

# **Beyond Natural:**

## **Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Motherhood**



**Edited by Emma Domínguez-Rué**

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Perspectives on  
Motherhood**

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Interdisciplinary Discourses

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*BEYOND NATURAL:  
INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON MOTHERHOOD*

Edited by Emma Domínguez-Rué

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# Contents

<b>Introduction:</b> <b>Interrogating Cultural Discourses on Motherhood</b> <i>Emma Domínguez-Rué</i>	5
<b>Problematizing Motherhood:</b> <b>Unorthodox Mothers, Mother Figures and Surrogate Mothers</b>	
Intergenerational Female Dialogue: Mother(Figure)s and Daughters at the Table <i>Ines Belkahla</i>	12
‘I wanted to be like you’: Complicated Motherhood in <i>Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight (2010)</i> <i>Beth Roberts</i>	30
Mothers and Mother Figures in George Sand’s <i>Story of My Life</i> <i>Tatjana Šepić</i>	46
<i>MILF</i> Manor and the Horror of a Mother’s Sexuality <i>Zorianna Zurba</i>	65
“Ab Main ‘Maa’ se “Mummy” ban Chuki Hoon!” (I have become “Mummy” instead of Maa): Understanding Indian Diasporic Mothers on Screen <i>Madhurima Guha</i>	81

**Body and State: (Trans)National Perspectives on  
Motherhood and the Mother's Body**

Greenlandic Mothers, Danish Mothers, and “Mother  
Denmark”: Displays of Motherhood in Mâliâraq Vebæk’s  
*Historien om Katrine*

*Francesca Turri*

The shifting meanings of ‘mother’ in the latter half of the  
20th century – a Sino-Japanese comparative study

*Martina Nedialkova*

Reproduction Policies and their Implications in  
Contemporary Romanian Women’s Prose

*Monica Manolachi*

Motherhood in Turkish Novels in the Early Republican  
Period

*Rahime Sarıçelik*

Mothers under Patriarchy: Mothers and Children Trapped  
within Violent Relationships

*Rosalba Castiglione and Gözde Doğanıylmaz-Burger*

## **Introduction: Interrogating Cultural Discourses on Motherhood**

“It is literally impossible to be a woman,” says Gloria (America Ferrera) to Barbie (Margot Robbie) in the eponymous film (2023). I would add to this that being a woman-mother in a patriarchal society gets even more impossible. As one of the most fundamental experiences a woman may go through, motherhood carries profound emotional, cultural, social, and political implications that vary across time, place, class, race and ethnicity, among other aspects. Although it is often idealised as a natural and fulfilling role for women, the actual experiences of mothers reveal a complex and multifaceted reality. This edited volume seeks to explore the various dimensions of motherhood through an interdisciplinary lens, bringing together perspectives from literature, TV and cinema, while taking into account the many social, legal, political and economic aspects that may condition a mother’s experience. By examining how motherhood is constructed, represented, and regulated across different fields, we hope to offer a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of this crucial aspect of a woman’s existence.

The figure of the mother has long been a stereotype in literature and cinema, where stories of maternal devotion, sacrifice, and love are often juxtaposed with narratives of loss, abandonment, and struggle. Cultural representations of motherhood have both reflected and shaped societal attitudes towards women’s roles, particularly in relation to childbearing and childcare. In her seminal work, *The Mother Knot* (1997), Jane Lazarre challenges the cultural narrative of “the good mother” by explaining her own experience of ambivalence and frustration. Lazarre articulates the unspoken emotional struggles that many mothers face, pointing to the enormous contrast between the idealized cultural image of motherhood and the realities

experienced by many women. As she writes, “I came to realize that the struggle was not in me alone, but in the false image of motherhood itself” (Lazarre, 1997, p. 47). This tension between societal expectations and personal experience is a recurring theme that this volume explores, particularly in the contributions that address literary and cinematic portrayals of motherhood.

In recent years, feminist scholars have increasingly critiqued the social expectations imposed on mothers and the ways in which these expectations are shaped by neoliberal and heteropatriarchal structures. Orna Donath’s controversial work *Regretting Motherhood* (2017) marks a significant landmark in the cultural discourse of motherhood by questioning the assumption that it is universally fulfilling and desirable. Donath’s work is based on interviews with Israeli women who expressed regret over becoming mothers, thus voicing a taboo subject by challenging deeply ingrained beliefs about the maternal instinct and women’s ‘natural’ desire to have children. By presenting women’s experiences of regret, Donath calls attention to the ways in which society coerces women into motherhood and then punishes them for not living up to its ideal (shall we say impossible?) standards. As she argues, “motherhood is not only taken for granted as a universal calling, but it is also imagined as a source of infinite joy and satisfaction, no matter the personal cost” (Donath, 2017, p. 23). Her work urges readers to consider the huge emotional and psychological cost of such expectations and gives visibility to the diversity of maternal experiences, a theme that resonates throughout this volume.

As Adrienne Rich argued in her influential work *Of Woman Born* (1976), the institution of motherhood is different from the experience of being a mother. As she writes, “the physical potential for motherhood creates the institution, but it does not wholly determine its social meaning” (Rich, 1976, p. 42). This distinction is crucial, as it allows us to explore how motherhood has been enforced as a social obligation and at the same time reclaimed as a space for women’s agency. The chapters included in the first part of the volume, “Problematising Motherhood: Unorthodox Mothers, Mother Figures and Surrogate Mothers”, present mother figures

that deviate from stereotyped notions of motherhood by transgressing their role as sacrificial, selfless or asexual, as well as explorations of the ways in which surrogate motherhood and alternative mother figures can subvert, preserve or transgress a mother's role.

In literature, TV and cinema, motherhood has been depicted as a site of both oppression and empowerment, often reflecting the socio-cultural background in which the works are produced, thus interrogating the ways in which motherhood is constructed, imagined, and experienced by women. In contemporary literature, authors such as Jamaica Kincaid and Elena Ferrante explore the ambivalence of motherhood, capturing the intense emotions – love, guilt, resentment, and pride – that often coexist in maternal relationships. In *My Mother* (1992), Kincaid poignantly depicts the conflicting relationship between mother and daughter, marked by control and resentment and yet remaining a deep connection. Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter* (2006) similarly challenges the idealised notion of maternal sacrifice and selflessness through the account of a mother who abandons her daughters, a choice that reveals aspects of motherhood that are often unspeakable because of their disturbing nature. As Ferrante's protagonist reflects, "I loved my children, but I felt suffocated by the weight of my responsibility" (Ferrante, 2006, p. 71). These works serve as literary contrasts to dominant cultural narratives that idealise motherhood as a necessarily joyous and fulfilling experience. Similarly, the chapters contained in the first part of this volume examine some of the more ambivalent aspects of mothering, such as the complexities of maternal guilt, societal pressures placed on women to be perfect caregivers, the mental and physical toll of motherhood, the emotional and psychological burdens placed on mothers, the invisible work of caregiving, or the social judgement placed on mothers who display sexual desire.

Beyond cultural representations, the political, legal and economic dimensions of motherhood also play a significant role in shaping maternal experiences. Social and political realities, together with legal and economic considerations are central to understanding the lived realities of motherhood, particularly in the context of

neoliberal economies that often place excessive burdens on both working and stay-home mothers. The feminist economist Nancy Folbre critiques the undervaluation of caregiving in capitalist economies in *The Invisible Heart* (2001). As she argues, the emotional and physical labour of mothers is systematically underrated because it is seen as ‘natural’ for women to perform it, thus evidencing that caregiving, and especially motherhood, is both essential to society and yet economically invisible: “the work that mothers do is both indispensable and discounted, in large part because it is taken for granted as something women will do for free” (Folbre, 2001, p. 9). This economic undervaluation of motherhood is explored in several contributions in this volume, together with the many social, legal and political conditions that have profound implications in the lives of women.

Added to the reality that in many parts of the world reproductive rights remain heavily contested, women’s bodies often remain the battleground for legal and political debates. The intersection of motherhood with legal frameworks – particularly regarding reproductive rights, maternity leave, divorce law and childcare policies – reveals the ways in which the state exercises control over women’s reproductive choices and their roles as mothers. The second part of this volume, entitled “Body and State: (Trans)National Perspectives on Motherhood and the Mother’s Body”, includes five papers that examine the ways in which the role of mothers – as well as the woman’s body itself – can be profoundly influenced by national contexts, together with the ways in which cultural and political notions of womanhood and motherhood can preserve, transform and even oppress a woman’s experience of motherhood.

The interdisciplinary approach of this volume underscores the need for a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of motherhood – one that accounts for the diverse experiences of mothers. By bringing together various perspectives, this collection seeks to highlight the multiplicity of maternal experiences and to challenge the dominant cultural narratives that often marginalize or silence certain voices. Motherhood, as this volume demonstrates, is not a monolithic experience but a deeply personal and socially

constructed role that is constantly negotiated and redefined. As scholars, writers, and activists continue to explore the complexities of motherhood, it is crucial to listen to the voices of those who have been historically excluded from these conversations – single mothers, queer mothers, migrating mothers, and surrogate mothers, to name but a few. The contributors to this volume engage with these voices, offering new insights and perspectives on what it means to go through the experience of mothering.

Ultimately, this volume aims to move beyond idealised and reductive representations of motherhood, offering instead a more nuanced, critical, and empathetic exploration of the maternal experience. It is with this purpose in mind that *Beyond Natural: Interdisciplinary Discourses on Motherhood* attempts at illustrating ongoing discussions on motherhood from different approaches. By drawing on the insights of literature, cinema and TV, cultural studies, law and economics, we hope to contribute to an ongoing conversation about motherhood that is as diverse and multifaceted as the mothers themselves. Through this interdisciplinary dialogue, we seek to challenge dominant narratives, address systemic inequalities, and imagine more just and supportive frameworks for all those who mother.

This volume is the result of the research presented at the “Discourses of Motherhood” international conferences, celebrated in London in 2022 and 2023 and organised by the London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research. The editor would like to thank its Director Dr. Olena Lytovka and her wonderful team for making this volume possible.

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**Problematizing Motherhood:  
Unorthodox Mothers, Mother  
Figures and Surrogate Mothers**

**Ines Belkahla**

## **Intergenerational Female Dialogue: Mother(Figure)s and Daughters at the Table**

### **Introduction**

The mother-daughter relationship is a much discussed topic in literature around the world. Despite the instinctive similarities a mother and her daughter might share, the relationship between them is seldom smooth. Among the interesting fictional works that approached the ‘mother-daughter complex’ in Jungian terms, I have chosen Alice Munro’s *The Beggar Maid* and *Lives of Girls and Women*. In my paper, I intend to examine the role of the mother, as well as that of the mother-figure, in the identity formation of the daughter. My analysis of the Munroian mother-daughter dynamics should unravel how complicity, rivalry and even rejection represent the anchor of the female identity. My contribution to research lies in approaching the mother-daughter relationship in Munro’s above selected works through the lens of psychoanalysis.

Toned with a biographical component, the narratives of *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *The Beggar Maid* (1977) present the mother-daughter relationship in its naked nature: its intimacy and its conflicts. Throughout the fragments of the short story cycle genre, we move forward in the life span of the characters, and we get to follow the emotional maturation of the mother-daughter relationship. In particular, we realise about Del’s and Rose’s recognition of the importance of their motherly figures. The different phases of communication and miscommunication are the guiding pathways for the psychological transformations of the main characters.

Munro's biography, interviews and personal notes<sup>1</sup> reveal concrete evidence that she is writing her life in her narratives, and therefore rewriting parts of herself through every story. Even though the stories she had written are distinct from one another, they all focus on recreating common human qualities. For instance, the relationship with the mother prevails throughout her stories. At one of the interviews, she confesses: "The material about my mother is my central material in life, and it always comes the most readily to me. If I just relax, that's what will come up. So, once I started to write that, I was off." Then she adds: "I've done the character of my mother so often, and my feelings towards her, I didn't have to look for those" (McCulloch and Simpson, 1994, web). Further, when asked about the real-life inspiration for the characters of the aunts in *Lives*, she answered:

My mother was not in the role of the lead female in my life by that time, though she was an enormously important person; she wasn't there as the person who set the standards anymore. So these older women moved into that role, and though they didn't set any standards that I was at all interested in, there was a constant tension there that was important to me. (McCulloch and Simpson, 1994, web)

This proves, once again, that Munro's concern with motherhood is a predominant theme in her narrative and that her childhood memories are echoed throughout her work. Her female characters are consequently composite, since they embody not only fictional dimensions but, more importantly, parts of herself and her personal history and relationships.

Through such statements, Munro declares that her fictional portraits are derived from real people, even if altered or recomposed, and not from imagination. She therefore represents the figure of the mother through different models: as the biological mother, as the stepmother, as the godmother or as the spiritual mother. The

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1 - I am referring to Munro's essays "What is Real?" and "Working for a Living".

different mother(figure)-daughter relationships unfold in Munro's world within the very domestic setting of the house, and more specifically around a table, whether it's the kitchen's, the veranda's or the living room table. In this paper, I attempt to elucidate how the mother-daughter relationship in Munro's stories is central to identity formation despite its complexity and its different facets.

### **Munro: The Daughter and the Mother**

Munro explains that her obsession with the mother-daughter complex, and the tense relationship and lack of communication between the two goes back to her mother. Munro confirms that the characters of Del and Rose bear "an aspect of [herself]" (Rasporich, 1990, p.23). In this sense, it seems interesting to analyse the different aspects of the mother-daughter relationship through the lens of her own relationship with her mother. Paradoxically, while devoting her time to writing, Munro deprived her own daughters of affection and sufficient communication with them. One of Munro's three daughters, Sheila Munro, wrote a book called *Lives of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro*, in which she narrates her life story with her mother. In this book, Sheila notes how her mother preferred the act of writing over being a housewife or spending time with them. She also highlights that her mother was almost absent despite her physical presence. As a matter of fact, even Munro has mentioned a few things about her interest in writing and how parenting has been an obstacle to that. She says: "When my oldest daughter was about two, she'd come to where I was sitting at the typewriter, and I would bat her away with one hand and type with the other" (McCulloch and Simpson, 1994, web). Munro unconsciously recreated the mother-daughter complex with her own daughters while attempting to convey the important role of the mother in her daughter's prospects in life and her psychological development. It could be said, based on this, that Munro's depiction of dialogic relationships between mothers and daughters is the reflection of her own life experience.

The different mother-daughter relationships in the selected cycles will be analysed through the lens of psychoanalysis. In effect, the mother-daughter kinship represents in both cycles the initial school that shapes the protagonist's perspective on friends, men, and the larger social system. The micro-cosmic world of the female protagonist – which might consist of her parents, her sibling, her home or even her mirror – constitutes the nucleus of the irreversible change in gender discourse. In Munro's short story cycles *Lives* and *The Beggar Maid* we find three distinct types of motherly rapports. First, there is the mother-daughter relationship in *Lives* with Del and Ida. Second, in *The Beggar Maid*, we have the daughter-stepmother relationship with Flo and Rose. And third, we have the daughter and the mother-figure, or the spiritual mother, with Rose and Dr. Henshawe.

### **Resistance and Conformity: Del and her Mother Addie**

The relationship between Del and her mother undergoes several phases of development throughout the cycle. In her childhood, Del admired her mother physically and mentally. A particular passage from "Princess Ida" illustrates the gradual change in Del's perception of her mother. First, she describes her feelings towards her mother as a child. She says: "When I was younger... I would watch her walk across the yard... like a priestess, walking in an unhurried (way) ... Then, I had supposed her powerful, a ruler" (Munro, 1971, p.89) However, with her intellectual awakening, Del starts to question her mother's ideas and criticises her attitude. The change in the mother's description reflects the change in Del's attitude. She adds: "She had power still, but not so much as perhaps she thought...She had a loudly growling stomach, whose messages she laughed at or ignored, but which embarrassed me unbearably" (Munro, p.90). The shift in perspective for Del is visible in this passage and it seems to be caused by her growth rather than by an actual change in her mother. As she says "not so much as perhaps she thought," Del insinuates that she is at present able to discern facts from fiction, and that her mother has

lost the power she would uphold when she was younger. The shifting image of Del's mother from a "strong priestess" to just a woman with a "growling stomach" indicates not the change in Addie's physical appearance and demeanour but rather Del's growth, which is oriented to disconnecting with her mother at this phase. She reiterates her irritability with her mother's social conduct, as the exposure of her mother to society is immediately linked to her identity. She says: "I hated her selling encyclopaedias and making speeches and wearing that hat. I hated her writing letters to the newspapers" (Munro, p.90). Del's contempt towards her mother is not specifically justified, though later we understand that this attitude could be caused by the process of maturation itself because, in the final stories, Del does not express resentful thoughts about her mother but rather embraces a like-minded path in life, which is writing. But unlike her mother, she opts for fiction as a different way to deal with society and its paradoxes.

In this respect, the development of some negative feelings towards one's mother seems to be related to what is called in psychological terms the mother complex. This notion is elaborated by Carl G. Jung, who sets four categories for the mother-daughter complex: the hypertrophy of the maternal element, the overdevelopment of eros, the identity with the mother, and the resistance to the mother. Through a close inspection of Del's attitude towards her mother in the adolescent age, it seems that it would fall into Jung's last category. In fact, Jung describes the "resistance to the mother" complex this way: "The motto of this type is: Anything, so long as it is not like Mother! ...This kind of daughter knows what she does not want..." (Jung, 2014, p.90). Conforming to Jung's theory, Del manifests in her teens a rejection of her mother's thoughts and beliefs and seems to disconnect from her mothers' world as she starts establishing her own world with her friends. Moreover, Jung notes that the daughter in such an archetype resorts to cultivating her intellect. He argues: "Resistance to the mother can sometimes result in a spontaneous development of intellect for the purpose of creating a sphere of interest in which the mother has no place" (Jung, p.91). Fitting this profile, Del works on amassing as much knowledge as she can to equal and bypass her mother's intellect with the help of her mother's encyclopaedias and the school library books. Inasmuch as

her mother demonstrates a pronounced love for knowledge, Del tries to defy her by showing her advanced intellectual abilities. However, while Del has easy access to sources of knowledge at her age, Addie did not but rather struggled to get an education. She says: [sic] “Encyclopedias. Books... I would have given my right arm to have had a set of books like these around the house when I was a child” (Munro, 1971, p.98). While Del expresses annoyance and irritation towards her mother’s inscription in the “Great Books discussion”, for instance, she remains her greatest source of inspiration.

On the other side of the mother-daughter relationship, we have the mother’s perspective. Addie sees herself in Del “as if in a mirror” (Macdonald, 1978, p.204). It is at this precise moment that we should ask the question: To what extent does the mother contribute to the mother-daughter complex? In total objectivity, Addie unintentionally distances her daughter from her while trying to teach her and bring her close to her. Her perspective on her daughter differs from Del’s towards her, in the sense that Del perceives her mother’s lecturing attitude as a threat to her fulfilment, while Addie tries to prevent her daughter from enduring what she went through when she was a child. While Addie projects herself onto her daughter, trying to force what Steph Lawler calls “mimicry” (Lawler, 2000, p.2) or “the reproduction of the self” (Lawler, p.56), Del is constantly trying to escape the image her mother is trying to define for her. However, Del unconsciously grows up resembling her mother and following her steps in the sense that she becomes a feminist herself, a non-religious person, and a writer.

The parenting approach that Addie adopts is highly influenced by her relationship with her mother and the memories she has retained about her. In a brief analysis of *Lives of Girls and Women*, Rae Macdonald touches upon Addie’s mother’s impact on her identity formation. He argues that Ada’s eccentricity comes from her mother’s parenting style and behaviour. He sees that her fight for knowledge starts from her early childhood and that her mother was her main obstacle in achieving her goals, as she would order her to distribute Bibles she buys “all over the country at the age of eight, in boys’ shoes and not owning a pair of mittens” (Macdonald, 1978,

p.203). Interestingly, Addie's disagreement with her mother about sacrificing everything for religion and the oppression she had to endure manifest in an antithetical manner in her parenting approach. In fact, her mother's religious extremism is inverted into scientific extremism with her. While her mother used to distribute Bibles, she sells encyclopaedias across the region. Also, unlike her mother, she shares the task of distributing encyclopaedias with her daughter rather than forcing her to do it alone.

Through her fight to spread knowledge among young and uneducated women, Addie spontaneously transfers feminist values to her daughter. Her feminist engagement is manifested through her commitment to raise women's awareness about contraceptive devices to prevent unwanted pregnancies that result in social tragedies. She is portrayed as an advocate for the second wave of feminists who stand for the idea that women should have the right to choose when to have a baby, given that the foetus is "part of the woman's body" (Beauvoir, 2010, pp.611-612). In fact, through the stories in *Lives*, the reader comes to understand that though motherhood is undeniably one of the most instinctive and primitive roles attributed to women, not all mothers contribute to the intellectual growth of their daughters as Addie does.

As a feminist mother, Addie acts like a warden over Del's intelligence every time she gets involved in an intense relationship with a man, as a way to protect her from being submissive and defenceless in the name of love. She repeatedly urges her daughter to outsmart social and religious customs through education. Moreover, she conceives love as a threat and a destabilising agent for her daughter's judicious thinking. Conversations revolving around the importance of being alert with regard to men and love relationships are recurrent in the stories of *Lives of Girls and Women*. At one point, Addie tells Del: "You've gone addled over a *boy*. You with your intelligence. Do you want to be the wife of a lumber-yard worker? Well I'm only trying to open your eyes. For your own good" (Munro, 1971, p.241). By the end of the story "Baptizing," Del proves her mother's concerns and suspicions to be valid as she is totally distracted from her final examinations and eventually fails to win a

scholarship for university. In fact, the disappointing ending of the love story has repercussions that illustrate in detail what her mother foretold and warned her about. At this point, Del stands midway between denying her mother's wisdom and knowledge and acknowledging it. As a measure to accept what she went through while preserving her pride in her mother's eyes, Del decides to put herself together and move forward in life.

