

The Implications of Food in Michele Roberts' Novels

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the significances of food developed by the writer Michèle Roberts. The female body provides a non-transferable identity, but it is a political and historical object upon which Power works. It utilizes the body to represent its vision of the world, which is suspicious, since representations are fictitious, but at the same time reality cannot exist outside representation. Hence, the body is an object of representation and signification. Women have apparently won sexual freedom and become owners of their own bodies, but this is not the case: Western society promotes unreal thinness, and yet, advocates for food as a space of socialization. This is a way to mix freedom, slavery, and dependence on global beauty canons imposed by men, consumerism, capitalism, and the fashion and beauty industries, which only serves to strengthen female dependence on male approval.

Key terms: female body, representation, Power, Michèle Roberts, food.

Introduction

The present paper starts from the contemporary sociological theories of Translation and the concept of *microphysics of power* (Foucault 1985) that prevails in societies. At the same time, it takes as a basis the concept of *ideology* (Hermans, Bassnett and Lefevere), whose traces are to be seen in the mass media, and the *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu 1988 [1979]) that they exercise against women.

Moreover, given that the female body is an object of representation, as we will later discuss, the present paper also explores the concept of *representation* (and hence, signification): the image is the only thing that exists (Barthes 1990 [1980]) because reality cannot exist outside representation (Bourdieu 1988 [1979]). Nonetheless, as we shall discuss, representation is never neutral, but an object upon which Power and ideology work. For this reason, feminism has also analyzed the body, both as an object of representation and as a historical and cultural construct.

Likewise, the book *Constructing a Sociology of Translation* (2007), edited by M. Wolf and A. Fukari, has a considerable influence within the present paper, since it analyzes the symbolic violence especially in the case of women. In other words, we base the present research on a new but yet well-established methodology.

1. The Body as a Semiotic System

Go back to the body, which is where all the splits in Western Culture occur.

Carolee Schneemann

Writing is never neutral, nor is it when we write on the body, which provides both a non-transferable identity and subjectivity. Instead, writing on the body is writing on the power of representation. But not everybody has a voice or authority to do it, so writing means having Power to represent, and impose, a certain vision of the world. Nevertheless, this vision is no more than a particular representation and hence, fictitious (Foucault 1988 [1966]), even though reality cannot exist outside representation (Barthes 1990 [1980]). Then, writing on the body is an exercise of Power and representation and perhaps that is why many authors have dealt with this question, such as Luce Irigaray, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Gillo Dorfles, Pierre Bourdieu, Yuri Lotman and Jean Baudrillard, to name but a few examples (Vidal 2003: 43).

But before moving forward, we should bear in mind that these philosophers did not focus their theories on the female body, but on a neutral one. For this reason, feminism, whose waves we will discuss in greater detail below, adapted their theories to the question of gender.

During the first wave, feminists vindicated their civil rights, individual freedom, and a political voice. Women also fought to gain access to colleges and universities. The feminist movement petered out as patriotism took over due to the outbreak of World War I. The second wave, which occurred at the end of World War II and was formed by several branches—liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, etc—is characterized by the words *oppression* and *liberation*. For the subject of this paper, we consider that liberal feminism is the most relevant from this period. For this movement, “the language of liberty, rights and legal equality is the currency” (Whelehan 1995: 28). Therefore, women pressed for abortion rights, birth control methods and sexual freedom. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile undertaking a brief overview of radical feminism, the time of the “celebration of womanhood” (Jaggar 1998 [1983]: 97), since this is the period when the slogan “the personal is political” was coined. Especially during this wave, women became aware of the power of language and would repeatedly make use of it: in fact, they utilized the performative character of language, and hence translation, to re-shape reality.

