



Margaret Atwood: Moving into a more tentative and ambiguous mode

Tales Of The Unexpected

There has been an explosion of new women's writing. New forms, genres and moods. Nicci Gerrard explores some of the latest fiction and wonders what has happened to the old-style feminist novel

Feminism is dead according to an article in an American magazine that I read the other day. They - who are 'they' anyway? - say we are in a post-feminist era; a time when collective advances are abandoned for individual assertion; a time of weariness with anger and worthiness. And we - who are 'we' anyway? - know all too often what 'they' mean. Being a feminist in the late-80s can be a bit dispiriting.

It is hardly surprising that much contemporary feminist literature reflects and comments upon this shift from outrage to ambivalence, or from batty optimism to slumped resignation. After all, feminist writers have often interrogated feminism itself. The feminist fiction of the 60s, 70s and 80s

is full of anxious self-questioning, which can be thought-provoking and revealing or can eventually become tedious, narrowing the world to an individual's narcissistic self-analysis. Feminist confessionals have had their day. There was a time when it was exhilarating and liberating to read about the daily and familiar desires and despairs of women. Such fiction placed female concerns at the centre of the tale and gave them grave or witty attention, and it showed readers that the personal and the public cannot be disentangled. But not many people care anymore about whether you shave your legs.

Today the equivalent debate is not so much 'how good a feminist are you?' but 'what

has happened to the feminist you once were and the feminism you once espoused?'. The very question can herald a new way of writing as well as a shift in perspective; it implies disavowal, re-wording, disenchantment, change.

Margaret Atwood has written several funny and angry books about clever, witty women and the escapes they make from tyrannical, but rather dim and feeble men. In *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *Life Before Man* and *Lady Oracle*, panic and horror and humour are found in everyday domestic experiences. Then came her bleak dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, a nightmare vision of the world we could be heading towards.

The Handmaid's Tale seemed to move Margaret Atwood from her previous tales of bizarre realism to a brilliant kind of prophetic futurism. In her latest novel, *Cat's Eye*, however, she turns back to contemporary society and individual lives, and in so doing questions what feminism has become.

The heroine of *Cat's Eye*, Elaine Risley, is a middle-aged and successful feminist painter who has grown uneasy with the assertions she used to make, the tag that she bears, and the images of female ferocity that she finds in her art. It is difficult not to identify the painter with Atwood herself, or Elaine's questions about her art with Atwood's about her writing.

Elaine's reflections about her uneasy relationships with other women demonstrate the painter's feelings of guilt as well as defiance: 'At parties they start to ask leading questions that have the ring of inquisition; they are interested in my positions, my dogmas. I am guilty about having so few of these; I know I am unorthodox, hopelessly heterosexual, a mother, quisling and secret wimp... I still shave my legs.'

While cursing their demands: 'I am not Woman, and I'll be damned if I'll be shoved into it', she also admits to envying 'their conviction, their optimism, their carelessness, their fearless-

ness about men, their camaraderies.'

Margaret Atwood looks back on feminism's heady and irrecoverable beginnings with a mixture of admiration, nostalgia and patronage. In doing so she finds a new tone for her writing. Where she was previously brilliant, fast-paced, witty, inventive, she now shifts into a more tentative, investigative and ambiguous mood. And other feminist writers have also moved towards reassessment - Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*, for example, questions old loyalties and reworks beliefs. Marge Piercy's massive tome about world war two, *Gone To Soldiers*, lacks the fire and rage of her earlier novels. Marilyn French's *Her Mother's Daughter* possesses the hectoring old missionary zeal but is lugubrious about the possibility of feminism transforming the world. Yesterday's dramatic certainties are today's ghosts.

There is now a different, and more exciting, kind of feminist fiction emerging, which turns away from the angst-ridden feminist confessional and plunders other traditions - futurism, magic realism, crime and science fiction, post-modernism - to piece together idiosyncratic, outward-looking and adventurous novels. Such novels leave the small canvas of everyday individual life for a more epic sweep. The world, rather than Hampstead Heath, becomes the stage.

Jeanette Winterson serves as a good example of future possibilities. In her mid-20s she wrote her first novel, the funny and moving *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, which is an autobiographical account of a girl growing up in an Evangelical household. She then wrote the not-so-funny but still humorously-engaging *Boating For Beginners*. Then, after an aborted attempt to follow her two comic successes with a third in the same vein, she produced *The Passion*. *The Passion* leaves the small town of today behind; it is set during the Napoleonic Wars and explores the nature of passion



and risk, and the fate of sensitive young men in militaristic times. It is full of bizarre events, surreal images, half-formed philosophies. The flaws of *The Passion* are ones of welcome excess; it is ambitious, magical, epic, over-weaning and thoroughly captivating.

Of course, many novels have been liberated rather than simply defined by their feminism. But there is the sense now of such liberation being more widespread and emphatic than it was a decade ago. Young(ish) and new(ish) writers are bringing out books that are full of daring rather than of anxiety. So Leslie Dick's first novel, *Without Falling*, is an irreverent post-modernist examination of female masochism. It is about passion and the language of passion; about the impossibility of a coherent identity or romantic fulfilment in a post-modern world. It inherits the worn-out feminist question, 'how much have I suffered?' and turns it into a far less complacent, uncomfortable one, 'why do I take pleasure in my own suffering?'