Throughout the phases of her formation, Del is portrayed as a character who seeks to diverge from her mother's image, whether it is out of fear of becoming the person she has been criticising all her life or out of motivation to become a better version of herself. However, since the moment she finds herself, in Jung's words, "completely at sea as to what she would choose as her own fate" (Munro, p.91), Del is slowly transformed into a different copy of her mother. Though they are most of the time unbalanced and rather dominated by the mother, the dialogues that Del and Addie have seem to have a long-lasting effect on the daughter's psychological development. Did Del eventually realise that her mother was right most of the time? Did she adopt her mother's alertness in social relationships? These questions are left unanswered in Munro's cycle but only get hinted at in the last story "Epilogue: The Photographer," where Del decides to become a writer and gets to explain her perception of people's lives. In a sense, we find subtle traces of Addie's tutoring and personality in the grown-up Del.

### **Near the Overdevelopment of the Eros: Rose and her Stepmother Flo from Confrontation to Reconciliation**

The second type of Jung's mother-daughter archetype is found in *The Beggar Maid*. Flo is Rose's stepmother, who has been raising her since she was a baby. Their relationship is characterised by two particular phases. The first phase is marked by Flo's authority, and the second starts when Rose takes over. According to Jung's theory of the mother-daughter complex, their relationship falls near the archetype of the overdevelopment of the eros where:

Jealousy of the mother and the desire to outdo her become the leitmotifs of subsequent undertakings, which are often disastrous. A woman of this type loves romantic and sensational episodes for their own sake. Once the goal is attained, her interest evaporates for lack of any maternal instinct, and then it will be someone else's turn. This type is noted for its remarkable unconsciousness. (Jung, pp.88-89)

The character of Rose fits exactly to the depicted profile in this archetype. However, like Del and Addie, Rose's relationship with her stepmother is central to her identity formation, but unlike Del, she does not get to know much about her mother, since all traces of her have been erased: "No books or clothes or pictures of her mother remained. Her father must have got rid of them, or else Flo would" (Munro, 1977, p.4). By removing the image of the real mother, Munro brings into the centre of the narrative the figure of the stepmother, untouched by any chances of comparison and contrast. And if we look at this from a different angle, the removal of the real mother's trace could be considered an assertion of power by Flo.

The stories in the first half of the cycle revolve around the life of the young Rose and the adventures that mark her childhood and adolescence. These stories largely include verbal exchanges between Rose and Flo as well as stories told by the latter. In fact, storytelling is one of the methods of power assertion that Flo uses. By telling Rose and her brother stories about people in the neighbourhood, Flo shows that she is a source of news and that she is knowledgeable about the things happening around her. Moreover, she created a convincing image of herself as a person who knows secrets about everyone in the neighbourhood that the young Rose believed. To emphasise the importance of her stories, Flo would "put the lid down on the story" (Munro, p.11) or "let her face go soft and thoughtful, tantalizing, warning" (Munro, p.9) and say: "I shouldn't be telling you this stuff" (Munro, p.9). With such closures, she gives a sense of secrecy and exclusivity to the stories she tells. These

techniques would influence the young Rose but as soon as she grows older and becomes aware of Flo's illiteracy and naiveté, her attitude towards her is altered.

Another device that Flo uses to prove her authority over Rose is by intimidating her. In this phase of their relationship, Flo is the commander and Rose is the receiver, or coerced subject. Flo does not miss the opportunity to criticise and even bully Rose. For example, in the passage where Rose wets herself on the way home from school, Flo seizes the moment to belittle her instead of comforting her and maintaining her self-esteem. She mocks her out loud saying: "Wee-pee, wee-pee'... 'Walking home and she had a wee-pee!" (Munro, p.25) Such embarrassing situations bring joy to Flo, as she thinks that such moments bring people "down to earth" (Munro, p.25). When Flo feels that Rose is starting to get good at something, she does not show her support or encouragement, but instead tries to downgrade her immediately. She does not cease to throw the rhetorical question that will haunt Rose for the rest of her life: "Oh, don't you think you're somebody ... and a moment later, Who do you think you are?" (Munro, p.15). Flo seems to find this verbal technique efficient, as Rose never speaks back after hearing it. Then, the other instance worth mentioning is when Rose steals a bag of candy for Cora, and embarrasses herself after Flo finds out about it. Flo takes the opportunity to remind her of her enamoured gesture "now and then, for years" (Munro, p.38) and whenever she sees Cora, she mocks Rose by saying: "There goes your idol!" (Munro, p.38). Therefore, Flo uses all of her efforts to impose her power on Rose in the domestic space by keeping everything in order and taking care of the whole family, followed by storytelling, mocking, and intimidation.

Rose's characteristic traits get to be accentuated through the evolution of her relationship with her stepmother. In "Royal Beatings," "Privilege" and "Half a Grapefruit" we notice a change in the dynamics between Rose and Flo. The narrator foreshadows the gradual change in the relationship between the two by saying: "There was a long truce between Flo and Rose in the beginning. Rose's nature was growing like a prickly pineapple" (Munro, p.7). The authority that Flo maintains over Rose is soon met with

stubbornness, teasing, and confrontation. Indeed, through her long exchanges with her stepmother, Rose learns to be selective with the things she discusses with her and therefore matures her communicative and social skills. In effect, her awareness of the power of the speech-silence dichotomy indicates Rose's socio-intellectual awakening. Moreover, with her integration into the environment of high school, Rose understands that she should stand up for herself in whatever trouble she faces and not expect her stepmother to come in and defend her. She is aware of the change that she is headed to, for "Justice and cleanliness she saw now as innocent notions out of a primitive period of her life. She was building up the first store of things she could never tell" (Munro, p.26). After that moment, Rose became, like Flo, on the one hand a mine of secrets and, on the second, a person who assumes her straightforward words and actions.

With the maturation of her identity and the development of her intelligence, Rose succeeds in overcoming the authority that was imposed on her by Flo: "Flo and Rose had switched roles. Now Rose was the one bringing stories home" (Munro, p.42). In fact, roles have been inverted following Rose's will to dissolve her stepmother's hierarchal position as the storyteller: "Every day when Rose got home, she would tell Flo about what went on in school. Flo enjoyed the episode of the Kotex... Half-a-grapefruit she never got to hear about. The change in Rose, once she left the scene...changed herself into a chronicler, was remarkable" (Munro, p.42). At this point of the story, she demonstrates her readiness to shed her role as an apprentice and to step in Flo's shoes, or in the grown-up girl's shoes, and declares her independence from her stepmother.

Unlike Del's mother, Addie, who spends time with her daughter to discuss different issues in life, Flo has not proven to be a mother who passes moral values down to her daughter or ensures the discipline and good manners of her children. She has lent Rose a great deal of herself, including mistrust, curiosity, and caretaking. But most of all, Rose inherited from her stepmother the passion for storytelling and imitation, which eventually became her job: acting.

Imitation is Flo's innate skill, and she tells Rose about a childhood memory that cost her going to school. She imitated her mistress: "If you want any pie you can make it yourself," said Flo, in the exact words and tone of her mistress when they were packing the dinner" (Munro, p.45). Despite poverty and lack of education, Flo teaches Rose invaluable lessons about acting. The latter learns that though talent is necessary, practice is crucial: "It was not surprising that she could imitate that woman so well; she was always doing it, even practicing at the mirror" (Munro, p.45). After Flo realises that she has no hope in education, she carries on imitating people even when she gets older. Her impersonation of the townspeople represents to Rose a daily lesson in dramatic art, as she would imitate "their flibberty voices. Monsters, she made them seem" (Munro, p.12). The frequent imitations she performs in front of Rose prove to be contagious because Rose soon adopted this passion for acting and started to entertain her brother by mocking the village fool Milton Homer.

In the second part of *The Beggar Maid*, we observe Rose's detachment from Flo at different levels. Rose goes out into the world, exploring new places and meeting new people; and more importantly, she reinforces her identity through adventures and mistakes. She also gets married to a wealthy man and gives birth to a child, a daughter, to be precise. After ten years of married life, Rose and her husband get divorced under the blessing of their daughter: "Have a happy divorce!" (Munro, p.139). After getting divorced, Rose tries to take care of her daughter but then seems to be unable to cover all the expenses of their daily lives, so her former husband takes her to live with him and his new wife.

There is an interesting parallelism identified between two images representing Rose and Flo in slightly similar situations. On the first image, there is Flo sacrificing her life when "She saw her father saddled with a baby daughter and she thought, what is that man going to do? So she married him" (Munro, p.15). And the second picture consists of Rose giving up on her grown up daughter, because she thinks that she would better live with her father as she cannot afford a decent life for her. Obviously, the two images are totally

opposed and consequently set the notion of motherhood or 'mothering' into question. As a matter of fact, as the reader starts to frown upon Flo's role as a mother, the new mother figure, which is Rose herself this time, comes to bypass her in mediocre parenting quality. It is important to note, nevertheless, that Rose's one and only selfless behaviour consists of bringing her daughter Anna to life. And while Rose was alienated from her mother because she passed away when she was a baby, Anna is alienated from her mother by her mother's choice.

The following phase of Flo and Rose's relationship is toned with compassion and reconciliation. In the story "Spelling," and after undergoing the experience of having a daughter herself, Rose goes back home to take care of her stepmother charged with good intentions. She intends to clean the house for her and assist her in her daily life due to her invalidity as a way to redeem what Flo has called "lack of gratitude" (Munro, p.15). Rose's intention to care for Flo is based on the assumption that it would take physical sacrifice; however, Flo's situation soon makes her aware that an indefinite amount of patience and tolerance is needed. In fact, having memory loss, Flo denies her return: "Rose is away... Rose got married" (Munro, p.179). Ironically, the moment Rose took her time and acknowledged the one who cared for her in the past, Flo has become forgetful. Rose's attempt to become a selfless and grateful daughter soon comes to an end since she takes Flo to the County Home.

At this level of the story, we do not get to know Rose's depth of feelings towards her stepmother throughout the cycle, except for a slight desire to express gratitude in her adult age. To grasp the centrality of Flo in the evolution of Rose's personality, we have to look at the narrative passages devoted to her. As a matter of fact, while we are provided with a few passages on Rose's father's sickness scenes, we are, on the other hand, given a whole chapter on the final situation of Flo and her health issues, along with the epiphany, the feelings, and the change that this situation has brought in her life as well as that of her son and stepdaughter Rose.

**Identity with the Mother(-figure):  
Rose and her Godmother Dr Henshawe**

The last relationship to be discussed in this part of the paper is the mother-figure and daughter relationship, mainly consisting of Dr Henshawe and Rose. When she gets a college scholarship and moves to Toronto, Rose gets the chance to meet Dr. Henshawe. This elderly woman provides shelter to disadvantaged students like Rose and offers them academic and social mentoring. To Rose, Dr. Henshawe represents more than a host or mentor. Their relationship could be framed within Jung's 'identity with the mother' archetype. In this model, the daughter is passive. He notes: "She is content to cling to her mother in selfless devotion, while at the same time unconsciously striving, almost against her will, to tyrannize over her." (Jung, p.89) In fact, Dr Henshawe first introduced her to the world of high-class etiquette, by which she was confused: "At times she felt discouraged, sitting in the dining room with a linen napkin on her knee, eating from fine white plates on blue placemats" (Munro, 1977, p.70). Then, shortly after her stay, she started addressing her as an educated girl whose primary interest is culture, as she says: "You are a scholar, Rose" (Munro, p.69), or when she talks about politics and writers and suggests that "Rose must read this" (Munro, p.70) or that. Although Rose seemed not to agree to her ideas and suggestions, she would not show it to her out of esteem, respect and also in order to avoid discussing her choices and actions (Munro, pp.72-73).

Interestingly, Dr. Henshawe provides Rose with an external point of view on her social and cultural belonging, which she has always viewed subjectively; that is the working class and the unconscious behaviour of people trying to assimilate to the masses. It is only then when Rose starts questioning the things she has taken for granted back home. As an example of this, we have Flo's calendar, which has religious verses on it. When she comes home, Rose wonders: "Why did Flo have those, when she wasn't even religious? They were what people had, common as calendars" (Munro, p.71). A

simple observation helped Rose realise that Flo is inscribed within the 'common block', that is, the category of people who do not take the time to think about the details in their lives, but rather let themselves get driven by the current. Through this meditation, Rose starts to see the old things she used to know anew.

Soon, Dr. Henshawe's character develops from being a simple host to a mother figure who cares about Rose and watches out for her. Unlike her stepmother, who only warned her about men who dress up as ministers who might kidnap or rape girls, Dr. Henshawe is rather worried about the amount of Rose's time and education that could be misused because of love stories, thus starting to manifest a motherly attitude: "Dr. Henshawe was always saying she was glad Rose did not waste her time running around with boys" (Munro, p.78). However, instead of seizing the chance to have a motherly model who takes care of her and raises her awareness about life decisions, Rose resists her sensible arguments and goes for what her emotions dictate.

Furthermore, Dr Henshawe even echoes Addie's words when she expresses her worries about her daughter. She talks with Rose about Patrick's engagement proposal, and asks her: "What about your ambitions, Rose? What about your studies and your degree? Are you going to forget all that so soon?" (Munro, p.80) Just like Addie, who foresaw a catastrophe approaching, Dr. Henshawe perceives Rose's relationship with Patrick bound to fail, since it is founded on material motives, and based on a psychological compensation for the poverty and inferiority she had felt in her childhood. The following course of events proves Dr Henshawe right.

Jung's model of the identity with the mother is accurately illustrated in Munro's work through Rose and her mother-figure Dr Henshawe. In fact, Rose has manifested traits of passivity and vulnerability after her stay with Dr Henshawe, which has led to subsequent events. In his theory, Jung explains:

Because of the woman's characteristic passivity, and the feelings of inferiority which make her continually play the injured innocent, the man finds himself cast in an

attractive role: he has the privilege of putting up with the familiar feminine foibles with real superiority, and yet with forbearance, like a true knight.” (Jung, p.90)

This theory actually explains Patrick’s attraction and description of his relationship with Rose as the portrait of “King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid”. While he is the commander and the superior in the relationship, Rose stands as the vulnerable and helpless figure.

The discourse of the mother-figure and daughter relationship appears to be of no less intensity than the mother, stepmother and daughter relationship. Throughout her relationship with Dr Henshawe, Rose has shown mostly compliance and reluctance when Dr Henshawe would recommend things to her. But ultimately, the impact of Rose’s discussions with Dr Henshawe continued to resonate through her stories until her adulthood.

## **Conclusion**

Munro’s narrative architecture seems to be structured around the mother-daughter relationship. She has embedded this psychological complex using different models of the mother’s figure in both selected short story cycles. In all three Jungian archetypes of the mother-daughter relationship in the Munroian world, there is always resistance and adversity before acceptance, conflict before compassion and suspicion before apprehension. Both female protagonists, Del and Rose, reject whatever advice they get from their mothers and mother-figures and build their identities afterwards upon their mistakes and regrets. Munro’s portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship shows that despite all attempts to evade the mother(figure)’s authority and influence, the daughter always ends up referring back to her. Although the reasons for this homecoming are not laid bare for the reader, as it always the case with Munro’s stories, it is easy to see that these daughters return primarily for the feeling of belonging.

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**Beth Roberts**

**‘I wanted to be like you’:  
Complicated Motherhood in *Emilie:  
La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her  
Life Tonight* (2010)**

In Lauren Gunderson’s history play, *Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight* (2010), metadramatic conceits are used to emphasise the difficult relationship between eighteenth-century French natural philosopher Emilie du Châtelet and her daughter, Gabrielle-Pauline. Gunderson utilises the play within the play structure to justify her characters acting out multiple roles and allow the actress playing the titular Emilie to address the audience directly. Through these means, multiple acts of Emilie’s life are performed and she is able to choose scene by scene whether to observe or join in, with other characters switching or maintaining roles depending on the scene. When Emilie engages in a scene in which she is confronted by Gabrielle-Pauline at the end of Act One, she must come to terms with her position as a mother and consider how she may be able to make amends for her mistakes. In this article, I contend that the metadramatic aspects of *Emilie*, specifically the play within the play and role switching, emphasise the distance between Emilie and her daughter whilst also offering Emilie a chance at redemption.

*Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight* was first staged in 2009 by the South Coast Repertory and first published as a play text in 2010 by Samuel French. The play takes place after Emilie du Châtelet’s death and opens with the titular character explaining to the audience that she is no longer alive. The

other actors then take to the stage and begin performing different memories from Emilie’s life as if they are scenes in a play. Emilie watches and participates in memories of her turbulent relationship with Voltaire, her tempestuous family life and her struggle to establish herself as a serious scientist in a male-dominated field. Gunderson’s play allows du Châtelet the opportunity to reconsider her life choices and events from a post-life perspective. This provides her with the potential to recontextualise and appreciate her relationships, whilst also giving her the gift of finding out how her legacy lives on in her scientific work, through her publication of her *Foundations of Physics* (1740) and her French translation of Isaac Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1756), which is still the standard French translation used today.

Lauren Gunderson is an American playwright based in San Francisco. Gunderson’s work is concerned with crafting sequels to canonical literary texts, the retelling of women’s political history and the staging of historical women in science. In 2017 and 2019, she was the most produced living playwright in America and her upcoming works include *Muse of Fire*, a play based on the relationship between William and Anne Shakespeare, and *Lady Disdain*, a modern comedy based on *Much Ado About Nothing*. Gunderson says she is “passionate about telling stories about women: women’s bodies, women’s life stories and experiences that make it very clear that women’s lives matter” (Pipino, 2020: 20) and she demonstrates this through her playwrighting and her active engagement with feminist politics in interviews and on her social media accounts. A mother herself, Gunderson has shown support for women’s bodily autonomy, gender-neutral birthing terminology and equal medical treatment for women of colour in the United States.

A plethora of Gunderson’s plays contain metadramatic conceits, making the metadramatic form a staple of her canon. In his original 1963 definition, Lionel Abel referred to metatheatres as plays that “tell us at once that the happenings and characters in them are of the playwright’s invention” (1963: 59). By this, Abel means that the construction of the narrative, performance and theatre art consciously draws attention to the fact that the playwright has

formed the way the story is presented to the audience. Richard Hornby later defined metadrama as “drama about drama” (1986: 31), invoking a similar sentiment to Abel but also suggesting that the self-consciousness and self-reflexivity of metadrama prompt the form to explicitly draw attention to the aspects that allow it to function. Whilst Abel uses the term metatheatre, Hornby makes the significant switch to metadrama. Since drama is a literary form and theatre is an artistic practice used in the practical application of drama, I will use the term metadrama in this article. This is due to the dramatic text being my primary concern, with reference to certain theatrical practices such as costume design.

Metadrama involves the application of certain formal conceits. Hornby narrows these conceits down to five sub-categories: the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role playing within the role, literary and real-life reference within the play and self-reference. For the purpose of this article, I will be focusing on two of these sub-categories: the play within the play and role playing within the role. Gunderson’s *Emilie* uses what Hornby refers to as the “framed” play within a play, where the outer play is a framing device and the main content is seen in the inner play (1986: 33). Due to this use of the framed play within the play, some of the characters are involved in role playing within their role; Hornby refers to this device as where “characters in the inner performance [are seen] also as individuals in the outer performance” (1986: 67). The use of both metadramatic devices in *Emilie* allows for frequent role-switching and offers costume designers the opportunity to be malleable with their choices in regard to costume changes.

The play within the play and role playing within roles in *Emilie* functions due to three characters: Soubrette, Gentleman and Madam. Emilie and Voltaire are the only two characters within the play that do not switch roles and are not referred to as “PLAYERS” (Gunderson, 2010: 5) in the play text. Soubrette, Gentleman and Madam are separated from Emilie and Voltaire in the cast list by the “PLAYERS” sub-heading and underneath their names is the list of characters they play. Soubrette plays a young Emilie, her daughter Gabrielle-Pauline (referred to as “DAUGHTER” in the cast list) and

Marie-Louise, one of Voltaire’s young lovers. Soubrette plays a young Emilie in some scenes for two reasons: firstly, because protagonist Emilie is dead and cannot touch the other actors and secondly, so that protagonist Emilie can choose to observe the scenes she wants to. Gentleman plays Emilie’s husband Florent-Claude, Emilie’s later lover Jean-François, Emilie’s tutor Maupertuis and Emilie’s scientific rival Jean-Jacques d’Ortous de Mairan. Finally, Madam plays Emilie’s mother and Madam Graffigny, an “obnoxious and rich” (Gunderson, 2010: 5) aristocrat. In some productions these role switches are signified by costume changes, however, some productions instead choose to have the actors only change their acting style when switching roles.

I am primarily interested in Soubrette’s role-switching in regard to her scenes with Emilie, specifically in the scene between Emilie and Gabrielle-Pauline. Emilie prefaces this scene by pondering on the gender roles ascribed to her by Voltaire, who calls her a “stunning woman. And an impressive man” (Gunderson, 2010: 41). Emilie asks herself and rhetorically asks the audience “why is manliness the compliment?” and considers how the foundations of scientific enquiry – the mind, the earth and the stars – are all sexless and therefore not defined by their gendered attributes (Gunderson, 2010: 41). In contrast to her own identification with objects outside of the gender binary, Emilie introduces her daughter, whom she describes as “all woman [...] loyal, demure and... entertainable” (Gunderson, 2010: 42). Here we see that Emilie describes Gabrielle-Pauline as everything Emilie is not. Gabrielle-Pauline is associated with femininity and feminine markers aligned with placidity and a level of palatability to patriarchal standards for early-eighteenth-century French women. Meanwhile, Emilie actively rejects the traits she associates with her daughter and desires to be seen as someone beyond the limits of gendered identification. This means that the scene between Emilie and Gabrielle-Pauline is prefaced by a declaration of the disparity between each woman.

