

**University of Adelaide**

**Maya Clair Linden**

**‘Desire and its disastrous results’<sup>1</sup>: re-examining representations of feminine masochism in women’s writing**

Abstract:

Should the feminist critique of literature posit a feminist utopia as its cause or presume and seek an affirmative feminist narrative in female-authored texts?

This paper examines how the concerns of feminist literary studies interact, and sometimes interrupt, women’s pleasure in reading and writing transgressive femininities by invoking as a case study, one of the most contentious areas of feminism’s interaction with women’s sexuality—feminine masochism.

Using examples from contemporary fiction and criticism, it explores how social and theoretical movements shape our interpretation of creative writing and examines the conflicts that arise when the critical study of literature focuses on the appropriateness of the images of femininity that are portrayed.

Biographical note:

Maya has lived and worked in the US and in Australia as a writer, researcher, restaurant and bar critic, book reviewer and teacher of creative writing at the University of Melbourne. She has recently completed a PhD on feminine masochism in women’s literature at the University of Adelaide and her creative and critical writing has been published in many local and international journals including *Meanjin*, *Westerly* and *Australian Book Review* as well as several anthologies.

Keywords:

Masochism—Feminism—Literature

Recently, I came across a thought I'd noted down in the margin of James Salter's *A sport and a pastime*: 'A seemingly sadistic act, the subsequent acquiescence of the other, is acceptable when, and because, we sense there is somewhere love at its heart? Like a cold day in February—beautiful in its opposition to what is expected, tantalising even—because it still hums with the knowledge of a future heat beneath it?'

I still desire to escape at times into the lust and reverie of Dean and Anne-Marie's hotel room trysts, the sullen streets and sleepy cafes of that passionate, violent romance. An American man and a French girl, lost in an intoxicating sexual exploration. I can't recall the reading of which passage exactly made me write the note, but I know some part of me was hesitating, seeking to justify my enjoyment of Salter's story that, as it may be argued, portrays women as a collection of erogenous parts, existing solely for the sexual satisfaction of men. Indeed, the intensity of Anne-Marie's physical objectification has inspired anger: 'Anne-Marie is objectified in such a way that would make any good collegiate feminist cringe. She's woman defined as sexual vessel,' writes one critic (Faulkner 2008). Yet, I do not wish to linger on a discussion of Salter's novel, for such questions and objections have too often and expectedly been raised in relation to the writing of seemingly masochistic female sexuality by *male* authors. What are of greater intrigue to me are reactions to writing by women that present analogous accounts of feminine desire. What greater hesitations do we have with these texts? Is it dangerous for a woman to write such an image of femininity into fiction?

During an interview with author, Susanna Moore, I began to ask about the apparent seduction by violence of the character, Frannie, in her novel, *In the cut*, which I will later discuss. Literary critics, Moore said, have misunderstood: 'Her behaviour is less motivated by masochism than by her refusal to be afraid.' Frannie's practiced submission, Moore claims, is no more than a pleasurable 'part of the dance that can occur between a man and a woman [...] the woman's resistance is erotic, it gives her power [...] it is a kind of play-acting, a replication of the relationship between men and women that is going on every second of the day.'<sup>2</sup> I wanted to agree wholeheartedly, but again I could not resist some hesitation. What level of responsibility do we have to women and to feminism in our writing and understanding of femininity in fiction? As stated by Merri Lisa Johnson, 'the familiar connection of sex and violence provokes in me two responses: there's the proper feminist critique (violence is bad, connecting sex and death devalues the erotic, condones and fetishises the brutalized female body) and then there's my real response...' (2002, 42).

This paper will explore the sites of tension that arise for women as an awareness of feminist political thought interacts with their experience of creative texts. More specifically, how the concerns of feminist literary studies interact, and sometimes interrupt, women's reading and writing of transgressive femininities. It is also an attempt to invoke debate surrounding one of the most contentious areas of feminism's interaction with women's sexuality—feminine masochism—and to examine and attempt to re-read the uneasy presence of this aspect of sexuality in women's writing. For, as Janice Radway suggests: 'it is not generally considered politically correct for women to seek out

masochistic pleasures, whereas the pleasures of being nurtured and cared for are offered as the politically correct alternative' (1984, 81) by many contemporary feminisms.

Although I do not make the assumption of a standard feminist perspective on representations of sexuality and violence or underestimate the complexity of feminist debate on this issue—there are feminisms rather than a single feminist position and, of course, as many variations on these positions as there are us—the restriction of the duration of this paper limits me to the most common feminist response: that romance plots involving masochistic female characters are damaging to women and the feminist project because they encourage women to respond erotically to the conditions of their own oppression.