In addition, radical feminism considered the sex a created system of social organization and blamed the patriarchy for the domination and Power relations exercised upon them at a micro-level (Amorós 1991: 25). The third wave, and consequently cultural feminism and difference feminism, addressed the global situation in the XXI century. Cultural feminism extolled in writing the virtues generally attributed to women, as tenderness and emotion. Finally, difference feminism represented the progression both of radical feminism, thanks to its ubiquitous conception of patriarchy, and of cultural feminism, because it sought for a new women’s culture. Then, as a summary, the female body can be either an object of representation (Juliet Mitchell, Julia Kristeva, Nancy Chodorow, Marxist feminism, psychoanalytical feminism) or a historical and cultural construct (Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, Jane Gallop, Judith Butler, Naomi Schor, etc), but either way it is never neutral, but a semiotic system where economic, political, intellectual, and sexual struggles take place (Vidal 2003: 44).

As said above, the particular, homogeneous and only body imposed is a matter of Power exercised mainly by mass media and advertising. This body, as a true semiotic system, spreads and disseminates beauty canons, with which women must comply in order to be successful. Then, the body is shown as something imperfect and changeable that must be re-shaped and deconstructed. Obeying these forms of representation and signification, which obviously causes social and political problems, means trying to change our own identity and taking part in a kind of struggle with our own bodies that will last throughout our lives.

In the light of the above, Western society is apparently self-contradictory and inconsistent: on the one hand, women are told to have gained legal and reproductive rights and to be owners of their own bodies and yet, on the other hand, they are compelled to achieve unreal thinness as a way to attain love, happiness and social success (Wolf 1990, Lipovetsky 2013 [1997]: 125, Ventura 2000: 40, Vidal 2003: 56): “The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon them. [...] During the past decade women breached the Power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest growing medical speciality” (Wolf 1990: 1).

This situation does not happen by chance, but it represents the male backlash to feminism that utilizes the female beauty as a “political weapon against women’s advancement: the beauty myth” (Wolf 1990: 2). In fact, this political weapon, the beauty myth, “countered women’s new freedoms by transposing the social limits to women’s lives directly on to their faces and bodies” (*ibid.*: 227). However, beauty, as a quality, has not always existed and it is neither objective nor universal. Therefore, “the beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance” (Wolf 1990: 4). To begin with, the woman has not always been the beautiful sex (Lipovetsky 2013 [1997]: 94). The Upper Paleolithic art, for example, was focused on female breasts, hips and belly as clear signs of fecundity and fertility. After that, in the Neolithic period the female representations are not essentially different from the Paleolithic Venus figurines. Then, in Western culture, more specifically in the Greek and Roman cultures, women of upper classes started to use cosmetics. However, as Lipovetsky warned us, this does not mark the beginning of the culture of the beautiful sex: quite on the contrary, it is closely associated with a desire to look beautiful (2013 [1997]: 99). Even though it is true that Greek artists extolled woman’s charms, they never considered them the pinnacle of beauty. In addition to the Greek culture, the Judeo-Christian tradition distrusted the female beauty: in fact, it was related to the Devil’s temptations.

In Lipovetsky's opinion, the veneration of the beautiful sex is a Renaissance invention: the woman became the embodiment of beauty in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (2013 [1997]: 105). During Renaissance, female beauty lost its sinful meaning and Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* became the paradigm of the spiritualized beauty (Ventura 2000: 31). More specifically, we are the heirs of this tradition, namely the celebration of women's aesthetic supremacy (Lipovetsky 2013 [1997]: 106). Meanwhile, Wolf holds a different point of view. For her, the beauty myth is a much more recent invention, since: "[B]efore the development of technologies of mass production, she was exposed to few such images outside the Church. Since the family was a productive unit and women's work complemented men's, the value of all women who were not aristocrats or prostitutes lay in their work skills, material shrewdness, strength and fertility" (Wolf 1990: 4). In fact, she moves forward and states that "[m]ost of our assumptions about the way women have always thought about 'beauty' date from no earlier than the 1830s, when the cult of domesticity was first consolidated and the beauty index invented" (*ibid.*: 4-5). In view of this, the next question we should raise is why it is possible that the beauty myth attains its goal. Perhaps it has to do with the "divide and conquer" philosophy: "[c]ompetition between women is part of the myth so that women will be divided from one another" (Wolf 1990: 4). The beauty myth breaks repeatedly and continuously the links between generations of women so that "older women fear young ones [and] young women fear old" (*ibid.*). Hence, under the myth, "one's woman body is used to hurt another" (*ibid.*: 234). Women find the value of their beauty in comparison to that of other women. As a result, women do not consider themselves as natural allies: quite on the contrary, they see themselves dangerous to one another.

