în literatura britanică contemporană aşa cum sunt tratate acestea în romane ca *Nopţi la circ* de Angela Carter, *Al cincelea copil* de Doris Lessing, *Drum strălucitor* şi *O curioziţate normală* de Margaret Drabble, *Academia de schije* şi *Viata si iubirile unei diavoliţe* de Fay Weldon şi Moon Tiger de Penelope Lively. Atât autoarele cât şi personajele lor feminine sunt caractere puternice care prin acţiunile lor "spun" ceva: că sunt femei şi sunt mândre de asta.

The period following the Second World War was characterised, among other important movements, by the controversial movement of feminism; it was interested in 'freeing' the woman from the rigid position society kept her tightly closed in. It was dealing with the emancipation of women in a society that viewed her only in strict roles: the wife, the housekeeper, the mother, the servant, and others as such. The feminist movement fought for the right to make woman's voice heard.

Just like any 'revolutionary' movement, the feminist movement felt like protesting against something or somewhat; interestingly enough, this led to the fact that, in the 70's feminism came to be perceived as simply anti-family, anti-marriage, anti-children, and perhaps even anti-religion, not to mention anti-men. Most early feminists, as especially detailed by Graglia, certainly regarded marriage and family as so burdensome as to approach slavery. Feminism presented the family as a kind of prison, with a working career on the outside as a kind of liberation. This did not take into account that for most people a family has always been the meaning of their life, the finding and creation of the closest relatives that a human being can have. Men did not go to work to enjoy the self-fulfilment of work. They went to work to support their families, often at jobs that they positively hated, or at least just tolerated for the sake of the income. Few men were so fortunate as to be doing something fulfilling or interesting that paid the bills at the same time. While feminists lamented that women often give up years, or all, of their careers in order to have children, even men with hopes of a fulfilling career traditionally have often had to give up those hopes if they suddenly were responsible for a family.

Feminist theory mostly still hates capitalism - 'patriarchy' is often simply equated with war, racism, and capitalism; feminism with pacifism, socialism, environmentalism, multiculturalism, and even vegetarianism - in short, any case that might be regarded as 'progressive' from a leftist point of view. Hence the ironic move of doctrinaire feminists dismissing with contempt Margaret Thatcher, one of the most successful, powerful, and historically important women, and the longest serving British Prime Minister, of the 20th century.

A fundamental move for early feminism was to distinguish between sex and gender, where sex, male or female, is about physical differences between the sexes, while gender, masculine or feminine, is about characteristics of behaviour, demeanour, or psychology which

feminism wished to claim are culturally constructed and conditioned and so ultimately arbitrary. Since the moral and political program of 'gender feminism' was essentially to abolish gender differences, so that men and women would end up living the same kinds of lives, doing the same kinds of things, and perhaps even looking pretty much the same in 'unisex' grooming and clothing, it was important to distinguish between the class of cultural and alterable items, matters of gender, and the class of physical and unalterable items, matters of physical sex differences.

The problem with the theory that personality and gender differences are entirely the result of environment, not heredity, is that it is indeed a prescription for just the kind of coercion and tyranny that most conspicuously tried to exploit its possibilities: if everything that we are is just socialisation, then the reasonable thing is to socialise us in the best way possible, and that would be through the agency of those who know best. The socialisation, in turn, would be a thorough indoctrination which, if done to adults, would have been called brain washing - but then the brain was supposed to have been blank in the first place.

Christina Hoff Sommers' *Who Stole Feminism?*, Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae* and Warren Farrel's *The Myth of Male Power* believe in a certain form of feminism, what Sommers has dubbed 'equity feminism,' which is just the principle that there must be legal and political equality for women. Warren Farrel was actually on the national governing board of the National Organization for Women until he became disillusioned and decided that NOW was not fighting for the proper goals. The fourth book is the powerful recent *Domestic Tranquility, A Brief Against Feminism* by F. Carolyn Graglia. Graglia explicitly opposes feminism as such, except perhaps the 'social feminism' of the 19th century, on the principle that identical laws for men and women, which were opposed by the 'social feminism,' are harmful to women who chose a traditional domestic occupation.

