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Of Fragmented Memoirs or Dismembered Bodies: Censorship and Subversion in Michèle Roberts's *Impossible Saints*

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Abstract

In society, creative expression has always been a matter of rampant socio-cultural scrutinies. Needless to say, memoirs and autobiographies, being the most candid forms of literature, occupy the highest position in the hierarchy of receiving censorship. In the present paper, I propose to re-read Michèle Roberts's highly controversial novel *Impossible Saints* with a view to highlighting the workings of the constrictive socio-cultural forces that frustrate all the attempts of the protagonist Saint Josephine to record in her memoir her highly subversive tale of deviance. The alternative version of the memoir that Josephine is compelled to write under the active guidance of the church highlights the culture of doctored documentation that patriarchal institutions promote and practice. Efforts will also be made to see and show how Josephine's story that she ultimately decides to rewrite and which her niece Isabel actually completes encompasses the tales of several other 'no-name women' who have been similarly crushed by the society and religion and erased from all the available versions of authorized male history.

Keywords: Memory, Memoir, History, Censorship, Subversion

The tension between freedom of expression and social censorship is deeply embedded in human history. While society always tries to maintain a rigid order and wants its members to adhere strictly to the social givens, the human need to expression often runs contrary to such limiting expectations. Memoirs and autobiographies, being the most candid of expressive forms, have often been found to contain and/or highlight subversive elements of human experiences of social, legal, cultural or religious difference and/or deviance the free expression of which can neither be expected nor accepted in a constrictive social bulwark. Myth and history have thrown up interesting instances of memoirs and autobiographies being "banned" on counts of their "dangerous" and "damned" nature. A memoir or autobiography needs to conform to the social standards of the norm and the normal for its acceptance and accommodation into the socio-cultural setup of the literary world. And this need for acceptance transforms the true account of an individual's deviant life into a socio-culturally mediated version of perfectly expected and then, therefore, accepted socialized existence In fact, it is due to such constrictive codes of expectations and acceptability for which exceptionally talented works of literature such as Andre Gidè's *If It Die*, Maya Angelou's *And Still I Rise* and Kamala Das's *My Story* have been subject to social censorship. These books were legally banned and many of their authors were subject to public humiliation and social threatening. The present paper attempts to re-read Michèle Roberts's controversial novel *Impossible Saints* (1997) with a view to highlighting how the female protagonist Josephine suffers tremendously under socio-religious panopticon which can

never accommodate women who dare or desire. Attempts will be made to see and show Josephine's act of writing her official memoir according to the dictates of the church, instead of symbolizing her cooption by religion, points up her subversive strategy of paying society back in its own coin. Efforts will also be made to explore how Josephine's niece Isabel's decision to complete her aunt's unfinished true memoir finally exposes the thousand lies that are kept buried under the rather impressive high-rises of organized religion and close-knit family.

The novel *Impossible Saints* attracted attention from its very publication in 1997. The popularity and the criticism are as much due to the novel's controversial portrayal of incestuous father-daughter relationship as from its highly subversive presentation of the institution of Christianity. Inspired by the life and the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila, *Impossible Saints* narrates how instead of actually helping the femalekind realize their full potential and liberating their minds from all shackles of fear and ignorance, society always tries to constrict them within the boundaries of modesty, chastity, and respectability. In the novel, Roberts attempts to restore the forgotten life stories of some twelve celebrated female saints from the authorized narratives of a patriarchal religion. And it is through this act of reconstructing the erased narratives that Roberts tries to expose the double standards of a society for which human value lies not in one's abilities or achievements but in one's normativity.

By re-framing these hagiographies, the text interrogates how ecclesiastical authority systematically strips women of their agency, transforming dynamic individuals into passive symbols of docility. Roberts leverages the visceral, often transgressive nature of her characters' lives to challenge the rigid dichotomies of sacred versus profane and purity versus pollution. The domestic tyranny depicted in the incestuous dynamics mirrors the macrocosmic tyranny of the Church, illustrating how patriarchal power operates seamlessly from the private household to the public pulpit. The novel suggests that the canonization of female saints is rarely an honor bestowed for spiritual excellence; rather, it is a tool of institutional containment that sanitizes female rebellion. In doing so, the narrative bridges the gap between historical oppression and modern feminist critique, presenting bodily and spiritual autonomy as acts of political defiance. Ultimately, *Impossible Saints* functions as an architectural deconstruction of myth, replacing the sterile, idealized icons of tradition with raw, complex human realities that demand a total reevaluation of faith, gender, and power.