Nevertheless, Ventura blames the economic market for the beauty harassment exercised against women. In fact, women try to apply the canons even though they know that the images they consume have been manipulated. The reason for this lies in the industrial and commercial policies and the sophisticated promotional mechanism (Ventura 2000: 41). It may also be due to the fact that women are convinced that they are free: they receive atomized proposals which are also adapted to a great variety of characters, so they have the possibility to choose among all of these proposals (*ibid.*: 47). In other words, advertising is subtle because it adds some details that women recognize to the images that it created and these details show us that these images are somehow within our reach. In short, our time has witnessed the democratization of beauty, as beauty products have become everyday consumer articles: an affordable luxury for everyone (Lipovetsky 2013 [1997]). The truth is that now we are only image, as Bourdieu reminds us, and so does Kundera when he claims that we are imagologists (1999 [1988]). In the same way, Kristeva, whose concept of *abjection* we will explore later, argues that the aesthetics is the contemporary religion (1988 [1983]). For Wolf, those to be blamed for the beauty myth are men, Power (1990: 4) and the economy: "[t]he contemporary economy depends right now on the representation of women within the beauty myth" (*ibid.*: 7). What's more, she introduces the concept of the Iron Maiden to exemplify the tyranny of beauty: "The original Iron Maiden was a medieval German instrument of torture, a body-shaped casket painted with the limbs and features of a lovely smiling young woman. The unlucky victim was slowly enclosed inside her; the lid fell shut to immobilize the victim, who died either of starvation or, less cruelly, of the metal spikes embedded in her interior. The modern hallucination in which women are trapped or trap themselves is similarly rigid, cruel, and euphemistically painted. Contemporary culture directs attention to imagery of the Iron Maiden, while censoring real women's faces and bodies" (Wolf 1991: 7).

In any case, what is truly remarkable here is what Bourdieu calls the "doxa paradox": the fact that women have not yet rebelled against the symbolic violence exercised by men. This is a softened violence, insensitive and invisible to its victims, and it is symbolic because it is exercised essentially through the purely symbolic paths of communication and knowledge or, more precisely, of ignorance (Bourdieu 2015 [1998]: 12). According to Bourdieu, it can be owed to the fact that the andocentric Power structure needs no justification, since it prevails as neutral and does not need to legitimate itself (*ibid.*: 22). Here, the "second-level meaning" of language (Barthes 2009 [1957]: 9), one of the most efficient manipulation instruments, is also relevant: the media seem to suggest that it is *logical, natural and normal* to be slim. But what is "logical" or "normal"? Why is something "natural"? Who says so? In any case, women's identity seems to be premised upon their beauty, which makes them "remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air" (Wolf 1990: 4). Consequently, there is only one way to escape this situation where women feel invisible and rejected unless they comply with the canons imposed: "A woman wins by giving herself and other women permission: to eat, to be sexual, to age, to wear a boiler suit or a paste tiara or a Balenciaga gown or a second-hand opera cloak or combat boots, to cover up or to go practically naked; to do whatever she chooses in following—or ignoring—our own aesthetic.

A woman wins when she feels that what each free woman does—uncoerced, unpressured—with her own body is her own business. When many individual women exempt themselves from the economy, it will dissolve. Institutions, some men, and some women, will continue to try to use women’s appearance against them, and against one another. But women won’t bite” (Wolf 1990: 240). On the contrary, Lipovetsky claims that the contemporary aesthetics of thinness means self-control, success and self management (2013[1997]). The reason for it is simple: today women use contraception and are professionally engaged, which has led to a radical transformation of female living conditions and their attitude towards their physical appearance (*ibid.*: 128). In this sense, the realm of thinness represents the refusal to identify the female body with fecundity and maternity, and therefore with corpulence, its typical feature (*ibid.*). In short, it has to do with neutralizing the too emphatic signs of femininity. Hence, the aesthetics of thinness must be interpreted as the female desire of emancipation from their traditional consideration as sexual objects and mothers. For this reason, the thinness code must be understood as a gender equality perspective instead of one of oppression (*ibid.*).

