

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH IMAGES OF CLOTHING IN FLEUR ADCOCK'S POETRY

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This study examines how Fleur Adcock, a New Zealand-born British poet, establishes identities through images of clothing in three of her poems. Adcock's acute observations of clothing reflect the close link between dress and the construction of the self and our place in society. In "The Soho Hospital for Women," Adcock portrays clothing as a crucial aspect of personal identity, while in "Londoner" clothing reflects the conflict of the divided self. "Witnesses" reconstructs female identity under patriarchy by emphasising the different functions of clothing for men and women in the courtroom.

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Fleur Adcock's poetry is characterised by acute and witty observations of various quotidian experiences. Several of her poems exhibit detailed descriptions of the wearing of apparel, through which she attempts to construct her displaced identities in different manners. This paper focuses on three of Adcock's poems – "Londoner," "The Soho Hospital for Women," and "Witnesses" – exploring how the imagery of clothing in her poetry emerges as a symbolic reflection of displacement, marginalisation, and power dynamics in the process of identity formation.

Rather than being solely a part of the external and social creature, clothing is eminently associated with the internal subjective self. As Joanne Entwistle notes: "Dress lies at the margins of the body and marks the boundary between self and other, individual and society" (2001, 37), and is thus essential to the construction of individual identity. Adcock's interest in identity is apparent throughout her "nine collections of poems from *The Eye of the Hurricane*, published in New Zealand in 1964, to *Looking Back* (1997), gathered together in *Poems 1960-2000* (2000)," and "one of Adcock's main preoccupations is her own identity, New Zealand or British" (Bracefield 2018, 59). Born in New Zealand of Northern Irish and English descent, Adcock grapples with a complex sense of identity marked by enduring estrangement from both her country of birth and her country of immigration throughout her lifetime. This paper delves into the pivotal role of clothing in Fleur Adcock's poetry, employing it as a lens to scrutinise the intricate dynamics of identity

formation. While firmly grounded in the motif of clothing, the examination extends beyond its initial focus, contributing to a more expansive understanding of identity construction throughout Adcock's poetic work.

In "Londoner," the inappropriate clothes and shoes the speaker wears suggest the psychic disruption caused by her frequent physical journeys between Britain and New Zealand, reflecting the conflict of the divided self. As the title "Londoner" adumbrates, the poem depicts how the speaker spent her days as a Londoner back from her visit to New Zealand, experiencing dismal weather and dreadful traffic along the flourishing metropolis in contrast to the rustic atmosphere in New Zealand. The poem starts with her attempt to renegotiate her hybrid British-New Zealand identity by transforming her incongruity of wearing "a cotton skirt, a cardigan, jandals –/ or flipflops as people call them here,/ where February's winter" (2000, 182). According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, our experience of our bodies in time and space gives us our sense of self. As an "embodied practice," dress is essential to our perception of the world; our experience of dress determines our sense of self and place in society (qtd. in Lee 2015, 31). The speaker's neglect of the difference of the season between the two countries demonstrates her alienation from both nations, which is emphasised by the sheer contrast between her light outfit and her neighbours' overcoats. The rhetorical question "Aren't I cold?" (2000, 182) conveys a sense of self-deprecation and uncovers her inner struggle triggered by the abrupt physical change of travelling from New Zealand to London. Accidentally blurting out the kiwi word "jandals," which has been a core part of New Zealand's cultural identity for ages, reveals that her consciousness fails to keep up with her physical movement. Furthermore, her brief moment of confusion and the immediate response to change the word into "flipflops" demonstrates her awareness of her physical surroundings and her psychological struggle to locate herself. Louise Dabène and Danièle Moore argue that "language plays the part of an 'emotional cement' in own-group recognition and the determination of in-and-out boundaries" (1995, 23). This language choice and the subsequent quick adjustment by the speaker here can be interpreted as a manifestation of code-switching, involving the juxtaposition of elements from two or more languages, thus serving as a "boundary-leveling or boundary-maintaining strategy" (Heller 1998, 1). This strategic use of language may evolve into a marker of identity and is particularly relevant when examining code-switching in post-colonial literature.