Impossible Saints revolves around the problem of completing St. Josephine's unfinished memoir. During her youth, Josephine was on the verge of being declared a heretic. To save herself from the imminent punishment, Josephine wrote her autobiography under the active guidance and strict supervision of the church authorities in perfect compliance with the prevalent socio-religious expectations. However, what is interesting is that the moment this piece of doctored writing was brought to the notice of the same authorities who were earlier thinking about punishing Josephine, the memoir was not only praised but also prescribed as a mandatory read for the young girls who wanted to join convents as nuns. While Josephine was quite relieved to have escaped punishment, she was visibly disconcerted to find how vain and superficial are the standards of religious acceptability and how easily those standards can be duped and manipulated.

It is during this phase of her life that Josephine not only grows increasingly uncomfortable with her own decision of becoming a nun but also becomes extremely doubtful about God's existence at least in the way organized religions teach man to believe, "I became a nun for the wrong reasons. I wanted to be a saint, but not because I loved God. I was frightened of dying and going to hell. I didn't love God. I feared him" (IS 136-137). This actually marks that point of Josephine's story when for the first time she starts questioning the necessity of abiding by religious verdicts. Needless to say, each and every journey to knowledge can only begin with questioning things that were hitherto unquestioned. In one of her interviews with Patricia Bastida Rodríguez, Roberts herself points up the important role that questions might play in making people understand and approach reality more clearly and in an unbiased manner (Roberts 95). According to her, her parents were never contented with their religious lineage. They were more interested in understanding ways in which Protestantism and Catholicism differed from each other. Roberts claims that she was rather enriched with the debate between her parents on the issue and this made her to learn that one should not blindly accept any version of one's cultural or religious heritage, but that one should always question it before submitting to its narrative (Roberts 95).

That "inheritances" can be "questioned" is important. For, if something traditionally thought to be as unchallengeable, unchangeable, and constant as a person's "inheritance" can be questioned, then beliefs of all kinds—socio-cultural or religious—can equally be challenged. And, emboldened by this newfound power of questions, Josephine starts exploring those avenues of her life which her religion proscribed her to access. Within the narrative economy of the novel, this interrogation of lineage acts as a catalyst for dismantling the broader, entrenched structures of patriarchal hegemony. By questioning her biological and spiritual patrimony, Josephine effectively destabilizes the foundational myths that anchor both the domestic sphere and the institutional Church. This dual critique reveals how familial inheritance and religious dogma operate as codependent mechanisms of containment, each reinforcing the other to restrict female autonomy.

Furthermore, this act of systemic questioning transitions Josephine from a passive recipient of historical tradition into an active agent of her own destiny. Her transgressions into forbidden physical and intellectual spaces mark a radical departure from the passive docility demanded of the canonical female saints. This transition illustrates how Roberts employs her protagonist to theorize a distinctly feminist epistemology—one where knowledge is not top-down or dogmatic, but rather embodied, experiential, and inherently political. Ultimately, by reclaiming the right to question her inheritance, Josephine does not merely reject her past; she actively constructs an alternative space of self-determination that challenges the epistemological violence of a male-dominated orthodoxy.