In response to representations of what have commonly been considered masochistic characters in the work of contemporary female authors, many times critics place their focus on the text's appropriateness in terms of the aims of feminism and its potentially negative effect on the movement's achievements and progress.<sup>3</sup> As Carla Kaplan writes, 'Feminist criticism has often looked to women's writing to mirror feminist criticism itself', and 'more than any other aspect of contemporary feminism, the so-called dominant feminist perspective on sexuality is what seems to signal regression' (Henry 2004, 100).

My title, 'Desire and its disastrous results'—a line taken from René Girard's writings on deceit and desire in representations of the self and other in literature—has a double meaning. Firstly I use it to refer to the sometimes volatile nature of desire, the notion that we do not always want what is best for us, and, secondly, to refer to the disastrous results that may eventuate when such desires are written. Particularly the shocked responses that critics and readers may express regarding a woman writing self-destructive representations of feminine desire. I would suggest, as Janice Radway contends, that one of the consequences of feminist literary criticism has been a 'resulting preoccupation with the question of what a [female-authored] literary text can be taken as evidence for [...] whatever her intentions, no writer can foresee or prescribe the way her book will develop, be taken up, or read' (1984, 2). For example, one response to Susanna Moore's novel, questions: 'how can presumed feminists justify producing an erotic story involving the matter-of-fact mutilation of women?' (Fuller & Francke 2006, 16). Yet, the questions that seem most pertinent, and that return to me most persistently in my reading, writing, research and teaching of creative writing and critical theory are these: why should the feminist critique of literature posit a feminist utopia as its cause or presume and seek an affirmative feminist narrative in female-authored texts? How do social and theoretical movements shape our study and interpretation of creative writing on a more general scale? And what is ethically at stake for readers, writers, and theorists in works of literature?

The tendency for the feminist critique of literature to seek an affirmative feminist narrative in female-authored texts is a tendency I observed across a broad spectrum of critical material that deals with twentieth-century women's writing during my doctoral

research, and one that I proposed some alternatives to in lengthy analyses of writing by Marguerite Duras, Anne Carson and Susanna Moore, the latter of which I will now outline more briefly. Just as Moore's *In the cut* is a significant example of the shifting literary spaces of contemporary fiction, her critics' responses have predominantly exemplified the ways in which expectations of women's fiction has been influenced by feminism.

*In the cut* is undeniably a novel about women, writing, sexuality and violence. Frannie Avery is a divorcee living in New York, a creative writing teacher and literature professor who is researching a book on regional slang. Because of her occupation, Frannie's frequent musings on the mutability of words, and her articulate reflections on modern women's sexual expression, find an appropriate context:

Words themselves in their wit, exuberance, mistakenness and violence are thrilling to me: *Virginia*, n., vagina (as in 'he penetrated her Virginia with a hammer') (Moore 1995, 85).

I have new words for the dictionary [...] *to do*, v., to fuck, *to do*, v., to kill (Moore 1995, 149).

The novel recollects a few months in the life of Frannie and her friend, Pauline, as they are drawn into the investigation of a serial killer who is terrorizing the women of their neighbourhood. There is an array of suspects: Frannie's student, Cornelius, who is obsessed with serial killer John Wayne Gacy, her disgruntled ex-boyfriend, Curtis, and most importantly the smouldering Detective Malloy with whom Frannie becomes drawn into a volatile sexual liaison.

'A dangerous combination for me. Language and passion,' Frannie states in the opening pages, as if acknowledging the tension inherent in her story (Moore 1995, 30). Certainly, responses to Moore's foregrounding of violent eroticism within a romantic paradigm seems to reflect the fact that a narrative centring on these dual themes is 'troubling not only to women at large but [particularly] to feminists' (Radner 1995, 86). As Catherine Benoit reflects, Frannie's apparent seeking of her own death in the affair with the detective disturbed reviewers and critics because they saw the novel as an earnest examination of woman's inner instincts and desires (*Sex and violence as phantasm*, 2006). The first-edition dust jacket reviews exemplify this too: 'Sex and savagery all the more disturbing for being rendered in stylish prose' (*New York Times*), 'Extremes of sexuality and abuse' (*Miami Herald*), 'Sex and violence [...] written by a woman' (*Washington Post*). These responses suggest that the detached nihilism of Frannie's narration, coupled with the author's female identity, doubles the disturbing and "dangerous" nature of the novel's graphic content. In fact, as confirmed by Susanna Moore during interview (Personal interview, 2009), there emerged a widespread rumour following the novel's publication that it had been written by a man using her name as a pseudonym because no one wanted to, or could, believe that a woman would write about female desire in this way:

He lifted his handcuffs from his waistband [...] 'What are you doing?' I whispered. Even

though I knew. It was as if I had to pretend that I did not know what he was about to do to me. Opening what was closed. Insisting. Fixing me. Unsealing me. At last. I who did not wish to belong to one man. I who did not want to be fixed, to be held down, the closed opened, the heart broken. I wanted to be fixed, to be held down. Opened. The old longing to be chosen, pursued, fought for, called away (Moore 1995, 181).