Taking into discussion the representation of Feminism in British contemporary literature, this essay will focus on Angela Carters' *Nights At The Circus*, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, Margaret Drabble's *Radiant Way* and *A Natural Curiosity*, Fay Weldon's *The Shrapnel Academy* and *The Life And Loves of a She Devil* and Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*.

Angela Olive Stalker Carter

'Where you begin is up to you. Where you end will be a new mourning.' - John Clute on Angela Carter.

English short-story writer, novelist, journalist, dramatist and critic. Carter was a notable exponent of magic realism, who added into it Gothic themes, violence, and eroticism. Carter utilised throughout her career the language and characteristic motifs of the fantasy genre. 'A good writer can make you believe time stands still,' she once said. Her work represents a successful combination of postmodern literary theories and feminist politics. She wrote lush, dense prose in a variety of voices and is considered one of the major British writers of the last 20 years or so. Her work is imbued with a keen sense of the macabre and the wittily surreal and draws heavily on symbolism and themes derived from traditional fairy-tales and folk myths. Her novels developed further a characteristic neo-Gothic ambience, often underpinned by a strong, but never intrusive, feminist sensibility.

In 1970, having separated from her husband, Carter went to live in Japan for two years. During this period she working at many different jobs, among others as a bar hostess. The experience of a different culture had a strong influence on her work. In 1979 Carter published *The Sadetan Woman*, where she questioned culturally accepted views of sexuality, and sadistic and masochistic relations between men and women. Surprising some of her readers, Carter defended the Marquis de Sade's images of women. After the novel Carter's fiction was

described by some less enthusiastic critics as 'entertainment for boys and girls who like their De Sade mixed with Suchard chocolate.'

Her collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) is probably her most representative work: it is a collection of twisted, gothic, feminist fairy tales, redolent with adult themes, as only Carter would have told them. The early novels tend more to realism pushed to an edge, while the later novels are more fantastic and surreal. Her last novel is mostly burlesque realism. *Shadow Dance* is about a mad hedonist who has a severe negative effect on the lives of his friends and lovers, particularly when he becomes involved with a woman who may be even less sane than he is, and who he feels he must destroy. Somewhat dreary; startling ending. *Love* is about a cheerfully adulterous young teacher, his insane art-student teenage wife, and his equally insane brother as they try (and fail) to co-exist in a small flat in a British university town. *The Magic Toyshop* is about an upper-class teenage girl who feels obscurely responsible for her parents' untimely deaths; she and her siblings are forced to go live in poverty with their uncle, a sadistic and controlling toymaker who is obsessed with creating a life-sized puppet theater, his beautiful mute wife, and her two Irish brothers. More than most of her books, it's a coming-of-age tale. It is also one of my 3 favorites. *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* is about a scientist who creates an 'unreality atom' that causes the everyday occurrence of the extraordinary and surreal, and about the young man who becomes a national hero by defeating the Doctor. The fact that the young man is in love with the Doctor's daughter somewhat complicates matters. *Heroes and Villains* is about a young woman from an insular society of academics who is captured by the 'Barbarians' (outsiders) and forced to marry their leader, and how she comes to an uneasy peace with the situation. Because this book is borderline science fiction and has to do with social divisions in a post-apocalyptic future society, I find it hard to explain in a capsule review. If you're interested, look it up. *The Passion of New Eve* is purported to be the most rigidly 'feminist' of her novels. 'This story follows Evelyn, a young Englishman, along a journey through mythology and sexuality. It is a story of how he learns to be a woman, first in the brutal hands of Zero, the ragtime Nietzsche, then through the ancient Tristessa, the beautiful ghost of Hollywood past.' In the end, Eve, having transcended the various impersonations s/he has passed through metamorphosis, takes ship westward, en route maybe to Eden. In *Heroes and Villains* professors and scientist live in guarded cities. Outside live tribes of Barbarians. Marianne, escapes from the city to the wilds and is adopted by a Barbarian tribe. *Wise Children*, narrated by Dora Chance, an old dame, is marked by optimism and humor. It has more realism and humour, and is about twin music-hall stars who are the unacknowledged daughters of a famous Shakespearean's actor. There are also a number of short stories, most notably the *Bloody Chamber* stories, that are best purchased in a single volume: *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories*, published after Carter's 1992 death. Many of these are the fairy tale retellings and revisions for which Carter was noted; there are also some pleasant surprises (I like 'Reflections' and 'The Loves of Lady Purple', but the Victorian Slang pastiche is worth the price of the book itself).

