Endless Becoming: Identity Formation in Michèle Roberts' *Flesh and Blood*

Sonsuz Oluşum: Michèle Roberts'ın *Flesh and Blood* Adlı Eserinde Kimlik Oluşumu

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Abstract
Working with a Chinese box narrative structure, Michèle Roberts creates a set of embedded stories in her 1994 novel, *Flesh and Blood* that would seem like a loose collage of unrelated stories of women at first sight, but are actually interwoven by the novel's protagonist, Frederica Stonehouse. The multitude of histories responds to a variety of needs: personal, cultural, social or religious, all alluding to the narratable self and its desire for recognition and change. Roberts offers an alternative account of the Cartesian subject by introducing Frederica's character as an 'agentic subject' who embarks on a psychological journey and moves freely through different identities. The plurality of voices presented in the text alludes to the fragmented and contextual nature of the self and shows how a contingent identity is able to escape the notion of a single and stable meaning in a literary narration. The endlessness of the embedded cyclic narration and its explicit function as a force of transformation allows Frederica to become able to eventually re-invent herself, find self-recognition and to formulate herself in her own terms, even if only temporarily. By utilising recognition theory and focusing primarily on Axel Honneth's critical social theory of recognition and idea of autonomy, I investigate the ways in which particular characters express their expectations for appropriate levels of recognition. In choosing to weave my paper around the histories of specific characters—namely, the protagonist Frederica, who journeys from daughterhood into motherhood, and the late nineteenth-century painter character of the embedded stories, Georgina, whose story most powerfully portrays a struggle against social subordination—I wish to examine how the characters face struggles between social obligations, family roles, and individual desires and scrutinise the means by which the text questions a fixed, stable, and homogeneous identity. Roberts's fluid view of the self emphasises the fact that we, as human beings, are formed through multiple discourses of identity and always in-process, devoid of a complete inner, secure or authentic self.
Keywords: Agentic subjectivity, cross-dressing, (mis)recognition, storytelling.

Öz
Michèle Roberts, 1994 yılında yazdığı eseri *Flesh and Blood*'da iç içe geçmiş bir anlatı yapısı kullanarak romanın içerisine gömülü bir dizi hikâyeyi okuyucularına sunar. İlk bakışta birbiriyle çok az bağlantılı hikâyeler derlemesi gibi görünen romanda bu hikâyeler aslında ana karakter Frederica Stonehouse sayesinde birbirlerine bağlanmıştır. Hikâyelerin çokluğu, tamamı anlatılabilir benlik kavramını ve onun tanınma ve değişim isteklerini çağrıştıran kişisel, kültürel, sosyal veya dini gibi birçok ihtiyaca hitap eder. Roberts, psikolojik bir yolculuğa çıkıp farklı kimlikler

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arasında rahatça dolaşıp kendi hayatını kendisi şekillendiren 'temsili özne' Frederica karakteriyle, Kartezyen varlık anlayışına bir alternatif sunar. Roman içerisinde aktarılan hikâyelerin sarmal anlatımının sonsuzluğu ve bu tarzın aşikâr bir biçimde bir dönüşüm gücü oluşturması amacı Frederica'nın neticede kendini yeniden keşfetmesine ve her ne kadar geçici de olsa kendi kendini tanımlamasına ve kendi şartlarıyla formüle etmesine olanak sağlar. Metinde sunulan çok seslilik, benlik kavramının bölümlenmiş ve bağlamsal doğasını çağrıştırır ve bir edebi anlatıda herhangi bir kimliğin nasıl tek ve sabit bir anlam oluşturmaktan uzak olduğunu gösterir. Roman içerisinde cinsiyet kavramının işlenmesi, bizim normatif cinsiyet beklentilerimizi ve bireylerin kendi deneyimlerini ele alır. Daha çok karşı cinsin giydiği kıyafetlerin giyilmesi, kılık değiştirip gizlenme, baskıcı çevrelerden kaçınma gibi tekrar eden temalar yoluyla sunulan Robert'in karakterlerinin deneyimleri, karakterler kişiler arası ve/veya sosyal tanımlanma arayışları içerisindeyken onların tanımlanma yanlısı ve karşıtı mücadeleler vermelerini temsil eder. Robert'in sabit olmayan—ve bazen de belirsiz olan—cinsiyet ve kimlik kategorilerini kullanımı yeni tanımlanma şekillerinin ve böylece yeni sübjektiflik modlarının oluşmasına yol açar. Benliğin akışkan bir kavram olarak görülmesi bizim insanoğlu olarak çoklu kimlik söylemlerince oluşturulduğumuzu ve sürekli bir oluşum süreci içerisinde olup kendi içerisinde bütüncül, güvenli ve otantik bir benlik kavramından uzak olduğumuzu vurgular.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Belirsizlik, karşı cins kıyafet giyme, akışkanlık, tanın(ma)ma, öteki.