As the speaker navigates the physical and linguistic transitions, she seems to gradually embrace her complicated national identity. "The neighbours in their overcoats are smiling/ at my smiles and not at my bare toes" (2000, 182). Being greeted with genuine smiles instead of being mocked by her neighbours renders the speaker a sense of belonging and establishes the grounds for her to come to

as being integrated into its prosperous capital city. However, as she observes her surroundings through the foggy night, her identity seems to become vague again. In the end, she cannot help but laugh at herself for being too naive to believe that she eventually located herself in London. As Erik Erikson notes about teenagers, “the search for a new and yet reliable identity can perhaps best be seen in the persistent adolescent endeavour to define, overdefine, and redefine themselves and each other in ruthless comparison” (1994, 87). Similarly here, the relentless comparison with and imitation of Londoners reveals the hard effort the speaker made to construct and maintain her seemingly reliable identity.

In “The Soho Hospital for Women,” Adcock gives a portrayal of the clothes worn by two female patients on the weekly outing, in comparison with the hospital gowns that patients are supposed to put on during their admission, which indicates her reluctance to efface personal identity. As Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex point out, the uniform suppresses individual idiosyncrasies in behaviour and appearance (1972, 719). Hospital gowns, being a kind of uniform, create the sense of being exposed, vulnerable and de-identified. When patients don their hospital gowns, they are relegated to the “sick role,” being automatically stripped of their own identity.

Nellie, a breast cancer patient and mother of several children, wears a quilted dressing gown that “softens/ to semi-doubtful this imbalance” (Adcock 2000, 158). The hospital gown not only cunningly covers her flawed body but also shields her from unkind gazes. However, her individual identity is also “softened” by “her quilted dressing-gown.” Women often experience dissociation from themselves and the loss of identity after becoming mothers, as the maternal role outweighs their individuality. As depicted in the poem, people focus on Nellie’s single breast as having been able to feed several children, while “there’s no starched vanity/ in our abundant ward-mother” (2000, 158). In spite of the fact that she nurtures a big family, no one keeps her company aside the bed. Her silvery hair, lolled slippers, and weathered smile disclose her frailty and loneliness, but also suggest her tenacity and serenity. Moreover, when she is granted the chance to go out, she finally can choose her own outfit which provides moments of comfort and individuality.

When she dresses up in her black
with her glittering marcasite brooch on
to go for the weekly radium treatment
she’s the bright star of the taxi-party –
whatever may be growing under her ribs. (Adcock 2000, 158)

The moment she exchanges the uniform for her favourite piece of clothing, her own personality becomes more vibrant. The narrative then pivots to the second female patient the speaker encounters at the hospital. Battling cancer, she opts to

wear her unsuitable personal clothing for the weekly outdoor treatment amid her deteriorating health.

Doris hardly smokes in the ward –
and hardly eats more than a dreamy spoonful –
but the corridors and bathrooms
reek of her Players Number 10 [sic!],
and the drug-trolley pauses
for long minutes by her bed. (Adcock 2000, 158)

Player's No. 10 (the cheapest cigarette on the British market in 1968), the minimal food intake, and the shrinking waistline imply that Doris is one of the lung cancer patients who often experience loss of appetite and unintentional weight loss as a result of cancer treatment. Her pale face, in sharp contrast with the scarlet sweater, announces her shattering health condition.

Each week for the taxi-outing
she puts on her skirt again
and has to pin the slack waistband
more tightly over her scarlet sweater.
Her face, a white shadow through smoked glass,
lets Soho display itself unregarded. (Adcock 2000, 158)

Despite her declining condition, she manages to get rid of the hospital gown in exchange for her ill-fitting clothes, assuring herself that she remains connected to and aware of her surroundings. The act of changing into her familiar clothes helps her maintain a sense of normalcy or familiarity even in the midst of health challenges. As Joseph and Alex claim, "standardisation of apparel is another source of group-imposed conformity" (1972, 723). Notwithstanding having little control over what treatments they have to receive and when or how much medication they have to take, patients are able to retain moments of dignity and self-expression in choosing what to wear for the weekly outing. Adcock pays homage to the way women strive to establish and maintain their identities.