In *Ordinary heroines*, Nadya Aisenberg claims that novels such as Moore's provide thought-provoking sites of identification for women because, these female characters, as well as their readers, are forced to reflect on and negotiate the boundaries of what is appropriate in terms of their sexual behaviour (1994, 150). Yet she concludes that these female characters 'provide vicarious satisfaction' for female readers—a satisfaction that is dangerous because 'they are hardly transformative messengers [...] like Erica Jong's characters they adopt the role of their male counterparts but in all other ways leave society as they find it' (1994, 154). Aisenberg's response is one of disillusion and frustration, a reaction commonly expressed in feminist literary studies of texts such as Moore's or Jong's. But what is returned here is also a common thread I came across in the feminist literary studies of such texts—the suggestion that the behaviour of fictional characters afford a real danger to readers, and that the role of literature, particularly that by women need be to perform a positive, social function. Should literature always, or ever, be expected to perform a transformative social function? As I will later suggest, it is suggestions and expectations such as these that I find may be more damaging to our enjoyment and understanding of literature than its failure to present a politically correct world vision.

The closing scene of *In the cut* unequivocally in remains one of the most shocking and powerfully written episodes of sexual violence by a contemporary female author. As her breasts are sliced from her body, narrator, Frannie watches:

The nipple resting on the edge of the blade, the razor cutting smoothly, easily, through the taut cloth, through the skin, the delicate blue skein of netted veins in flood, the dark blood running like the dark river, the Indian river, the sycamore, my body so vivid (1995, 261).

This violent description later shifts from first to second, to third person, transporting the reader from literal descriptions of bodily pain to a disengaged poetic consciousness in which Frannie's narration dissolves into quotation from *The passionate man's pilgrimage* by Walter Raleigh:

My skirt was heavy with blood, pooled between my thighs [...] it tickled when it dripped onto my skin, into my pubic hair, over the labia. I was not wearing any underwear. You remember [...] I am bleeding. I am bleeding to death. And I will be lucky if I die [...] Give me my Scallop shell of quiet (1995, 265-267).

What we also find in Frannie's voice is an example of a female character speaking from, what Barbara Freeman identifies as, 'a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into a relation with an otherness—social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic—that is excessive and unrepresentable' (1995, 2-3). Moore's juxtaposition

of meditative description with an account of dismemberment renders the scene more pleasurable, and therefore more troubling. Frannie's dying voice, both in its femininity and its erotic otherness, embodies all that is often unrepresented in fiction by women that takes female sexuality as its topic. In its disturbing allure, this closing scene simultaneously opens a questioning of all that has been found problematic by literary theorists who have argued for some level of feminist responsibility in novels by and about women and is, among many other scenes, probably the reason that the novel has most often been met with ambivalence and distaste in its analysis (see Fuller & Francke 2003, Hopgood 2004, and Konow 2003).

In his writings on ethics and literature Derek Attridge refers to the 'urge to allegorise' when interpreting literature, which he relates to our desire to retreat to the safety of utilising a 'traditional trope to make sense of things that, for one reason or another, are puzzling when taken at face value' (2004, 39). In the case of women's texts such as Moore's, which depict transgressive feminine experience, the traditional approach has been to lay over them a grid of feminism. However, as Attridge contends:

Whether historical, biographical, psychological, moral, or political [...] these modes of interpretation do damage to the work as a work of literature. In reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed *everything* (2004, 36).

Perhaps it is a fault in the way we are sometimes taught to think about literature, that that which pushes us beyond the boundaries of the representable must be confined in order to be understood. Perhaps, too, we most often resort to a fixed mode of interpreting writing when we are faced with examples that *are* disturbing, unexpected, ambivalent or excessive. Yet, perhaps more expansive readings of transgressive femininity might be generated when an orthodox feminism is set aside. For on closer examination, Moore's characters often are divided, double voiced, double discoursed—aware, of the sometimes problematic intersection of fictional identities and social reality. *In the cut's* Frannie anticipates, questions and speaks back: 'I know that. The difference between male and female perversion. The action of the man is directed toward a symbol, not himself. The woman acts against herself,' she states, as if replying directly to Freud's writings on feminine sexuality, but 'I am not a masochist. I know this' (Moore 1995, 188).

