patriarchal ideologies. Yet despite her defiance of Brahmanical norms regarding marriage, as especially manifested in her choice to marry a non-Brahmin, and her sustained critique of the harsh treatment of Hindu women, especially widows, which she saw as being sanctioned by mainstream Hindu society and its laws and mythology, Ramabai apparently derives her own ideas regarding the proper role for women from Hindu mythology.

In scoping out such complexities, Kosambi also critiques Ramabai's essentialization of the oppressed Indian woman, which, as she argues, remained firmly entrenched within a Western, Orientalist framework. While such a critique is insightful, identifying and elaborating for the readers the particular strands of Orientalist thought that impressed Ramabai would enable a more critical understanding of this complex connection. Such elaboration would also complicate further our reading of Ramabai's views on a variety of subjects pertaining to women and religion, caste politics, women's education, widowhood, Sati and the position of Western women — subjects that were of central importance to colonial and nationalist debates in late 19th-century India.

In recent years, the issue of translation has also received significant attention in colonial and cultural studies and warrants some commentary in the context of this book. While scholars such as Tejaswini Niranjana have cautioned us to view translations with suspicion, especially colonial translations that became sites for constructing the colonial subjects as inferior, Kosambi's project points to the productive aspects of translation. Not only does it enable an excavation of obscured histories; it also provides us with new information and insights on the contributions made by women such as Ramabai during the Raj. In so doing, projects such as this one serve as social histories of women and their relation to nationalist and colonialist thought. For this reason, Kosambi's translations of Ramabai's essays are a welcome addition to the expanding corpus of recently uncovered and translated stories about and by women such as the late 19th-century actress Binodini Dasi, and housewives such as Rashsundari Devi, whose *Amar Jiban* has been identified as the first full-scale autobiography in the Bengali language. Overall then, the book makes a significant contribution to translation studies, women's studies, and scholarship exploring the links between culture and colonialism.

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Old wives' tales: feminist re-visions of film and other fictions

Tania Modleski; I.B Tauris, London and New York, 1999, £14.95, ISBN 1-86064-386-8 (Pbk)

How women tell stories within patriarchal structures that exclude their voice is a question that feminist scholarship has wrestled with for some time. Recent

criticism, in particular, has challenged earlier essentialist arguments rooted in semiotics and psychoanalytical theory, to interrogate how the category of 'woman' intersects with other categories, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and national specificity. Tania Modleski's previously published work (on women's popular genres and feminist criticism) has itself contributed to this current trend, and *Old wives' tales* represents a valuable intervention into feminist (film) theory and popular culture which pulls together and builds on her earlier contributions.

Modleski commences her book with a polemic blast against what she sees as 'a newer generation's perception of earlier feminism as bland, monolithic, and wholly repressive' (Modleski, 1999: 3–4). Raising objection to how the younger critics denigrated the 'boldness' of earlier feminist debates adds to her previous discussions on how 'postmodern feminism' has problematized the speaking subject within feminist critical theory (Modleski, 1991). Difficulties of speaking and asserting female narrative authority thus emerge as key issues to be interrogated in her latest work.

The book consists of nine distinct essays, including pieces on public controversies, contemporary genre films, romance novels, racial mimicry on stage and film, and autobiography. Each chapter is relatively self-contained and can be read in isolation. Yet, and as the *Old wives' tales* title indicates, the book coheres around 'how the stories that women tell get legitimated or discredited' (Modleski, 1999: 8) and how feminism rethinks these stories and contests the public and private fantasies that they produce. The (political) crisis of narrative legitimacy – women's stories that are denigrated by men as well as other women who support patriarchy, how feminism reclaims those stories but also relegates others for not adhering to a feminist agenda – that Modleski aims to highlight is for me persuasively argued.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach (psychoanalysis, literary criticism, postcolonial and gender studies, and feminist theory) to understand generic forms of story-telling helps Modleski link the disparate topics. The first part examines the transformations taking place within female genres (melodramas and popular romances). Analysing how language was used in the US Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas sexual harassment hearings reveals how race and class separates women and can render stories suspect. The Senate testimony given by Hill (an African-American lawyer) becomes submerged by black male (Thomas' 'melodrama of suffering black manhood' (Modleski, 1999: 19)) and white women's stories (his wife's suspenseful thriller involving Hill's obsessional love for her husband). Fantasies of patriarchal seduction and violence against women inform Modleski's reading of Jane Campion's 1993 film *The Piano*. Beneath the erotic pleasures of being owned (interlaced with a postcolonial narrative of land seizure and territorial exploitation) lies a repressed narrative about a daughter's jealousy and failed possession of the mother. Modleski explores further erotic fantasies of dominance in the female reading pleasures of Harlequin romances, a despised genre that she has long worked to make credible (Modleski, 1984).