"*The I exists in a state of endless becoming,*
there is nothing permanent about it at all."
Johann Gottlieb Fichte

Working with a Chinese box narrative structure, Michèle Roberts creates a set of embedded stories in her 1994 novel *Flesh and Blood* that would seem like a loose collage of unrelated stories of women at first sight but are actually interwoven by the novel's protagonist Frederica Stonehouse as her initial self–narrative segues into a set of short narratives. A stylistically and structurally experimental text unfolds during the course of the novel in which different times and different values are expressed through the polyphony of voices and styles, thus unsettling the centred stability of the novel as a coherent whole. The plurality of voices presented in the text alludes to the fragmented and contextual nature of the self and shows how a contingent identity is able to escape the notion of a single and stable meaning in a literary narration.

In the thirteen embedded narratives, various events, locations, and time periods are covered by the various embedded narrators. In her book *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories* (2007), Sarah Falcus calls *Flesh and Blood* as one of Roberts's "typically inventive novels" which utilises "multiple narratives to tell complex stories that cross boundaries of space and time" (129). Indeed, after fashioning herself into a storyteller, Frederica shares stories not only from her own life, as in the chapter "Freddy," but also from the lives of those that she might have encountered; stories heard, read, and/or (re)created; stories that are part of her subjective reality and cultural imaginary. Just as Roberts's earlier 'patchwork' novel *A Piece of the Night* (1978) in which reality and fantasy are blurred, *Flesh*

and Blood as well pieces together stories of various women to "uncover the hidden patterns of women's oppression across time and place" (173), as Gill Frith notes in her essay "Women, Writing and Language: Making the Silences Speak". As *Flesh and Blood* spirals from Frederica's present, the 1960s, to the 16th century and back again, the reader meets, among others, Georgina's fable of cross-dressing to gain recognition as a painter in the nineteenth century, the story of Rosa, who takes the place of her mother fled into the wilderness, Eugénie's tale of a troubling reunion of mother and child, Cherubina's *parler femme* introducing Paradise, the chapter named "Anon," which portrays a prenatal inner text of the feminine that moves beyond time and history, or Louise's story of loveless and failed mothering. The unfolding embedded narratives between the interlocking first and last chapters provide stories that are meditations and reflections on motherhood, death, love-hate relationships between mothers and daughters, power relations, religious fervour, marriage, and sexuality. The recurring themes work as echoes and threads throughout the book, binding the different narratives of women to one another.

By utilising recognition theory and focusing on especially Axel Honneth's critical social theory of recognition and idea of autonomy defined as the capacity to lead one's own life, I investigate the ways in which particular characters express their expectations for appropriate levels of recognition. As Christopher Zurn observes when discussing Honneth's social theory of struggles and its continuously changing nature, "the particular roles, expectations, and concrete forms of recognition change throughout time and differ across distinct societies" (7). Accordingly, the transformations of society's particular recognition order can be noticed in Roberts's novel through the various ways of approaching the issues that confront women. The characters' basic recognition needs are changing as they are always shaped by particular social circumstances or structures of a given time; different centuries entail different struggles.