She also edited a few anthologies: *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book* and its sequel, *Strange Things Sometimes Still Happen* (published posthumously and with a wonderful eulogy/obituary by Marina Warner as an introduction), which were collections of fairy tales and folklore in original to near-original form; and *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women*, stories about subversive and/or independent women, with some suprising choices - ghost stories, feminist stories, stories about female con artists and witchy maids. A posthumous anthology of Carter's nonfiction writings, *Shaking A Leg*, has also been published.

Angela Carter is generally seen to be (and has, indeed, designated herself) a *demythologiser*. 'I'm basically trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our

society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them', she tells Anna Katsavos in an interview. Demythologising of the structures of patriarchal society, of which literary structures are an important part, is achieved in her work mainly through self-conscious parody and inversion. A concern with this project serves as a backdrop to most critical discussions of *Nights at the Circus*. In the bibliography of Alison Easton's *Angela Carter*, criticism of Carter's *oeuvre* is systematised into different categories, which may also apply specifically to the work done on *Nights at the Circus*. Slightly revised, these headings may read: feminist strategies of (re)writing and reading, intertextualities, formal/generic questions, Freudian psychoanalysis, French feminisms, questions on deconstruction, postmodernism and post-structuralism, gender as performance, carnival, spectacle and power. At first glance this list hardly seems to indicate uniformity. However, at a closer reading of the critical work done on *Nights at the Circus*, one finds, as indicated above, that these categories are merely different starting points which interconnect at a basic level in being motivated by and geared towards a treatment of Carter's demythologising project. As part of the demythologising project, the metafictional aspect of Carter's novel is important on two levels. *Nights at the Circus* is on the one hand a fiction about cultural fictions which through a rewriting of other narratives, theoretical as well as non-theoretical ones, emphasises its own intertextuality. On the other hand, it is also a fiction about how fiction and reader interact, that is an allegory of reading. *Nights at the Circus* is in other words a fiction about fiction(ing) as well as a fiction about reading. Concern with sexual politics was central to Carter's burlesque-picaresque novel *Nights At The Circus*, (1984), which first begins in a gaslight-romance version of London, moves for a period to Siberia, and returns home. *Nights at the Circus* is about a female 'aerialiste' born with wings (or so she says) and the young reporter who finds her fascinating enough to follow across turn-of-the-century Europe. The imagery and situations are dazzling. *Nights at the Circus* about a female Victorian circus performer called Fevvers who can fly, confirmed her as a gifted literary fabulist, while her ability to evoke and adapt the darker resonances of traditional forms of fantasy was brilliantly deployed in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), which contains one of her best-known re-workings of traditional material, *The Company of Wolves'*(based on the story of Little Red Riding Hood), filmed in 1984. Fevvers may symbolise the New Woman, but she is also a real woman of the time. Fevvers is out to earn a living. Everything she say s in that direction is undercut by her mother, but the stuff that she says in the beginning about being hatched from an egg, that's what she says. We are talking about fiction here, therefore, it may be true or not. That's just what she says, a story that's being constructed. That's just the story of her life. Part of the point of the novel is that you are kept uncertain. The reader is more or less kept uncertain until quite a long way through. When she is talking about being a new woman and having invented herself, her foster mother keeps on saying it's not going to be as simple as that. Also, they have quite a long conversation about this when they are walking through the tundra.