"Adcock's compassion for women who have suffered from neglect, illness or maltreatment or who are victims of male predatoriness or social mishap, in particular environmental disaster, is interwoven with an acute sense of their individuality" (Wilson 2007, 79). This compassion is vividly portrayed in the opening stanza, which creates a disagreeable and depersonalising atmosphere. Here, patients are exposed to incessant buzz, harsh lights, and suffocating whiteness. The threefold repetition of "strange" in the very first stanza emphasises the speaker's anxiety and helplessness, which set a desolate tone for this poem. With "strange rooms,"

“white door,” “strange bed, mechanical hum” and “white light,” the Soho Hospital for Women witnesses the doomed destiny of countless women. No male figures, except for one doctor, appear in the poem, which ironically coincides with the social function of the hospital for women, as the title explicitly suggests. The absence of men throughout the poem exemplifies the dismal conditions of disregarded women in society.

The speaker’s personal experience of a medical surgery sheds a light on women deprived of agency, revealing their emotional struggles and the depersonalising impact of invasive medical procedures.

Doctor, I am not afraid of a word.
But neither do I wish to embrace that visitor,
to engulf it as Hine-Nui-te-Po
engulfed Maui; that would be the way of it.

And she was the winner there: her womb crushed him.
Goddesses can do these things. (Adcock 2000, 156–57)

These two stanzas above imply that the heroine is undergoing an induced abortion. Hine-Nui-te-Po, a goddess of night and death in Maori legend, crushed her son Māui, who attempted to enter her vagina and exit from her mouth to achieve immortality and destroy her at the same time. Although the protagonist claims that she is “not afraid of a word,” she is still worried that raising a child as a single woman might destroy her life. “But I have admitted the gloved hands and the speculum/ and must part my ordinary legs to the surgeon’s knife” (2000, 156–57). This powerful and emotive statement underlines the loss of agency and control experienced by women who simply become passive recipients of violent and invasive procedures. The words “admitted” and “acceptance” (in the first stanza) suggest a sense of resignation or defeat on the part of the speaker, which exposes the emotional toll that these experiences can take on women, as they are forced to endure painful and invasive treatments that strip them of their dignity and autonomy. The ironic use of “ordinary legs” is particularly striking, as it reinforces the ways in which the speaker’s body has become depersonalised and reduced to another medical case to be examined and treated by a medical authority.

The hierarchical power dynamics between male doctors and female patients reveal the depersonalising and objectifying aspects of medical settings, which present women as passive subjects rather than individuals with agency and emotions. After recounting the stories of herself, Nellie, and Doris, the speaker casts the narrative lens back on her own story:

The senior consultant on his rounds
murmurs in so subdued a voice
to the students marshalled behind
that they gather in, forming a cell,
a cluster, a rosette around him
as he stands at the foot of my bed
going through my notes with them,
half-audibly instructive, grave. (Adcock 2000, 159)

The only man present in the poem is surrounded by students and he seems to enjoy his glorious moments of dominating the current situation. The gorgeous and vigorous "rosette" strikes a discordant note with whiteness and numbness prevailing in the hospital. On the one hand, the rosette, in many of the ancient Near Eastern religions, represents the birth, death, and rebirth of the sun. This symbolic imagery adds a further indication that the speaker went through an abortion surgery. The "cell" serves as an invisible wall resisting the entry of the protagonist who is supposed to be the centre of this situation. Treated as a passive medical case rather than a woman who endures, she is ironically secluded from her own health condition. "The slight ache as I strain forward/ to listen still seems imagined" (Adcock 2000, 159). With no intention to concern himself with the speaker's emotions, the doctor "turns his practised smile on me:/ 'How are you this morning?'" (Adcock 2000, 159). On the other hand, the rosette has been linked by H. S. Smith to the concept of 'divine' kingship and to Sumerian and especially Elamite symbolism: "It is believed the rosette was a symbol for kingly authority, or possibly the king's power of life or death over subject peoples" (The Book Blog). Playing the role of the king in the hospital, doctors are in command of life and death over patients. It highlights the ways in which women's bodies are depersonalised and objectified in medical contexts, as they become reduced to mere patients or medical cases, where their personal experiences, emotions, and autonomy are eclipsed by their health conditions. In addition, the situation in the Soho Hospital for Women can be seen as the epitome of the whole society, in which men are supreme rulers who always stand in the centre of the world, surrounded and supported by "students," with women being their subjects. "'Fine,/ very well, thank you.' I smile too./ And possibly all that murmurs within me/ is the slow dissolving of stitches" (2000, 159). Replying in a polite and restrained manner, the speaker manages to maintain her dignity by making efforts to bury her emotions. Similarly, W.H. Auden also examines the power dynamics between female patients and male doctors in the lyrical ballad "Miss Gee," which presents by understated and unadorned verbs how the woman patient is violently and cruelly treated as a medical case even after her death: "'Gentlemen, if you please,/ We seldom see a sarcoma/ As far advanced as this.'" (Auden 1979, 55). The doctor's apparently polite and professional utterance to his students is ironically contrasted