The play with gender in the novel aims towards our normative expectations of gender and its effect on the experiences of individuals. Expressed through the recurring themes of cross-dressing, disguise and escape from oppressive environments, Roberts's characters experience struggles for and against recognition as they seek interpersonal and/or social recognition. In choosing to weave my paper around the histories of specific characters—namely, the protagonist Frederica, who journeys from daughterhood into motherhood, and the late nineteenth-century painter character of the embedded stories, Georgina, whose story most powerfully portrays a struggle against social subordination—I wish to examine how the characters face struggles between social obligations, family roles, and individual desires and scrutinise the means by which the text questions a fixed, stable, and homogeneous identity. For both characters, the act of cross-dressing opens up new opportunities for action. Frederica disguises herself in order to escape from her judgmental environment, while Georgina puts on men's clothing so as to be able to take her place in the male-dominated artistic circles and find recognition in the art world. With the representation of embedded stories and gender ambiguity, Roberts examines and critiques not only the concept of a fixed gender but the concept of stable self as well, thus initiating a shift from an atomistic to an intersubjective model of the subject. In other words,

as a stable subjectivity is absent in the text, the self is introduced as a commutable entity always in-process.

A Suspended Identity: Overcoming Misrecognition

By introducing Frederica's character as an agentic subject, Roberts offers an alternative account of the Cartesian subject. The novel commences with the story of Fred on the run, confessing to having murdered her mother: "An hour after murdering my mother I was in Soho" (1). Frederica's narrative turns into multiple tales; a set of short narratives unfold between the interlocking first and last chapters, which are titled "Fred" and "Frederica," respectively. Only in the final chapter do we learn that Frederica's crime consists in being pregnant with an illegitimate child and in turning away from her mother and her father and their harassing criticism. Therefore, as Ralf Hertel argues, "her murder is not that of flesh and blood but merely a metaphorical one" (133). As Falcus notes as well, the matricide can be understood as "a literal interpretation of the psychological paradigm of separation" (130). That is, with the metaphoric matricide, Frederica expresses her desire for detachment, change, and authenticity. She separates herself from the maternal bondage with a symbolic shift from daughterhood to motherhood, which subsequently leads to gaining individuation and autonomy over her life. However, by the displacement of a previous state of being, being a daughter, she is put into an ambiguous, suspended state where a quest for a positive relation-to-self can take place on novel terms.

Frederica's metamorphosis initiates in Madame Lesley's shop where Fred succumbs to the experience of the overflowing patterns and textures but soon comes across an "irresistible" salmon color chiffon dress, which she refers to as her "savior" (4). She sets her foot in the shop's fitting room, already introduced at the very beginning of the novel as the place "where it began" (1), and gets rid of men's clothes: the boots, jeans, and the loose jacket giving her the look of a young man while she was on the run. Although the reader is informed about her reason for donning men's clothing only in the final chapter where we learn that Fred is on the run to escape from her parents' harassing criticism about carrying her illegitimate child, with the act of cross-dressing she enables herself to change into someone else: she claims to put on a disguise so that someone else can "feel the bite and sting of those words but not [her]" (174). Wounded by her inability to conform to her parents' social convention, her skin is branded with harassing words like "EVIL and MAD" and "YOU LITTLE SLUT YOU LITTLE WHORE" (174). The stigmatised body alludes to Cixous's "branded criminal". As Cixous writes in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*: "When marked, the innocent person is 'guilty'" (xiv). "My flesh was branded with those words for everyone to see, I had to cover myself with a man's clothes then run" (174), Frederica narrates. The men's clothing thus serves as a disguise for Frederica, who refuses to be recognised as "evil and mad". Recognition theorists such as Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth seek to interpret and justify struggles through the idea that identity is shaped, at least partly, by relations with other people. As selfhood is closely connected to and shaped in relational contexts, feelings of self-worth, self-respect, and self-esteem are possible only if one is positively recognised for who one is.

In his essay "The Politics of Recognition" Taylor claims that identity is "partly shaped by recognition or its absence [...][n]onrecognition or misrecognition" (25), which "can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being," and "can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred" (26). Consequently, by being misrecognised, a false or distorted identity might be formed which can completely limit aspirations and undermine authenticity, self-respect, and self-esteem. As Taylor succinctly puts it, "due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people . . . [but] a vital human need" (26).

With the act of cross-dressing, Frederica conceals her bodily features and gender to a point of irrecognisability which gives her a chance to cover her symbolic wounds and overcome misrecognition. She temporarily suspends her own identity, which can be understood as a reaction to the negative emotional experience of disrespect and a denial of inappropriate recognition. By detaching herself from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from the state of being a daughter and part of a family, she destabilises not only prevailing identity categories but also relations of power.