The second part focuses on how women artists are moving into generic territory traditionally considered a male preserve. Reading Sandra Bernhard's blackface mimicry in *Without You I'm Nothing* (John Boscovich, 1990) through queer theory and the American minstrelsy tradition allows Modleski to suggest how Bernhard uses impersonations of African-American artists as a self-conscious strategy to explore sexual identities and lesbian desire anew. African-American playwright/performer Anna Deavere Smith employs mimicry in her one-woman shows based on controversial public event (race riots, sexual harassment). Mimicking those she has interviewed and continually traversing ethnic/gender borders enables Smith not only to provide insight into how mimetic processes function to constitute identity but also challenge 'the authority of the speaking subject' (Modleski, 1999: 102). The next two chapters focus on female interventions into specifically male genres – the war film and western. Nancy Savoca's *Dogfight* (1991) and Maggie Greenwald's movie about a frontiers woman who dresses as a man, *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), challenge strict male/female binary systems to create what Judith Butler has called 'gender trouble' (Butler, 1989).

The collection continues Modleski's concerns with popular culture and women narratives – how they speak and make known public private experience and fantasies. Her interest extends to her own tales about her parents. Incorporating letters and reminisces with psychoanalytical and cultural theory, her stories about dying parents are told with poignancy. However, this personal touch leads me to my reservations about the book. She is, for example, particularly vitriolic in her romance chapters. I find her acrimonious response to criticism, her feeling of being hung 'out to dry' (Modleski, 1999: 66), and her diatribes against the current generation troubling. For one thing it gives the book, in the words of Julianne Pidduck, a defensive tone (Pidduck, 2000: 127). However, my discomfort may prove instructive. It strikes me that the simmering discontent speaks volumes about the problems feminist theory still face in speaking to – and disagreeing with – itself. Returning to the book's *Old Wives' Tales* title, there is a sense that what may be at stake here is the very discourse of feminist critical theory. Modleski's long participation in feminist scholarship gives her insight into the intricacies involved in such a dialogue while revealing the inherent dangers of it as she performs a similar act of reductionism on what she calls the apoliticalism of 'postfeminism'. Read as a mediation on the continued struggles of feminist narratives under patriarchy I find the book compelling.

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Rebel writer: Mary Wollstonecraft and enlightenment politics

Wendy Gunther-Canada; Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb Illinois, 2001, ISBN: 0-87580-280-X (Hbk)

This fascinating book poses the question, was Mary Wollstonecraft a political theorist? It answers with an exploration of how gender and sexuality were inscribed within enlightenment humanism and rationality, meaning that Wollstonecraft came to the texts of the political theory canon as an outsider, disrupting the boundaries of both genre and gender. From this perspective, Wollstonecraft emerges as both a more marginal figure and a more explicitly *political* thinker than she appears to be from other accounts.

The book is structured around the contrast between the 'quest plot' and the 'marriage plot'. The quest plot ties the individual to the search for the good society; the quest for knowledge brings them to rationality and self-government. Women are excluded from this quest because it unfits them for marriage and takes them outside their proper sphere. Instead, they must pursue the marriage plot, centred around sentimentality and the reproduction of society through the generations. Gunther-Canada argues that Wollstonecraft understood how Rousseau used the novel to romance his female readers into embracing the marriage plot and accepting their inferior status within the social contract, and that Wollstonecraft's own work was about rejecting the marriage plot as the basis for women's story in the history of political philosophy. She argues that the political intent of Wollstonecraft's writing 'was nothing less than the complete subversion of the traditional philosophical plot in which she claimed women were born only to "propagate and rot"' (Gunther-Canada, 2001: 40).

The motif of the quest plot versus the marriage plot is striking and successful, bringing out the shift from a dream of negative liberty based on freedom from familial obligations of gender and generation to a dream of positive liberty based on the freedom to become a new type of being. Wollstonecraft's passion for reason and the importance of education was about filling up the 'empty spaces of traditional femininity' (Gunther-Canada, 2001: 56), the vacuum created when women were not obliged to struggle with the external world, to strive for independence and self-mastery, and were instead immured in their families, groping in the dark. By not isolating the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* from Wollstonecraft's other works, Gunther-Canada makes it clear how the novels, *Mary: A Fiction*, and *Maria: or the*