The time Josephine spends at the luxurious house of her cousin Magdalena allows her to explore her own latent sexuality, and soon she recognizes her decision to join the church as hasty and impulsive, "Josephine had realized that she wanted to be not a full-time nun but a part-time one" (IS, 193). However, it is during her stay in the pleasure dome of Magdalena that she discovers the real meaning of sainthood. The ancient yellowed scroll that Magdalena gives Josephine introduces her to the secret world of heretic writings where God exists not as the holy

father of a holy *son* but as a loving father of erring individuals regardless of their gendered identity. Written in a secret code language of the "Faithless Ones," the scroll signals that epiphany in Josephine's story which liberates her from the shackles of both religious and religion-induced personal impositions. In fact, the importance of Heretic writings in Christian tradition can hardly be overrated, especially when it comes to the writings of the essentially subversive writers like Roberts. Roberts herself acknowledges her debt to the heretic tradition of writings in structuring her tale of deviant female saints in *Impossible Saints*:

> (...) the Catholic Church gave me this rather beautiful tradition of heretic writing, which I cherish, I really do. So in that sense, I'm now thinking, "Well, it wasn't all bad, was it?"; like Teresa of Avila, I mean, she was almost a heretic, all the way through. I read and read and read about her when I was writing *Impossible Saints*, and it was so interesting how she became very, very close to being condemned by the Inquisition. So that fascinates me, that's my image of the feminist actually, it's the heretic. (Roberts 95)

When Roberts herself was so highly influenced by the putatively 'heretic' character of Teresa of Avila, the prototype for her female rebel, Josephine will surely embody some of Teresa of Avila's heretic beliefs. Coming back to the novel we can find soon Josephine is back with a plan to build a house for the single women like her. This plan for building a double-faced house for the single women with two opposite doors, a strict convent on one and luxurious pleasure dome on the other, highlights her newly awakened sense of the need of both religion and sensuality in human life. Josephine's story comes to an end with her return to the church and her decision to write a different memoir which shall be free from all religious influences.

According to Sonia Villegas López, "In *Impossible Saints*, the British writer of French origin Michele Roberts sets out on a journey towards the origins of women's (auto)biography, and thus of women's history" (López 173). And in the novel, the Golden House where the bones of Josephine are preserved that operates as a sort of metaphor for the memoir that Josephine could not complete and her niece Isabel attempts to write. This makes the novel's opening with the picture of Isabel visiting the Golden House to collect materials for completing Josephine's memoir rather important. The Golden House of *Impossible Saints* is modeled after the Golden Chamber situated at the Basilica Church of St. Ursula at Cologne the Rhineland, Germany, which is famous for preserving the bones of some 11,000 female saints and those of Josephine. Though Isabel visits the place with the purpose of collecting materials for completing the unfinished memoir of her aunt, the more she explores and analyzes the sacred Golden House and how the bones were collected and preserved, the more she grows dissatisfied with what she finds there.

In the first place, the Golden House itself is a structural paradox. It is situated in a Chapel which is a place to attain peace of mind and salvation. But, what the house offers the visitors is actually a veritable necropolis containing the mortal remnants of those marginalized and erased women. Secondly, though the Golden House was a structural part of the St. Joseph's Cathedral, it was constructed in a way as to hide it from public view:

> You wouldn't know it was there. You would think the low door at the end of the aisle led back outside, another exit, to sunlight and smoky, glittering air. Instead, when you put your hand on the cold iron latch and lifted it so that the pointed door swung open, you pitched forwards down two steps into that gold house full of bones. Thinking to go outside, you went in, to that disorderly house full of dead women (IS 1).

This desperate attempt at concealment reminds one of a similar kind of suppression that all female attempts at difference or deviance be it social, religious, legal or sexual have suffered. In fact, just like the smothered and silenced personal histories of thousands of 'no-name women' like Josephine, the Golden House is also an erased existence. Just like the victim of the father's lust St Agnes who was banished from her house to lessen the family's ignominy or the mischievous Josephine who was sent to the convent as a punishment for her sexual awakening, the Golden House is a forbidden existence which can neither be lost sight of nor be allowed to exist openly for its subversive nature and content. Therefore, just as the jumbled up bones stored inside from which one saint can hardly be identified from the other, the house is fated to remain a necropolis of blurred memories and multiple impossibilities. This deliberate spatial isolation serves as a physical manifestation of how patriarchal religious institutions manage the legacies of unruly or non-normative women. By tucking this ossuary away behind grand facades and restricted corridors, the Church architecturalizes historical amnesia, ensuring that the subversive potential of these women's lives is safely contained and sanitized. The physical concealment mirrors an epistemological one: the church framework relies on burying the authentic, lived realities of female defiance beneath layers of stone, dust, and gilded mythology.