with the stark reality of Miss Gee's miserable situation, as she lies half-cut on the table, which underscores the lack of agency and control that women often face in medical settings.

Adcock's poem continues with the speaker's post-hospitalisation experience, where the act of choosing the ingredients for a meal in a supermarket and preparing it becomes a powerful symbol of her autonomy and self-sufficiency, contrasting sharply with the loss of identity and autonomy experienced during her hospitalisation.

I am out in the supermarket choosing –
 this very afternoon, this day –
 picking up tomatoes, cheese, bread,

things I want and shall be using
 to make myself a meal, (Adcock 2000, 159)

The deictic device “this” indicates that there is some perceiving “I” in the situation and the line “things I want and shall be using” reinforces the presence of such a perceiving self. Despite her inability to maintain autonomy and dignity in the hospital, the female speaker is able to do so in the supermarket as she chooses the items she wants to use in her meal. In addition, the temporal deixis here conveys a sense of immediacy or urgency, which suggests that the speaker is reluctant to spend time in the hospital since it might remind her of loss and pain. Following her discharge, the patient's first priority is to procure groceries and prepare meals for herself, with no external support to rely on. This inclination towards self-sufficiency precludes any immediate reflection or processing of her emotional state. Notably, the choice of food items suggests her financial constraints, indicative of a single woman living independently. Nevertheless, she revels in the sense of freedom and satisfaction. The speaker then shifts the focus from herself to other women patients she encountered at the hospital again. She feels content and blessed to be able to make a seemingly simple meal for herself, while they are confined to their beds with “stodgy suppers” that serve as a reminder of the unpleasant conditions faced by patients.

The role of names is key to the construction of identity and to notions of selfhood (Hough and Izdebska 2016, 30). Adcock renders every female figure a sense of identity by mentioning their names, which also demonstrates her celebration of their composure and fortitude. At the same time, these named characters appear to be the readers' acquaintances, a fact that tends to provoke their compassion and empathy. However, there is no hint of a name for the speaker. What is more, the constant narrative shifts and the unnamed heroine imply an incoherent and unstable self. “Discontinuities, displacements, shifting angles of vision characterise Adcock's treatment of gender as they do her treatment of place,

and raise questions, in a similar way, about identity” (Gregson 1996, 94). It is not until the very end of the poem that she seems to locate herself:

I lift my light basket, observing
How little I needed in fact;
and move to the checkout, to the rain,
to the lights and the long street curving. (Adcock 2000, 160)

Observing closely yet detached, the speaker unveils a cruel but real condition women are facing. And in doing so, Adcock strives to defend their lost identities throughout the poem.