Fashioning into a Storyteller: Formulating an Agentic Subjectivity

Madame Lesley's peculiar shop represents a protective place where Frederica finds a haven and can embark on a psychological journey by the act of storytelling. Here, Frederica is able to utilise the tools of language and is able to express herself freely. The shop owner Madame Lesley serves as an audience ready to be amused by the stories Fred is about to share: "Tell me about it, [Madame Lesley] said: while I do the fitting" (6).

When discussing collective identities in his book *Hegel's Theory of Recognition*, Sybol Anderson claims that "everyone is associated with a number of collective identities simply by virtue of having shown up in the world, whether or not we identify with them or consider them salient" (4). Similarly, stories that are part of our intangible cultural heritage make up our life and can influence an individual's horizon of judgment. Following this train of thought, the different forms of life presented in the embedded stories can be understood as Anderson's concept of collective identities shaping each individual's judgments, values, and choices.

Moreover, Roberts draws an analogy between Frederica and Scheherazade, the storyteller–performer who continually unfolds one tale immediately after another in an inventive splicing way in order to postpone her death: "Scheherazade had told stories, night after night, to save her life. She made them up. She was a storyteller. I didn't know whether or not the stories that jostled in my head were true, or whether I was a liar. So many different voices chattered inside me" (6). Using storytelling and thus language as a performative power, Frederica is given the ability to articulate the "many different voices," and to enter into the other. Roberts's choice of likening Frederica to Scheherazade serves as a means to show the potential power of storytelling and language. To utilise Todorov's words, for Scheherazade, "[n]arrative equals life; the absence of narrative equals death" (74). Indeed, from the point of view of language, both Scheherazade and Frederica fight for the right of free expression and use language as a powerful tool to deter either

physical or psychological violence. Although Frederica seems uncertain about whether her narratives can save or transform her: "I wasn't sure if my stories could save my life or my mother's" (7), utilising language as a means of self-expression, she is formulated into an agentic subjectivity with "a capacity to think and to will" (Lengermann 78). Therefore, the act of storytelling provides Frederica with the means through which she is able to understand and articulate her negative interpersonal experiences and to formulate herself and her history in her own terms, even if only temporarily. To put it another way, just like Scheherazade, Frederica is empowered by the application of narrative skills, which eventually becomes an essential component of facilitating transformation, a point I shall argue later.

Interestingly, Roberts's work enters into dialogue with Virginia Woolf's act of 'thinking back through our mothers,' famously declared in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in which Woolf suggests the possibility of different constructions of narrative and female identity: "For we think back through our mothers if we are women" (75). The task of thinking back through other women aims at self-recognition, but it is not a process of differentiation or negation, but rather a construction of a self in which the (m)other(s) can co-exist and interact with the self thus developing a female genealogy. Such an act provides a common ground of shared female experience through different historical eras. Roberts's occupation with female genealogy has also been noted by Falcus, who argues for a maternal genealogy presenting women's voices not only in *Flesh and Blood* but in Roberts's whole oeuvre. The various depictions of female experience in the novel widen the definitions of identity, self, and gender, and produce interrelations between the concepts of Frederica's identity and the narrated stories, therefore alluding to the narratable self and its desire for recognition and change.

Frederica's psychological quest of self-discovery through narration begins with a word which she carefully selects and holds like the end of a yarn she can wind up: "Out of the babble inside me I picked a word. I held it like the end of a thread, unravelled, that I could wind as I wove my way into the labyrinth" (7). This word is "love" (7)—a word with a long philosophical and literary history—and it initiates the several embedded stories of the novel.

At this point it is crucial to mention Axel Honneth who, following Hegel's, Mead's, and Winnicott's theories, identifies a tripartite division of ethical life; a three "patterns of recognition" necessary for an individual to develop a positive relation-to-self. Continuing Hegel's concepts of love, family, ethical unit and ethical life expressed in *Philosophy of Rights*, Honneth states in his book *Struggle for Recognition* that a fully formed identity requires recognition by others and must include the universal needs of human subjects: love, rights, and social esteem. To to borrow the words of Honneth: "For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem - provided, one after another, by the experience of those three forms of recognition - that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as both an autonomous and an individual being and to identify with his or her goals and desires" (169). By the mode of recognition termed 'love' Honneth connotes our physical needs and emotions being met by others realising in our primary relationships including friends, family, and romantic relations. Love thus signifies the experience of being