All the same, several authors dissent from Lipovetsky’s point of view: Wolf (1990), Ventura (2000) and Vidal (2003), to mention just a few. In their opinion, the Western world promotes, and imposes, a canon of unreal thinness, and yet, advocates for food as a space of socialization (Ventura 2000: 70, Sceats 2000: 3). In this sense, it is a way to mix freedom, slavery and dependence on global beauty canons ultimately imposed by Power or, in other words, men, consumerism, capitalism, and the fashion and beauty industries (Vidal 2003: 60), which only serves to strengthen female dependence on male approval (Douglas 1994). Or, as John Berger says in his well-known *Ways of Seeing*, published in 1972 (2008 [1972]): Men look at women, women see themselves when they are looked at. Again, in Western society, women are but symbolic objects at the same time subjected to a symbolic dependence that puts them in a state of permanent body insecurity. Then, they exist basically for and because the others see them: that is to say, as warm, attractive and available objects (Bourdieu 2015 [1998]: 86). They are expected to be “feminine”: smiling, pleasant, attentive, submissive, discreet, restrained... However, this alleged femininity is often only a way to please the real or supposed expectations of men, especially in terms of boosting their egos (*ibid.*). Women need that the others see them to build themselves and are ready to be rated on the basis of their physical appearance, and the way they move and present their bodies: consequently, this relationship of dependence tends to constitute women’s being (*ibid.*: 86-87). In any event, the truth is that women are concerned with their appearance and worried about pleasing through their image because their worth depends on it (Vidal 2003: 33): women are an object whose only value is aesthetic. Therefore, as aesthetic objects their function is seducing, but they should not forget that today’s seduction means complying with the canons imposed.

In view of this, women have tried to subvert this situation and they have more than often used art for this purpose. Thus, women’s art should be understood rather as a revolutionary value system and a lifestyle, instead of an art movement. In this sense, 20th century art and literature reacted with *other representations* of the female body, both in publications (Jones 1998; Jones and Stephenson 1999; Pollock 1996; Alezander 1999; Holliday and Hassard 2001) and in works like those of Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Nancy Spero, Leslie Labowitz, Jo Spence, Miriam Schapiro or the late 1980s activism of the Guerrilla Girls and in obvious exhibitions like *Menstruation Bathroom* by Judy Chicago, *Post-Partum Document* by Mary Kelly, *Nightmare Bathroom* by Robin Schiff, *Linen Closet* by Sandy Orgel, *Interior Scroll* by Carolee Schneemann, or Marina Núñez or Donna Haraway’s cyberbodies (Vidal 2003: 47). Cindy Sherman’s well-known criticism of stereotype images of women is particularly interesting, as is Eleonor Antin’s incredible *performance/sculpture/photograph Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1973) presenting the vision of a body tortured by diets, or the Parisian artist Orlan’s physical transformation, thus making her body the place where this criticism is taken to extreme (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the exhibition *To Eat or Not To Eat* is highly interesting for us because it brings together several feminist works and papers closely related to food, as the one written by Martha Rosler. In the case of this paper, as we said before, we will focus in Michèle Roberts’ works, since food, and hence the body, has different connotations for her and serves to constitute her characters’ femininity.

2. Michèle Roberts: The Food as Constituent of Femininity

“Food is our centre, necessary for survival and inextricably connected to social function” (Sceats 2000: 1). Then, what we eat, how and with who is especially relevant to comprehend the moral, affective and psychological values of any human society and its behavior patterns. Consequently, food is particularly significant as a symbolic element—for its meanings are not at all necessarily apparent:

“According to psychoanalytic theory, formative feeding experiences are inscribed in the psyche; food and eating are essential to self-identity and are instrumental in the definition of family, class, and ethnicity” (*ibid.*). As we explained before, the contemporary Western society is more concerned than ever about the aesthetics and the body, which entails major social and physical implications: “The prevalence of eating disorders in Western culture indicates at least an insecurity about embodiment, the nature of being and the boundaries between the self and the world” (*ibid.*).

