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Carr. Lago de
Gundalupe Km. 3.5,
Atizapán de Zaragoza
Estado de México.

Tels. (52)(55) 58645613
Fax. (52)(55) 58645613

Número Actual

**Women's liberation and some
stories about the Anglo-French
contemporary feminist writer
Michèle Roberts. Paper
Houses: a Memoir of the '70s
and Beyond by Michèle
Roberts. London: Virago, 2007**

Por [Soraya García-Sánchez](#)
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Michèle Roberts's last novel, *Paper Houses: a Memoir of the '70s and Beyond* is a valuable contribution to women's studies, history and writing. After having studied in Oxford, Roberts moves to London to experience a time filled with political demonstrations and comforting herself by becoming part of various women's groups. Yet she also enjoys and loves the company of men. Even though Roberts does not live in the most desirable conditions, she is determined to become a writer despite her lack of time, her parents' misunderstanding and many other impediments.

The plot of this fictional memoir is filled with accounts of experiences related to family, friends, religion, food, sex, love, feminism, parties, demonstrations, being in motion, homes, fashion and the passion for becoming a writer. The form of the novel presents an autobiographical piece of writing, and also an historical overview of the movement for women's liberation and emancipation in England during the 1970s. From communal houses to private spaces, the homeless protagonist has to fight back, make her own decisions in order to move on and become the subject of her dreams. By means of writing (and the revision of diaries and notebooks from her past), Roberts portrays the construction of her persona with continuous arguments between inside and outside, unconsciousness and consciousness: "I had written all my life ... In any case, writing felt secret, still. A secret activity. A safe house of art in which my illegal emotions might hide ... Writing was my soul-saver" (19, 20, 55).

The novel, written in the first person narrator, has an introduction and is divided into twelve sections which are titled according to specific places. The organization of the content is linear with conscious reflections from the narrator's present perspective about the historical time that she lived. Areas in London where Roberts spent most of her youth are Regent's Park, Holloway, Clapham Junction, Camberwell, Peckham Rye, Holland Park, Notting Hill Gate, Bayswater, Wivenhoe and Tufnell Park. Bangkok and Cambridge, Massachusetts comprise chapters four and ten respectively. Roberts also describes her journeys to France, Italy and other cities in Europe and England but they form only a small part of the content. Black and white pictures of Roberts and some friends along with a descriptive note introduce every chapter. These spaces, experiences, meetings and jobs are constituents of the protagonist's identity and her transformation from a religious woman to a feminist and conscious writer who expresses her reservations about Catholicism.

Historical facts and Robert's personal viewpoints are intertwined in this literary text. Traditional contradictions are primary sources in Roberts's production but in this novel, as in her previous fictional texts, they complement each other. Some of the examples are Male-Female, Catholic-Protestant, Mother-Father, Active-Passive, Form-Content, History-Fiction, Outside-Inside, Community-Individuality, Conscious-Unconscious, and Form-Content. When Roberts narrates her relationship with Jim, her second husband, she acknowledges oppositions and the need to convey it into words, into language: "First of all the words were in the streets and then they moved into the house, into my diary" (116). I use the term protagonist because even though Roberts is reflecting upon her life 20 or 30 years ago, she is using story-telling, fiction, autobiography and history as techniques simultaneously in her fictional writing. Her past is reflective and predominant in her conscious writing: "I take my past with me. History matters" (337).

Dedicated to *all the young ones*, Roberts explores her dynamic and revolutionary past from her present by placing herself in different positions, not only spatially but professionally. She worked as a librarian, an editor, a teacher. Time and space construct her identity as she is presented as an explorer, as a flâneur: "Worry dissolved when I roamed London and forgot myself in exploring it" (74). This physical travelling around corresponds with the protagonist's discovery of her persona. That is to say, Roberts puts into practice Charles Baudelaire's theory and she herself participates, understands and portrays the facts that happened to London and to herself. The outer world is observed and developed at the same time that the inner world of the writer-protagonist is being explored. The *flâneur* has a double purpose of observing and participating: "I continued my solitary walks around London" (56). This attitude corresponds with her technique at the time of writing this novel where oppositions and

dualities merge. Roberts not only observes but, as the young protagonist, is being observed by her mature and more conscious voice: "When I write, the outside comes inside, and then the inside goes back outside again" (336).

Paper Houses: a Memoir of the '70s and Beyond uses a feminist approach to convey a profound knowledge about women's communities, particularly, from a conscious and reflective "I" voice. There is a sense of persistence and continuity at the time of writing and we sense the atmosphere during the creation of novels such as *The Wild Girl*, *The Visitation*, *Daughters of the House* or *Impossible Saints*, to name a few. Roberts even acknowledges the invention of experimental techniques that she originally used in *Flesh and Blood* and they form now part of her writing style (335). *Paper Houses* enforces the union of oppositions such as that between the sexes. Yet among all her novels, this one is about life, decisions and the construction of identity, the construction of her own *paper* house, of her own writing. As Hélène Cixous, Michèle Roberts defends the idea of writing one self in the text. Body and form dance together in her vision of writing. *Paper Houses* is about living and building your results, your luck. It is a must especially for students and scholars interested in women's writing, creative and experimental writing, feminism, sexuality, Catholicism, history and fiction.

Soraya García-Sánchez

The University of Queensland, Australia.