Kathy Acker's novels are upsetting post-modernist examinations of warped desires; the American, Gloria Naylor, describes an exuberant Utopia, inverting and reinventing black history; Sara Maitland writes a feminist book of spells; Maggie Gee's *Grace* is about love and redemption in a nuclear age. Feminists are writing science fiction, crime novels, ghost stories, satires, Ealing comedies, horror stories; they are writing futurist fiction, magic realism, history. They are inventing their own forms.

Marianne Wiggins' *John Dollar* and Helen Hodgman's *Broken Words* are fascinating examples of such diversity. *John Dollar* is a female version of *The Lord Of The Flies* - a horror story in which it is little girls, rather than boys, who are tipped off on to a deserted island off Burma and whose behaviour disintegrates into unimaginable excesses. At the end of the novel they eat a man, in a final act of female worship

and revenge. *John Dollar* is a sinister and rivetting novel. It is a compulsive example of the female horror story.

Unlike *John Dollar*, Helen Hodgman's *Broken Words* starts from the particular (south London in the 80s) and the mundane. Daily and rather depressing ordinariness - unemployment, squalid housing, trivial quarrels - is infused with a surreal black humour. While being a lesbian novel, it takes a swipe at the traditions of feminist fiction, constantly pulling the carpet out from under its own feet.

Helen Hodgman is affectionate but rueful about her crowd of ageing and wavering feminists. A dog called Angst, wandering around on Clapham Common, takes on the burdens of old-style feminist fears - and gets stolen. Hodgman evokes an age of postfeminism, sick fantasies, sexual violations and broken words. Out of the imaginative hiatus she has written an imaginative if slightly mad novel.

Both *John Dollar* and *Broken Words* show how women writers can move away from their inheritance. They are not gentle, not domesticated, not (what a relief) worthy or brave. They are ambitious, wide in scope, experimental in style. *John Dollar* is not about feminism at all; *Broken Words* is gleefully on feminism's lunatic and self-mocking fringe.

The feminism of today is less heady, certain and unified than it was a decade ago. It is no longer possible to talk confidently about its aims and values. But such diversity is its strength as well as its weakness. Its elasticity and pluralism ensure that feminism will not harden into an old and familiar shape but that it will continually change, challenging the forms that it once took. This is nowhere more evident than in feminist fiction. The variety of genres, styles and subjects, the willingness of authors to plunder old traditions for new ways of writing is both confusing and exhilarating.

If feminism is dead, well, long live feminisms. •

The End Of The Affair

In the following passage, taken from Helen Hodgman's *Broken Words* (Virago, £11.95), Moss is talking to Buster, who once had filled her with lust but now inspires pity. Both are lesbians, staunch feminists and fellow-workers on the Women's Design Collective. Sometimes sisterhood between all the women becomes a bit precarious

'I'm sorry the Collective had to break up,' Buster was saying now. 'I'm not. We none of us has the energy for it any more.'

'I did,' said Buster, which was true. 'I sort of feel -' She blew small trails in the soft hair of the baby's head, 'feel you all decided things behind my back.'

Yes, they had. Not intentionally. Buster just hadn't been around when it happened, that's all. Moss could understand how she felt, but she didn't want to talk about it. Once, discussion would have been imperative but now Moss just felt wrecked, exhausted by what felt like a thousand years of talking with other women, of listening, sharing and struggling to define their common experience. It had been exciting, necessary, valuable, but now she wanted to hand over the baton and let others - younger, stronger women - continue the race. Moss knew this defeatist line would cut no ice with Buster, though the sporting metaphor might appeal. Moss tried to think of something to say that would prevent further discussion. She saw an article Hazel had torn from the *Guardian* and stabbed on the wall with the paring knife. Yes. That would do nicely.

'Besides,' says Moss, her voice falling and softening in an effort to strike sweet reason, the tone of one persuading a dog to give up its bone, 'wouldn't you honestly say, Buster, that we've all moved on a bit from the early days of the Collective? That indeed, darling, we may have reached a

plateau beyond all that. Entered a sort of - uh, a sort of - urn, post-feminist phase?'

Buster's eyes blurred behind a film of pain. 'You don't mean that. You can't.' . . .

I do mean it. And I'm not alone in my opinion, you know. It's a reasonable analysis.' Moss turned her guilty gaze to the bit of the *Guardian* curling on the wall.

Buster's face closed; she packed it away and stood up to do the same with the baby. Buster was leaving; going to Berlin perhaps where, it was said, interesting things still happened. But first Moss must ask Buster if her baby's a boy or a girl. Buster's not forthcoming. 'The baby's perfect,' was all she said. Moss saw Buster and the perfect baby to the gate. 'Ciao bella,' said Moss for old times' sake. 'Adios,' said Buster firmly.

Moss watched her trudge up the street to the bus-stop. She thought her brave. Buster stopped when she reached the corner and looked back at



Hodgman: Wide in scope

Moss. The baby's head poked from its pack, bobbed from side to side like a balloon. Traffic fumes blurred the line of trees growing at the edge of the Common across the busy road behind them. The whole scene felt wavery, uncertain, as did Moss's stomach as she raised her hand to wave goodbye.

'Good luck,' she cried, though by now Buster was far too far away to hear her. Moss noticed a strand of mauve wool caught on the gate post. As far as Moss could see, it ran all the way up the street. Buster had been wearing a mauve jumper. Was Buster unravelling?... Life was full of loose ends. •