

THIRD  
EDITION

# FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY

*A Reader*

EDITED BY  
MARY EAGLETON



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poetic, comes about, among other methods, through a process aptly demonstrated by Flora Nwapa, that is, 'transposition', the shift between literary and linguistic media that creates possibilities for polysemy. Through writing, through claiming a text – and a narrative territory – women sign into and at the same time subvert a nationalist narrative that has excluded them as negativity, as corporeal and unclean, or as impossibly idealised.

Possibilities for the disruption and/or transformation of a masculine nationalist text can therefore be seen to operate in two main ways in women's writing: the *textual* and the (broadly) *temporal/territorial*. The first occurs through the medium of the text, in the substance of the writing, and involves *interrupting* the language of official nationalist discourse and literature with a women's vocality. Nationhood is so bound up in textuality, in 'definitive' histories and official languages and mythologies, that to compose a substantially different kind of text, using vernacular, non-literary and phatic forms that are part of people's everyday experience, is already to challenge normative discourses of nationhood – even where, as in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), that discourse announces itself as always-already multi-voiced. Moreover, as this suggests, these different forms of composition manifest, crucially, *within* the poetics of the text, as nuance, emphasis and ironic juxtaposition – disruption is not expressed merely at the level of externalised, 'protest' writing.

Yet, because national identity rests on received images of national history and topography, the second method of transformation is as important. It involves *changing the subjects* that have dominated the nationalist text – and therefore questioning the centrality of the male-defined nation as *the* key historical player in the post-independence period. Where women tell the story of their own experience, they map their own geographical perspectives, scry their own history and so, necessarily, contest official representations of a nationalist reality. They implicitly – and in some cases explicitly – challenge the nation's definition of itself through territorial claims, through the reclamation of the past and the canonisation of heroes. At the same time they also lever the icons of heroes and national mothers from their dominant positions as mascots and symbols of the quintessential national experience.

(2005)

## Notes

- 21 Gcina Mhlope, 'We are at war', in Susan Brown (ed.), *LIP from South African Women* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983), pp. 159–60.
- 22 See Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 35; Filomena Steady (ed.), *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1981),

p. 29. While the present study acknowledges the importance of motherhood and of mother figures to African and South Asian women, it also wishes to consider women writers' concerns with identities configured in contradistinction to the institution of motherhood.

- 23 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 87.
- 24 Simon Gikandi made this point as early as 'The politics and poetics of national formation: recent African writing', *ACLALS Triennial Conference* paper, University of Kent, Canterbury, 24–31 August 1989, pp. 1–20, and has interestingly elaborated it in his work since, as, for example, in *Reading Chinua Achebe* (London: James Currey, 1991). See also Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- 25 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, trans. Léon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), in particular the essay, 'How does one speak to literature?', pp. 92–123.

ROSI BRAIDOTTI

### *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*

The image of female exile can be complemented by that of the nomad and of the migrant. I shall take the nomad as the prototype of the "woman of ideas":<sup>14</sup> in the history of women's struggle the international dimension is implicit from the start. Not only is feminism as such an international movement, like most other major social movements of this century but at the intellectual level also the very conceptual structure of women's studies is the result of intense international networking. As an example: the single most important feminist book of this century, *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir, appeared in France in 1949, and although it raised a few eyebrows and many nasty comments, it did not trigger a revolution. We had to wait till the 1960s and the American second wave of the women's struggle for Beauvoir's book to become recognized as the earth-shaking analysis it is. It was not until Kate Millett, Ti-Grace Atkinson, and Shulamith Firestone dedicated their works to Beauvoir that *The Second Sex* produced what we would today call women's studies. A transatlantic connection was needed for a book published in 1949 in Paris to be greeted in Europe, via the United States, as a revolutionary work.<sup>15</sup> Had the Americans not done so, the book's subversive potential might have remained latent. This is only one of the many discontinuities one can find in the history of feminist ideas: internationalization is, for women, a way of preserving their fragile heritage.

This point is obviously not restricted to women's studies or to feminist thought. The history of ideas as a whole is made of such disconnection, of transatlantic loops and gaps; once again one may think here of the international

dimension as a variation on the theme of the “archive,” that is to say of stocking, preserving, and reproducing a symbolic capital. Internationalization can also be a resistance tactic; it can allow for certain ideas to survive despite the accidents of history; it can create continuity out of disruptions. The nomadic nature of ideas is their safest safeguard. For example, the fate of the central European Jews after the rise of Nazism: a whole wave of exiles from Germany and neighboring countries emptied the European intelligentsia of its most brilliant subjects. Most of these exported to the English-speaking world such notions as Marxism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology – not to speak of the hard or exact sciences, which simply made American culture the leader of the western world. The history of ideas is always a nomadic story; the physical displacement is just a way of preserving in time certain ideas, so that they do not get lost. Ideas are as mortal as human beings and as subjected as we are to the crazy twists and turns of history.

Next to this, the other image we want to evoke is that of the migrant. Contrary to the nomad, the migrant has a clear destination: it goes from one point in space to another for a very clear purpose. The question of migration is important in that it has concretely created in every European culture a series of foreign subcultures of which women tend to be the loyal guardians and perpetuators.

Migrant women constitute the bulk of what we would call the “domestic foreigners” in our postindustrial metropolis. These people who speak a language and embody cultural values so different from the dominant ones tend to be forgotten in all the debates about international perspectives. When will we accept that internationalization begins at home? How close are we, the “white” intellectual women, to the migrant women who have even fewer citizen rights than we have? How sensitive are we to the intellectual potential of the foreigners that we have right here, in our own backyard? We would ask those of my readers who plan to have an international career and become professional jet-setters: how much do you know about the foreignness of these people? For internationalization to become a serious practice, we must work through this paradox of proximity, indifference, and cultural differences between the nomadic intellectual and the migrant women.

## Notes

- 14 Dale Spender, *Women of Ideas* (London/Boston/Melbourne: Ark Publications, 1982).
- 15 Many American feminists have commented on this trans-Atlantic connection, especially Alice Jardine and Domna Stanton; see Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, *The Future of Difference* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980).

## Bibliography of Extracts

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