After Emilie introduces her daughter, Soubrette enters the scene as Gabrielle-Pauline and confronts her mother. Emilie begins to introduce this confrontation to the audience by saying “the scene

in which..." before Soubrette as Gabrielle-Pauline quickly cuts her off by saying "the scene in which the daughter is seen and finally heard" (Gunderson, 2010: 42). Gabrielle-Pauline then tells her mother "I wanted to be like you. I still do" (Gunderson, 2010: 42) and Emilie tries to explain to her daughter that she does not want Emilie's life because of the trials she has suffered through. The confrontation comes to a crescendo when Emilie continues to deflect from Gabrielle-Pauline's accusations:

**EMILIE.** I'm an exception. And being exceptional is exhausting. You don't want that.

**SOUBRETTE.** How do you know?

**EMILIE.** Didn't those nuns teach you to respect your mother?

**SOUBRETTE.** My mother is a picture in my locket. I don't know you. You shipped me off to a convent. Now you marry me off to a prince. I don't have a mother, and I don't have a life that's mine, and that's your fault" (Gunderson, 2010: 42).

In this exchange between the two, we see that the relationship between Emilie and Gabrielle-Pauline is so strained that Gabrielle-Pauline does not even perceive Emilie as her mother. Gabrielle-Pauline uses the third person phrase "my mother" to refer to a hypothetical version of Emilie – the one in her locket – but uses the pronoun "you" straight after to directly address Emilie; this shows that there is a disconnect between Gabrielle-Pauline's expectation of her mother and the reality of Emilie's actions.

Furthermore, Emilie's choice to send Gabrielle-Pauline to a convent for her development and learning contrasts with early-eighteenth-century French aristocratic expectations of active motherhood. Lesley H. Walker says of the relationship between mothers and their daughters during this period:

The daughter’s enlightenment – that is, an education in virtuous self-possession and reasonable employment – could help bring about the desired social and cultural revolution. The mother-daughter relationship can thus be seen as a microcosm for the larger Enlightenment project that sought, through human intervention, to bring greater justice and equality to the many (Walker, 2008: 27).

Here, Walker notes that an intellectual and educational relationship between mother and daughter was not only acceptable during early eighteenth-century France, but it was also actively encouraged. Whilst Emilie, a woman who underwent various passionate love affairs and undertook advanced scientific pursuits, may not have been able to pass on “virtuous self-possession” to Gabrielle-Pauline, her intellect and activity would have allowed her to encourage Gabrielle-Pauline in “reasonable employment”, certainly more so than her convent education would have allowed. Gabrielle-Pauline’s disappointment in Emilie’s mothering is therefore due to her belief that her mother could have taken an interest in her learning and betterment rather than leaving her education to the nuns.

The confrontation between Emilie and Gabrielle-Pauline ends when Emilie finally reaches the conclusion that Gabrielle-Pauline is not too different from herself. Soubrette as Gabrielle-Pauline parrots several lines said to Emilie by Emilie’s mother, causing Emilie to realise she has been as inactive with her daughter as her mother was with her:

**SOUBRETTE.** A girl does not slouch. Does not speak in excess. Does not question or laugh loudly. She marries rich. She obeys. She submits. And she–

**EMILIE.** I’m sorry.

**SOUBRETTE.** She has–

**EMILIE.** I’m sorry.

**SOUBRETTE.** And she has an easy life. Good luck with yours.

(**SOUBRETTE** starts to leave, then comes back for a harsh hug. **The lights crackle and plummet out to blackness.**)

(Immediately the lights rise. **SOUBRETTE** is gone. **EMILIE** is alone.)

**EMILIE.** And I see what I missed: myself in her. What have I done? What any thoughtless *man* would do. I assumed and missed a woman of my own... element. I'm sorry. I am so sorry (Gunderson, 2010: 43).

Unlike the first interaction between the two, where Gabrielle-Pauline interrupts her mother, here Emilie's attempts at interruption are unsuccessful against Gabrielle-Pauline's harsh rebuttals. Gabrielle-Pauline's "good luck with yours" appears to be a resolute goodbye to her mother and the "*harsh hug*" that follows similarly indicates that Gabrielle-Pauline has no intention to see her mother again after her marriage. The fact that the hug is described as "*harsh*" not only reiterates the difficult relationship between mother and daughter but also works as a visual cue to signify how emotionally distanced each woman is from the other; the hug can be perceived as harsh because perhaps there have been far too few hugs between mother and daughter.

This resolute goodbye from Gabrielle-Pauline sparks Emilie's acknowledgement of her daughter's true nature. As we can see, Emilie notes that she completely missed herself in her daughter and apologises rhetorically and retroactively for her mistakes. Unlike the introduction to this scene where Emilie notes her positive masculine-coded attributes and questions why maleness is seen as positive, here Emilie explicitly equates her negative characteristics with the actions of men. Likening herself to a "thoughtless *man*", Emilie has switched from denouncing the passivity and placidity associated with women to admonishing the carelessness associated with men.

Gunderson also places the word “*man*” in italics, suggesting that the actress playing Emilie emphasise the word and therefore highlighting the association between Emilie’s mistake and her removal from femininity in this moment. Emilie also uses scientific language in the word “element” when describing the similarity between herself and her daughter; by uniting Emilie and Gabrielle-Pauline through a desire for learning, Gunderson flips the expression of disparity at the beginning of the scene into a longing to embrace similarity by the time the scene comes to a close.

The metadramatic aspects of *Emilie* emphasise the narrative arc within this small scene by making use of Soubrette’s ability to role play within her role. Up until this point in the play, Soubrette has only played a younger version of Emilie, allowing the main character, post-death Emilie, to comment on and observe some of the memories from her life played out in front of her in the small inner plays. The scene between Emilie and Gabrielle-Pauline is the first time that Soubrette switches to a different role and this time, Soubrette plays Emilie’s daughter. Since Soubrette has played Emilie up until this point, both the main character, post-death Emilie and the audience have become used to equating Soubrette with Emilie. Not only does Soubrette’s role-switching in this scene draw attention to the theatricality of the scenes being played out before the audience, and therefore their construction and distance from a perceived reality, but it also physically demonstrates the similarities between Emilie and Gabrielle-Pauline. Since Soubrette has played both characters, post-death Emilie and the audience are witnesses to two characters being presented as having the exact same facial features. This means that when Emilie is distraught and says “I see what I missed: myself in her” the impact is heightened because Gabrielle-Pauline as a character looks exactly the same as young Emilie as a character; this makes Emilie’s mistake seem even more egregious as it seems impossible to have missed the resemblance.

While Emilie’s mistake in not recognising her daughter despite the resemblance brought on by the dual casting may seem extreme, it can be explained by Luce Irigaray’s concept of the mother-daughter mirror phenomenon. In H el ene Vivienne Wenzel’s translation of

Irigaray's "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other", Irigaray claims "you look at yourself in the mirror. And already you see your own mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, what are you? What space is yours alone?" (1981: 63). Here, Irigaray suggests that the resemblance between mother and daughter can cause a subjugation of autonomy and identity, blurring the distinction between the mother and daughter as independent selves. Since Emilie's focus in life is her scientific pursuit and legacy, her reluctance to see herself in her daughter could be seen as a form of self-preservation: an attempt not to lose her sense of self. Irigaray states that one can avoid losing the self in the mirror phenomenon by "play[ing] with the mirror phenomena, with symmetrical and asymmetrical phenomena (particularly right-left) to minimize the chances of being projected into or devoured by the other" (1993: 49), which would mean that Emilie would need to acknowledge this resemblance to forge a relationship with her daughter while retaining a sense of self. This moment in the play where the resemblance is acknowledged represents a turning point in the relationship between mother and daughter, offering an opportunity for a relationship to blossom while also allowing Emilie to maintain her selfhood.

Several productions have costumed Soubrette in different ways when dealing with this scene, but the overall impact of Emilie's mistake remains, despite disparate costume choices. The 2019 Texas Woman's University production provided marked differences in Soubrette's costuming depending on which role she was playing. When playing Emilie, Soubrette wears the same coat as post-death Emilie and she has her hair in the same dual-plaits as post-death Emilie (Texas Woman's University, 2019a). Meanwhile, when Soubrette is playing Gabrielle-Pauline, she is seen in a navy gown with a white wig, distancing her non-biological similarity to her portrayal of Emilie (Texas Woman's University, 2019b). Taking a markedly different approach, the 2014 111 Theatre production of *Emilie* does not show Soubrette in a different costume when playing a different role. 111 Theatre's Soubrette is seen throughout the play in a cream dress with red decorative patterning. This is dissimilar from post-death Emilie's dress, which is also cream but contains

several sepia-toned images of Emilie du Châtelet, highlighting the actress as the main version of Emilie (111 Theatre, 2014). The Texas Woman’s University production has the effect of showing Emilie within Gabrielle-Pauline despite the difference in Soubrette’s costuming. The ostensible differences in costuming in opposition to the facial resemblance can be seen as reflecting Emilie’s changing perception during the inner play; Emilie begins by only seeing the obvious differences but comes to notice the similarities underneath the exterior. The 111 Theatre production is perhaps a less subtle take on the scene as Soubrette’s entrance as Gabrielle-Pauline looks very similar to her entrance as Emilie, conflating the two characters and leaving differences in the roles down to disparate acting styles. Regardless of the different takes on costuming Soubrette, we can see that differences in production choice do not lessen the emphasis on Emilie’s mistake in not recognising the resemblance between herself and her daughter.

Whilst the metadramatic aspect of Soubrette switching between playing Emilie to playing Gabrielle-Pauline may emphasise Emilie’s mistake to the point it becomes irredeemable, Gunderson does not pass judgement and uses Emilie’s mistake to prompt a redemption arc. Once Emilie is alone on stage with only her regrets for company, she comes up with a way to help her daughter fulfil her wish to pursue scientific enquiry:

**EMILIE.** (*cont.*) What do I do? What can I give her to give her a chance? Everything I know? A book. Foundations of science for anyone – The whole universe – for all, for her.

(*Regroup*)

The scene in which I write my first book. The silent scene that takes back the world. For my daughter. Force Vive, Space Time, fire and life, and love and – this is it – this is purpose, progeny, *living force*.

(*A writing desk and a chair appear.*)

(*She looks at us.*)

This could take a while.

*(She claps and the house lights turn on. She shoos us into...)*

**End of Act** (Gunderson, 2010: 44).

The “everything” that Emilie desires to give Gabrielle-Pauline constitutes the entire breadth of her knowledge. When Emilie professes her wish to give Gabrielle-Pauline “the whole universe”, she not only means that she wants to metaphorically give everything she can to her daughter, but she also literally means that she wants to provide Gabrielle-Pauline with an understanding of the constitution of space, the stars and the planets. The book referenced in this section is Emilie du Châtelet’s *Foundations of Physics* (1740), which was generally well received by her male contemporaries. One of du Châtelet’s tutors, Pierre Louis Maupertuis, was particularly impressed with *Foundations* and claimed that the book was “even more marvellous” (Arianrhod, 2012: 126) because it had been written by a woman. The book went through several translations, including German, and spread across the continent, providing an opportunity for all who were able to read it to gain an insight into the scientific world that du Châtelet had access to. In Gunderson’s play, Emilie creates *Foundations* as a way of atoning for her previous failed attempt at mothering Gabrielle-Pauline and, by publishing a book that Gabrielle-Pauline will be able to read and learn from, Emilie gives Gabrielle-Pauline the choice and chance she desires.

Whilst Emilie’s *Foundations* does provide Gabrielle-Pauline with a pathway to learning the information she wanted, the book also allows Emilie to become a foremother to young women in pursuit of scientific enquiry. In addition to writing *Foundations* for Gabrielle-Pauline, Gunderson’s Emilie also writes her book “for all” to gain an understanding of science. Emilie’s next challenge was translating Isaac Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687) into French; at the time of Emilie’s translation, no one outside of Britain had translated the text and Emilie became

the first to do so (Arianrhod, 2012: 133). Emilie’s edition of the *Principia* is so revered that historian Bernard Cohen considers her translation “one of the two ‘great’ eighteenth-century editions of the *Principia*” (Arianrhod, 2012: 134) and to this day, du Châtelet’s translation is still the most used French version. In providing two important texts, one foundational work and one translation of a key scientific text for all, Emilie positions herself as a foremother to scientifically minded women and her texts become useful materials for her daughter and future women to use as bases for their own scientific enquiry.

By highlighting Emilie’s ability to perform mothering through the publication of her scientific work, Gunderson presents foremothering as a form of mothering. JaneMaree Maher refers to mothering as “the component labours of motherhood: the biological reproductive elements and activities, the social and emotional care, and the broader communal and national contributions” (2010: 17). By sharing her scientific work, Emilie achieves a form of social and emotional care because she has provided Gabrielle-Pauline with a tool she desired and she is able to contribute communally and nationally as a foremother of scientific discovery. Kate Manne notes that the mother is seen as “a human giver, a woman who is held to owe many if not most of her distinctively human capacities to a suitable boy or man, ideally, and his children” (2017: 301) and Emilie rejects this form of mothering. Instead of subjugating herself to men and children, she exhibits her own form of mothering by embracing her most positive traits and sharing them with her daughter and the world. Whilst the word “forefather” is ranked by the Oxford English Dictionary as fitting the requirements for frequency band five (OED, 2022), the word “foremother” sits two bands below at frequency band three (OED, 2021). By allowing Emilie to exhibit mothering through her position as a foremother, Gunderson suggests that our foremothers are as important, if not more important, than our forefathers and forebears. If a man becoming a forefather is a celebration, then a woman becoming a foremother should be just as revered.

The acceptance of foremothering as a form of mothering in *Emilie* allows Gunderson's Emilie to push the definitions of motherhood and mothering and avoid patriarchal restrictions. In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Sara Ahmed notes that "part of the difficulty of the category of women is what follows residing in that category, as well as what follows not residing in that category because of the body you acquire, the desires you have, the paths you follow or do not follow" (2017: 15). Gunderson's Emilie follows the desires and paths she wishes to without attempting to fit into rigid definitions of "woman" and "mother" and, therefore, she presents alternative opportunities for womanhood and motherhood. Emilie's mistake in missing the similarities between herself and her daughter could be seen as a judgement of Emilie's mothering. However, the metadramatic resemblance sparks an acknowledgement in Emilie and allows her to forge a path towards a form of motherhood that she finds acceptable and achievable. Following the Supreme Court decision to overrule *Roe vs Wade* on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2022, Ahmed sent out a tweet on her personal Twitter account stating that "define comes from the old French, definer, to finish. That is why feminism is about liberating women from being defined" (2022). Gunderson's play is still resonant thirteen years after it was first produced because it advocates for women to be able to resist being defined by patriarchal parameters. Unlike the subjugated form of mothering Manne describes as being favoured by patriarchal systems, Emilie's foremothering as mothering celebrates Emilie's knowledge, whilst also allowing her to provide care for her daughter and many daughters to come.

Lauren Gunderson's *Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight* (2010) explores complicated definitions of motherhood and mothering and celebrates different interpretations of the word "mother". The metadramatic play within the play requires certain characters to switch roles, allowing for the character of Soubrette to play both a younger Emilie and her daughter, Gabrielle-Pauline. This exacerbates Emilie's mistake in not seeing the similarity between herself and her daughter because the intellectual similarities are reflected by the physical resemblance.

However, the similarity and resemblance also offer Emilie a chance at redemption by allowing her to realise her mistake and prompting her into atoning action. By producing a book for her daughter and going on to translate the *Principia*, Emilie provides Gabrielle-Pauline with access to the knowledge she desires whilst also paving the way for future women in science to pursue their own lines of enquiry. While Gabrielle-Pauline is never seen coming to terms with the restrictive expectations of motherhood that led her mother to choose scientific pursuit over conventional motherhood in the play, the production of the book suggests that Gabrielle-Pauline will be able to repair this relationship with her mother through Emilie’s foremothering. Emilie’s successful foremothering reveals the difficulty for women when rigid restrictions on the definitions of motherhood and mothering are enacted and encourages fluidity and malleability in perceptions of the role of mother. Gunderson’s play uses metadrama as a method of heightening conflict but also as a catalyst for resolution. By complicating Emilie’s journey towards her own form of mothering, Gunderson reserves judgement on her protagonist and instead emphasises the issues facing Emilie when oppressive restrictions are placed on her by patriarchal systems.

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**Tatjana Šepić**

**Mothers and Mother Figures  
in George Sand's *Story of My Life***

**Abstract**

*Story of My Life*, George Sand's 'autobiographical adventure' she set out on in 1847 turned out to be the history of her 'intellectual and emotional growth' rather than, what her readers had expected, a straightforward account of the life of a scandalous and rebellious woman. The 'study of her own nature and examination of her existence' is closely interwoven with the family history in which mothers, real, adoptive, possessive, affectionate or absent, play a crucial role. Traditional as well as unconventional mothers and mother figures appear throughout the autobiography, from G. Sand's two 'rival mothers' (her mother and grandmother), her 'chosen' mother, Sister Alicia in the convent, to the writer's personal experience later on as a wife and a mother but also as a maternal figure with some of her lovers. Even though G. Sand has frequently been perceived as an independent and open-minded woman challenging traditional gender norms and roles that saw women primarily as wives and mothers, she repeatedly emphasized the importance of marriage and motherhood, both in her autobiography and in her fictional works. What she tried to achieve in her private life and also give to her fictional heroines, was a new kind of union between a man and a woman based on 'equality in difference' in which motherhood and mother-child bond was of utmost importance, while at the same time not neglecting the fact that a woman may have other needs and aspirations outside her family and children.

## Introduction

In popular imagery the name of the French writer George Sand (a pen name of Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Baroness Dudevant, née Dupin de Francueil, 1804-1876) still evokes a rather caricatural and one-sided representation of this controversial and extraordinary woman. She had a reputation of being promiscuous and open-minded, smoking cigars, wearing trousers, always ready to fight for her rights as a woman and as a writer and to negotiate with her publishers on equal terms as her male fellow writers. However, she was also affectionate, devoted to her family and friends and showing compassion to the poor and oppressed. Her rich and diverse oeuvre demonstrates she was a prolific, versatile, innovative and imaginative writer. Since her death, more than a hundred and forty years ago, Sand has been better known for her scandalous private life and the political involvement in some of the major historical events that took place during her lifetime than for her (non)fictional works.

It may seem difficult to associate this famous public figure and her artistic and socially oriented interests with the notions of motherhood and the maternal. Yet, Sand 'lauded family values, love marriages, and harmonious relationships between parents and children' (Knapp, 2002, p. 16) both in her fictional work and in her autobiography *Story of My Life* (1847-1854). Therefore, it is not surprising that besides her own experience of being a mother and a grandmother, mothers and different mother figures appear throughout the history of her emotional and intellectual development.

Refusing to see herself as a woman writer when it comes to fiction and positioning herself within a male literary tradition, Sand does the same when writing her autobiography. In the opening chapter of the *Story of My Life* she describes her autobiographical project with several models in mind – Saint Augustine, Rousseau and Chateaubriand. But even though she admires these authors and acknowledges their influence, she sets her narrative against theirs. She is going to provide a kind of personal writing "rarely accomplished (...) in which the interior life, the life of the soul" is

related (Sand, 1991, pp. 73-74). With no proper female models, apart from some religious autobiographical texts such as the *Life of St Teresa of Avila* or Madame Roland's memoirs of 1793 describing the time she spent in prison during the Revolution, and reluctant to follow the examples of her male fellow writers, George Sand creates a new kind of autobiographical discourse. This "sincere study of my own nature and a careful examination of my own existence" (Sand, 1991, p. 71) will give her an opportunity to reflect on and understand, among other things, her own role as a mother and grandmother by remembering important mother figures in her life. Listening to Sand's voice and that of other female characters, the portraits of different mothers - biological, adoptive, absent, possessive, affectionate, indifferent, and distant - emerge before us in this original autobiography.

### **Aurore and her two 'rival mothers'**

For George Sand to talk about herself, to present her readers the story of her life necessarily meant dedicating a large portion of the autobiography to her family history, to 'the memory of other lives' (Szabó, 1994, p. 3). Writing the biography of her grandmother and that of her parents, she is able to establish the continuity between the past and the present, and to reflect on the future as well.

At the very beginning of the book she points to her aristocratic origins (on her father's side she was a descendant of Comte de Saxe, an illegitimate son of Augustus II the Strong, king of Poland), while making emphasis on the less known fact that her mother was a commoner, 'a poor child of the old streets of Paris' (Sand, 1991, p. 77). G. Sand is well aware of the fact that she is the 'product' of cultural 'métissage', and as such a true child of the Revolution. Even though this fact makes her equally proud of both of her parents, she is aware of the special bond that exists between a child and its mother:

One is not only the offspring of one's father, one is also a little, I believe, that of one's mother. It seems to me that the latter is even more the case, and that we are attached to the entrails of the one who gave birth to us in the most immediate, powerful, and sacred way. (1991, p. 77)

It is this bond with her mother Sophie-Victoire that for Aurore/George Sand was going to be the source of constant inner torments throughout her life. Loving and affectionate towards Aurore in her early childhood, she encouraged the child's imaginative inclinations, fantasies, daydreaming and her close contact with the natural world. Yet, over the years, Sophie-Victoire would become more and more distant from her daughter, both physically and emotionally. Her contradictory nature, mental instability, together with the adverse circumstances of her life, resulted in her taking less and less interest in Aurore's life and future.

What was the cause of this change? What made Sophie-Victoire turn from an affectionate and possessive mother into a distant and indifferent one? The explanation lies in the tragic events that occurred in Aurore's earliest childhood. When she was only four years old, it was within a week that first her baby brother died and then her father Maurice Dupin got killed in an accident, following the fall from a horse. This unexpected and premature death of a dashing young soldier was going to turn the already fragile family relationships upside down. Aurore's mother and grandmother would grieve for the lost husband and son, and at the same time try to find consolation in their affection towards the child Aurore (G. Sand), who, in many ways, resembled her dead father. G. Sand would grow up torn between her two 'rival mothers' (her mother and grandmother), nurturing an idealized and romanticized image of her dead father. Her identity as a woman, mother and artist was going to be the result of that complex and difficult family situation.

The opposition represented by Mme Dupin and Sophie-Victoire is one of the major themes that runs throughout the book, both explicitly (as the rivalry and the differences between these two

women) and in a more subtle, symbolic way (as the contrast between Paris and Nohant, the city and the countryside, culture and nature, body and soul, reason and madness). This duality also reflects the two sides of G. Sand's nature, who, unlike her mother and grandmother, will manage to successfully reconcile these opposing traits/spheres throughout the course of her life.