Furthermore, this architectural secrecy highlights the institutional anxiety surrounding the female body and its historical narrative. By limiting public view and access, the ecclesiastical authority maintains strict control over how these bodies are interpreted—or rather, misinterpreted—transforming complex, rebellious individuals into uniform, silent relics of institutional piety. When Isabel attempts to navigate this hidden space to compile Josephine's memoir, she is not just exploring a building; she is actively breaching an institutional vault designed to keep women's history obscured. This spatial paradox ultimately exposes the Cathedral not as a sanctuary of divine truth, but as a heavily policed monument designed to enforce structural silence and preserve the double standards of a patriarchal faith.

One needs to understand at this very point that Roberts hailed from a devout Christian family. For a woman coming from such a strict religious background who, as a teenager, herself sought to become a nun, this choice of "religion vs. sexuality" theme for her novel was never an unproblematic one. By the time Roberts graduated with a degree in English literature she had deserted her idea of entering the church and became actively engaged in the subversive movement of second wave feminism. Her training in literature and association with the feminist magazines only boosted up her feminist spirits. Roberts' childhood remembrances of the biblical tales and her mature readings of them highlighted several too-easy-to-overlook gaps existing between their lines. And when the so called heretic writings caught her attention, these gaps seemed to be bridged. Evidently, Impossible Saints records this inquisitive-subversive nature of its author.

According to Margarida Rendeiro et al. literature has never been "peripheral to politics" (Rendeiro et al. 9). it is rather "a cultural praxis" that archives unrecorded history and form resistance strategy for marginalised subjects (Rendeiro et al. 9-10). In Impossible Saints, Roberts tries to present such an archive of erased female experience. Though in the novel Roberts does not make it clear whether Isabel is finally able to complete what Josephine could not do in her life, the presence of Isabel's granddaughter in the narrative structure of the novel, eagerly observing the details of the Golden House, promises that the story of Josephine will not be lost. The stories of the eleven other female saints that Isabel presumably includes or thinks of including in her writing actually fill in the gaps that exist between the lines of Josephine's story. Subversive or heretic, Josephine's incomplete memoir along with the stories of these other unholy, and then, therefore, 'impossible' female saints highlight how patriarchy has always condemned all kinds of female self-assertion in the fear of losing its supreme control on the subordinated female body. Needless to say, it is the patriarchal religion that provides this control with both basis and legitimacy. With this, women are categorized either as pious virgins or as bloody whores, while a third group of women who dare to challenge the justifications of this binary are immediately condemned as heretics. It is this understanding of the self-assertive woman as heretic that leads Roberts to weave in the narrative of *Impossible Saints* a potentially disruptive tale of unnameable desires, indomitable spirit, and unfaltering courage.

Ultimately, *Impossible Saints* stands as a radical act of narrative resurrection and political defiance. By weaving together the fragmented, forbidden desires of these twelve women, Michèle Roberts effectively shatters the monolithic structures of patriarchal hagiography. The novel moves beyond a simple critique of religious institutional containment; it serves as an active, revisionist space where the boundary between the sacred and the heretical is permanently collapsed. Through Isabel's reclamation of Josephine's unfinished history, Roberts illustrates that the act of women writing their own lives is inherently revolutionary—a direct threat to an orthodox system that relies on female silence and physical subjugation for its legitimacy. In the final analysis, the "impossibility" of these saints is not a mark of spiritual failure, but a testament to their refusal to be reduced to passive, bloodless icons. By replacing the sterile, gilded monuments of the Church with the raw, embodied truth of female agency, *Impossible Saints* offers a profound intervention into the landscape of women's autobiography. Roberts leaves the reader with a powerful conclusion: while institutions can stone, burn, or attempt to neatly compartmentalise the female body behind hidden cathedral walls, the indomitable spirit of their self-assertion remains a disruptive, cyclical force. The unfinished memoir thus becomes an open invitation for future generations to continuously question their inheritances, dislodge oppressive binaries, and write themselves back into history.

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