recognised which further develops the individual's basic self-confidence - meaning "the very basic sense of the stability and continuity of one's self as a differentiated individual with particular needs and emotions" (Zurn 31). Without such recognition one would lack the capacity to express themselves publicly: "to speak of 'love' as an 'element' of ethical life can only mean that, for every subject, the experience of being loved constitutes a necessary precondition for participation in the public life of a community" (Honneth 38). Love thus serves as a form of mutual recognition between self and other whereby one comes to know oneself and to be oneself only in and through an affective relationship and a specific form of emotional support from another.

Accordingly, Frederica's thread and the journey of the "labyrinth" (7) seem multi-layered: she creates a position for herself as a storyteller-performer by which she is able to relate to others and eventually develop a positive relation-to-self. As a storyteller-performer, she creates a space in which she can initiate the process of creating an ontological autonomy and begin to write a subjectivity which exceeds the limitations imposed upon her by misrecognition.

(De)constructing Gendered Identities and Norms: Aiming for Intersubjective Recognition

Roberts presents the story of the nineteenth-century English painter character of the chapters "Félicité" and "Georgina" in an imaginary documentary film-like scenario where the reader can experience "[o]ne more illusion of reality" (157). Georgina's story portrays both struggles for and against recognition when in order to gain admission into a masculine group in France, she decides to wear men's garments and introduces herself as George Mannot. Since conventional female roles are limiting for Georgina, she chooses cross-dressing to provide an outlet for her to be able to act outside of the accepted and expected behaviour patterns. To escape from social exclusion, from a kind of "social death" (Zurn 39), Georgina puts on a disguise. Her act can be understood as a necessary reaction to a form of disrespect which makes it impossible for her to understand herself as a free and equal agent and therefore deprives her of the ability to develop an appropriate sense of self-respect. By presenting a new identity to the world, she reaches a new dimension of selfhood which motivates her to pursue recognition (Anderson 73), and therefore, has a chance to cultivate the world according to her societal and artistic goals and desires. Her engagement in the practice of cross-dressing in France becomes an extension of her everyday Aesthetic dress style practiced in England: "Dressing as a man was almost simply an extension of how she dressed every day as a student painter" (162). Her profession and the conscious choice of Aesthetic dresses mark the beginning of Georgina's rejection of attributes that made late-nineteenth-century women attractive; the rejection of "encumbering petticoats and constructing corsets" (Condra 82), as well as domesticity, passivity, and dependence. However, Frederica can only fully embrace her liberation when covered in men's clothes since it is then that she discovers a new way of being and is able to realise herself fully in a social context: "Like George Sand before her, she found that men's clothes meant that she was not accosted when she roamed around by herself at night" (162). By wearing men's clothes, she is enabled to negotiate her way in the public sphere independently, without unwanted

approaches. That is, her disguise not only gives her an *entrée* into the "masculine world she admire[s] as superior" (163), but also creates different opportunities for intersubjective recognition. Being able to manipulate the perceptions of her surroundings, her struggle as a woman artist ceases as she escapes the socially defined limitations imposed on late-nineteenth-century womanhood.

Roberts names Georgina's act of cross-dressing as a "daring masquerade" (156), which alludes to its carnivalesque nature. Involvement in a carnival implies - as Terry Castle suggests while developing her theory of masquerade from Bakhtinian carnival - the sartorial exchange, masking, mingling of different social groups (11), as well as the abolition of rules, control, and hierarchies. Based on and drawing from performance traditions and conventions, carnivals allow people to create spaces where they can raise awareness about and challenge societal and gender roles, and facilitate reflection that might eventually bring about changes not only in the individual but also in the community. Georgina's character therefore can be understood as a destabilising figure who challenges not only fixed gender categories but also social roles and conventions.