Mme Dupin is aristocratic, educated, refined, self-controlled, while Sophie-Victoire is of humble working-class origins, passionate, wild, spontaneous, contradictory. These two women who belong to different social classes, different generations and different worlds are brought together by Sand's father Maurice and, after his disappearance, they are left to grieve for him never fully to recover from this loss.

Different as they may have been when it comes to their social background, education and character, Mme Dupin and Sophie-Victoire also had one thing in common. As widowed mothers who lost their sons, they had to find a way to go on with their lives, to make decisions and often difficult choices in order to survive in a predominantly man's world.

Still, the differences were too strong: "their tempers clashed, their natures were antipathetic, their views contradictory, their positions irreconcilable" (Thomas, 1889, p. 8). The natural antipathy they felt for each other grew even deeper after Maurice's death, in particular when they started to express opposing ideas about Aurore's upbringing.

Having lost a son and a husband, Mme Dupin and Sophie-Victoire find in the child Aurore "a replacement, an understudy", but disagree "on how she should interpret her part" (Jack, 1999, p. 48). The rivalry between these two women makes the child feel "in the midst of the struggle" (Sand, 1991, p. 637): "I was much loved (...). It was my misfortune and destiny to be wounded and torn apart by an excess of those affections, whose purveyors sometimes lacked foresight or sensitivity, other times appropriateness or moderation" (1991, p. 520).

Since her earliest childhood little Aurore has shown inclination towards daydreaming and creating imaginary worlds. At the age of ten she invents Corambé, a being that first comes to her in a dream: "(...) while dreaming one night, there came to me a shape and a name. (...) My phantom was called Corambé, (...). It became the title of my novel and the god of my religion" (1991, p. 605). This perfect creature that possesses "all the attributes of physical and moral beauty, the gift of eloquence, the almighty charm of the arts, and above all the magic of musical improvisation" (1991, p. 605) is born out of the child's desperate urge to love and to be loved in return, unconditionally. He is the hero of her endless, oral childhood 'novels', a poetic space from which her fictions will eventually emanate one day, and her private god, the divine, androgynous creature for whom she builds a sanctuary of garlands, flowers and shells in the hidden corner of the garden at Nohant. Corambé is also going to be her imaginary companion, a friend, a sister, a substitute for her dead father and, above all, for her absent mother. Even though Corambé has no gender, or better to say, it is both male and female, dressed in all sorts of different disguises, it is significant that it often appears with female features. The adult Sand remembers: "(...) I also had to complement it at times with a woman's garb, because what I had loved best and understood best until then was a woman – my mother" (1991, p. 605). Among many different shapes and roles, Corambé is also a sort of a fictive adoptive mother who "consoled and made reparation ceaselessly (...), surrounded by forlorn and tender beings, whom it charmed with its talk and song, listening to the tales of their trials and leading them back to happiness through virtue" (1991, p. 606).

Just like Corambé later on, it is for a while that Sophie-Victoire is going to charm Aurore with her talk and song. She teaches her daughter not only to read and write, but she also tells her stories and fairy tales, sings songs and lullabies that spark the child's lively imagination. She allows Aurore to run barefoot around the country, to mix freely with other peasants' children and to speak Berrichon (the regional patois). The mother also encourages the child's sensitivity to the sounds and sights of nature such as a bird's song

or the smell of the bindweed in flower. The physical closeness between the mother and the child comes as something natural for Sophie-Victoire: Sand remembers her mother's passionate hugs, sitting on her lap, or sleeping with her feeling "like a baby bird in its mother's bosom" (1991, p. 560).

Mme Dupin does not approve of this kind of intimacy, retaining it is "neither healthy nor chaste for a girl of nine to sleep next to her mother" (1991, p. 561). Her grandmother's caresses are "ceremonial", "solemn", they seem more like "rewards for good behavior" than a spontaneous expression of affection (1991, p. 490). Mme Dupin believes Aurore has to be tamed and taught good manners in order to become a true lady, and that this transformation must be achieved by repressing every spontaneous impulse of the child's being. The damage, the violence done to Aurore's instincts is so powerful that it causes her to tremble convulsively.

In her grandmother's presence the girl feels as if she were "locked into a box with her", and when instructed not to be "loud or boisterous (...) it felt like an order to be dead" (1991, p. 491). Only years later, reflecting on this period of her childhood, Sand realizes that her grandmother, in spite of her kindness and generosity, could not adequately fulfil the maternal role she took with her:

Nature makes no mistakes, (...) I do not hesitate to say that an aging and invalid forebear can never be a mother, nature is insulted at every turn when an old woman takes absolute charge of a young child. God knows what He is doing when He inhibits the powers of motherhood at a certain age. (1991, p. 491)

In spite of her age and declining health, Mme Dupin decides to take complete charge of Aurore's education and manages to persuade Sophie-Victoire to leave the child in her care. The grandmother becomes the girl's guardian in exchange for an allowance that will enable Sophie-Victoire to go back to Paris and live there with her eldest daughter, born out of the wedlock before she met and married

Maurice. The adult Sand will try to understand her mother's difficult situation, to justify her actions, yet deep inside she will never be able to forgive Sophie-Victoire for abandoning her, for 'selling' her to her grandmother. There is some truth in Mme Dupin's words describing Sophie-Victoire's maternal instincts:

Your mother is stranger than you think, and you do not know her at all. She is so uncivilized that she loves her children the way birds do, with great care and ardor during early infancy, but when they have wings, when it is a matter of reasoning and using instinctive tenderness, she flies to another tree and pecks at them, chasing them away. (1991, p. 803)

Instilling more respect and fear than true filial love, in Aurore's eyes the grandmother is going to be seen as the one who separates her from her mother and her half-sister Caroline, and whose methods to educate her are completely opposed to those of Sophie-Victoire. In spite of her inadequacy to fulfil the role of adoptive mother, it is until her death that she is going to be the only person Aurore could rely on. Sand's lofty admiration and the invincible physical dislike she feels for her grandmother as a child will be transformed into true affection in her mature years. "I did not truly love her until I was old enough to reason" (1991, p. 491).

As the story unfolds, moving back and forth in time, Sand recounts the events of her childhood, the history in which her two rival mothers play a crucial role. We see them through the eyes of the child, and at the same time from the perspective of Sand the writer, who at one point says: "(...) it has taken me thirty years to see things clearly and cherish almost equally the memory of both" (1991, p. 561).

## **The Convent of English Sisters and Aurore's adoptive mother**

One would expect that the writer's voice is going to be dominant at all times, yet there are parts of the autobiography, in particular Part Four entitled 'From Mysticism to Independence', where Sand, besides giving us mini-portraits of her convent friends – novices, nuns, and the Mother Superior – occasionally 'disappears'. Her voice is silenced and "a symphony of female voices" (Hanoï, 1994, p. 7) emerges, thereby revealing life stories filled with passions, dreams, aspirations and sorrows. The description of the period of two years Aurore spent as a *pensionnaire* at the Convent of English Sisters in Paris is an opportunity for Sand to give voice to women living in this closed community, a metaphor for 19<sup>th</sup> century women to whom society has imposed silence. Among these female characters of different ages, nationalities, social and family backgrounds, there are those called 'mothers' as the Mother Superior, or Mother Alippe, whose voluntary or imposed decision to enter the convent turned them into "virgin mothers" (Yeo, 1999, p. 208), mothers whose duty was to run the convent and take care of their sisters – nuns and boarders.

When Aurore arrives at the convent, she is 13 years old and already a deeply hurt and tormented child, "weary of being the apple of discord between the two people I cherished" (her mother and grandmother) (1991, p. 640) and at the same time suffering for having been abandoned by both of them:

My mother seemed to have given up trying to come to my aid in this mute and painful struggle (...). It seemed as though she was ready to accept for herself a future in which I was no longer an essential part. (1991, p. 692)

She [the grandmother] was to blame if I considered the convent a penance she had imposed on me (...). (1991, p. 640)

Not being happy with her life, Aurore sees the convent as a change from which she can profit, a place where she can be “forgotten” (1991, p. 640). Yearning to be loved for herself, and not just seen as her father’s substitute, Aurore finds in one of the nuns a maternal figure, someone who can love her and understand her in the way none of her two rival mothers had seemed capable of. Looking back at this period of her life, the mature Sand realizes that it was this strong passion of a not reciprocated filial love that pushed her towards Sister Alicia, who had all the qualities her mother and grandmother did not possess:

I needed a wise mother, (...). I needed someone to cherish and place in my thoughts above all other beings; to imagine perfection, tranquillity, power, and fairness through that being; to venerate an object superior to me, and to give heartfelt, assiduous worship to something like God or Corambé. This something took on the grave and serene features of Marie-Alicia. She was my ideal, my holy love, my chosen mother. (1991, p. 679)

Even though Sister Alicia’s response to these passionate feelings were not of the same intensity, the love, serenity and candour of this “beautiful soul” (1991, p. 680) made Aurore feel happy and fulfilled. The convent, at first experienced as “a prison” (1991, p. 641), turned for Aurore into a place of stability by the end of her two-year stay, a place where she learnt about human nature and about women in particular, but also about love and commitment. It was “a safe haven in which she had gradually learnt to live as a whole person” (Jack, 1999, p. 82) and where she experienced her first passionate relationship with her adoptive mother Sister Alicia.

### **Aurore/George Sand as a mother**

After having completed her formal education at the Convent of English Sisters, Aurore returns to Nohant, to find her grandmother “painfully changed and weakened” (1991, p. 737). During the months that follow, Aurore’s affection for her grandmother grows immensely. She begins to understand her complex nature, to appreciate her wisdom, knowledge, good taste and breeding, and above all, she realizes that there is a sensitive and delicately susceptible woman under her apparent coldness. Mme Dupin’s deteriorating health and eventual death put an end to a brief period of emotional reconciliation, mutual respect and understanding between Aurore and her grandmother.

When Mme Dupin becomes seriously ill, it is for the first time in her life that a seventeen-year-old Aurore assumes responsibility for someone. Nursing and looking after her grandmother will arouse maternal feelings in her. The time has come for them to exchange roles and the grandmother becomes “a poor child to care for and look after”, and the tenderness Aurore feels for her resembles “a mother’s anxiety” (1991, p. 746). In the months to come, her life is going to revolve “around the bedside of the poor dying woman” (1991, p. 751), taking care of her during the day, while at night she reads, writes and reflects, sleeping just a few hours. Sand will follow this pattern of living and working in her mature years as well.

“In order for me to live I have always had to have a fixed resolve to live for someone or something, people or ideas” (1991, p. 635) writes Sand. Her maternal affection and solicitude were not limited to her children and family members only; in the course of her life, she was frequently in the situation to care for and nurse the weak, the ill and the needy. For the local peasants the elderly Sand was ‘the Good Lady of Nohant’, while her love affairs with the poet and dramatist Musset or the composer Chopin had something incestuous about them, with Sand demonstrating a mixture of romantic and maternal passion for her lovers. Even her friendship with Gustave Flaubert eventually turned in some sort of a mother-son relationship.

However, before Aurore becomes George Sand, she has to go through the experience of a loveless marriage, the birth of her two children and the years of struggling with depression. At the age of eighteen Aurore Dupin marries Baron Casimir Dudevant, nine years her senior. She is drawn to him by the similarities in their family backgrounds, in particular Casimir's parentage as an illegitimate child, very much like that of her half-brother Hippolyte. Their union is to be a symbolic one – just as was the union between her parents – but the marriage founded on the ideas of social equality, loyalty to one's parents, or the fact that they were born on the same day nine years apart is not destined to last. The friendship and close affinity they feel for each other are soon gone, and Aurore realizes how different they are. Yet, at the beginning Aurore manages to abide by convention and their marriage, at least outwardly, seems a happy one. Even though he never speaks of love or passion, the unromantic Casimir is an attentive husband and Aurore tries to be a good wife and mother. But not before long, she realizes that marrying Casimir will not cure her 'life-ache' nor will the birth of her son. Aurore becomes aware of the everyday reality of her marriage soon after the wedding. Apart from the differences in character and taste between the two people united in matrimony, she comes to the conclusion that if this union is to function, "one of the two must renounce himself or herself completely, abnegating not only their will, but even opinion, in order to see through the eyes of the other, to enjoy what the other enjoys...". She also asks herself – is it a husband or a wife who is going "to *recast* his or her being according to the mould of the other?" The answer is, as it may have been expected, that "it is the bearded party that is all-powerful, (...) and that it is necessarily on us to bend compliantly" (a letter to Émilie de Wismes, January, 1823 quoted in Jack, 1999, p. 115).

The birth of her son Maurice, named after her dead father, temporarily alleviates the feeling of melancholy and dissatisfaction with herself, the marriage and life in general: "It was the most beautiful moment of my life, when (...) I saw, on waking, the little being asleep on my pillow. (...) I was afraid to move lest the vision vanish as it always had before" (1991, p. 838). After this rather

conventional description of her emotions following the birth of the child, Sand reveals some interesting details about childbirth and child nursing in post-revolutionary France. The first is her choice to breastfeed her son, something she will also do later on with his sister. This was highly unusual among women of her social status, but not completely unexpected with Sand. It could be taken as an act of solidarity with her mother who, being a commoner, breastfed as her aristocratic grandmother had done decades earlier, following J. J. Rousseau's prescriptions for maternity (Jack, 1999, p. 116). The second description concerns the period immediately following the childbirth. The difference here is not so much between working class women and those of aristocratic or bourgeois origin, but between the country and Paris, where it was common to take more precautions with young mothers. Sand complains she had to stay in bed just after the childbirth for a much longer period than she felt it to be necessary. The second time she became a mother, at Nohant, she "got up the second day and was fine" (1991, p. 838).

What we have learnt about Aurore and her childhood and teenage years, fraught with drama, together with these early reflections on marriage, childbirth and child nursing, suggests that we are not reading the story of an ordinary young woman and mother. At the age Sand was writing, most women writers were unmarried and childless. Writing and motherhood were seen as two incompatible things, "the one conscious and intellectual, the other natural and physiological" (Hiddleston, 1999, p. 26). A woman who chose a vocation as a poet/writer/artist usually had to do it to the detriment of the maternal vocation (M. Homans quoted in Hiddleston, 1999, p. 26). And yet, Sand managed to successfully reconcile motherhood and writing, at least apparently.

The relationship with her son Maurice and her daughter Solange will in some ways repeat the past family relationship patterns. By calling her son Maurice, Sand tries to establish continuity in two directions, namely with the past as well as with the future. She proposes herself as an intermediary between two generations, that of her parents on the one hand and that of her children on the other, with herself in a double role as the daughter

of Maurice Dupin and the mother of Maurice Dudevant (Brahimi, 1993, pp. 8-9). We do not learn much about the joys and pains of motherhood by reading Sand's autobiography. Only occasionally does she let her feelings emerge, and in these rare moments her adoration for Maurice is revealed, although not the same enthusiasm is present when she speaks of her daughter Solange. In her unconditional love for her son Maurice, Sand is going to repeat the idealized relationship based on love and loyalty between Maurice and his mother Mme Dupin. When reading Sand's correspondence, the words she uses when addressing her son could be easily taken for those of a lover: "I could hardly wait to kiss you, to put you inside me, in my heart, and to become one with you" (November 1835, quoted in Margerie, 2010, p. 64, translated by T.Š.). This strong attachment, this fierce bond created between mother and son will never be broken.

Sand's feelings towards her daughter Solange are ambivalent from the moment the child is born: "I had been longing for a girl, and yet I did not experience the same joy as when I had had Maurice" (1991, p. 875). As Solange is growing up, for Sand it becomes more and more difficult to control her daughter's capricious nature and indomitable spirit. While Maurice is docile, willing to follow his mother's advice, to correct his 'flaws', Solange is just the opposite. When describing her daughter as 'disobedient', Sand seems to have forgotten her own childhood and 'not so docile character'. Instead of establishing a loving and affectionate bond with her daughter, and thus breaking the pattern, Sand is repeating, "recycling the legacy of her relationship with her mother" (Harlan, 1997, p. 422). Over the years, the tensions, the lack of love and attention Solange experienced from her earliest childhood, and Sand's failure to educate her daughter, to accept her rebellious character, grow into an open animosity, rivalry and cause the writer to place "distance, emotional as well as geographic, between herself and her daughter" (Harlan, 1997, p. 421).

## **Mothers and maternity in George Sand's fictional works**

In the case of Sand, as with many other writers, the author's biography is essential for the understanding of her fiction. If we consider family relationships in the writer's novels, it becomes obvious that they mirror "her personal psychological dynamics" (Harrison, 2015, p. 13). The unhappy union with Casimir made the issue of marriage one of the central themes of many of her novels, together with the child-parent relationship where the concept of maternity takes on different forms, from nurturing and caring to education.

Writing novels for Sand thus becomes "a quest for the ideal man (...), an imaginary substitute for the often-disappointing reality" (Rea, 1979, p. 44), and a way to explore motherhood and various mother figures. As in many nineteenth-century novels, Sand's love stories revolve around family: her fiction frequently features a single-parent family where father and daughter or mother and son make "a couple" (Reid, 1992, p. 47), the bond between them being harmonious, filled with love and devotion.

The novel *Mauprat* (1837), for example, interweaves several themes that are typical of Sand's fiction – namely the issue of marriage, the role of women and maternity. Both Bernard's and his cousin Edmée's mothers are dead. While Bernard grows up with his beastly all-male family (his grandfather and uncles), Edmée lives a protected and idealized life with her father. In the course of the story, in order for the two young people to marry, the savage Bernard has to be civilized, educated by his cousin. The complex relationship between the two at certain moments resembles that of a mother and child: he describes her as a "tender" mother, while Edmée looks at the progress of the wild child "with a maternal pride" (Sand, 1997, p. 135, 185).

After her grandmother's death, Aurore, now in her late teenage years, is finally reunited with her mother. The girl's feelings of love and loyalty towards her mother are as intense as they were when she was a child. However, Sophie-Victoire's 'exaggerations', her changing

moods and behaviour towards the girl, shifting from indifference to intolerance and even inexplicable cruelty, make Aurore realize that the bond between herself and her mother is broken beyond repair. This 'nonreturn' or 'delayed return' to her mother causes Sand to experience the division within the maternal, and the 'fissure' is reopened repeatedly in her fiction (Lukacher, 1994, p. 10) in incomplete and unsatisfying child-parent relationships, where biological mothers are either dead, absent or not capable to give love and attention the child craves for. *Valentine* (1832), Sand's second novel, is a good example of this incomplete and frustrating mother-daughter relationship. Besides an explicit condemnation of the traditional marriage (different from *Mauprat*, where the union between a man and a woman is based on equality, mutual understanding and respect), the novel explores the lives of three female characters - Louise-Valentine, her half-sister Louise and Athénaïs, who represent each other's non-identical 'doubles'. Their destinies, though similar at first, diverge towards the end of the novel as a result of an inadequate maternal care and education or their complete absence (Mallia, 2018, pp. 85-89).

## Conclusion

In many ways George Sand's *Story of My Life* represents a novelty in the field of 19<sup>th</sup> century autobiographical discourse. Written, as we have seen, with no proper female models and refusing to follow the examples of her male fellow writers, she produces an original story where her family history and the memory of her childhood and teenage years represent a key to the understanding of her emotional and intellectual development.

Already in the early years of her marriage, the feeling of frustration and deep emotional dissatisfaction, together with a yearning for something she herself cannot articulate, cause Aurore to become physically ill. Her journey into the Pyrenees in the summer of 1825 represents a turning point in her life. Surrounded by the wild and romantic nature, Aurore experiences a moment of

revelation that casts a new light on every aspect of her life. She realizes that the source of her inexplicable and mysterious melancholy, of her anxiety and *ennui* lies in the fact that her married life, her husband or even her child cannot give her what she needs. Her desire to explore life and its philosophical riddles and her need for intellectual stimulation is as vital for Aurore as is her need to love and to be loved in return. Despite her unhappy marriage, for Sand the marital bond remains 'a sacred ark' (Sand, 1997, p. 1067) and the (biological) maternity and different forms of attachment between a child and its (adoptive) mother become 'a leitmotiv of her life' (Rea, 1979, p. 38) and of her (non) fictional works.

The nineteenth century was the period when terms such as 'mother', 'motherhood' and 'maternity' were acquiring new meanings and interpretations, becoming more complex and not referring only to the biological relationship between mother and child (Harrison, 2015, p. 1). Sand's autobiography thus constitutes a relevant contribution to debates on motherhood by portraying examples of mothers and mother figures where the idea of motherhood "far exceeds the bounds of biology" (Harrison, 2015, p. 9) and where the traditional roles and limiting social expectations for mothers are revised and expanded. Regarding marriage, she envisages a new kind of union between a woman and a man based on "equality in difference" (Legouvé in Offen, 1986, pp. 452-484), in which motherhood and the mother-child bond is of utmost importance, while at the same time not neglecting the fact that women may have other needs and aspirations outside their families and children.

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**Zorianna Zurba**

***MILF Manor* and the Horror  
of a Mother's Sexuality**

In Linda Williams' (1991) *Film Bodies*, she reflects on watching films with her 8 year old son. The pair were describing films that give them a physical jolt: gross movies. For her son, there are 3 kinds of gross movies: 1. those that "go over the edge of the respectable" (p. 2), 2. those that make you cry, and 3. those that involve the k word—kissing. Williams later names these the fear, tear, and jerk jerker. That Williams turned to the spectatorship of the son was what struck me. Between the lines, I read into or recognized the dual perspective taking of engaging in critical reflection on the media while also taking seriously the ideas of her son who perhaps had not quite yet been fully saturated in dominant culture. What her son saw was gross, excessive, and too much. Gross has a plurality of meaning. Gross is what comes before the institutions of society have delimited value. Gross is the feeling of the abject.