One of the original ideas behind the creation of that character was a piece of writing by Guilliaume Apollinaire, in which he talks about Sade's Juliette. He's talking about a woman in the early twentieth century, in a very French and rhetorical manner. He's talking about the new woman, and the very phrase he uses is, 'who will have wings and will renew the world.' And I read this, and like a lot of women, when you read this kind of thing, you get this real 'bulge' and think, 'How wonderful...How terrific,' and then I thought, 'Well no; it's not going to be as easy as that.' And I also thought, 'Really, how very, very inconvenient it would be for a person to have real wings, just how really difficult.' Fevvers is a very literal creation. She's

very literally a winged spirit. She's very literally the winged victory, but very, very literally so. How inconvenient to have wings, and by extension, how very, very difficult to be born so out of key with the world. Something that women know all about is how very difficult it is to enter an old game. What you have to do is to change the rules and make a new game, and that's really what she's about. That novel is set at exactly the moment in European history when things began to change. It's set at that time quite deliberately, and she's the new woman. All the women who have been in the first brothel with her end up doing these 'new women' jobs, like becoming hotel managers and running typing agencies, and so on, very much like characters in Shaw.

Doris Lessing is recognised as one of the pioneers of contemporary feminism, though this label might sometimes seem somehow hasty when applied to some of her works. She was born in Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) in 1919 and, as such, she has always been a writer deeply interested in the problems of white African colonialism and master-servant relationships, just as in her first novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950). She was also influenced by Marxism, in whose spirit she wrote the Martha Quest trilogy, known as *The children of Violence*, which also reflects the aspirations of western women. *The golden notebook* (1962) became a core text for all those interested in modern women's studies. Doris Lessing also attacked the subject of science fiction in a series of novels mainly dealing with little-understood spiritual and extra-sensory side of human development. However, her field remains that of realism to which she returned with a number of short pieces about London and Zimbabwe, in general, about the conditions of modern life, the problems of old age and education of children. Among her creations are: *Briefing For A Descent Into Hell* (1971), *The Memoirs Of A Survivor* (1974), *The Making Of The Representative For Planet 8* (1982), *The Diaries Of Jane Sommers* (1984), *The Good Terrorist* (1985), *The Fifth Child* (1988), *London Observed* (1992), a book of short-stories.

Amy C. Rea considers that in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, there's something to chill every reader's bones. It doesn't matter if your prefer your nail biting to result from supernatural, political, societal, or cultural scares; you can find any or all of them in this book. *The Fifth Child* is the story of a couple in early 1970s Britain who decide to go against the conventions of the times and have a large family. The babies come sooner and faster than they expect, but not until the arrival of Ben, the fifth child, do they have serious reason to regret their decision. Lessing's book is a spare, frightening masterpiece. Harriet and David Lovatt want the same things - fidelity, love, family life and above all a permanent home. Stubbornly out of line with the fashions of the 1960s they decide to marry and lay down the foundations of their haven in a rambling Victorian house. At first, all is idyllic. Children fill their lives and re-united relatives crowd round the kitchen table at Christmas and Easter, greedily enjoying the warmth and solidity of the Lovatts home. It is with the fifth pregnancy that things begin to sour. The baby moves inside Harriet too early, too violently. After a difficult birth, he develops faster and grows much bigger than ordinary infants; he is unloving and instinctively disliked by his brothers and sisters. Inexorably, his alien presence wrecks the dream of their happy family. Harriet's fear grows as she struggles to love and care for the child, finding herself faced with a dark sub-continent of human nature, unable to cope. With *The Fifth Child* Doris Lessing triumphs in a realm of fiction new to her. She has written an ominously tangible novel, a powerfully simple contemporary horror story that makes compulsive reading to the last word.