Recognised as a male, Georgina is not treated differently among men; nobody puts her in her place or offers her unsolicited advice (162). As George, she produces new frames for her identity as well as new sets of relations. With the deconstruction of masculine gendered acts, she incorporates new habits and a list of various masculine gendered acts that create the era's very idea of maleness appear as possibilities for her: she can "tip back her chair, crack jokes, smoke cigarettes, eat and drink what she like[s], and advance strong opinions" (163) without any consequences. Therefore, her masculinity is realised not only through the physical presentation but through action and self-conduct as well. Having fulfilled the relevant criteria, Georgina gains the power, privileges, and significance traditionally attached to male members of the society. To put it another way, as a man, she is able to acquire the rights and social status usually reserved only for men and can claim the cultural signifier of masculinity as her own, and thus is able to pursue confirmation of her status as a talented artist. By so doing, she not only achieves a healthy sense of self-esteem, but a "livable life" - to adapt Butler's term from *Undoing Gender* - by being recognised by her community as a viable subject having unique value and legitimacy.

However, the empowering force of disguise reveals the boundaries of gender as well since when dressing in men's clothing Georgina imitates a pre-existing performance that has already been determined in advance; she performs a "socially scripted act" (117), to use Paddy McQueen's words. With a focus on the separation between the corporeal and the acted gender, the Butlerian performative aspect of gender, which implies the rejection of the notion that gender comes from any internal essence or predetermined structure of being, is revealed. Georgina utilises "identificatory mobility" (Campbell 94) by dissecting masculinity into a series of behaviours and gestures that can be learnt by a female subject just as easily. Consequently, the "daring masquerade" (156) not only empowers Georgina to assert a new social identity but shows how gender is constituted and naturalised by the repetition and reiteration of certain appearance, behaviour, and action.

Although her performance highlights the constructed nature of gender stereotypes, ultimately, she succeeds in destabilising both masculinity and femininity as stable categories of identity. To put it another way, Georgina never stops being a woman; she creates her masculine identity only in order to be able to express an essential part of herself and gain recognition in the society. In virtue of having a new status in society, she is afforded certain rights and is able to acquire a sense of self-respect; that is, the sense of being free and equal among others (Zurn 34). During the periods Georgina spends as a male painter, she is removed from the limited feminine subject position, allowing her to develop into an independent, decisive, and self-determining subject. Gender deception thus becomes the means through which a woman can achieve social recognition in a patriarchal society. Cross-dressing, therefore, provides Frederica a way to circumvent society's power plays and boundaries without coming out in actual rebellion.

Referring to a cross-dressing type of masquerade in her book *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, Marjorie Garber notes that cross-dressing constitutes "a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of 'female' and 'male' whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural. The current popularity of cross-dressing as a theme in art and criticism represents, [Garber] think[s], an undertheorised recognition of the necessary critique of binary thinking" (10-11). Accordingly, Georgina's cross-dressing disturbs the behavioral repetitions of conventional categories of both genders, thereby producing a unique identity that challenges the limiting boundaries of traditional male and female roles. Georgina acquires "two bodies, apparently separate and different, male and female, which were joined together by the to-ing and fro-ing between them. One skin stitched to the other then ripped off, over and over again" (156). She "marries" both her male and female identity parts, thus making a commitment to the different roles and also creating a bond by joining them: "She made herself into a marriage. She married two split parts of herself, drew them together and joined them, and she also let each one flourish individually" (156). Georgina's adaptability enables her to oscillate between genders thus resisting full integration into a particular gender-related norm. Through the double role and carnivalesque disguise, Roberts portrays a complex self that operates in transition and articulates the instability of the inhabited binary categories. Such movement offers Georgina a playful and temporary liberation from the socio-cultural norms and expectations, by which she manages to achieve liberation from her struggle against ascribed identity category and social status as a woman and is able to gain a self-determining and agentic subjectivity.

Having achieved a sense of authority through storytelling, Frederica comes to recognise her own personal strengths. Just like Georgina, Frederica as well changes her garments and subsequently presents her new identity to the public. She incorporates into society wearing the chosen pink chiffon dress which stands as a symbol for her new identity; the frock gives her a "new and beautiful self" (5), a "new skin" (147), in other words, a new frame to settle within. "Madam Lesley sold me the pink chiffon frock so that I could come out in style. [....] I had a new skin to try on. I pulled it around me, a skin of pictures and words" (147)—we can

read. Referring to Frederica's new self as a "new skin of pictures and words," Roberts once again reflects on our intangible cultural heritage serving as a rich source and markers of identity; a context for shaping roles and identities, as well as transmitting knowledge.