The question: *what is too much for a son to see* is at the heart of the Learning Chanel's reality show, *MILF Manor*. The gross too muchness is extrapolated to what is too much for a son to know, and what is too much for a son to know about his mother? Indeed, *MILF Manor* crosses boundaries and plays with the unacceptable through its set-up, challenges, and general discussion of the sexuality and sexual pleasure of its female—single mother—contestants. If as Weisskopf (1980) argues: "Maternal sexuality is a topic that makes virtually everyone anxious" (p.767), then *MILF Manor* is a constellation of anxiety provoking topics. On the surface, *MILF Manor* flirts with the pornographic category of the MILF while the

presence of the son contributes the ‘gross out’ shock value. If as Williams (1991) suggests, “there is no accounting for taste, especially in the realm of gross” (p.2) but there is value of the experience of pleasure, fear, and pain, then the abjection of the MILF serves to restore a kind of social order. As Creed (2022) corroborates, horror restores order through by ejecting the abject (p.2). With reference to Julia Kristeva’s approach to horror and the abject, this paper examines the way in which the premise of *MILF Manor*, as a reality television show, reinforces patriarchal values by drawing upon the bad mother, in this case simultaneously the single mother and MILF, as a source of blame and shame not only for her own sexuality and sexual proclivities, but for her inability to properly raise her son, create separation, and release him into the world.

The title of the show already indicates that there is an emphasis on the MILF, an acronym for mother I’d like to fuck. The pilot episode which originally aired in January 2023 begins with an introduction to the 8 women who have been invited to this Manor: April J, Pola, Soyoung, April W, Charlene, Kelle, Stefany and Shannan. *The New Yorker’s* Naomi Fry (2023) describes: the women as are “not the usual crew of twentysomething bachelorettes but, instead, hot-to-trot peri-or post-menopausal foxes, who are looking for youngsters to canoodle with.” The show’s introduction to the women lists their ages, their romantic narrative, as well as how many children they have and some description of their relationship with their children. As Moorti and Roos (2004) argue, the reality television “stag[es] the drama and spectacle through traditional narratives of gender and class.” Notably minimized is any mention of their career path or career success.

Already upon arriving, the women have been caricatured against the dominant discourse surrounding mothers. Motherhood and sexuality remain mutually exclusive aspects of women’s lives (Friedman et al. 1998). Typically, mothers are perceived as generally asexual or “matronly” (Friedman et al. 1998; Tardy 2000; Weisskopf 1980). Montemurro and Siefken (2012) suggest that “there seems to be a notion that once a woman has children she is first and foremost an example, and must be responsible and

conservative in a culturally specific way. Any public expression of sexuality is still primarily associated with being young, childless, and unmarried (Dempsey and Reichert 2000 cited by Montemurro and Siefken 2012, by p. 367). Being “mature and sensible” implies that one would not engage in sexual activities for recreational purposes or discuss or express sexual desire. A mother, not necessarily even a good mother, would harness and overcome her indulgent desires. The characteristics of the good mother are well known: she is protective, nurturing, caring, organized, and instills good social and moral values in their child” (Guendouzi, 2005, p. 20).

It bears repeating, these women are framed not simply as middle-aged mothers seeking romantic partners, but as sexually desirous mothers whose attractiveness has a specific cultural referent rooted in male fantasy: the MILF. The acronym MILF exemplifies middle-aged mothers who are found to be attractive or desirable by younger men, most typically teenaged boys. As Montemurro and Siefken (2012) explain, the ‘hot mom’ has the resources—financial and time—to dedicate to her appearance and fitness, commonly with the support of a nanny and with a boost from plastic surgery. The resources needed to maintain a certain level of attractiveness are not available to women who are not wealthy and struggle with the demands of caring for children, maintaining a home, and balancing a career. The attractive, middle-aged mom has a legacy in Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) of the *The Graduate* (1967), then later epitomized by Steve Stifler’s mom (Jennifer Coolidge) in *American Pie* (1999) and in the pop song, *Stacy’s Mom* by Fountains of Wayne. The television show *30 Rock*, about a television network, contained a green lit pilot episode for a series entitled *MILF Island* that similarly featured ‘hot moms’ looking for love. Most commonly MILF refers to a subgenre of pornography which stars a 35-50 year old woman, though the women are often as young as 25, who seduce a younger man, typically in his 20’s. The skew age here is noteworthy: the pornographic MILF is neither middle aged, nor old enough to be the younger man’s mother. The actresses portray the role of the stepmother, friend’s mother, mother’s friend, or the girlfriend’s mother: a sexually experienced older woman who actively pursues

a younger man. Pornography offers the fantasy of taboo, a contrived transgression. This distance affords a safety that Elaine's (Katharine Ross) mother, or Stifler's (Seann William Scott) mother, or the imagined Stacey's mother, who are the biological mothers of their children, bring closer. Where these representations have skirted the incest taboo, *MILF Manor* flirts with the incest taboo.

Reality television has offered various "representations of new ethical selves take in offering a grammar of self-conduct: self-authorising, rehearsing repertoires of trauma, stress, attitude, intelligence, self-esteem, fulfilment, and self-realization. These are routed through ethical scenarios where particular forms of selfhood are represented as solutions to the dilemmas of existence" (Moorti & Ross 2004). Shows like *What Not To Wear* and *Sparking Joy* have offered aspirations of transformation and created rhetoric of improvement. Wood and Skeggs (2004) argue that regardless of the format, reality television shows are "uniform in their interrogations of self under the pressures of particular conditions." Where shows like *What Not To Wear* offer contestants a makeover and renewed self-confidence, or shows like *Survivor* offer a cash prize, the reward for participating in *MILF Manor* is 'finding' love; unfortunately, the logic of the show is a deception.

The manners at the Manor are not explicit. The show is not hosted, rather the women are each given cellphones to guide their experience in the manor. As the women are milling about the Manor bar becoming acquainted with one another, they each receive a text to prepare to meet the male contestants. The conceit of the show is that this group of women have been invited to a manor in La Paz, Mexico under the assumption of meeting a potential love match. Likewise, their sons have been invited to a manor where they too will participate in a show to meet a potential love match. What they do not realize is that they will be contestants in the same reality television show. When the men walk through to meet their matches the reactions range from confusion to surprise.

The element of surprise that the mothers and sons are in the same dating pool is the conceit of the show. Shannan receives a text message on her *MILF Manor* cellphone: "You are about to

experience a unique dating journey. All of you have expressed an openness to intergenerational dating. In the real world, there is often a double standard where an older man with a younger woman is accepted. But an older woman with a younger man isn't." Shannan dramatically pauses: "not here." The camera cuts from a close up of Shannan's face to a wide shot of the guests at the Manor. Cheering is heard. Jose, Pola's son, receives a text: "Over the next few weeks, you'll be part of a dating experiment that will level the playing field and see if you can find that special someone from a different age group." Jimmy, Soyoung's son, receives a text. As Jimmy reads the camera begins with a close up on his face, then cuts to a shot of where he is standing behind Charlene whose wide eyed, frozen face is looking into Soyoung's and April J's, triangulating the shock and confusion. "You are not exactly on the show you thought you were on. You are now in the same dating pool. Open your minds and have an experience you may have never imagined." A palatable mood shift overtakes the group.

April J covers her eyes, then glances over to someone in the distance—possibly her son Gabriel. There is a moment of tense silence before the camera pans to Kelle. Emboldened in the moment of chaos, Kelle raises her arm above her head, then mimes checking her watch: "I'll be in the hot tub at ten." The camera pans from across the bar, her son Joey whines "Moooom, you gotta chill out." Exemplifying what the *New Yorker's* Naomi Fry (2023) distills as *MILF Manor* being a show in which "the coupling-up rites of a dating show are given a cheap boost by the supposed hilarity of the sons' embarrassment at their moms' brazen sexuality, and the moms' discomfort with their baby boys' horniness." These antics fulfill Wood and Skeggs' (2004) criteria of reality television depicting a "subjecthood that prioritizes the intimate failure of self-control as a solution to the ethical dilemmas of modern life".

The plot twisting dupes the women of *MILF Manor* and sets up them up as determined Jocastas eager to hook up with a thirst trap Oedipus. Everyone is giddy—dizzy, not excited—yet the teleos of reality television takes over: they are there to win. The Manor's residents, a veiled name for the contestants, compete

in challenges to win outings and special dinners. The challenges centre upon the sharing of sexual secrets and enacting scenarios. To participate is to expose, to enact gross too muchness. Within the logic of the show, to be too much is to be rewarded. The moments provided by these outings give them an opportunity for privacy and building a connection with another participant. The accommodation in the Manor is lavish. The mother-son duos share a room with two beds, and an adjacent sauna and hot tub. Some have hot tubs on their balcony. There is another separate suite, the Fantasy Suite, should anyone require privacy. If reality television sets up the individual to dramatize an ethical dilemma, then *MILF Manor* stages the pursuit of intergenerational romance and sex while being watched by your son.

To be clear, these are not women who are left to their own devices, these are women who have been given devices and left on their own. Each of the women have been given a cell phone through which instructions get texted to them. The cell phone is the only symbolic presence of the social order outside of the participants themselves. There is no host who introduces, organizes, or welcomes them. The lack of host, typically a male presence, implies there is no one to enact the Lacanian no of the father. Without this presence the behaviour of the mothers in the manor is not aspirational or grounded in self-improvement, “but rather reflects the lack of taste, pathological culture, and ‘bad choice’ in which the subjects are displayed with no possibility of redemption” (Skeggs and Wood, 2004). It is precisely the absence of the symbolic patriarch, the father and husband, in the host that the show needs to reveal and revile the single mother as threatening the social order.

For Kelly Oliver (2000), the on-going dominance of the image of the nuclear family undermines the possibility of imagining loving relationships by maintaining the psychoanalytic tropes. I want to emphasize that still, the family with two homes - the divorced family in general, and the single mother in particular - are an affront to the heterosexual two-parent family due to the rearrangement of the parental authority, power relationships, and emotional labour. Yet, it is the single mother on to whom culture foists competing values.

If mother and sexual person are separate identities, then the single mother who is seeking a romantic partner is already an outsider to what is socially acceptable, already she is horrific. Not all threats to the social order are the same.

The maternal body, the functions and fluids of the maternal body, and the role of the maternal body in growing and keeping a child alive, engender its horror and the feeling of abjection. In her analysis of the monstrous-feminine in horror cinema, Barbara Creed (1993; 2022) outlines three applications of Kristeva's concept of horror and abjection. First, explicit images of abjection like blood and putrefying flesh. Significantly, for my inquiry here, for Kristeva women are particularly related to the abject because of the two polluting objects, "excremental and menstrual." "The image of a woman's body, because of its material functions, acknowledges its 'debt to nature' and consequently is more likely to signify the abject" (Creed 1993, p.102). Second, the abject in the idea of a particular border being breached, transgressed, or threatened as a result of an encounter between the symbolic order and that which destabilizes it; that "which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject" (Creed 1993, p.11). For example, the border between the normal and the abnormal in terms of sexual desire; or normal matronly mothers and monstrous sexual mothers. Third, and most significant, is the construction of the maternal figure as abject. The female body is bound up with horror and the abject because of menstrual fluid which visually resembles internal damage, and the vulva as a visual reminder of the lack of phallus and the body's vulnerability. Mothers' bodies are more so bound up with the abject because of the visual mess of birthing— 'the bloody show' of the mucous plug, for example—and because unlike other women, the mother has a distinct authority. Her authority is two-part: 1. The mother possesses the generative power of reproduction, and 2. The mother maintains the care, nurturing and education of the child before they enter the authority of conventional law and social order—the arena of the father. The child seeks autonomy from the mother. Kristeva, responding to Lacan and Freud, describes the maternal body as a site of conflict. The child struggles to break free, but the mother is reluctant to release them, so abjection is

a protective force against that which or she who threatens our subjectivity. Importantly, this same abjection is a defense against the incest taboo. The punchline here being: we need to be grossed out by our mom's body in order to grow up.

To summarize, horror, for Julia Kristeva, is a threat to the boundary which regulates the social order. The feeling produced by the horror is that of abjection. If horror is a threat to the social, then the abject is the reaction to the breakdown of meaning. In this case, the horror of dating not my mother, but someone like my mother; the horror of dating not my son, but someone like my son. The MILF herself is not abject, as the abject "is not an object facing me" (Kristeva, 1982, p.230) rather she destabilizes meaning. The maternal figure is not merely caring, nurturing, and feeding. Abjection is felt in response to the flaunting of maternal authority as a reproductive site devoid of reproduction but used solely for pleasure. The horror of the MILF is that her pleasure threatens to collapse the boundaries of social order. The MILF of *MILF Manor* joyfully perverts norms. She is a single mother legally untethered from a man with a sexualized appearance who is actively seeking romance from a near peer to her son under the auspices of her son. She is dangerous: who is going to stop her?; who will enact the no of the father when there is a mere cell phone at the Manor?

The horror of taking pleasure in youthful activities, maintaining fitness and attractiveness, and taking pleasure in being perverse is best exemplified by Kelle. When introducing herself in the pilot Kelle boasts about her alter ego, Disco Mommy, who enjoys partying to house and disco music; she is very spontaneous, and fun. There is a cut to Kelle's social media page where she is decorated in glitter, holding open her fluffy, feathery jacket to reveal glitter covered breasts, as her neck sways to catch and reflect light off her glitter. In a reaction shot to their first meeting, Shannan describes Kelle as "too much." There is then a cut to Kelle describing her family, a question, she claims that she receives the most. Kelle is a mother to 6 kids, but "not all from the same father." Kelle trills, "like why would I do that? Hellooooo."

Kelle relishes in her perversity. Aware of her outward appeal, Kelle transgresses her maternal authority to make incestuous breastfeeding jokes. As Creed (1993) elucidates: "Virtually all horror texts represent the monstrous-feminine in relation to Kristeva's notion of maternal authority and the mapping of the self's clean and proper body. Images of blood, vomit, pus, shit, etc., are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific. They signify a split between two orders: the maternal authority and the law of the father" (Creed 1993, p. 13). The clean and proper body must be kept away from the abject liquids.

Yet, the mother's body also produces breastmilk, which sustains and yolks the infant to her body. Kelle's breasts become the site of a joke which echo the instability of the child breaking away. In the second episode, Joey notes "my mom does get a lot of attention from here up mainly because she never wears bras and the girls are always popping out, and the headlights are always on." Spurred on by the edging away from good taste, Kelle responds "didn't bother you when you were a baby and always sucking on them. So, let's keep it real." The butt of the joke, awkwardly Joey stammers "because I needed the milk mom, I needed the energy." Unphased, Kelle sweeps her fingers through her hair "you were really thirsty." Joey laughs, looking away from the camera. Kelle's joke about Joey's appetite reveals her willingness to speak the unspeakable, even if in jest.

Kelle uses her sexuality and her appearance as the source of jokes and teasing; she intentionally antagonizes the other women while openly pursuing their sons. Kelle's boldness and voraciousness upsets the other women, yet what unsettles them about her is never explicitly said. Rather the unsettling pulsates through the episodes. Kelle's pursuit of Jose, Pola's son, is particularly heated. Kelle deliberately ruffles feathers when putting her arms around Jose, then looking at his mother blankly and saying: "Pola, I'm gonna get the fantasy suite tonight? Okay?" as if to simultaneously make a demand and ask for approval. A square off between authorities. There is a quick cut to Pola's commentary: "Kelle is not the kind of girl for Jose. I'm 100% sure." Yet, Jimmy encourages her to look closer: "You see it in his body language though? Look at it."

Undeterred and unable to look, “no” is Pola’s clear reply. There is a cut to Kelle’s commentary “whether she likes it or not, I’m gonna do whatever it takes to get my man home”, which then cuts back to Pola’s vantage point of Kelle hugging Jose with Kelle’s voice over and Pola flatly muttering “no way.”

Kelle’s antagonism of Pola does not receive much attention, rather Pola’s reaction is much criticized revealing internalized fears of the dominant mother. Where Kelle’s gauche joke about breastfeeding was intended to make Joey uncomfortable, Pola’s relationship with Jose is critiqued. Later in episode 2, Kelle tells Jose “I told your mom I’m going to take you out on a date.” Kelle then raises her voice and stares at Pola: “You’re going to interfere. I think we need to get creative.” Pola repeats several times over the series that “Jose likes very like quiet girls, nice girls.” Pola here expresses a clear dichotomy between nice girl and bad girl - modest and carnal; clean and dirty; appropriate and coarse - while she clarifies her preferences for her son.

The undifferentiated harkens back to the fusion of the child and the mother when the baby was dependent on the mother’s body. For Kristeva, the autonomy of the child is granted through the abjection of the mother: “She sees the mother-child relation as one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it” (Creed 1993, p. 11). For even as the child struggles for self-constitution, he or she is partly terrified of separating from his or her mother, while being partly consumed by a desire to remain locked in an engulfing embrace with the maternal figure. Generally, the relationship between mother and child is marked by conflict because the child ultimately wants to break free, while the mother yearns to exert her hold. This domineering abject mother finds its popular culture extreme as the ‘phobic object’ or monstrous mother of the horror film who inspires “awesome fear” (Kaplan 1990, p.133 cited in Creed, 1993, p.139). Her perversity is almost always grounded in possessive, dominant behaviour towards her offspring, particularly the male child (Creed 1993 p. 139). The stunted, murderer son in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, for example, struggles with an over possessive mother who moralizes sexual activity.

The sons in the Manor range in age from 20-30. The younger cast members, in particular, are at a crucial age or stage of transitioning into independence and maturity. Jose is the eldest at 30. His relationship with Pola receives the most screen time criticism. After sneaking away from the Mezcalateria in episode 3, Ryan asks Pola what she is looking for out of her experience in the Manor, she thoughtfully and seemingly sincerely replies: "I really wanna enjoy my company, I love myself. I wanna enjoy my time with Jose, I really love my son." There is a cut to Ryan's post-date reflection, he looks into the camera and nods "it really is a little mama's boy going on with Jose and Pola." Ryan moves to put down the bond between Pola and Jose. Here Pola is framed as the overbearing mother, rather than Ryan recognizing her response as deliberately evasive.

Others in the manor use boyhood and manhood to delineate the end of maternal authority, and consequentially to make space for the romantic and sexual life of the son. While Kelle and Jose are on their date in episode 3, Pola seems stressed and Ricky W repeats to her: "No, he's okay. He's a man now. He's a man now." In her reflective commentary on their date, Kelle laughs off Jose: "Either Pola is a helicopter mom or a jealous wife." Later in that episode, her commentary adds: "I think Mama Pola forgot to cut the umbilical cord when he was young.... Clearly there's some sort of attachment disorder going on. So I'm like.." Kelle rolls her eyes and purses her lips. Pola's distrust of Kelle's intentions toward Jose are pathologized and Pola is framed as an overbearing mother who is still metaphorically tied to her son. Finally, in a third commentary she adds: "I think Jose's a Mama's boy for sure." That Kelle repeatedly draws upon the figure of the domineering monstrous mother while enacting the role of a sexual, near incestuous, monstrous mother reveals her own internalized ambivalence around what constitutes maternal horror.

If a mother should be able to control her sexuality and conceal it from her children, then *MILF Manor* makes a spectacle of the moral failings of these women by showcasing their sexual desires. Prior to the introduction of the sons at the manor, April J describes herself as having a very high libido, then pretends to correct herself as simply still having a libido. Kelle as previously mentioned is

framed as having a voracious sexual appetite. Soyoung jokes “uh huh, Jimmy doesn’t know about me. I tell the men: I’m Soyoung and I’m sooo ....” (the word is beeped out).

Exemplary of how the show dramatizes and shames the women is through the Manor challenge, The Wall of Secrets in Episode 2. The challenge asks the participants to write down a sexual secret. Once the secrets are written down, the mother-son duo are asked to guess which secret belongs to their mother or son. Secrets range from having sex in an elevator, to a 7 woman orgy, to having sex with someone I just met, to dating my son’s middle school teacher, to I grinded on a grandma and she liked it. The winners are: Ryan and Shannan; Kelle and Joey; and Gabriel and April J, each of whom stumped each other. In her self-reflection Shannan comments: “by way of how we won, I’m horrified.” They won a date to a Mezcalaria and are told to invite another participant of their choosing. The prize for participating in a game of too muchness is an intoxicating night out with one of the sons of the other participants. The gross conduct of the game pushes into a threshold and a social limit.

The nadir of the wall of secrets occurs when Soyoung reveals that she had sex with Jimmy’s best friend. Jimmy is devastated. In the following episode, he shares with Gabriel that he is embarrassed not only to have found out, but to have the information shared while filming the show and having everyone know. (The paper could focus just on this, but I want to move on and away from this too muchness). This moment serves to galvanize the goings on and the manners at the Manor. *MILF Manor* flirts with the incest taboo but does not cross it, as the implied activities of the Fantasy Suite never come to fruition. The horror that has already been enacted outside of the Manor is jettisoned, quickly abjected, and Soyoung is given less screen time. “Pervert, but do not pollute” seems to be the manners at the Manor.

In the penultimate episode, the “connections” are put to the test by the arrival of an outsider who pops the bubble of bliss: Kelle’s daughter, Pola’s daughter, Stefany’s best friend, and April J’s ex-husband. In her critique of the psychoanalytic origin story, Kelly Oliver describes the male body as a “ghostly absent paternal body that safeguards culture” (2000 p.16). Culture in the Manor is

determined from afar by an unknown texter, then the metaphorical parachuting of these arbiters of culture from the outside. These visitors bring with questions animated by the social order that destabilize the budding connections. Gabriel's father enacts the no of the father and puts a literal stop to the her date when he picks her up and carries her away.

Largely ignored are the women's careers and their successes navigating a career while raising children. As self-sovereign women who have successfully navigated patriarchy they are an affront to the social order which denigrates their power and limits them to a trope of male fantasy.

Now middle-aged, with adult children, all the women on the show describe themselves as being ready to focus on themselves. Charlene, in particular, tearfully mentions her years of loneliness and the development of her hyper-independence as a trauma response to her situation as a single mother after leaving a challenging relationship. With lots of potential as a tear-jerker, the show could have emphasized the sacrifice and hard work of the mothers for over 20 years, rather than offering a wincing fear-jerker.

Cultural Studies has long been preoccupied with cultural texts as reflective of the broader cultural imaginary at a given time. As Katherine Goodnow argues "we need a clearer sense of how a new text comes to be inserted into a society's storehouse: comes to emerge in a particular shape, comes to be received in one way rather than another—to be greeted, for instance, with alarm or to be taken over the mainstream as acceptably daring" (2010 p. 46).

