

BARBARA HANRAHAN'S WORK OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

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KEWPIE *Doll* suggests that the narrator's early adulthood coincides with her refusal to accept the prescribed life-scenarios available to women of her generation. The narrator constructs herself as unique in resisting oppressive constructions of femininity but at the same time suggests that it is the emerging new subject positions available within the changing culture that enable her to evade and resist them. This results in constructions of cultural oppression and personal autonomy that strategically draw upon different readings of 'women' and that more nebulous political tool 'woman'.

In one of the very few feminist reviews of *Kewpie Doll*, Kerry Goldsworthy argues that while Hanrahan's feminism is 'deep' the feminist message in *Kewpie Doll* is 'crossed' by a nostalgic recreation of many of the symbols and forms of oppression. This perception raises a number of questions about the nature of so called feminist 'messages' and what they might encompass which summons up the debate around that ill-defined gap between feminist fiction and women's fiction.

I too wish to argue that the feminist message in *Kewpie Doll* is 'crossed', not in terms of Goldsworthy's sense of Hanrahan's preoccupation with the visual sensuousness of physical objects some of which being symbols of women's oppression, but the connection between this very notion of oppression and a model of developmental feminism. In this sense Goldsworthy's review suggests two sites in which women's empowerment is perceived historically and personally as an unproblematic linear ascension. These circulate around 'consciousness-raising' as an expectation of feminist realist fiction (that feminist texts depict a woman's journey towards political knowledge, empowerment and autonomy) and how feminist criticism reads along and against this model to fathom the political 'message' and worth of a text. I wish to argue that the narrator of *Kewpie Doll* reads and delineates women's experience in a way that mirrors some of the problematics of feminist critiques of realist fiction.

To begin discussing this I want to call to mind some of the debates within feminist history regarding women's experience of popular culture. This 'experience', as Meaghan Morris argues in 'Things To Do With Shopping Centres', is problematic. As feminists, do we read 'with' or 'about' women? How does whether we construct them as active or passive function as a reflection of our own feminisms and, perhaps of most importance, who are 'these women' anyway and what is 'our' relationship to 'them'?

Kewpie Doll and another of Hanrahan's autobiographical fictions, *Sea-green*, utilise constructions of 1950s women as victims and perpetrators of patriarchal consumer culture, echoing the politics of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in their construction of a previous generation of women as 'confined to the shallow and inauthentic choices offered to them by the marketplace'. Friedan's sense that women in the 1950s needed to mature from their confinement within the category 'woman' to become full individuals is mirrored in Hanrahan's narrators' depiction of their journeys toward freedom and away from the conventions of 1950s suburbia and its implications for women's choices. In particular Hanrahan's narrators grow up and away from their mothers who, while

figures of ambivalence, symbolise the powerless position of a female self trapped within the limitations of gender and false popular pleasures.

In doing so these narrators both position themselves as forging identities within an emerging second wave feminism and as having a unique capacity for liberation because of a vision they name 'artistic'. I think it is wise to be critical of this identification with, and romanticisation of, the artist, particularly in terms of the narrator's construction of its central role in according her the ability to reject prescribed female life-scenarios. Goldsworthy argues that it is 'the artist in Hanrahan and her narrator' that produces a sensuous preoccupation with physical objects that are the symbols of oppression. Her sense of the contradictory or crossed nature of the text's feminist politics can be also read in terms of the problematic representation of the narrator's difference from these symbols of cultural limitation, in particular in her difference from the figure of her mother.

Meaghan Morris calls attention to feminists' need to scrutinise the expression of ambivalence concerning modernisation processes through allegorical female figures. Tying the mother's identity to the consumption of popular pleasures allows Hanrahan's narrator to construct textually her mother as a wedge between herself and the social world. Constructing her mother as a victim allows the narrator to suggest herself as comparatively mobile and having the capacity for choice. This sense of difference masks the narrator's own inscriptions by the culture which hover beneath her assumption of freedom of choice. In this sense the narrator's mother is the location of transferred, but by no means eliminated, concerns about a restrictive social world's construction of women.

In *Kewpie Doll*, for example, the narrator's metaphorical construction of the commercial/sexual contract that ensnares her mother reaches a climax with her description of her mother's miscarriage:

Then it was a day when they carried in my mother. She was home early from the advertising department, plastic wrapped around her below the waist. She didn't see me her eyes were closed. My grandmother was running, the bedroom door slammed. Uncle Bill was in there, I was shut out. She had the baby clothes knitted but the baby bled away. (42)

Immediately before these lines is a description of her mother's photo in her husband's wallet. The critique of an economic transaction of women's bodies that structures heterosexual relationships is conveyed by the mother's pin-up pose within the photo. The immediate jump to the miscarriage suggests that there is a causal link between the mother's sexualised body within the photo and the miscarriage she suffers. This chain of association through juxtaposition is problematic because it inscribes the mother's body in a way that suggests that cultural control of it is total. The tenuousness of this representation is only further problematised by a contradictory ambivalence around the mother's own complicity in her victimisation. The recollection of the mother's photo and her miscarriage are linked by the fact that in both memories her eyes are shut. This suggests both her blindness to her own situation and the lack of any allowable positive gaze that would counteract this. The mother is both cultural victim and dupe, suffering the loss women's bodies incur within the contract yet validating the cultural inscription of women's bodies, particularly as throughout the text she attempts to reproduce it in her daughter.