Roberts's other word choice: "come out in style" (147) echoes the notion of 'coming out' which indicates the "public display of identity" (McQueen 170) and "focuses on issues of visibility, self-acceptance, inclusion, recognition, and autonomy" (McQueen 169). As Frederica passes through the shop's threshold symbolising a kind of ritual boundary, she moves into a new world and thus suddenly becomes present and visible to others. Her movement corresponds to Georgina's *entré* in the masculine world and indicates an integration into a community which will be responsive to, and affirmative of her new sense of self. In addition, the concept of 'coming out' carries a political value as well, strongly linked to the rise of identity politics in the 1960s - the time period when the novel's frame narrative is set - during which positive recognition of one's collective identity was the basis for political action (McQueen 169).

Frederica closes her movement from her previous position of daughterhood to a responsible and authentic life with poetic offerings. First, she offers an elegy for her mother she remembers, then for a mother she lost but found again. Her lyric elegy addresses her "first great love" who used to talk to her "in a secret language of mamabébé" (173): "(this is an elegy for the mother I remember [...] She was my place once and I was hers. I didn't give up her without a struggle" (173). Roberts's presentation of "merged subjectivity" (100), as Anna Fisk has put it in her book *Sex, Sin, and Our Selves*, is in accord with Honneth's argument on the symbiosis between baby and mother based on object relations theory and the concept of love as the first form of recognition-relationships. After remembering her "paradise garden" and "Queen of Heaven" (173), Frederica continues her elegy addressed now to her lost mother: "for my mother I lost, when the skin that bound us ripped away, our separate skins tore off and we were miserable being two being so different she couldn't like me being so unlike herself [...]" (173). Here Roberts suggests the symbiotic connection between mother and daughter and its inevitable dissolution. Honneth emphasises such attempts as a struggle for human emancipation and comprehension of each other and argues that the primary bond of love between the infant and the mother is given up to perceive themselves as separate beings with their own physical and emotional existences. However, such individuation can only take place, as Zurn notes, "in a healthy and productive manner if accompanied all along by mutual emotional support" (24), and requires a certain amount of sacrifice. Accordingly, Frederica's separation-individuation struggle can be considered, on the one hand, as a need of human nature. When discussing the final section of the novel in "Journeying Back to Mother: Pilgrimages of Maternal Redemption in the Fiction of Michèle Roberts," Cath Stowers emphasises on the psychoanalytic "journeys into and away from pre-Oedipality," a kind of rejection and return, and notes their necessity for the "subject formation of both mother and daughter" (71). However, it is crucial to consider the mother's inadequacy as a loving parent capable of recognising her child as another; as a separate individual with potentially conflicting needs and desires. In the penultimate chapter "Louise" the reader can learn Frederica's

mother's point of view where a certain lack of understanding and awareness of each other's needs are made explicit:

> We gave her everything a child should have: food clothes a roof over her head a good education. But it wasn't enough. There was something else she wanted. I never knew what it was. She made me feel so terrible for not giving it to her. But how could I give it to her when I didn't know what it was? What she gave to me was reproaches. Suffering. [...] I did my best. [...] But for her it wasn't enough. (170)

Frederica's mother's lack of recognition towards her daughter and her denied individuation seems evident from the quoted passage and is even more emphasised as she continues on criticising her daughter's interest and eagerness to become an artist: "She threw away all our hopes for her" (170). Although Frederica confronts her mother with her desire for having had emotional support, the articulation of the missing experience of affectionate care triggers the opposite reaction: "She was evil, to say what she said to me. That I hadn't loved her properly" (171). When discussing the link between successful identity formation and the experience of recognition as a precondition for public life, Honneth uses Hegel's argument on intersubjective recognition and draws a further conclusion: "an individual that does not recognize its partner to interaction to be a certain type of person is also unable to experience itself completely or without restriction as that type of person" (37). Consequently, since Frederica's mother is unable to reach a state where she can understand herself as a separate and distinct being, she can embrace neither her own independence nor her daughter's otherness. In fact, her wish for her daughter to assume her anger further emphasises her incompetency of treating her daughter as a separate individual: "Anger is the stone in my heart that I have carried since childhood, the stone I must not throw, let my daughter carry it for me, let her clasp the stone and let my heart lightened" (171).