Moreover, food is also a matter of trust, for there is no way of knowing for certain what it is in the food we consume or give others, mainly in the contemporary realm of additives and genetic modification. In this sense, it is interesting that women write about food and eating because “[w]omen’s bodies have the capacity to manufacture food for their infants which categorizes them as feeders, and in Western culture women have traditionally borne most of the burden of cooking for and nourishing others, with all that this implies of power and service” (*ibid.*: 2). Nonetheless, it remains striking that “mothers are overwhelmingly powerful but at the same time are socially and domestically disempowered by their nurturing, serving role” (*ibid.*: 11).

Then, apparently food does not have its own significance, since it is psychologically, politically and socially construed in many layers, as the one of sexuality (Sceats 2000: 3). This is so because food and customs surrounding it result from the cultural conditioning. Again we are faced with the paradox that we mentioned before: “An obvious if paradoxical contemporary example is bingeing and self-starvation, which occur in a cultural context of rampant consumerism in which consumption (literal or metaphorical) is promoted as wholly desirable, while overweight women are stigmatized and often portrayed as joke figures, as coarse, stupid or sexually promiscuous” (*ibid.*: 3).

Besides, food can also be a medium of communication of love, affection and desire. As a clear example: food occupies a central place in the majority of religious rituals—as in the Passover and the Eucharist, among others. Similarly, we are used to giving chocolates as a sign of affection or support when visiting a sick relative or friend. As a clearly more obvious example of higher love and affection, we can refer to the maternal nurturing, at least from the mother’s point of view. During the first stages of our lives, the food we are fed is a way of showing love, and obviously the satisfaction it brings with it is great both to the mother and infant. Hence, as many other psychologists, Roberts suggests that the roots of adult dissatisfaction can be traced back to the earliest eating experiences. Moreover, Sceats remind us sardonically enough the adage that shows the huge weight of food and its manipulative powers: “the best way to a man’s heart is through his stomach” (2000: 20). Then, women have control not only over food, but also through what Sceats calls the “nightmare of repetition”, which implies that they are in a position to “take advantage of men’s subordination to the powerful maternal figure of their childhoods” (*ibid.*: 21). As we said before, food can express sexual desire as well, as the term ‘sexual appetite’, in which sex and food converge.

In short, food is a social, interpersonal and cultural signifier. Accordingly, Farb and Armelagos (1980) consider food a major means of self-definition and transmission of culture, given that it is something that we do every day. For them, eating habits are the most conservative behavioral patterns and, therefore, eating is highly influenced by the cultural system and its world view and ideology. In fact the impacts of ideology on food are not usually perceived at a macro level, but micro. Apparently, ideology permeates almost imperceptibly food and eating, and the customs surrounding them, which are usually perpetuated through the nuclear family and social practices. “In Foucauldian terms, food is given meaning within specific discourses and discursive practices, including recipes, reports on diet and health, advertisements, government rhetoric, newspaper articles, ‘foodie’ literature, religious rules and cultural rituals (not forgetting those of class). Less obviously ideological but of no less influence are parental guidance, peer group advice and self-made regulations. Food itself is not bound within any single discourse, but becomes impregnated with meanings from the many and various frameworks within which it figures—and this is a major reason why it is so rich a resource for writers” (Sceats 2000: 126).

As said above, Roberts’ works, more particularly *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), deserve particular attention because she shows an evident concern with politics and women’s experiences and roles. Besides, “[f]ood and eating suffuse the novels. Poetic and often lyrical, her writing is both deeply sensuous and perspicacious; characters are often literally hungry, but also psychologically, affectively, spiritually” (Sceats 2000: 5).

Apparently Roberts supports the idea of women-as-mothers-as-nurturers in several of her books, as in *A Piece of the Night* (1978), *The Wild Girl* (1984), *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), and *In the Red Kitchen* (1990).