The plastic that wraps the mother's body below the waist is a symbol of her position

as an icon of the sale. This symbol is underscored by the lines immediately following the quote which list the household goods that have accumulated in this sexual/commercial trade-off. At this level, then, the narrator advances a moral criticism of the masculine capitalist culture that confines women's desire and self-expression to producing themselves for an inevitable consumption. There is a central irony however in that the symbolic construction of the miscarriage is produced by the *narrator's* inclusion of it within a chain of associations that give it a particular meaning and implication. The symbolic cultural contract that produces the mother's loss is simultaneously that of the complicit narrator who juxtaposes associations together for the purpose of asserting and maintaining the status of her own life choices.

If we look more closely at this paradox it becomes apparent that the plastic that wraps the mother's body has another function in that it also allows the mother to be made the object of the gaze while ensuring that she will not contaminate. The daughter thus can look at the mother while remaining safe from what she represents – the classic Kristevan abject that threatens the daughter with what she might become. Laura Palmer, who is the central character of *Twin Peaks* springs to mind as another woman wrapped in plastic, contained by her role as victim but dominating the narrative of the text. The need in *Twin Peaks* to find Laura's killer so that the murders will stop is perhaps mirrored in *Kewpie Doll* by the need to state the mother as a victim so that her daughter can escape any such implications for her own life. The narrator's memories of her mother in this sense are an evasion of direct, contemporary political engagement.

The narrator does not construct her freedom as absolute but evades any direct political criticism of her own situation by focusing on her capacity for choice. Her sense of her own autonomy as a cultural product and producer intersects with Lesley Johnson's account of growing up in the 1950s. In a shining example of feminist history that engages directly and politically with cultural inscriptions of the self, Johnson argues that the position of active individual was structured by a limited range of identities that the culture offered as positions for women to negotiate. The modern individual is, in this sense, suggested as caught between the production of a recognisable self and a self that is paradoxically engaged in the process of negotiation.

The plastic film produces a narrative of continual repression and return and leaves unchallenged the discourses of femininities that are central to the narrator's capacity for negotiation producing an uneasy slippage around the sense of the individual that the narrator aspires to become. But for the narrators of both *Kewpie Doll* and *Sea-green* the capacity for negotiation is dependent upon the tenuous construction of their mothers' generation as ensnared within a single and inescapable position, all longings, desires and frustrations channelled into buying goods that sedate and appease. The mother is perceived as being limited to one position, but lacking identity, whereas the narrator constructs herself in terms of the culture's marketing of the modern female self.

The narrators of *Kewpie Doll* and *Sea-green* construct the 1960s as enabling some women of their generation to perceive the limitations of the culture and, within limits, actively challenge them in ways that were not available to the previous generation. This is tenuous and masks a number of political issues that are central to an ongoing sense of feminist political analysis. One way of elucidating this is to suggest that the narrators' difference is dependent upon the consumer culture that it ostensibly critiques. That is, that the narrators are as much contained as their mothers who have an equal capacity for resistances. The narrators' assumption of a greater freedom and mobility is at the same time both true and false in that the culture offered different subject positions but with not so dissimilar implications.

Lesley Johnson argues that the discourse of the free, modern individual was marketed as a stage in a woman's life that was as implicitly gendered as that of the previous generation. While women may have been offered a greater range of immediate positions such as some of those the narrator of *Kewpie Doll* identifies ('Saturday night girl', 'girl next door', 'career woman', 'artistic girl' or 'married woman'), underneath the possibility for choice that this range of subject positions offered was still the necessity for choosing a position. The possible options masked the inevitability of the need to choose one of what was a limited range of options. The promise of freedom that choice figures masks the similarities of generations in such a way that they are equally depoliticised.

In dissociating herself from the previous generation the narrator is able to locate herself in the period of youth where the self can be made anew within the limits of the culture. It is this fear of the inevitable moment in which negotiation and mobility are negated by the demands of maturity that haunts the text. The mother is a reminder that her daughter must make herself anew one last time. Constructing her as a victim allows the expression of an ambivalence that cannot be politically articulated as such within the socio-political moment of the daughter's bid for her own difference. The blindness that the repeated reference to her mother's closed eyes insists upon is a transference fundamental to the narrator's sense of her own self.