Interestingly, Frederica's elegy in the final chapter continues on a similar account: she suggests a transgenerational continuum between mother's and daughter's fate: "this is also an elegy for a mother I found again she thought I had abandoned her and given her up for ever but I had not I needed to go away so that I could come back just as she did)" (173). Importantly, although Frederica is about to leave behind her previous state, her last words "just as she did" connote that the necessary separation from the mentioned original symbiosis between infant and mother, in other words, an inevitable maturing was performed by her mother as well. Although the pattern of separation passed on generation to generation connotes continuity; an existence of past in the present, Frederica's quest for identity and selfhood closes with a hope for a better future.

Unfinished and Unfinishable: An Always-Becoming Subject

By the end of her psychological journey, Frederica perceives herself as an agentic subject who takes responsibility for realising a good life for herself as well as for her family. She recognises herself as someone who is capable of motherhood and articulates confidence in her own capacity not to repeat her mother's entrapment. By doing so, she echoes Honneth's mode of recognition termed 'esteem' which

relates to recognition of one's traits and abilities, and underpins the process of becoming fully individualised.

Following her mother's elegy in the last chapter, Frederica expresses her unconditional love towards her unborn daughter. With such articulation the initial relationship of recognition between child and mother is immediately born: "(this is a love song for my daughter not yet born, who swims inside me dreaming unborn dreams, my flesh and blood, made of love in the land of milk and honey, the land of spices and stories)" (174). The love song indicates the ability to recognise and perceive her daughter as a subject worthy of being loved. Shortly, the love song is followed by a prayer in which Frederica expresses her assurance and hope for the future and the transformation of the present as well. She promises her baby not to be harmed or burdened neither by herself nor by her partner, Martin, but to be recognised for being who she *is*: "(a prayer for my daughter that I shall be able to contain her grows, inside me and outside me, that I shall be able to see her through while she needs me then let go, not to bind or fetter her but to see her as she is, different the same, to love her with imagination and plenty)" (175). The prayer in parenthesis can be understood as a symbol of the new values and norms based on love, mutual recognition, individual self-assertion and development as Frederica aims at acknowledging the distinctiveness of her daughter and hopes to develop an undistorted recognition relation with her. In the lyric prayer, Frederica creates a "trusted space," to use Zurn's term, in which the fear of the other dissolves and one receives positive recognition for their own traits and accomplishments and can develop according to one's needs. Zurn writes about such a state as a place "where each acknowledges the other as a vital, living, embodied physical being with its own particular urges and emotions, through a steady background of emotional support that allows for the healthy individuation of each away from the original state of felt symbiosis" (30).

Furthermore, Frederica's quest for self-recognition is not only a personal one aimed at producing a feeling of self-confidence or well-being but takes a broader, more social perspective. The novel's final lines express her vision for a more perfect social order which aims at changing an insufficient status quo towards a more just recognition order; a hope for a shift in views and a new social structure. Roberts's usage of the unstable—and occasionally uncertain—categories of gender and identity opens up new forms of recognition and thus new modes of subjectivity. However, Frederica's and Georgina's new identities and positions in life cannot be considered as teleological ends in themselves. By presenting Frederica's and Georgina's characters as agentic, performative, and always-becoming subjects, Roberts undermines an essentialist understanding of identity and thus formulates a novel way of self-understanding which resists the allure of wholeness, unity, essence, and self-mastery. The plurality of voices presented in the book suggests a world constantly changing and adapting to new circumstances. Thus, a fluid view of the self emphasises the fact that we, as human beings, are formed through multiple discourses of identity and always in-process, devoid of a complete inner, secure or authentic self.

Like a Cixousian sentence, the text is manipulated from back to front by its infinity; it turns into a stream with its own direction (Jacobus 80). The novel

finishes on an alternative account therefore leaving it open to other women, other storytellers to continue: "We were young, and full of hope. It was the sixties. So we walked back through Soho and into the next story:" (175). Roberts offers an open-ended future which can be understood as a refusal of stability as well as a call for other life-stories to continue; a call for future generations that will be similarly challenged and changed through the interpretive politics of social struggles for and against recognition.

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