After the release of *MILF Manor*, popular culture saw an increase in sexual middle-aged women, many of whom are mothers. The *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) reboot, *And Just Like That* (2001-2025), featured Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) discovering her sexuality. Relationships with younger men are featured in Miranda July's novel *All Fours* (2024); Halina Reign's film *Babygirl* (2024) starring the Nicole Kidman, and Robinne Lee's novel *The Idea of You* (2017) which was made into a film starring Anne Hathaway. In the film, *The Idea of You* (2024) even features a meet-cute wherein

the Hathaway character rebuffs advances from a pop-star, who she later dates, while accompanying her daughter and the daughter's friends to a concert and a band meet-and-greet.

The series ends with a softening, or a releasing around the erotic elements, in exchange for an emphasis on “emotional connection” that, to paraphrase Stefany, “could potentially lead to (her match) Gabriel being the one.” The show concluded by simply asking the couples if they would still date upon returning home— to which two couples (Jose and Kelle, Stefany and Gabriel) agreed.

Initially, the show undifferentiated the identities of the mother and the lover—and the undifferentiated is the abject. To dodge abjection, *what is needed is to maintain the separation of the identities: mother and lover*, and still to imagine the mother in a loving relationship with another man who is not the father of her son. The final moments offer glimmers of this possibility, Kelle finds the tenderness in Jose's support and describes her relief at having met someone who finally “has her back.” Yet the most poignant relationship remains the elastic affection between the mother and her adult son, as exemplified in the conversation with Jose and Pola, where she emphasizes their saying “I think everyone will have good memories from you and me, and that's nice.”

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**Madhurima Guha**

***“Ab Main ‘Maa’ se ‘Mummy’ ban Chuki Hoon!” (I have become “Mummy” instead of Maa)<sup>1</sup>: Understanding Indian Diasporic Mothers on Screen.***

**Introduction**

In his theorizations about identity and diaspora, Stuart Hall proposed that cultural identity is never static, linear, ahistorical, and bereft of changes or modifications. He asks us to think about identity as a “production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 2003, p. 234) . The continuous role of popular media in producing and creating popular images about a particular ethnic group and their cultural identity is also crucial. In a similar understanding, Indian motherhood and its representations in popular media have always been significantly informative about the cultural identity for the

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1 - The words “mummy” and “maa” both mean mother but they have different origins. “Maa” is Indian, spoken as such by majority of people in the Indian subcontinent in both Hindi and non-Hindi speaking regions. Some regions also use their colloquial “Aamma”, “Maati” or “Ba” instead of “Maa”. “Mummy” is, in contrast, very Western, spoken mainly in the UK and the US and other English-speaking regions. This quote is from Karan Johar’s film *Kabhie Khushi Kabhie Ghum* (K3G), 2001. Anjali utters these words expressing a sense of disappointment that her son Krishi has become a complete “Englishman” and prefers to call her “Mummy” over “Maa”. This change indicates a transnational shift and dislocation of Anjali’s identity as an Indian mother.

Indian diasporic community. As a patriarchal institution, motherhood shapes all women across the globe but with variations consequential to the nation and community they belong. Indian motherhood is no exception in this case. Furthermore, Indian motherhood has also transformed and evolved over the years, as Indian immigration into the Western countries (such as the US and the UK) escalated and as Indian Americans or British Indians, like other Asian American groups, started to grow in these Western countries.

Combining the theoretical framework of motherhood and mothering (Rich, [1976], 2020; O'Reilley, 2014) with the cultural identity and racial-gendered expectations of an Indian mother in the West, this essay examines how various media spaces, such as cinema and web series, represent Indian mothers and motherhood. This essay will focus on their struggles and experiences, and the transformations that have occurred over the years. The other aspect that this paper aims to do is also capture the acts of *mothering* that can radicalize and subvert many hierarchies and conventions of the institution of motherhood. By conducting a comparative character study, I will study the three Indian diaspora mother characters: Ashima (a late 1970s timid Bengali mom) in Mira Nair's film *The Namesake* (2006), Anjali Sharma (a late-1990s loquacious middle-class Punjabi mom) in Karan Johar's film *K3G* (2001) and finally, Dr. Nalini Vishwakumar (a 2020 medical professional mom) in Netflix's web series *Never Have I Ever* (2020/21) to see how their motherhood comes out on screen and also what acts of mothering they perform. In order to better situate and discuss these cinematic mother characters, it is essential to historically contextualize Indian motherhood, both in India and in the Western diaspora.

### **Contextualizing Indian motherhood**

Indian motherhood has deep connections with Indian nationalist struggle and nation reconstruction during the post-independence period. In her study of the importance of mothers within the cultural life of Bengal, Jasodhara Bagchi (1990) stated

that motherhood was a phenomenon that was quite uniquely promoted during the colonial era of Bengal. As she stated, “the religious, cultural, and aesthetic domain were politicized with the help of the [...] ideological aspect of motherhood;” however, it mainly “served the purpose of taking away real power from women and creating a myth about her strength and power” (Bagchi, 1990, p. 65). Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* ([1976] 2020) delineates how right from the dawn of time, wonders of the world alongside the wondrous prodigious power of woman’s body had become the center of patriarchal curiosity, power, and control, while discussing the conceptualization of Mother Goddess (pp. 106-107). This ideology, however, was also applicable for the entire nation. Literary works alongside with nationalist slogans glorifying the mother and the motherland pulsed across the country as India resisted the British and gained independence.

The post-colonial period in India saw utilizing and reconfiguring the ideal mother to also assure the propagation of an anti-West discourse. As Bagchi mentions, “with the emphasis on one’s selfhood and identity to be opposed to the western rulers, motherhood emerged as the domain which the colonized could claim of their own” (Bagchi, 1990, pp. 65-66). Good Indian mothers were glorified as spiritually laden, desexualized, morally superior to the West, with values and ideals that emphasize home, family unity, respect, virtues, sense of duty, obedience, and selflessness. They promoted traditions, culture and synchrony while discarding their self, individual desires and pleasure, and basically everything else that was considered Western per se. Partha Chatterjee’s essay (1989) indicates how the nationalist “reforms” and resolutions of the women’s questions (pertaining to everything - gender roles, education, marriage, motherhood) relied heavily on the dichotomy of home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine, east/west, and this in turn renewed the norms of organizing family life and determining the right conduct for women (Chatterjee, 1989, pp. 116-135).

The notion of the sanctimoniousness of women and family life within the larger South Asian culture<sup>2</sup> also dictated Indian motherhood. The identity of the Indian woman, therefore, entwined with the needs and well-being of the family at the cost of selfhood. Bagchi (1990) called this concept of the mother a 'paradox' that legitimized oppression and leached out the joyful meaning of motherhood. The cultural construction of motherhood that is bestowed upon Indian mothers is also dependent on broader social factors. Migration is one such factor that has heavily impacted on Indian motherhood, and which I will discuss briefly in the following section.

### **Indian mothers in the western diaspora**

Transnational migration of the Indian community spiked during India's gradual turn towards globalization around the 1990s, a period that also redefined the notions of Indian femininity and motherhood. Although Indian mothers were much more modern than their predecessors in the 1950s, they were not allowed to be over modernized. In other words, a modern Indian mother cannot be allowed to let go of her national/traditional identity completely – that is, she should be liberated, but also aware of her socio-sexual boundaries and respectability (Puri, 1999, pp. 75-77). In her essay Jasjit K Sangha (2013) delineates how this ideological concept of Indian motherhood also transmigrated in the Indian diaspora, where culturally determined gender roles were equated with South Asian

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2 - The term South Asian is a heterogeneous one. This term refers to people with origins from various countries in South Asia such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the surrounding areas. Jasjit K Sangha (2013) notes that this term has been racially used to put a diverse set of 1.5 billion people into a homogenous category and does not capture the heterogeneity of this group of people with differences in language, cultural practices, religion, geography, and ethnicity (413). There are many overlaps of culture, gender roles and duties, family traditions, as well as family structure within these communities; however, each community has its own particularities and uniqueness.

identity and women were thus measured against it (2013, p. 3). While discussing Asian American women, Lina Y. S. Fong (1997) contends that “a central issue in the adaptation of Asian-American women is the extent to which they retain their own cultural traditions relative to acculturation and assimilation into American society” (Fong, 1997, p. 93). She notes that the acculturation process for these women is not a linear simple process, but rather an extremely convoluted one that mixes cultural (values, norms, languages) with structural dimensions (primary groups, class, status, and power). In thinking about how immigration affects mothering and intensive motherhood of the South Asian community, Sarah Miter and Usha George (2003) stated that internalized values and beliefs clash with external socialization process and environmental stress, as immigration has surged from non-European countries.

As subjects of postcolonial politics of purity and honor, Indian mothers suffered (read: keep suffering) a lot and must negotiate a specific set of codes and languages to carve out viable sexually progressive and powerful identities for themselves, while becoming typical cinematic representations as objects of male domination and sexual desire. However, in the more recent works of Indian female filmmakers such as Mira Nair, Pratibha Parmar and Aparna Sen, Indian mothers have been continuously portrayed as evolving subjects of change by breaking the taboos surrounding female sexuality and women’s desire (Bose, 2019, p. 120). The majority of these latter renditions are brought forward by more progressive, non-Bollywood filmmakers such as Mira Nair and Mindy Kaling, whom I will be discussing in this essay.

I will be also discussing renditions of Indian mothers found in mainstream Bollywood (more specifically, one film directed by Karan Johar) which also deserve mentioning. The reason behind discussing the Bollywood Indian diasporic mother rests mainly with the unavoidable impact Bollywood has had as a significant mediascape and a culture industry in constructing the Indian diaspora in the West. As Desai (2004) rightfully noted, diasporas are constructed out of cultural narratives that in turn define the somewhat disenfranchised and fragmented diasporic subject

(Indian mothers) because these narratives evoke a sense of belonging and wholeness (Desai, 2004, p. 30). Sangita Gopal (2010) called this phenomenon *Bollywoodization* of Hindi cinemas. According to Gopal, the event of *Bollywoodization* took place in the wake of 1990s when India underwent globalization and market liberalization. At this time, Bollywood film industry underwent massive changes in terms of using high-end technology in filmmaking, film production, becoming more professional – and thereby altering film distribution methods. This was the era of New Bollywood. Gopal's essay further contended that Karan Johar's films<sup>3</sup> helped Bollywood to enter the global cinematic traditions. For Gopal, KJo was heuristic for global Bollywood for reproducing mainstream content – i.e., dramatic (often melodramatic) plot lines of family separation, emotional upheavals, and conjugality. His films upheld Indian traditions and gender roles (wives, mothers, and grandmothers) with a hint of modernity and wealth, targeted for both the mainstream audience in the subcontinent as well as the nostalgic audience of the Indian diaspora: the NRIs<sup>4</sup>. (Gopal, 2011, p. 2)

In the following section I will analyze screened representations of Indian diasporic mothers who perform their own acts of mothering, starting with Ashima in Mira Nair's *The Namesake* (2000), followed by Anjali in Karan Johar's *Kabhie Khushi Kabhie Gham* (K3G, 2003) and finally Nalini Vishwakumar from Mindy Kaling's global hit Netflix web series, *Never Have I Ever* (NHIE, 2020-2022).

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3 - Karan Johar is a popular Indian filmmaker. He mainly directs mainstream Bollywood (Hindi) films, which are also called *masala* entertainers. He is fondly known as KJo and is widely considered Bollywood Godfather and a seismic changemaker in mainstream Hindi films that mainly rose to popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

4 - The term NRI stands for Non-Residential Indian.

## Indian Diasporic mothers on screen

### *Ashima’s story*

In the novel (mainly) and in the film, Ashima is introduced through lack of space: as an expecting mother, as an invisible immigrant woman in the US, as a foreigner whose host country cannot provide her with the cultural connection. Her surname has been replaced through marriage, her socio-political identity has transformed as a result of immigration, and now motherhood devours her embodied space. Ashima is in exile from the opening paragraphs of the novel. As a young, middle-class, sheltered Bengali woman with very little exposure outside Bengali socio-cultural discourse, Ashima’s sense of foreignness is predominant, and her imminent motherhood aggravates that feeling even more. In the film Ashima’s alienness is established by Ashoke, who teaches her important things about the apartment – availability of water 24 hours that can be drunk directly from the tap without boiling it first, how the cooking range works, separate taps for hot/cold water, where the laundromat is located. His casual offering of making breakfast for her in the “American way” is strongly opposed to the conservative Bengali ideals of gendered household work she was brought up with. In the novel her alienation becomes extremely heightened at the hospital where Ashima births her first child Gogol. Lahiri explicitly describes how Ashima finds it awkward to be in a ‘knee-length’ hospital gown, nursed by two white women. For Ashima, childbirth is an intimate, private event that generally takes place in their natal homes, surrounded by mothers, aunts, and grandmothers – much unlike the experience she is going through. The addition of a plastic bracelet among the cavalcade of her matrimonial bracelets indicating her patient identity makes it even more obvious (Lahiri-Roy, 2017, 2-4). Ashima comes to us as a sturdy woman, resistant to assimilation and bent on forming an ethnic enclave of Calcutta by befriending other Bengali housewives who hailed from a particular class and culture status and practicing her Bengali culture through cooking food, hosting cultural events, or mothering Gogol’s American tendency of calling his parents

“guys”. As Ashima grew older, she became more open-minded. Nair portrays this through Ashima’s acceptance of Soniya’s mixed race American boyfriend or learning to drive. Ashima is limitless, one without boundaries, experimental and resistive - all in one. We see her struggles, as well as her explorations and transformations: from being Bengali to becoming a transnational Bengali American and recreating a mini Bengal niche for herself and her family; from being a married young immigrant woman to a becoming a mother of two and a widow; from being obediently betrothed to an unknown Bengali scholar to loving him deeply over the years; from struggling to spell out her name to the intern at Cleveland hospital after Ashoke’s demise to not enforcing on Gogol the traditional custom of shaving his head after his father’s death (Lahiri-Roy, 2015, 5-6). Ashima is born, time and again, over the course of the story. Her choice to be born again through her passion for music and becoming liminal and by moving both between India & the US and through the slippages of cultures reinforces Ashima’s resistance to being stereotyped.

### *Anjali’s story*

Anjali is a reluctant migrant who relocates to London following a challenging marriage to Rahul, the love of her life. Although Karan Johar subtitles the story “all about loving your parents” (Rahul’s parents, per se), I specifically examine Anjali’s struggles as a new Indian mother in the diaspora. Rahul is a child raised by the gentle-hearted yet staunchly traditional business tycoon Yashvardhan Raichand and his homely and devoted wife Nandini Raichand. Yash Raichand is blinded by ideologies of *parampara* (tradition). His household is tightly patriarchal and heteronormative in every way, which also forces him to strongly oppose his beloved son’s decision to marry Anjali, the daughter of a middle-class sweetmeat owner in Chandni Chowk (a small Indian town). When Rahul marries Anjali, he is disowned by his father and thus he decides to relocate in a different country to start his life anew. This plot premise justifies Anjali’s reluctance to leave her country, her locality Chandni Chowk, her memories and (most importantly) lose out on her in-law’s love, because that is what her traditional, gendered upbringing has taught her.

Anjali is always seen as a saree-clad, peppy, loud, extremely energetic woman, who recreates little Chandni Chowk in her grand Hampstead home. She wakes early in the morning, performs her Saraswati *pooja* (worship of the house deity), makes breakfast, instills the nationalistic values into her son Krishi<sup>5</sup> by reminding him to repeat “*Sare jahan se accha*”, a popular anti-colonial anthem praising the homeland. She also gives dramatic sighs over how her motherhood identity has changed from the Indian “*maa*” to the westernized “*mummy*” and pines to return home. She gets emotional when she suddenly finds her son singing the Indian national anthem “Jana Gana Mana” at his school musical performance (Mann, 2014, p. 498). Anjali also frequently mocks her British neighbors and spats at her own UK raised, westernized, catty, little sister Poo (short for Pooja) for being overtly western by disciplining her skin-revealing sartorial choices. Pooja, unlike Anjali, does not suffer from any particular grief of displacement and is seen as a quite content, happy immigrant woman. Pooja bears a striking resemblance to the character Moushimi from *The Namesake*, yet her character lacks the depth and complexity of Moushimi. Nonetheless, she does play an important role in bridging the gap between Yash and Rahul (towards the end of the film), reinstating the fact that Bollywood retains certain traits of Indian femininity no matter how western she becomes. One could also read this as an instance where Bollywood works as a culturally disciplining industry.

Throughout the film, there are a few scenes that showcase how Anjali asserts her power. The most important one is in the scene that shows her neighbor Mrs. Sprightley leaving her daughter with Anjali to be dropped off at school. As Mrs. Sprightley explains her reason for seeking help, Anjali openly mocks her and uses the power of Hindi calling her out as “*Jhoothi! Jhoothi!*” (Liar! Liar!). Anjali’s mockery of Mrs. Sprightley is a clear assertion of Anjali not buying into the everyday trappings of British life. This politics of exclusion renders Sprightley as the Other in her own country, no doubt discomforting for Anglo-Celtic British viewers. Sprightley herself speaks in a patronizing, upper-class tone, adding to the viewer’s

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5 - short for Krishna, the supreme god according to the Hindu theological tradition.

dislike of the character, and her role is reprised some moments later when, in the comfort of their kitchen, Anjali and Sayeeda (Farida Jalal) mimic Sprightley's shrill tone (Khorana, 2011, p. 366). This caricature specially calls our attention as audience to mentally connect to the charlatanism of the British imperialism that cunningly took over the entire nation during the colonial period. Within the family space, Anjali also asserts her power when she is seen convincing Rahul to allow his brother Rohan (who masquerades as Yash)<sup>6</sup> to stay at their place, as a part of helping a fellow Indian immigrant. She does this by upholding the traditional Indian (Hindu) hospitality custom of "*mehmaan bhagwan hota hai!*" (or *Atithi devo bhava*: Guests are equivalent to Gods). In her essay *Bollywood: The Next Generation*, Madhu Jain illustrates how NRI films show a society in transition despite their overwhelmingly reductive, stereotypical approach to the West. Jain also contends that these NRI based films contribute to Bollywood's churning out of peppy, feel-good romances, with song-and-dance sequences punctuated by little narrative, and filmmakers reduced to mere entertainers (Jain, 2002, p. 340).

### *Nalini's story*

It would not be wrong to say that Nalini Vishwakumar's character in the Netflix web series portrays a complicated mix of traditions and modernity. Nalini, a dermatologist by profession, is also a widowed middle-aged mother of a vivacious 15-year-old young girl, Devi Vishwakumar, living in Sherman Oaks, CA. The series is directed by Mindy Kaling, an Indian American woman born and raised in Massachusetts. In an interview with Terry Gross, Mindy states that this web series was like revisiting her own teenage years living and growing up in the US. Mindy wanted to focus on a new

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6 - In the film plot, when Rahul was forced to leave his house as a calamitous outcome of his marriage with Anjali, Rohan (Rahul's adopted brother) was little and away in a boarding school. In this scene, Rohan is all grown up and Rahul does not recognize him. Anjali is also unaware of Yash's true identity. Rohan comes to Hampstead to find his elder brother Rahul, hoping to reconnect the torn bridges between his father Yash Raichand and his elder brother.

kind of nerd who is a “belligerent, confident nerd” (Kailing, 2020). *Never Have I Ever* became an instant hit in many countries including the US and India and garnered cross border viewership. The web series became the first of its kind portraying an Indian American family which has a first-generation immigrant mother, an Indian born cousin sister, Kamala, who emigrated to the US for her Doctoral studies, and a second-generation daughter, Devi (the protagonist), all living under the same roof and facing their struggles. Devi is the American school kid who at her age should already have a “hot” American, non-nerdy boyfriend and should also have lost her virginity. This is the main aim of her school life, alongside acing in academics and getting admitted to Stanford (her dream college). Nalini, however, hails from a very conservative South Indian (Tamil-Brahmin) community and tweaks her Hindu traditions and customs every now and then. She deeply loves her deceased husband but does not wear white sarees or practice any repressive regiments of Hindu widowhood. She is the new Indian woman who possesses agency, control, ownership, dreams and desires for herself and her daughter. She is the female head of her Indian American household. What makes her character so loved and realistic is her vulnerability, sensitivity, and emotional softness, underneath her strong outer shell. Nalini’s role is very dynamic as well as complicated, especially in the way she deals with certain matters that affect her and her daughter’s life. She is conservative about Devi’s adolescence but simultaneously very progressive when it comes to eliminating unnecessary burdens of community expectations, and this complexity makes her character interesting and subversive. Nalini and Mohan Vishwakumar (her late husband) moved to the US in September 2001: as the legendary tennis player John McEnroe contextualizes, “it was not a super chill time to be a brown person in America” (S1, E1, 00:26:29). Both Nalini and Mohan show respect for their Indian roots by being strict vegetarians, while Devi gorges on her beefsteak and is distinctly “American”. Nalini and Mohan, although irked by Devi’s food choices, do not exercise any strict control on her. There are many moments throughout the show that highlight how whiteness and white supremacy exoticizes *Indianness* as “cultural”, “Instagram picture worthy” material or as the “weird

Indian thing”. There is also mindless simplification and homogenization of the distinctly different Hindu and Muslim religious events (such as Ramadan and Ganesh Puja) as one South Asian cluster, reflecting the struggles every South Asian experiences daily. John McEnroe’s voice does the much-needed contextualization of Ganesh Puja while snippets of people dancing and having fun in India fill the complement of the description.

Nalini asserts her Indian *momminess*<sup>7</sup> by mocking Devi’s struggles to deal with a saree that she wears for Ganesh Puja: “the itchininess of sarees is a rite of passage for Indian women. Deal with it” (S1, E4, 00:19:28). She urges Devi to persuade her college counselor, Raj, to assist with her admission to Stanford, which is Devi’s dream school. Additionally, she pressures a reluctant Kamala to prepare swiftly for meeting her future in-laws by insisting she apply “coconut oil on her hair.” This way, Kamala’s would-be Indian American in-laws can sense her mother’s presence, showcasing Kamala’s commitment to her Indian heritage.

