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Odysseus unbound and Penelope unstable: contemporary Australian expatriate women writers

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ODYSSEUS UNBOUND AND PENEOPE UNSTABLE:
CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN EXPATRIATE WOMEN
WRITERS

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the
degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

KAREN RUTH BROOKS, B.A. (Honours)

Department of English
December 1996
DECLARATION

I certify that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for a degree to any other university or institution. The work contained in this thesis is my own work except where otherwise indicated.

Karen R. Brooks, B.A. (Honours)
13th December 1996
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv - vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION Transience versus Permanence and the Female Expatriate Writer</td>
<td>1 - 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE Expatriation and the Schizonational Subject: A Psychoanalytical Interpretation</td>
<td>32 - 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO Travelography - The discourse of Self-Begetting: Charmian Clift and <em>Mermaid Singing</em></td>
<td>74 - 129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE <em>Peeling the Lotus</em>: Ambivalence and the Female Expatriate</td>
<td>130 - 176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR Through the Looking Glass: Dislocation and Cerebral Cartography in <em>The Bay of Noon</em></td>
<td>177 - 224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE Interrogating the Limen: Terrestrial and Psychological Oppositions in <em>The Transit of Venus</em></td>
<td>225 - 270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SIX Odysseus Unbound: Singing with the Sirens - Liminality and Stasis in <em>Dancing on Coral</em></td>
<td>271 - 313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SEVEN Signifiers and Signified - The Identity Crisis: Movement, Memory and Lexical Play in <em>Longleg</em></td>
<td>314 - 354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>355 - 363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>i - xviii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ii
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ABSTRACT

By examining the selected fiction of three prominent expatriate Australian women writers: Shirley Hazzard, Charmian Clift, and Glenda Adams, I analyse the expatriate experience generally, and advance a particular pattern of representation common to these writers. Their work evokes the liminality and ambivalence of the expatriate and “rewrites” the Homeric legend by giving an active and mobile prominence to Penelope figures. In exploring the psychological and physical dilemmas expatriation entails, they all disrupt generic literary forms (quest, romance, travelogue) and call into question systems of meaning from cultural conventions to language itself.

Expatriate fiction juxtaposes dynamism and stasis. The expatriate can experience both the need to articulate collective truths which stability and conviction allow, and the individual psychological harm that the inability to express these generates. Signifiers become arbitrary; nationality, land, chronology, temporal and spatial verities, and even gender, are all disturbed in the nomadic lives portrayed in the fiction of Clift, Hazzard, and Adams.

The principal method of the thesis is a close textual analysis of the various works of Clift, Hazzard and Adams, with some consideration of their different spatial and psychological relations with the country of their birth. This is informed by selected postcolonial and feminist theories. By also using the theories of Lacan as a useful heuristic for investigating the nuances and
unconscious designation of language and cultural identification, I establish an expatriate theory. This argues for the importance of a liminal discourse which I call *Femination*, a juncture that transcends physicality, culture, and gender without seeking to dominate any position, and as such is polemically situated against, while simultaneously embracing, the concept of “nation” which is masculine (imperial), colonising, and exclusive.