I believe that many misreadings of novels, such as Moore's, have occurred because critics view what might be considered masochistic female protagonists as wholly passive victims, acquiescent to the sexual scripts of patriarchy, without considering the ways in which these characters might in fact shift and expand our understanding of the nature of literary agency, through their very confrontation with the limits of the representable. Perhaps, as readers and critics we need to become more expansive in our analysis of literature, in order to understand characters such as these, as 'subjects who exert will, even at the cost of self-destruction, and thus not merely as victims who are acted upon' (Freeman 1995, 6). Potentially disturbing representations of femininity are then not "dangerous" as such or a purported threat to the achievements of feminism but are instead

contributions to an essential element of the pleasure of writing and reading—the part that can confront us with otherness, confound our view of the world, and educate our emotions. They are opportunities to explore and inhabit fleetingly, alternative subjectivities, those that differ from our own.

I see that Moore's rendering of the complexity of female desire is also both informed and freed by its intertextuality and post-modernist narrative strategies. There are many instances of reflection on the process of writing and story telling in conversations between Frannie and Detective Malloy: "How do you know I'm a writer?" I asked. "I can tell," he said. "You're making shit up in your head all the time" (Moore 1995, 44). Similarly, the genre in which Moore's text both falls and subverts (literary fiction/crime fiction) is asserted via an informal literature review (Woolf, Naipaul, Hemingway and so on are referenced in the opening pages) and when Frannie explains the considerations of each text that she has or has not included for her students in the course she teaches, she comments: 'I wondered if they would like Graham Greene. *Brighton Rock* perhaps. But I had forgotten, I don't know how, the dream in which the murderer, straight razor in hand, says only two words: "such tits"' (1995, 12). This works powerfully as a prolepsis of Frannie's murder—as does the excerpt given at this point from *The passionate man's pilgrimage* ('Give me my scallop shell of quiet'), later recalled by Frannie's dying voice.

In this way, *In the cut* is a literary text that 'demands a self-consciousness from the reader [...] a consciousness of the mechanism of language itself as structure [...] and analysis in the act of reading' (Radner 1995, 79). It possesses a double semiotic nature, both in its manipulations of language and genre—yet, aspects of the work such as these were largely ignored in most existing critiques that tended instead to focus on the inappropriateness or irresponsibility of Moore's representations of femininity (see Fuller & Francke 2003, Hopgood 2004, and Konow 2003).

While Moore's novel and other similar texts have often times been vilified for their contentious representations of female sexuality, perhaps these texts are not truly understood at all when we view them as narratives concerned with the problem of post-feminist heterosexual relationships. In her discussion of some of the problems of feminist literary analysis, Nancy K. Miller recognises the importance of accepting the presence of ambivalence and transgression in women's writing, concluding that 'to establish Reading lists [for women] that reflect only orthodox feminist positions, and to call for the production of literature with [only] positive role models [...] does not tell the whole story' (1990, 114). Miller suggests that these approaches to literature are dangerous in themselves because they 'threaten to erase the ambiguities of the feminist project' (1990, 114). I would agree, that it is through an acknowledgment of ambivalences, such as those achieved in Moore's writing for example, that we might in fact come to understand much more about women's fraught relationship to men, to patriarchy and to feminism.

As Kevin Brophy writes: 'my aim as a writer in approaching [literature] is to avoid becoming stuck in extreme closeness or extreme detachment, though without losing entirely the privileges and insights each of these possibilities offer' (2009, 36). In this

way, I hope too, as writers and teachers of writing, that we might negotiate a new place in the dialogue between feminism and literature, one that acknowledges in equal measure the importance of feminist literary studies and the sites of ambivalence that arise as women's political awareness interacts with their own subjective experience and self-representation. And, more generally, force the acceptance that novels are valuable, not only in their educational possibilities, but in their capacity to confront us with an otherness that *complicates* and thus enriches our perceptions of the relationship between writing, self and social reality.

## Endnotes

1. Girard, 1965, 182.
2. Personal interview, University of Adelaide, Australia July 15 2009.
3. Examples of this tendency are endemic and include Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over her dead body: death, femininity and the aesthetic* (1992) and Helena Michie's *The flesh made word: female figures and women's bodies* (1987) among many others.

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