In the unconstrained atmosphere of England in the late 1960's, Harriet and David Lovatt defy the 'greedy and selfish' spirit of the times with their version of tradition and normalcy: a large family, all the expected pleasures of a rich and responsible home life, children growing, Harriet tending, David providing. Even as the day's events take a dark turn

- an ominous surge in crime, unemployment, unrest - the Lovatts cling to their belief that an obstinately guarded contentedness will preserve them from the world outside. Until the birth of their fifth child. Harriet and David are stricken with astonishment at their new infant. Almost gruesome in appearance, insatiably hungry, abnormally strong, demanding and violent, Ben has nothing infant-like about him, nothing innocent or unsullied - nothing normal by society's standards. Harriet and David understand immediately that he will never be accepted in their world. And Harriet finds she cannot love him. David cannot bring himself to touch him. The four older children are quickly afraid of him. Family and friends who once gravitated to the Lovatts' begin to stay away. Now, in this house, where there had been nothing but kindness, warmth, and comfort, there is restraint, wariness, and anxiety. Harriet and David are torn - as they would never have believed possible - between their instincts as parents and their shocked reaction to this fierce and unlovable baby. Their vision of the world as a simple and benign place is desperately threatened by the mere existence of one of their own children. As the novel unfolds in spare and startling scenes, we are drawn deep into the life of the Lovatt family, and are witness to the terrifying confusion of emotion that becomes their daily fare as they cope with Ben - and with their own responses to him - through this childhood and adolescence... But Doris Lessing is giving us, as well, a larger picture. The story of the Lovatts' extraordinary circumstances becomes a vivid reflection of society's unwillingness to confront- and its eventually complicity in - its own most brutal aspects.

Margaret Drabble about Margaret Drabble: 'I sometimes ask myself whether I enjoy writing. The answer is yes, but a qualified yes. I only enjoy it when it's going well. Starting a new book is always hard work, and work that moreover for months feels pointless (why bother? why not do something else?) or ill-directed (why this subject? why not something more global, more domestic, less domestic?): I walk around, looking for plot, structure, characters, images, trying not to repeat or imitate or listen too much to the wrong voices. This is a dreary time, comfortless, irritable, unsatisfying. When the book begins to move, everything changes, and everything I see or hear or read seems to be part of, to contribute to the new pattern. This is exciting. It's the only time when I forget time. Past the half way mark, a novel almost writes itself. Events beget events, characters insist on seeing one another again, and I just sit and transcribe. I get quite cheerful and communicative.'

Novelist, biographer and critic Margaret Drabble was born in Sheffield in 1939. Her first novel, *A Summer Birdcage* (1963) tells the story of the relationship between two sisters. Her other novels include *The Garrick Year* (1964), set in the theatre world; *The Millstone* (1965), winner of the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, presenting the story in which a young academic becomes pregnant after a casual relationship; *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, about a young woman from the north of England at university in London; *The Waterfall* (1969), a formally experimental narrative; *The Needle's Eye* (1972), winner of the *Yorkshire Post* Book of the Year Award, the story of a young heiress who gives away her inheritance; and *The Realms of Gold* (1975), about a prominent archaeologist juggling the different aspects of her life. *The Ice Age* (1977) examines the social and economic plight of England in the mid-seventies while *The Middle Ground* (1980) is the story of a woman journalist forced to take-stock of her life.

The Radiant Way (1987), *A Natural Curiosity* (1989) and *The Gates of Ivory* (1991) form a trilogy of novels describing the experiences of three friends living through the 1980s. *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996) is a portrait of contemporary Britain. *The Peppered Moth* (2001) explores

four generations in one family beginning with Bessie Bawtry's childhood spent growing up in a South Yorkshire mining town at the beginning of the twentieth century. *A Natural Curiosity*, Margaret Drabble's eleventh novel, continues the story of Alix, Liz, and their university comrade Esther Breuer begun so brilliantly in *The Radiant Way*. In Margaret Drabble's words, it 'picks up some of the characters and stories, while adding others; and it presents them against the backdrop of a 'post-imperial, post-industrial' 1980s England that bears a striking resemblance to its American counterpart - a public landscape in which our questions about how we live our lives, and what has happened to us, take on a private intensity. The Dickensian sweep critics praised in *The Radiant Way* is illuminated here by Margaret Drabble's gifts for portraiture, her keen intelligence, and her wonderful sense of humor; the reuslt is proof that Miss Drabble is one of the most extraordinary writers on either side of the Atlantic.