The construction of 1950s women as the dupes of the marketplace might at this level be seen as a depoliticisation rectified by the perception of the commonality of gender; that is that women actively identify in terms of the nexus between gender and experience. Circulating within the construction of the modern free individual of the 1960s, or the sense that this individual was freed by the sudden recognition of commonality, is the assumption that women and feminism were (and are) engaged in a process of maturing or growing up. The irony of the developmental or 'othering' model of feminism and feminist practice is that it demonstrates a reliance on the very forms it seeks to distance itself from so that maturing, or developing, becomes itself ambivalent because it is constructed through difference.

The construction and valuations of women's lives that convey feminism as a developing linear progression has particular significance in that certain voices must necessarily be positioned as lacking so that new voices can be lauded. In many ways this is what is evident in the media's depiction of the generational differences in feminism. Younger feminists (as the media informs us) are actively critical of an earlier apparently strident and separatist social and personal feminist politics. Differences are stressed and the overlap of cultural positionings of women minimised in this representation of the history of feminism and its development towards a point when it will no longer be necessary. This sense of feminism working towards a desired ideal, endpoint or moment of arrival is undoubtedly problematic. Not only does it conjure up that awful word 'post-feminism' which has enjoyed much media currency, but necessarily must devalue particular manifestations of women's lives as one stage of feminism supplants another. This means that the complex web of resistances and compliances that comprise all women's lives are at risk of being reduced to a set of experiences placed in a hierarchy of value.

How then are we to talk about a feminist tradition in history and writing, and where do we draw the lines of inclusion and exclusion around texts, experiences and politics? Hanrahan's novel *Annie Magdalene* has as its epigraph a quote from Virginia Woolf that is relevant to these questions:

For all the dinners cooked: the plates and cups washed: the children sent to school and gone into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels without meaning to, inevitably lie . . . All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded.

This epigraph highlights the intersection of interior and exterior textual politics. It points to the connection between the lives and experiences of women within texts and their relation to feminist writing traditions. Clearly in terms of Hanrahan's own writing this epigraph is problematic. If women writers represent personal empowerment or consciousness raising through comparative constructions of other women then they participate in the marginalisation of certain voices by rendering them only incidental to the apparent discourses of power. The notion of a feminist tradition becomes problematic if second-wave feminism assumes these terms both in its fictional representations and the self-conscious construction of a tradition to which Hanrahan alludes in her quotation from Woolf.

The nature of feminist messages and what they can encompass is extremely problematic in connection to the depiction of women's lives within fiction and readings of women's texts within feminist criticism. Generational models are extremely difficult to apply to feminist analyses and representations in that they involve a hierarchy that often generates contradiction and ambivalence as well as a kind of elision. The marketing of a 'new generation' of women in the 1960s means one thing for Hanrahan's autobiographical constructions of the self, and another for some perceptions of her work within the 'new women's writing'. An example of this is Fay Weldon's assessment of another of Hanrahan's novels, *Dove*, which situates this text at the bottom end of a scale in which *Puberty Blues* is ascribed eminence. Weldon praises *Puberty Blues* as being 'direct, personal experience . . . what happens not what we'd like to happen' whereas in *Dove*, she suggests that 'the characters are long since dead and gone, undangerous'. The question of where this hierarchical model situates the text in relation to feminism generates ambivalence for Weldon who wishes both to claim and remove its relevance:

I feel that I am unfairly complaining. *Dove* should be read and Barbara Hanrahan, one of Australia's most valuable and visionary writers, complimented not nagged.

Another example of this strategy of both claiming and distancing a text in the name of feminism is Susan Higgins's and Jill Matthews's discussion of the political usefulness of *Where All The Queens Strayed*:

On the other hand a different strain in women's writing, the Gothic tradition to which a novel like Barbara Hanrahan's *Where All The Queens Strayed* belongs, can tell equally important truths about female experience in a patriarchal culture, but the label feminist, even when divested of its polemical implications, hovers uneasily over such imagined worlds. (321-33)

In this view depicting the reality of women's experience in patriarchal culture does not provide a feminist framework in Hanrahan's work because, contradictorily, this world is 'imagined'. Both assessments have a bias toward realist fiction that conveys experience through traditional, contemporary narratives. Higgins and Matthews situate Hanrahan's text as caught conveying real and important truths but depoliticised by unrealistic settings: it is real but curiously not realist in a feminist sense. In claiming that one kind of narrative and setting is better for a feminist purpose this assessment involves an inherent valuation of the kinds of experience and subjectivities that convey feminism.

The matter is complex particularly in terms of women's writing and feminist writing and what might constitute their difference. I share Rosalind Coward's perception that not all women's texts are necessarily feminist texts but suggest that ranking them in some kind of order of usefulness and exclusion and inclusion is problematic because it

immediately risks the suppression of, not simply women's voices, but a diverse play of feminist voices ignoring the pervasiveness of cultural denials of women's autonomy and the different possibilities that realist fiction might have in terms of representations and mobilisations of the 'political'.

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