Moreover, she focuses on the displaced mothering by grandmothers, as in *The Visitation* (1983), by nuns, as in *In the Red Kitchen*, and also by friends or other women as a result of their maternal impulses. Surprisingly enough, Roberts analyses the difficulties resulting from the motherhood combined with something else: “Michèle Roberts’s *The Book of Mrs Noah* touches on the rewards and stresses of motherhood in its explorations of women’s subjectivity, and her *A Piece of the Night* suggests an emotional juggling act for its protagonist Julie, if she is to nurture, love and feed both her child and the relationship with her lover Jenny” (Sceats 2000: 20).

Furthermore, Roberts seems to present food as constituent of female sensuousness. In fact, some foods are recurrent—soup, eggs, bread, grapes, wine, water, dried fruit, fish and lamb. These foods maintain their traditional connotations but at the same time Roberts creates some others of her own: “This is not to suggest that there is any absolute relationship between food, or any particular foods, and women [...]. It is rather a question of the way Roberts writes about food conveying profound physical, emotional and imaginative, as well as socially construed connections” (Sceats 2000: 129). Now we have briefly reviewed the general connotations and significances of food in Roberts’ literary production, now it is time to focus our paper on *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), as stated before.

In *The Wild Girl* (1984), the egg represents rebirth and potential for new life and future possibilities. In Sceats’ opinion, “[i]n its very essence embryonic, its unbroken state none the less suggests completion and wholeness” (2000: 127). Broken eggs recur as an instrument for exploring femaleness: raw eggs are slimy and lumpy, “suggestive of all that is antithetical to the cool shape of the unbroken whole” (*ibid.*: 128). In the novel, Roberts portrays the ten-year-old Mary Magdalene throwing her mother’s basket of eggs in the air so that they “crack and splatter in a splendid gold mess on the yard’s stone flags” (1984: 13). Supposedly, she is driven to do it by the sound and rhythm of her mother’s beating eggs. The slaps of her punishment that happen immediately afterwards enable her to discover her gift for songs, and yet more remarkably, this situation suggests a dramatic rupture, perhaps even a birth, or a rejoining of elements that have been previously separated: “Such mess is for Roberts quintessentially female, and the later travails of Mary explore, through the ‘mess’ of myth and dream, the problem of understanding and embracing a womanhood that includes both female spirituality and sexuality” (Sceats 2000: 128). Also in *The Wild Girl*, we can find some other foods and the lamb has a remarkable place among all of them. With regard to it, for the most part it maintains its religious significance in the Judeo-Christian tradition: Jesus recalls the lamb as it had been alive, and takes this particular image to begin a parable about the food of eternal life followed by the first communion with bread and wine. Besides, towards the end of the novel, the anniversary remembrance of Jesus’ death is represented by the Passover lamb, and his apostles and followers name the Lord “Lamb of God”. In short: “Roberts embroiders only a little on the grafting of Christian symbolisms onto the pre-existing Jewish associations of lamb, so as to underscore Mary’s holistic polemic. As suggested earlier, culturally established meanings adhere to food, whether or not they are overtly evoked” (*ibid.*: 130).

In *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), the connotations of eggs are more physical than in the previous case. Roberts underlines the displeasure that women’s bodies pose to the Church, and the misogyny of the male choir: “She breaks egg yolks into a bowl, whips them with sugar and flour, boils them with milk. Beats and beats with her wooden spoon to remove lumps. Lumpy female bodies. Lumpy bellies and breasts. Eggs breaking and splattering, warm mess of sweetness on the sheets, warm flow of sweat and blood. We can’t have *that* in our nice Anglican chapel. Only male chefs please” (Roberts 1987: 26-27).

In the same novel, Sybil, one of the characters, perceives the salmon she is about to cook as “dead”, on a silver “bier”, anointed with a “home-made chrism” of mayonnaise (Roberts 1987: 28). This section has a few interesting things: first, the grief projected onto the fish; second, the association of dead bodies and dead foods—a vegetarian perspective which “also recalls the waste matters of abjection” (Sceats 2000: 130), developed by Kristeva (1984); and third, a reference to women’s roles in cooking and shroud the dead.