According to Lorna Sage, 'The trilogy is about loose ends, and is made of loose ends. The centre doesn't hold any longer; the fictional law of gravity that pulled her people into an orbit has been suspended. These books portray a wide world, a global village, where there's no such thing as society, only masses and numbers and uprooted individuals, where those who cling to the notion of community look like the odd ones out.'

What I do suffer from is curiosity,' remarks the successful psychotherapist Liz Headland to her friend the gossip columnist Ivan Warner. 'I want to know what really happened.' This insatiable passion to know drives virtually all the characters in Margaret Drabble's brilliant, engrossing, and wise new novel: there is Liz herself, divorced from her TV producer husband, Charles, but united with him in an effort to find out what has happened to their friend Dirk David, now a hostage in a Middle Eastern country. There is Liz's sister Shirley Harper, who, with Liz learns the truth about their mother's life and death but only after a made escapade reveals parts of herself she never new existed. There is Alix Bowen, Liz's friend from university days, now living in a small city in the north of England, where she visits regularly with an imprisoned murderer, bringing him books about the ancient Britons and trying to track down his long-vanished mother-Alix, who learns things she didn't want to know. Candida Wilton, the central character in her most recent novel *The Seven Sisters* (2002), begins a new life in London after the breakdown of her marriage. A surprise windfall gives her the opportunity to travel to Italy with friends and explore new experiences.

Margaret Drabble is also the author of biographies of Arnold Bennett (1974) and Angus Wilson (1995), and is editor of both the fifth (1985) and sixth (2000) editions of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. She is a former Chairman of the National Book League (1980-82), and was awarded the CBE in 1980. She received the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1973, and holds honorary doctorates from the universities of Sheffield (1976), Manchester (1987), Keele (1988), Bradford (1988), Hull (1992), East Anglia (1994) and York (1995).

Fay Weldon about Fay Weldon: 'Well, there's no time to waste. Life's short, the world's history is long and its societies diverse. If I am a prolific writer and turn my hand, with what seems to some as indecent haste, from novels to screenplays to stage and radio plays, it is because there is so much to be said, so few of us to say it, and time runs out. Readers crave explanations of their lives: the writers of fiction provide it, enlarging experience, giving meaning and significance where none was before. I see myself as someone who drops tiny crumbs of nourishment, in the form of comment and conversation, into the black enormous maw of the world's discontent. I will never fill it up or shut it up; but it seems my duty, not to mention my pleasure, to attempt to do so, however ineptly. See me as Sisyphus, but having a good time.'

Novelist, playwright and screenwriter Fay Weldon was born on 22 September 1931. She was brought up in New Zealand and returned to the United Kingdom when she was ten. She read Economics and Psychology at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, and worked briefly for the Foreign Office in London, then as a journalist, before beginning a successful career as an advertising copywriter. She gave up her career in advertising, and began to write full-time. Her first novel, *The Fat Woman's Joke*, was published in 1967. Fay Weldon is a former member of both the Arts Council literary panel and the film and video panel of Greater London Arts. She was Chair of the Judges for the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1983, and received an honorary doctorate from the University of St Andrews in 1990. She was awarded a CBE in 2001.

Fay Weldon's work includes over twenty novels, five collections of short stories, several children's books, non-fiction books, magazine articles and a number of plays written for television, radio and the stage, including the pilot episode for the television series *Upstairs Downstairs*. Much of her fiction explores issues surrounding women's relationships with men, children, parents and each other, including the novels *Down Among the Women* (1971), *Female Friends* (1975), *Praxis* (1978) (shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction), *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989), and *Wicked Women* (1995), which won the PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Award. Her 1997 novel *Big Women* was based on the events surrounding the creation of the feminist publishing house Virago. Other novels include *Puffball* (1980), *The President's Child* (1982), *The Rules of Life* (1987), *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1987) and *Rhode Island Blues* (2000), the story of a young woman and her grandmother, an 83-year-old with a strong appetite for life. Her most recent novel is *The Bulgari Connection* (2001). A new collection of short stories, *Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide*, was published in September 2002.