The show *Never Have I Ever* upholds the shifts in the popular image and imaginations about an Indian American mother in the US. One could say that highlighting Nalini’s overt concern about her daughter’s virginity and dating or career choices, policing Devi’s personal life or having Kamala go through an arranged marriage (we do not yet know whether this will happen) still indicates Nalini’s

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7 - Susan Douglas defined *momminess* as “central to the new momism, in fact, [it] is the feminist insistence that woman have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy.” Douglas refers to it as a direct descendant and upgraded version of motherhood as defined by Friedan in her *Feminine Mystique*. Theoretically it has connections with the notion of ‘intensive mothering’ where the mother’s professional achievements are mainly connected to the idea of “good motherhood” – i.e., Nalini shows her intensive mothering by being overprotective about Devi’s career. Karin Sadadvar (2014) elaborates on intensive mothers as those who are caring, dutiful, devoted, trying to provide the best for their children. Nalini uses her professional achievements to become a mother at an older age and justifies this choice as perfect for good motherhood. See Sardadvar’s essay “Older Mothers: Trendy and Stigmatized” in the Andrea O’ Reilly’s book *Mothers, Mothering and Motherhood Across Cultural Differences : A Reader* (2014)

typical Indianness. However, I argue that there happens a strong subversion of the stereotype of Indian American women – always oppressed, passive, docile and helpless – through the portrayal of Nalini’s widowhood in this case. She may portray certain signs that are typical of an Indian American mother, but she also embraces several transformations and cultural shifts.

The overlap of Indian widowhood and motherhood posits a classic example where two very complicated cultural norms come together and coerce an Indian woman. This series, nonetheless, breaks away from the representation of a conventional widowed Indian mother<sup>8</sup>. For example, Nalini is shown to have more agency and financial security by being the head of her household after she becomes a widow. She does not hold herself back and decides to date her colleague Dr. Jackson, a man of African American heritage, despite being briefly hesitant. In one particular scene, Nalini can be seen overcoming her reluctance. Before heading out for a date, Nalini performs pauses. There is a momentary pause at each step as she prepares for her date. She pauses briefly as she gets dressed, then again when she glances at Mohan’s picture, and finally pauses one last time when she removes her wedding ring. She is constantly juggling between what is right by society and what is right for her; however, she finally decides to go ahead and chooses what is right for her. This is a huge shift in terms of an Indian widowed mother because generally she is supposed to succumb to the cultural burden and never re-marry nor fall in love after her husband’s death. I will also take this opportunity to highlight another important subversion that is implicitly taking place alongside this explicit tussle. Nalini’s

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8 - Rules of widowhood for South Asian (Indian) women are extremely rigid. Widowhood as a socio-cultural process is one of the most stringent existing. Being a widow, in 1920s or 1930s colonial India equaled social death, as widows were expected to live at the most removed positions of life. Good food, pleasurable wearables such as good clothes, jewelries had to be given up. These restrictions and policing still exists till today with sporadic modifications here and there. Although widow remarriage exists as an established legislature in modern India and many widows do get married, the cultural stigma is not completely dismantled. Women are still expected to maintain fidelity to the deceased husband and sacrifice her own desires for the community, family, and social honor.

choice to harbor feelings for a Black man is a very strong and a bold step towards undoing the inherent racism Indians have for Black people, but which is hardly discussed in studies about racism or critical race theory.

Significant scholarship that focuses on widowed mothers has explored widowed motherhood intersectionality, i.e., they have shed light in the nexus of race, creation of female-headed families, the negative impact of single motherhood on children, or the impact of US welfare policies. While the majority of research studies have only considered white, black, and Latinx single mothers, South Asian mothers are very under-researched. In their essay “Paradoxes of Being and Becoming South Asian Single Mothers: The Enclave Economy, Patriarchy, and Migration” (2020), Banerjee and Bhumika do a great job in gathering research limelight on South Asian women and breaking away from the blind understanding of model minority<sup>9</sup> about immigrant South Asian families. They focus on low-wage South Asian immigrant women who have become single mothers<sup>10</sup> in the USA (many of whom are Muslim women) because their husbands are subjected to racial profiling (as oppressive and potentially terrorist, colored Muslim men) as well as immigration complications. They also bring up experiences of widowhood

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9 - Model Minority generally considers all Asian people (including South Asian) and their families as educated and heterosexual high wage earners. This model implicitly puts other people of color (Black, Latinx, Native communities) under tension and competition among themselves. It also dismisses the heterogeneity of the communities, their struggles and demands; thus, I consider Model minority a racially repressive way of stereotyping non-white communities.

10 - In this paper, Banerjee and Bhumika (2020) elaborate on how restrictive and intensified US immigration policies such as the USA Patriot Act of 2001 and the Illegal Immigration Reform Act (IIRA) of 2002 have fractured many immigrant families and have single-handedly contributed to the creation of innumerable single-parent homes among immigrants of color. Their study of the South Asian immigrant women from low-income households in the Chicago enclave included many women who have been forced to become single mothers as many of their husbands have been deported. These families are undesirable within the South Asian culture and deviate from the ideal two-parent nuclear or joint (parents, grandparents etc.) family structures where the father is the breadwinner, and the mother is the caregiver.

through one Bangladeshi woman’s anecdotes and financial struggles (Banerjee, et al., 2020, p. 30). Though Banerjee and Bhumika’s work breaks the homogeneity regarding the model minority stereotype, Nalini’s story conveys that the choices about life made by a single mother get socially scrutinized when widowhood intervenes, regardless of her financial status. In other words, class privilege and monetary prosperity does not necessarily make things easier for a widowed Indian mother.

In Episode 9 (Season 2) we get to see another interesting cultural shift that re-constructs the image of the older Indian mother-in-law. When Nalini gets judged and reprimanded by her own “cool” and “modern” American-born daughter Devi for her lack of integrity towards her dead husband after kissing Dr. Jackson, Nalini’s mother-in-law surprisingly defends Nalini’s life choices as an independent and responsible good mother. This scene is extremely powerful in terms of breaking away from the antagonistic relationship between Indian mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law, a cultural stereotype. What we also see happening here is a role reversal and re-imagination of the roles of grandmothers and older mothers-in-law, who often go missing in the discussions of subversion, empowerment, transformation, and mothering.

## Conclusion

It is important for us to bring in Chandra Mohanty’s seminal work *Under Western Eyes* (2003), where she critically contested mainstream homogenized understandings of South Asian women as a set of “powerless” women who are often victims of socioeconomic systems, male violence, and religious and family systems. While Mohanty elaborates that neither women nor oppressions can be simplified and need historical and contextual focus, she also delineates a re-conceptualization of the postcolonial South Asian and Third World women from ‘objects of change’ to ‘subjects of change’, which is crucial to destabilize the hegemonic notions. (Mohanty, 2003, p.72). Indian motherhood, likewise, is complex

and has often been given a monolithic definition. It is important for us to reconsider how the agentic self of a South Asian Indian mother comes out. Bandana Purkayastha's work (2010) shows how "constellations of privilege and marginalization" contribute to the diversity of South Asian mothers' experiences, while it also explains how the expression of agency by mothers – through the act of mothering – will also be varied depending on the "matrix that shapes their lives" (Purkayastha, 2010, p. 14) .

Expressions of agency, when considered from the identity of the mother, can also be examined from the perspective of *mothering*. Andrea O' Reilly defines mothering as distinct from motherhood by stating that "motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word mothering refers to women's experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women" (Reilly, 2014, p. 185). Therefore, it could be argued that Ashima, Anjali and Nalini portray their mothering on screen through little acts of defiance and reclaim and re-assertion despite their socio-cultural and deeply gendered powerless status. In other words, despite Ashima's foreignness and loss of space, or the trouble she faces while birthing Gogol, she also showcases power in recreating a mini-Kolkata in her New England diaspora while resisting assimilation. Likewise, while Anjali's over dramatic, stereotypical portrayal in a mainstream KJo film might make her apparently appear as a loud, dramatic, silly Punjabi mother, she is successful in resisting assimilation as well. By recreating Chandni Chowk in her home, performing regular *saraswati* pujas early in the morning despite receiving complaints from neighbors, or through subverting Mrs. Sprightley's convenient exploitation of the help available from her brown neighbors, Anjali gains agency. Similarly, in the case of Nalini, the way she queers widowhood through her sartorial choices or by deciding on dating an African American colleague portray the empowered expressions of South Asian mothers in a diaspora in their own unique ways. This showcasing of their power in mothering overrides quintessential motherhood along with racism and sexism.

All three of them arrive in different parts of the West at different important time periods that mark significant shifts in the homogeneity of North American and British identity. In his book *Writing Imagined Diasporas: South Asian Women Reshaping North American Identity* (2007) Joel Kuortti highlights that the concept of diaspora is always undergoing changes; it constantly shifts and is never static. He asserts that these shifts are significantly taking place more through South Asian women who do not merely assimilate into their host cultures but rather reshape them. For Ashima, it was the time of 1967 when white collar Asians in the US were a significant minority. She experienced many troubles – including constant need for translation and a sense of exile and foreignness with almost no cultural connectivity – but nonetheless Ashima was able to create her own niche (Roy, 2015, p. 2). Anjali arrives in the imperial city of London during the late 1990s and early 2000s, during the significant event of India’s turn towards globalization, and she is also a reluctant migrant like Ashima. However, Anjali brings with her a unique postcolonial spirit and identity, which is reflective of a new nation “that is reckoned with its own terms and is being wooed by England not only for its technological capabilities and financial possibilities but also for its cultural capital” (Mann, 2014, p. 488). As for Nalini, she also arrived in the US in 2001 as a married woman, around the same time as Anjali arrived in London. Nalini’s character reflects the quick evolution and transformation of an Indian American widowed mother who is way more modern in her approach towards life and everyday maneuvers than her predecessors Ashima and Anjali. All three maternal figures of Indian descent arrive at various locations in the West during distinct periods that signify substantial transformations in the homogeneity of North American and British identity in the diaspora.

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**Body and State:  
(Trans)National Perspectives  
on Motherhood and the Mother's  
Body**

**Francesca Turri**

**Greenlandic Mothers, Danish  
Mothers, and “Mother Denmark”:  
Displays of Motherhood in Mâliâraq  
Vebæk’s *Historien om Katrine***

**1. Historien om Katrine  
*between postcolonial and gender studies***

Mâliâraq Vebæk (1917-2012) was, among other things, the first Greenlandic female author to write a novel. The text, *Búsime nâpíneq* (*Meeting on a Bus*; 1981), was translated into Danish by the author herself and, one year later, it was published in Denmark by Høst & Søn. *Historien om Katrine* (“Katrine’s Story”) – the title chosen for the Danish rewriting – undoubtedly pertains also to Danish literature, as the most influential studies on Vebæk agree on, and will be considered as such throughout the following pages. In fact, according to Inge Kleivan, Vebæk contributed to both Greenlandic and Danish literature: “[d]er er ingen tvivl om, at Mâliâraq [Vebæk] er en grønlandsk forfatter, men hun er også en dansk forfatter. Hun er en forfatter, der har beriget både den grønlandske og den danske litteratur ved i litterær form at videregive sine indtryk af selvforståelsen hos grønlændere i Danmark”<sup>1</sup> (Kleivan, 1997, p. 120). More specifically, the choice to publish a

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1 - “There’s no doubt that Mâliâraq [Vebæk] is a Greenlandic writer, but she is also a Danish writer. She is an author who has enriched both Greenlandic and Danish literature by giving literary form to her impressions on the self-understanding of Greenlanders in Denmark”, my translation.

Danish version of *Búsime nâpíneq* could be seen as an attempt to interface with readers in Denmark and critically engage with them. In this regard, the novel could be considered an example of “writing back” (see Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, 1989), as it is among the first works that openly addresses Danish racism towards Greenlanders, thus contributing to the dismantling of the myth of Denmark as a “model empire, educating its colonial subjects to become self-reliant citizens” (Thisted, 2010, p. 190).

A postcolonial reading of the novel, similar to the ones presented in Kirsten Thisted’s *Migrants, or Living the Postcolonial? Greenlandic Authors in Transnational Space* (2010) and in Ebbe Volquardsen’s *Pathological Escapists, Passing and the Perpetual Ice: Old and New Trends in Danish-Greenlandic Migration Literature* (2014), will be here paired with a focus on the dimension of motherhood, whose essentiality to the novel can be grasped already from *Historien om Katrine*’s original Danish cover, representing a Greenlandic mother and her daughter – allegedly Katrine and her toddler Emilie – in a grey cityscape. Although the novel is not new to considerations drawn from gender studies, this specific topic has not yet been investigated thoroughly, to my best knowledge. A point of contact between these two macro-areas of study could be identified in the concept of intersectionality, firstly theorised by Kimberlé Crenshaw in an attempt to “contrast the multidimensionality of Black women’s experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). In *Historien om Katrine*, Vebæk addresses a similar complexity, as her primary interest is the depiction of the difficulties encountered by female Greenlanders in Denmark. This concern was probably catalysed, along with other reasons, by the surge of a new feminist movement in Copenhagen around the year 1970 (Kleivan, 1997, p. 109). As stated by Kleivan, “[d]e nye ideer bidrog til en skærpet bevidsthed om, at grønlandske kvinder i Danmark kunne opfattes som repræsentanter for to undertrykte grupper, kvinder og grønlandere”<sup>2</sup> (Kleivan, 1997, p. 109). Therefore, it could be argued

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2 - “These new ideas contributed to a sharp awareness that Greenlandic women in Denmark could be regarded as representatives for two oppressed groups, women and Greenlanders”, my translation.

that the novel bears, already from its genesis, an ‘intersectional’ look on society. A similar perspective on the novel could be further enriched by focusing on motherhood, as, in the words of Andrea O’Reilly and Marie Porter, “both oppression and power, in complex interrelationships, are found in mothering” (O’Reilly and Porter, 2005, p. 8). This duality perfectly matches with the premises of most post-colonial writings since this kind of literature engages with unequal power relations regarding former coloniser and colonised. Aside from the relation between ‘Greenlandicness’ and ‘Danishness’, *Historien om Katrine* is also concerned with disparity relating to men and women. It could be fruitful, then, to isolate some of the modalities through which motherhood is displayed in the novel and verify whether these discourses serve the purpose to create unusual connections, or to reiterate familiar narratives in a ‘metonymical’ fashion. A key concept for my analysis will be the idea of motherhood as an idealised condition, based on the unquestionable abnegation and on the utter infallibility expected from ‘good’ mothers. The counterparts to these figures would be ‘bad’ mothers, mothers who neglect their children or, in the most extreme cases, attempt or commit filicide. These figures are at the centre of Sarah LaChance Adams and Karen Swift’s inquiries on the ‘dark side’ of motherhood, which I will be referring to throughout the paper.

## ***2. Greenlandic mothers: bad mothering, passings, and the quest for agency***

Motherhood is easily identifiable as one of *Historien om Katrine*’s primary concerns, since the novel largely concentrates on the relationship between the protagonist and her toddler, Emilie. Despite its centrality to the plot, this is far from being the only example of maternity displayed: the book offers a wide constellation of maternal figures coming from different backgrounds, and even seems to accommodate a less concrete and more metaphorical interpretation of motherhood which, in some passages, emerges in association with Dano-Greenlandic post-colonial relations. This

last aspect will be scrutinised later in the analysis, after some preliminary considerations on Greenlandic and Danish mothers who appear in the text. The present section, instead, focuses on the intersection between ‘Greenlandicness’ and motherhood and, aside from Katrine herself, a few other significant characters will be briefly taken into consideration.

According to Swift, the primary feature of a ‘good mother’ – and of the nuclear family as a whole, from which mothers are ideally inseparable – would be the capacity to provide for “the care of children on a day-to-day basis” (Swift, 1995, p. 101). Katrine already seems to contravene this first expectation since she fails in maintaining her relationship to Erik and, consequently, to Emilie. Her dreams of a happy family life, in fact, collapse when she is faced with her husband’s ‘doubleness’ and with his infidelity. In an attempt to cope with her disillusionment, the woman falls prey to alcohol abuse, and her frequently altered state has a strong impact on her capability to look after the child. Let us consider, for instance, this explanatory extract from the novel: “Jeg gav mig til at drikke, og jeg blev efterhånden temmelig fuld. Jeg var ligeglad med lille Emilie, som gik rundt og græd [...]. Jeg følte ingen dårlig samvittighed. Når min mand var sådan! Så kunne det også være lige meget, hvordan jeg var. Jeg passede ikke længere Emilie ordentligt”<sup>3</sup> (Vebæk, 1982, pp. 34-35). When Katrine starts neglecting Emilie, she revolts herself, more or less intentionally, against the traditional role attributed to mothers, namely fostering children (Swift, 1995, p. 102). The same cannot be said about her husband, who, despite his unfaithfulness, still provides for breadwinning – the only activity which, according to Swift (1995, p. 102), is generally expected from ‘good fathers’. Another example of an ‘unsuccessful’ family is provided by Karoline, a Greenlander living in Copenhagen as a prostitute, and her son. The two are separated, since the woman’s five-year old child refuses to move to Denmark and is consequently being raised by Karoline’s parents in Greenland (Vebæk, 1982, pp.

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3 - “I gave into drinking and eventually became quite drunk. I didn’t care about little Emilie who walked around crying [...]. I didn’t have a bad conscience. Especially when my husband was out carousing! So it didn’t matter how I was. I no longer properly cared for Emilie” (Vebæk, 2021, pp. 39-40).

70-71). In this case, a maternal figure takes up what is traditionally identified as a father's task, but in doing so she must renounce to a close contact to her son. It should be noted that both Katrine and Karoline, aside from 'rebellious' against their family roles, also do not manage to conform to the Danish society: they live at its margins, respectively as a non-worker and a 'fallen woman', ghettoised along with other underclass Greenlanders.<sup>4</sup>

A further element worth mentioning about Katrine as a mother, apart from child neglect, is her attempt to commit filicide; the woman, once she has realised that, after the divorce, Erik will be solely in charge of Emilie and that she is not likely to see her again, convinces a friend to kidnap her daughter. After having reunited with Emilie, Katrine throws herself, together with her three-year-old child, into the sea canal of Nyhavn. Sarah LaChance Adams, in her attempt to find nuanced ways to investigate the motivations behind filicide, recovers Cheryl Meyer and Michelle Oberman's conclusions on murderous mothers: the categories of *mad* mothers and *bad* mothers alone, being often hardly distinguishable, are of barely any avail, and it is generally more profitable to consider "[...] the entire spectrum of mental illness, ethnic and cultural group distinctions, and socioeconomic strata" behind the perpetrators of these actions (LaChance Adams, 2014, p. 2). Following this approach (and applying it to a fictional character), an explanation to Katrine's actions could be found in her disadvantaged background and in some situational con-causes: the woman, abandoned by Erik and, at the same time, by the Danish State – despite being respectively Erik's wife and a Danish citizen – finds herself with no ties with the exception of Emilie, and consequently decides to end her life and drag her daughter with her. LaChance Adams' observations,

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4 - Terpstra, reprising Olsen's comment on the matter, reminds that groups of "socially vulnerable Greenlanders" in Denmark are likely to be perceived as doubly 'alien' by white middle-class Danes, by virtue of both their ethnicity and their visibly marginalized condition (Terpstra, 2015, pp. 116-117). *Historien om Katrine*, however, also offers an insight on the life of some lower-class Danes, namely Erik and his mother; their condition catches the protagonist unprepared, as "[m]ost of us Greenlanders think that all Danes are rich" (Vebæk, 2021, p. 22).

however, only serve the purpose to give an account of Katrine’s behaviour in social terms; on a sheer – and therefore figurative – literary level, the woman’s murder-suicide attempt could be interpreted as a desperate endeavour to gain agency as a mother, since killing her own child would be the ultimate rebellion against her parental role and its idealisation, on the one side, and the impossibility to exert it, on the other. In the former regard, Katrine could perhaps come across as a Medea-like figure.<sup>5</sup> From this viewpoint, then, infanticide acquires another significance and, in line with this thinking, it may even be worth asking whether we could consider this terrible action as ‘performative’: in fact, after being repeatedly overseen by everyone she had asked for help, Katrine resolves to display her own death, and sacrifices herself publicly, so to say, shedding a light on the problems faced by marginalised female Greenlanders in Denmark.

Not all the Greenlandic mothers mentioned in the book, however, endure a fate similar to those of Katrine and Karoline. In this regard, it is worth taking into consideration the character of Louise, who has been exhaustively analysed by Thisted (2010) and Volquardsen (2014). The latter particularly focuses on the ‘camouflage’ operated by Louise, a middle-aged Greenlandic woman happily married to a Dane and living in Brønshøj, a residential district in Copenhagen:

Louise’s strategy to resist the mechanisms of exclusion applied by the Danish majority society to Greenlanders can be described with the concept of “passing”, a social practice by which one’s ethnic identity is concealed towards others and the acting person is thus freed from the expectations

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5 - According to Brooke Laufer, in fact, “[i]nfanticide begins with the story of Medea. Medea, as told by Euripides in 431 B.C., is an essential wife and support to the successes of her husband, Jason. After he brings her to his country and has several children with her, he leaves her for another woman. Enraged, Medea kills their children [...]. Medea is many things: she is an outsider in the Greek world, a woman of power and means, a woman dishonored by her husband, an ordinary woman, a mother, a barbarian. In modern works of art, Medea is often explored in terms of the subjugation and domination of women by men” (Laufer, 2021, p. 230).

associated with it. In the petty bourgeois neighborhood of Brønshøj, Louise, who tries to avoid any social contact or practice that might mark her as Greenlandic, passes as an ethnic Dane. (Volquardsen, 2014, p. 409)

According to Volquardsen, then, the woman repudiates her Greenlandic origins, as well as anything that could hint at them and, additionally, she avoids frequenting non-respectable fellow Greenlanders. This could explain Louise's eagerness to talk to Katrine, in the opening scene of the novel: she has the opportunity to speak her native language, but only for the duration of a bus ride. Even the misfortunes of other Greenlandic women do not seem to draw the woman's attention, and she liquidates them as others' private business, thus failing to acknowledge her (acquired) privilege, on the one hand, and her fear of losing it, on the other:

Det skete, jeg hørte om en eller anden grønlandsk kvinde, som ikke havde det så godt med sine danske familie, men jeg plejede ikke at tænke nærmere over det. 'Det kommer ikke mig ved. Det er private sager', sagde jeg til mig selv. Men jeg kunne ikke glemme Katrine [...]. Jeg ville gerne se hende igen og høre hendes historie. Måske kunne jeg hjælpe hende [...]. Efterhånden som dagene gik, og jeg ikke hørte fra hende, forsvandt hun dog til sidst helt fra mine tanker.<sup>6</sup> (Vebæk, 1982, pp. 6-7)

Indifference, then, as well as the rejection of her Greenlandic background, is the price Louise has to pay in order to lead her trite life as middle-class mother (for further reading see Thisted, 2010, pp. 191-192).