Towards the end of the book, Noah’s wife has to kill, gut and prepare “Gaffer’s fish for cooking, both because this supper involves the taking of life, and because it is a messy, bloody task that the Gaffer sees in terms of ‘some hideous pagan menstrual rite’” (Sceats 2000: 130). For this author: “The preparations for cooking this become something arcane, mysterious and feminine, as well as being associated with death and female sexuality, the smell, mess and menstrual associations of the fish adding to its mythological and Freudian sexual symbolism” (Sceats 2000: 130).

As an example, Jack's wife does not want more death after the flood and refuses to sacrifice a lamb. What is more, the meat stew sickens and nauseates her, "as though it were boiled up from dead babies" (Roberts 1987: 85). Later, "Roberts includes a further dig at the inconsistencies of a body-disciplining, abjection-inducing, animal-slaughtering religiosity as the Correct Sibyl remembers being told to eat up her meat by the nuns" (Sceats 2000: 131): "think of the starving millions who'd be glad of your leftover scraps of gristle and fat. Mortify your body. Spoon up the food that revolts you..." (Roberts 1987: 102). Thus, we could say that the meanings of meat in Roberts' narrative are contradictory, since it can mean both redemption and culpability.

So far, we have focused in the material reality of food, but some foods have figurative meanings as well. In the present paper, we will focus on the bread, even though there are some others that could be interesting. As commonly known, bread usually implies communion but it also has other metaphorical connotations in the two novels mentioned before.

On the one hand, in *The Wild Girl* (1984) bread is combined with wine. Consequently, we could say that Roberts deliberately uses the elements of the Catholic Mass. "[T]he 'new rite' of bread and wine, flesh and blood, that Jesus invited the mystified disciples to join in at the Last Supper is perceived by Mary Magdalene as an union of spirit and the word, of understanding and wisdom, of female and male" (Sceats 2000: 132-133). However, the author politicizes the practice when women are prohibited to offer the "supper of bread and wine", even though it contradicts Jesus' teachings. "Mary's experience of wine suggests the two contradictory associations of release and communion. Roberts represents wine in Mary's early life as deeply disturbing to her, 'smeared on women's mouth like blood' at a Dionisiac feast; it is a token of ecstasy and an unstable communicant, as she discovers to her cost through her own wine-fuelled indiscretion. However, her passage through the underworld, a personal marriage of heaven and hell which contrasts a vision of unity to the separation, hierarchy and murmurs of witchcraft promulgated by the male disciples, is consummated with the drinking of a special wine. And wine, with bread, continues to symbolise communion for the women and their followers in exile, as they combine the elements of their simple lives into a ritualised, almost pantheistic remembrance" (Sceats 2000: 133).

Finally, on the other hand, bread is also present in *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987). More specifically, Meg Hansey's story portrays Meg sending her wage home so that her sisters and brothers have bread, or in other words something to eat. Besides, "the narrator of the book recalls surviving on brown bread and carrots as an impoverished student" (*ibid.*: 132).

3. Conclusions:

As said in the introduction to this paper and in the first section of it, in the contemporary Western world food, eating, and the female body are burning issues: mass media continually project images that comply with the beauty canons imposed by Power and ideology and contribute to their perpetuation. Thus, we can say that the body in its broadest sense is one of the greatest anxieties today, not to say the greatest one.

Art also reflects this situation, and so does Roberts' narrative. In fact, what makes Roberts even more interesting is that she "is concerned not only with food in relation to women's bodies and lives and senses of self, but with the effects of its various 'external' meanings and their cultural resonances" (Sceats 2000: 130). In this sense, due to the fact that physicality, sensuousness, sensibility, the body's rhythm, feelings, and femaleness are connected in her narrative, the concept that Roberts develops may help to explain some of our contemporary anxieties and worries regarding food and its implications on our bodies. In the case of women, Wolf may be right and perhaps the best way to start respecting our bodies is by respecting other women's bodies first. To do it, it is necessary that women establish a relationship of sisterhood among all and listen to other women, instead of considering other women as potential enemies. Consequently, women should not let others evaluate their beauty in comparison to that of other women.

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