In *The Life And Loves Of A She-Devil* we find the image of Ruth, who is , by her own admission, an unlucky woman. Ungainly, unattractive, unassertive, she trudges through life bowed under the weight of a loveless marriage to a brazen, cheating, indifferent man named Bobbo. Although she has patiently suffered through the small and not-so-small indignities occasioned by sharing a life with the uncaring Bobbo, as The Life and Loves of a She-Devil opens, Ruth's patience is wearing thin, and the pain and resentment she has been swallowing all these years are finally beginning to bubble over. This is a black comedy, but it is also-as black comedies tend to be-an exceedingly sad meditation on facing one's lot in life, and coming to grips with a capricious fate that lavishly rewards some while cruelly withholding from others. But more importantly, it is a scathing indictment of a society and a value system that reinforces, twenty times over, that basic, cosmic unfairness. Ruth's adversary is a petite blonde named Mary Fisher, a superficial and casually amoral woman whose chosen occupation is writing passionate, best-selling, romance novels about the nature of love. Mary has been born with everything-looks, proportions, hair, and an understanding of how best to negotiate with the world to get what she wants. Not only does the world pay constant tribute to her shallow attributes (her novels are best-sellers), but Ruth's own husband openly prefers her over his dutiful, but unglamorous wife. When Ruth finally snaps and embraces the hatred that has been welling up inside of her, she goes on a single-minded quest for the power, success and glamour that have been denied her all these years. While she's at it, she wreaks revenge on her wayward husband and his loathsome mistress. In doing so, in embracing the 'She-Devil' inside of her, Ruth exposes the contradictions and hypocrisies of the superficial culture in which we live. If our culture tends to heap further rewards on those already rewarded by fate, it also sells us the largely false notion that we can shape ourselves into

whatever we want to be. It is a pernicious system since it not only teaches a person to be perpetually dissatisfied with him or (especially) herself, it also suggests that the feeling of dissatisfaction is indicative of a failure of will, of morals, of money, of imagination. Ruth, grotesquely transforms herself utterly, burning down her house, overhauling her goals and her sense of purpose, and, most alarmingly, recreating the contours of her body and face through extensive plastic surgery. The result is monstrous and totally morally bankrupt, but may unfortunately be indicative of the monstrosity and bankruptcy of the image-obsessed value system in which we live.

Another interesting and worth mentioning novel is *The Shrapnel Academy*, 'a pasionate, witty and important novel about men, women and war'. They thought they were attending a benign military lecture at the illustrious *Shrapnel Academy*, housed in one of England's grand manors and dedicated to the memory of Henry Shrapnel, genius inventor of the cannonball. But the weekend is not peaceful. Perhaps benign militarism is always a false conceit. Septuagenarian General Leo Makeshift, charged with delivering the annual Wellington lecture, arrives in a black Rolls-Royce. The knee under his hand belongs to his current mistress, Bella, who wars a tight black skirt and seamed stockings for the occasion. (Bella is considerably younger than the general.) Medusa, or 'Mew,' on the other hand, hitchhikes to Shrapnel after the gas runs out on her motorbike. Mew is the correspondent from *Woman's Times* and, yes, it was a mistake to allow a feminist reporter on the scene. On the greeting committee are Joan Lumb, the institute's dictatorial director, her lithesome secretary, Muffin, and Acorn the butler, a stunningly handsome South African whose army of Third World servants is primed to rebel against the ruling class. Fate provides a snowstorm, making escape impossible; lust, jealousy, bigotry, chauvinism, and pure greed provide the other essential ingredients for all-out war during the Wellington weekend - between Upstairs and Downstairs, between men and women, between First and Third Worlds, between the fiercest of sexual rivals. Speculation about the occupancy of a given bed or the espousal of a given cause is unlikely to prove correct, yet to attempt it is irresistible. As a chronicler, Fay Weldon has never been more brilliant or more ruthless about the folly of human relations. *The Shrapnel Academy* is a devastating update of the English country house novel, as savagely funny as it is topical.