As in “Witnesses,” a poem in which Adcock lays emphasis on the different functions of the dark clothes of men and women in the male-dominated courtroom, in an effort to reconstruct the long-oppressed female identity under patriarchal domination. “Dress can communicate certain messages language cannot, especially those requiring constant ‘semiotic repetition rather than innovation’ including cultural constructions such as gender” (Lee 2015, 28). In “Witnesses,” both women and men dress in black in the court, but the information they intend to convey is different in all respects. “We three in our dark decent clothes,/ unlike ourselves, more like the three/ witches” (Adcock 2000, 299). For the three women, “dark decent clothes” serve as a means to empower themselves. Black normally connotes professionalism and seriousness. When they come to testify in the courtroom, consisting solely of men, they must avail themselves of external forces. In this case, black clothes provide a sense of security and fortitude, which is particularly necessary given the scrutiny they will face from the men present. In order to counteract the oppressive male gaze, the women must assume a demeanour of determination and courage. As they stand up against masculine officialdom, they must exhibit these qualities in order to present themselves as legitimate and credible witnesses. Initially, these three women pin their hope on their testimony and they have the belief that they may win this trial for the woman. Therefore, they imagine themselves as “the three witches” who could wield supernatural power over the smoke to save this family. However, in the last stanza, the smoke disappears and reality resumes without them even getting a chance to testify. It can be seen that the three women are the epitome of the marginalised women in society, told to wait outside their whole life. Notably, the reference to the three witches in *Macbeth* suggests their failure. As Adriana Madej-Stang argues, “his [Shakespeare’s] witches are powerless” (2015, 74), since “the witches, with their first prophesy, create only a possibility, but it is Lady Macbeth who makes her husband act and overcome his fears” (2015, 73).

The baggage of dress carrying sexual meanings is entrenched within the culturally established definitions of ‘femininity.’ Richard Collier argues that “men’s bodies are

taken for granted or rendered invisible, in contrast to the attention paid to female bodies at work and in other public arenas” (qtd. in Entwistle 2001, 54).

A man in a wig
and black robes. Two other men
in lesser wigs and gowns. More men
in dark suits. We sit down together,

His future hangs from these black-clad
proceedings, these ferretings under her sober
dress, under our skirts and dresses
to sniff out corruption (Adcock 2000, 299)

On the one hand, the four women figures “decently” clad in skirts and dresses are unable to escape from the erotic scrutiny in the male-defined courtroom. On the other hand, the male body can be at least superficially obliterated by the male suit with no sexual association intended. The “wig,” “black robes,” “gowns,” and “dark suit” have come to connote ‘professional’ for men. Women are still seen as located in the body, whereas men are seen as transcending it. At the same time, they set out to convey an intimidating and oppressive image through their dark suits to be able to psychologically manipulate women in the court. According to Collier, for women who “wear a tailored suit much the same as a man, her identity will always be as a ‘female professional’, her body, her gender being outside the norm ‘masculine’” (qtd. in Entwistle 2001, 53). Therefore, the black skirts and dresses the four women wear are treated as the standard ‘masculine’ dress, the “meek versions/ of their clothing” (Adcock 2000, 300), as Adcock points out. Women are compelled to conform to the prescribed gendered connotations of dress. This tradition amounts to the repression of the body and also female identity, since identity is most clearly and consistently articulated by clothes. The phrases “unlike ourselves” and “our own meek versions/ of their clothing” suggest that the three women figures possess strong self-identities, which is celebrated by Adcock. However, this is far more than enough. They choose to stand up in solidarity to fight for the subjugated female identity.

Adcock explores identity issues throughout her oeuvre in various manners. She focuses upon the profound significance of dress in the process of identity construction and considers clothing as expressive of identity. In “Londoner,” Adcock portrays the speaker’s sense of displacement as a result of living in a city that is not her place of origin. Through the speaker’s own improper clothes and her observations of the clothing of those around her, Adcock captures the fragmented nature of the speaker’s identity. Similarly, in “The Soho Hospital for Women,” Adcock examines the experiences of women seeking medical attention in a male-dominated hospital,

using clothing as a means to highlight the marginalisation of women in the medical field. Finally, in “Witnesses,” Adcock dwells on the significance of clothing in the courtroom, particularly in relation to gender and power dynamics. In this poem, clothing is utilised to express the empowerment of the three female witnesses as they navigate the male-defined court system, and also to expose the suppression of the female body and identity. These three poems evidently reveal that Adcock uses clothing as a means to construct identities. The poet effectively employs images of clothing to explore issues of displacement, marginalisation, and power dynamics in a variety of contexts. In “Londoner,” “The Soho Hospital for Women” and “Witnesses” Adcock manages to renegotiate her hybrid British-New Zealand identity, defend personal identity, and imply a liberation of the long-oppressed female identity through the varied depiction of clothing.

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