Penelope Lively was born in Cairo in 1933 and educated at St Anne's College, Oxford. Her childhood in Egypt is vividly evoked in *Oleander, Jacaranda* (1994), an autobiography of her early years. Beginning with *Astercote* (1970), she has written over twenty well-received books for children. Penelope Lively wrote her first novel for adults, *The road to Lichfield* in 1977. Subsequent novels include *Treasures of time* (1979), *According to Mark* (1984), *Moon tiger* (1987; Booker Prize), *Passing on* (1989), *City of the mind* (1991), and *Cleopatra's sister* (1993). She has also written plays, screenplays, and several volumes of stories. Her non-fiction work include a work on landscape history, *The present and the past*.

Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987), the central narrating character is herself a professional historian, a clever outspoken, uncomfortable person who, lying in hospital as an old woman, reviews her life in a shifting kaleidoscopic pattern on 'voices' - voices from her own past and present, who are allowed (through Penelope Lively's extraordinarily original but never pressingly 'experimental' range of techniques) to make their own presences felt, their own separate points of view clear. At the heart of the book is the central characters', Claudia's brief and passionate love affair during the 1941 western desert campaign with a young tank officer who is killed in action. The whole book is Claudia's reflection on the words 'unless I

am part of everything I am nothing', set against the other competing and conflicting voices: the story of a person, but also history itself.

Considering the war as the setting in *Moon Tiger*, on could state that it provides the ideological 'climate' in which characters define and interpret words, objects, and events; in which they converse and compete; and fundamentally, where they struggle for the power to make sense of their own lives. In *Moon Tiger*, Tom's diary gives us an account of front-line experience. It presents the various roles that other people take when war is occurring. Generals take charge, families worry about their sons and daughters, correspondents (like Claudia) zoom in on the scene. The involved peoples adjust their lives to the pro-war ideology. Even conscientious objectors participate in the 'climate' by taking the war situation to assert their beliefs, mobilising according to their viewpoints.

On a level far away from the front line stories, there is Claudia, equally affected by the war 'climate'. By accepting the ideological positions of the war correspondent and historian, Claudia participates in the (re)creation and perpetuation of certain discourse, or ways of making sense through language. She scorns those who 'capitalise' on war, because from one perspective it is disgusting to write about it, take it over, trivialise it, erase parts of it, and then make money at the expense of people who have died. At the same time, she finds history very important. It is vital to her existence. She finds that her writing history (and, presumably, her memoirs) helps her convey something that deserves to be told. The contradictory aspects of writing history cannot be extricated, rearranged, and the contradictions resolved.

In contemporary philosophical and literary circles, feminism typically invokes the condemnation of male attitudes towards women, charging that men have historically imposed their will on women in order to convince the female population of some inherent inferiority. In the most radical sense, opposition to phallocentrism revolves around the embitterment of a woman, seeking revenge for her predecessors' suffering and mental anguish.

This essay tried to present the feminist traces in some of the most important representatives of this current in British contemporary literature. It contains the feminist ideas filtered through the minds and works of some British women writers, who wanted to 'create' a New Woman (as Angela Carter would say). Even if one may consider Fevvers from *Nights At The Circus*, with her wings (the desire to set free), or Harriet from *The Fifth Child*, the unfortunate mother who tried to break the laws of the contemporary society, therefore, go against the conventions of the times when she decided to have a large family, or any of the three ladies Liz, Alix or Esther from *The Radiant Way*, whose lives become quite complex, maybe too complex, one might add, for some women, or Ruth, from *The Life And Loves Of A She-Devil*, the one that became the she-devil, when her unloving and unworthy husband called her like that, and who rearranged her life as power turned into her hands, or Claudia from *Moon Tiger*, the who lives her whole lived again from her dying bed, but all of them are powerful, strong-willed characters, courageous enough to take life in their own hands and show them all that they are able. To be women and proud of it.

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