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6 - "It would happen that I heard of some Greenlandic women who have it tough with their Danish family, but I didn't usually think about it. 'That's none of my business. Those are private matters', I told myself. But I couldn't forget Katrine [...] I wanted to see her again and hear her story. Maybe I could help her [...]. Gradually, as the days passed and I didn't hear from her, she eventually disappeared completely from my thoughts" (Vebæk, 2021, p. 9).

### **3. Danish mothers: care to its exasperation**

Despite its general focus on Greenlanders, *Historien om Katrine* also introduces a few Danish mothers, tendentially depicted as counterparts to the protagonist and to other Greenlandic maternal characters. This is the case, for instance, of Erik’s mother, probably the most recurring representative for Danish motherhood in the novel. The woman, however, is not the first Danish mother to be introduced in the text: already during her flight to Copenhagen, Katrine must confront her seat neighbour, a middle-aged Dane who tries to engage her in conversation. Their encounter somewhat foreshadows Katrine’s future relationship to her husband’s mother, as the young Greenlander grows to realise that behind the woman’s friendly façade may hide a more disturbing, nearly morbid side. A couple of years after their casual meeting on a bus in Copenhagen, Katrine resolves to accept Louise’s invitation and visits her at her place, in Brønshøj; there, in desperate search for help and psychological support, Katrine opens up to Louise – a woman she barely knows – and gives an account of her story, including her flight. Let us consider the following extract from Katrine’s tale, in which she recalls her overseas journey and, in particular, her confrontation with the aforementioned “danske dame” (Vebæk, 1982, p. 14):

Jeg ville hen og snakke med nogle unge grønlandske kvinder, der sad et andet sted – bl.a. for at slippe væk fra den danske dame, som var så interesseret i mit forestående bryllup. Jeg blev i bedre humør, da jeg var kommet over til de unge kvinder. De var heldigvis ligeglad med, hvad jeg skulle i Danmark, og jeg var heller ikke interesseret i, hvad de skulle.<sup>7</sup> (Vebæk, 1982, p. 14-15)

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7 - “I wanted to go and talk with some young Greenlandic women who sat in another area and, among other reasons, to slip away from the Danish woman who was so interested in my imminent wedding. I was in a better mood when I had come over to the young women. Luckily they didn’t care what I was doing in Denmark and I wasn’t interested in what they were doing” (Vebæk, 2021, p. 16).

Two elements stand out in this paragraph: on the one hand, the woman's alleged inquisitiveness, which may hint at a 'controlling' attitude and, on the other, the fact that Katrine's presence in Denmark seems to be perceived as intrusive, and therefore requires some justification. We should bear in mind that these observations, as well as Katrine's story in its entirety, are filtered through the woman's subjectivity; another level of unreliability is added by Louise, narrator of the frame tale, who falls asleep during Katrine's account and cannot discern dream from reality – or, rather, Katrine's reality.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, the incipit of chapter four is quite explicative, considering that the first person refers to Louise, but the events described have been experienced by Katrine: “Jeg drømte, at jeg sad i en flyvemaskine på vej mod Danmark”<sup>9</sup> (Vebæk, 1982, p. 14).

The motif of an authoritative and 'menacing' Danish mother is reprised as soon as Katrine arrives in Copenhagen, in a twofold fashion. Firstly, the reader learns that Erik is married to a Dane, the mother of his son, who threatens to ask for sole custody of the child (Vebæk, 1982, p. 15); shortly after, we are introduced to Erik's mother, whose cumbersome presence, as already mentioned, was prefigured by Katrine's encounter on the plane. The woman, in fact, also comes across as intrusive, 'ever-present' – thus contraposing to Katrine and her conduct towards Emilie. It could be argued, in a way, that she fulfils Swift's major prerequisite to be considered an ideal mother (Swift, 1995, p. 102), as caring for her son Erik is her primary interest. This commitment, however, seems to be taken to its exasperation: when Katrine joins her future husband in Copenhagen, he is still living with his mother, who somewhat

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8 - According to Volquardsen, “[f]or a Greenlandic storyteller in the heyday of the oral narrative tradition, it was the greatest honor if the audience gradually fell asleep during the recitation” (Volquardsen, 2014, p. 408).

9 - “I dreamt, while still hearing Katrine, that I sat on an airplane en route to Denmark” (Vebæk, 2021, p. 15). With the addition of “while still hearing Katrine”, Stanley's translation stresses that the subject is unequivocally Louise and inevitably loses the ambiguity characterising the Danish version.

dictates their common daily routine – and hardly tries to communicate with her future daughter-in-law. In recalling her first days in the Danish capital, Katrine recounts: “For dagene, hvor jeg kun var sammen med moren, var strenge at komme igennem. Jeg havde svært ved at forstå, hvad hun sagde. Og hun forstod vel heller ikke ret meget af det, jeg sagde. Mit dårlige dansk blev endnu dårligere, når jeg var nervøs og genert”<sup>10</sup> (Vebæk, 1982, p. 23). The communication between Erik’s mother and Katrine, then, is poor – due to linguistic limitations, but also to the hostility displayed by the Danish woman, who, to begin with, did not even want a Greenlandic intruder in her house, since the apartment is not spacious: “[...]. Hun har ikke megen plads”<sup>11</sup> (Vebæk, 1982, p. 18). One day, Katrine even overhears Erik’s mother calling her “that Greenlandic slut” (Vebæk, 2021, p. 27) on the phone. On this basis, then, we can assume that the woman’s protective behaviour towards the son is not extended to his wife to be – who, on the contrary, is perceived as a threat. Her Greenlandic background, in this regard, may be a further hindering: not only is Katrine a stranger to Erik’s family, she is also a stranger to Denmark. In fact, similar preconceptions seem to characterise most Danish women Katrine has met, at least according to the following extract:

Tove var dansk. Den eneste gode danske kvinde, jeg kendte. Hun var virkelig god, også imod min mor, som hun og Ole besøgte sammen for flere år siden [...]. I det hele taget var der ingen danske, som jeg kunne kalde for ven, selv om jeg havde boet her i mange år efterhånden. Slet ikke kvinder [...]. Engang troede jeg, at jeg fik danske veninder, når jeg kom til at bo i Danmark. Jeg fik det ikke.

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10 - “I only spent time with his mother during the days so they were hard to get through. I had a hard time understanding what she said, and she probably didn’t understand much of what I was saying either. My poor Danish became even worse when I was nervous and shy [...]” (Vebæk, 2021, p. 27).

11 - “[...]”. She doesn’t have much room” (Vebæk, 2021, p. 20).

Det kunne jeg godt være ked af nogle gange, men så tænkte jeg: hvad skulle man også snakke med danske damer om? Vi var jo så forskellige.<sup>12</sup> (Vebæk, 1982, p. 60)

Tove, Katrine's sister-in-law, is here represented as an exception among Danes: she has been genuinely kind to Katrine, as well as to her mother. We could suppose, then, that the woman is considered a full-fledged member of Katrine's family, a Greenlandic family; the same acceptance is not offered to Katrine, whose presence is barely tolerated by Erik's mother, despite the young woman's attempts to build a friendly relationship to her. On this basis, it should be noted that agency is always on the Danish side: Tove manages to be part of Katrine's family because she is eager to, and Katrine does not succeed in pursuing the same ambition as Erik's mother does not welcome her; Katrine's mother and Katrine herself, on the contrary, passively accept the situation. This may count among one of the elements that contribute to the irreconcilability between Danish – be they ethnic Danes or Greenlanders who 'pass' for Danes – and Greenlandic women.

#### **4. “Mother Denmark”: a benevolent and caring colonial power?**

One last feature of *Historien om Katrine* worth considering is the display of Danish-Greenlandic relations in 'maternal' terms – which engages with the narrative of Danish exceptionalism, i.e., Denmark's “Danish self-promotion as a benevolent and caring

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12 - “Tove was Danish. The only good Danish woman I knew. She was really good, also towards my mother, whom she and Ole visited several years ago [...]. Overall, there was no Dane whom I could call 'friend' even though I had lived here for many years. No women at all [...]. I once thought that I would make friends with Danish women when I came to live in Denmark. I never did. I was sometimes sorry, but then I thought: what would I even speak with Danish women about? We were so different” (Vebæk, 2021, p. 68).

colonial power” towards Greenland (Petterson, 2012, p. 29). This rhetoric, often combined with what Lars Jensen identifies as “a Danish lack of interest in acknowledging the colonial past” (Rud, 2017, p. 3) lends itself to an association with the theme of motherhood – as benevolence and care, as we have already seen, are considered ideal maternal characteristics (Swift, 1995, p. 102). Furthermore, Denmark is explicitly addressed as a mother in the lyrics of a song played during a modest gathering following Katrine’s funeral. Let us consider the following verses:

Alt godt kommer fra Danmark / fra “Moder Danmark”.  
/ Jeg troede på min moder og min fader / da de i deres  
kærlighed til mig fortalte, at “alt godt kommer fra  
Danmark” [...]. // Jeg blev vred / og flygtede til Danmark  
/ til “Moder Danmark”. / Jeg ønskede selv at se / hvad  
dit paradys var. / Jeg kom og så / hvad dit paradys var  
[...]. // Jeg drak / jeg drak mig sanseløs / Og allerede  
her på jorden / befinder jeg mig I helvede /I dit helvede  
/ “Moder Danmark”!<sup>13</sup> (Vebæk, 1982, pp. 103-104)

In this extract, Greenland is represented as a sort of Paradise lost, contraposed to the ‘living Hell’ Greenlanders face in Denmark – or, at least, those who do not manage to become part of the Danish society, like Louise. The strong binary opposition depicted in the song leads us to think that the natural counterpart to ‘Mother Denmark’ is, of course, ‘Daughter Greenland’; this role distribution implies that the former colony is somewhat relegated to a child-like state and, as such, that it must be guided by an adult figure. Such narratives, unsurprisingly, are to be found in texts written during the colonial years: in B.S. Ingemann’s *Kunnuk og Naja eller Grønlænderne, en Fortælling (Kunnuk og Naja or the Greenlanders, a Story; 1842)*, for

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13 - “All good comes from Denmark / from ‘Mother Denmark’. / I believed my mother and my father / when they in their love for me said, that / ‘all good comes from Denmark’ [...] / I became angry / and fled to Denmark / to ‘Mother Denmark’. / I wished to see for myself / what your paradise was [...]. / I drank myself senseless / And already here on earth / I find myself in Hell / In your Hell / ‘Mother Denmark’!” (Vebæk, 2021, pp. 116-118).

instance, Greenlanders were described as “naturbørn”, “children of nature” (Ingemann, 1842, p. 17) – another expression referring to infancy and, at the same time, to a certain distance from culture and civilization. Similar discourses, however, persisted even after 1953 – in the Danish public discourse as well as in Danish literary representations of Greenland. A frequent (Danish) explanation to Greenland’s well-known social problems, in fact, is identified in the abrupt passage from ‘state of nature’ to a more complex society (see Terpstra, 2015, p. 116); in maternal terms, this situation may somewhat equal a premature emancipation from a parental figure. Conceiving Danish-Greenlandic relations in connection to motherhood, then, may serve the purpose to justify Danish colonial deeds (be they covert or not) while hiding behind discourses of supposed benevolence – as a sort of softened variation to *The White’s Man Burden*. This point of view is represented, for example, by the scholar Thorkild Kjærgaard, who “argues that the Danes have acted with such a degree of gentleness and selflessness in Greenland that the relationship cannot even be properly characterised as colonial” (Thisted, 2016, p. 159). Nonetheless, maternal metaphors may also be employed to unmask this rhetoric: in *Historien om Katrine*, Denmark seems to come across as a ‘bad’ mother, mainly because of its neglecting attitude towards its Greenlandic children; power abuses by Danish seasonal workers are tolerated by the central state, which, at the same time, does not intervene to prevent Greenlanders in Denmark from isolation (““Hvad laver de forbandede danske håndværkere hver sommer i vort land? De kommer og bygger huse, som slet ikke passer for grønlandere at bo i. Samtidig ødelægger de vores unge kvinder [...]”<sup>14</sup>, Vebæk, 1982, pp. 101-102). One of the attendants of the ceremony even affirms that it was the Danes who took away Katrine’s life (Vebæk, 1982, p. 101); this ‘murder’, according to the given premises, could then be perhaps identified as a metaphorical filicide.

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14 - ““What are those damned Danish craftsmen doing in our country every summer? They come and build houses which are not suitable for Greenlanders to live in. At the same time they destroy our young women [...]” (Vebæk, 2021, p. 115).

### Concluding remarks

The theme of motherhood is at the core of *Historien om Katrine*, which includes a plethora of maternal figures – whether they are main or side characters – and even considers Danish-Greenlandic relations in the light of parenting dynamics. Introducing the notions of ‘ideal’ and ‘bad’ mothering has served the purpose to guide my analysis of both concrete and metaphorical manifestations of motherhood. Moreover, the strong binary opposition between good and bad mothers lends itself to a post-colonial reading of the novel, which tendentially represents ‘Danishness’ and ‘Greenlandicness’ as two contrasting categories (albeit for social reasons rather than identity related ones). The association between these two sets of antithetical pairs shows that Vebæk, fully aware of their metonymical potential, plays with them – sometimes to the point of twisting the concepts. At first glance, in fact, Katrine could merely come across as a neglecting and murderous mother. A deeper scrutiny, however, demonstrates that ‘bad’ mothering could be considered as a way for her to exert agency. The character, being a Greenlandic woman, pertains to two different oppressed groups, and her transgression against marital and maternal duties can be read, on a figurative level, as a strategy to rebel against (Danish) society as a whole. Katrine’s situation does not differ greatly from that of Karoline, a sex worker who supports her son from Denmark, while he lives in Greenland with his grandparents. The matter is different in the case of Louise, a ‘self-realised’ mother leading a quiet bourgeois life in a residential suburb of the Danish capital – who, unsurprisingly, has chosen to disown her Greenlandic background and live like a “ethnic Dane” (Volquardsen, 2014, p. 409).

The key features of a good mother, on the other hand, – at least theoretically – are to be found in Katrine’s mother-in-law. This figure is in a privileged position both towards her son and Katrine: with the former, still living at her place, she replicates some of the mechanisms characterising the relationship between a parent and a

child; the latter is vulnerable as she is neither a Danish woman nor a *danifiseret* Greenlander. This advantage is used by Erik's mother to 'control' her son, on the one hand, and to isolate her daughter-in-law, on the other. Katrine, in fact, apart from being an acquired family member, also happens to be a non-Dane: consequently, in a way, she is regarded as a twofold external 'threat' by her mother-in-law. A similar benevolent façade, along with a problematic substance, is also displayed by "Mother Denmark" in its entirety, which – despite the promises of Danish exceptionalism – often cannot provide for its overseas citizens who have moved to the central state, and relegates them at the margins of society.

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**Martina Nedialkova**

**The shifting meanings of ‘mother’  
in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century –  
a Sino-Japanese comparative study**

Any comparative study in the broader culturological field that chooses Japan and China as its objects of study is invariably faced with the fact that geographical proximity coupled with lengthy cultural exchange both does and does not necessarily equate with similarity. The topic of *motherhood* and its shifting forms and meanings makes no exception, especially when it comes to the modern and contemporary timeframe. Where the Japanese and Chinese family systems share the most common ground would be in what is referred to as their “traditional” societal orders (for the sake of clarity, we shall narrow this term to the frame 17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century). This is mostly owed to the prominence that the Confucian moral prescriptions gradually came to have in both societies. Within said traditional value systems the woman was considered to fall under the rule of the so-called “three obediences”, whereby it was understood that in her lifetime every woman would be subject to the authority and will of three different men – first, her father, then her husband and finally, her son (Baker 1979; Johnson 1983). As a mother, her primary (albeit not sole) responsibility was to provide her new family with a male heir and then to instil in him a sense of filial piety so that he could one day repay his family by caring for his parents and grandparents in their old age (ibid.). Succeeding in these tasks could (and most often did) secure a woman a stable and comfortable life. A failure in procuring an heir, however, would most certainly entail a variety of subsequent difficulties for a woman. To put it differently, giving birth to a girl, much less a succession of girls, did not allow a young wife and

mother to pay off the debt she incurred in being “bought” into her husband’s family, and therefore could not provide her the much needed respect and security in her new household. This was especially true in pre-20<sup>th</sup> c. China. In that sense, it wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that in most traditional Chinese families women in their reproductive age were seen and treated as little more than expensive breeding cattle. As for Japan, even though giving birth to a girl was not seen as a family tragedy and cause for social embarrassment (Tian 1990) (as was the case in imperial China), the position of a young wife and mother in the traditional Japanese family was not necessarily much better. Whatever kind of authority and power she may have exerted in the family in the distant past, was completely swept away with the establishment of the patriarchal family structure at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. (Tian 1990, pp. 86, 117–118; Ko 2008, pp. 88–89). Needless to say, parental rights for the mother were not even a topic of discussion (Yoshizumi 1995, p. 188), let alone a field in which anybody strove to change the status quo. It is worth noting that divorce was also not a choice open to women in either of the two traditional societies. A wife, however, could be divorced by her husband (through nothing more official than a hand-written letter, no less!) for a variety of reasons (Steiner 1950; Baker 1979; Tanaka 1995; Zuo 2016). According to Confucian norms there was a list of seven unforgivable shortcomings on the part of a wife, for which her husband had grounds to end the marriage unilaterally – one of them was not providing a male heir (Baker 1979; Kansai Chugoku Josei Kenkyukai 2005).

Things began to slowly change for women of all ages around the beginning of the last century, most notably so during its second half. Efforts on the women’s liberation front were made around the 1920s in both societies. However, it was only after the end of WWII that more significant strides were made with regards to women’s rights. Young women benefitted arguably the most from the series of changes in the respective judicial systems. For example, in both countries there was a considerable improvement in girls’ access to education (including at the highest level). In addition, thanks to a

relative liberalization of the marriage institution – through the implementation of the Marriage Law (1950) in China, and the New Constitution (1947) and revised Civil Code (1948) in Japan – women<sup>1</sup> were granted the right to select a mate of their preference instead of marrying solely for the sake of their families (Baker 1979; Kinjo 1995; Yoshizumi 1995; Kansai Chugoku Josei Kenkyukai 2005; Zuo 2016). They also received equal rights to divorce as well as to personal property (Робъртс 2009), previously denied to them. Aside from that, Chinese women received the right to wide participation in paid labour, and Japanese women (thanks to the Eugenics Protection Law) were given easy access to abortion. Significantly, however, in neither country did the foundational tenets of the patriarchal family system change in any meaningful way. Despite all the positive accomplishments during the period in question, the patrilineal and patrilocal traditions remained unchallenged in China, thus preserving a series of women-specific problems. Whereas in Japan the tenacious unwillingness to divorce the image of Woman from the archetype of the Mother (Ohinata 1995), meant that most women were actively and continuously discouraged from seeking personal growth and fulfilment outside the home.

Interestingly, while the socialist regime in the People’s Republic of China put a stronger emphasis on women’s important contribution as paid workers (as opposed to their familial roles as mothers and wives), in Japan all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a repeated and mostly consistent<sup>2</sup> push towards emphasizing the importance of a woman’s role as a Mother. The first few waves of state policy mostly focused on and accentuated devout mothers’ contribution to national prosperity (in support of Japan’s expansionist military operations during the first half of the century). As of the 1950s onward, however, the continued official propaganda changed its tune. When it was no longer necessary for women to provide the nation with the next

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1 - Admittedly, this right was not granted exclusively to women, but pertained to all members of society.

2 - There have been a couple of short-lived exceptions to this policy following both world wars when women were called upon to re-enter the labour force (Ohinata 1995: 204).

generation of military soldiers, the government's messaging suddenly shifted toward emphasizing a need for the Japanese family to support the economic growth of its homeland (Ohinata 1995, p. 203). Namely, since exploiting the full energetic capacity of the male workforce was considered crucial for raising Japan from the ashes of the post-war economic devastation, women also had to play their part. They would do that by, firstly, creating a pleasant and problem-free domestic environment where their exhausted husbands could relax and recharge; and secondly, by preparing the next generation of "combat-ready" (i.e. well-educated) "corporate soldiers" (企業戦士 · *kigyō senshi*) who would later come to take their fathers' places. Once the economic growth started to level off around the mid-70's Japanese mothers were further urged to nurture their caretaking faculties, in a thinly veiled government effort to cut "unnecessary" welfare spending (Ohinata 1995, pp. 200–204). These policies had an unforeseen side effect – the creation of a mythology around the Mother figure. The resulting archetype of the Japanese mother could be said to carry the characteristics of complete devotion, boundless self-sacrifice and never-ending support for her children, even in the direst of circumstances (Ohinata 1995, pp. 205–206).

Meanwhile in Maoist China a very different kind of messaging around women's roles in society was taking place. In an effort to draw more women into the labour force, the 1950s were inundated by propaganda lauding the nobility in working for the benefit of country and nation, whilst shaming the choice to remain home and solely take care of one's family and household (Hershatter 2011, pp. 185–186). Although the transition to mass female participation into the work force took up the better part of the '50s, once completed it ushered in a radical shift in the perception of domestic labour. Being placed at the disadvantageous end of the binary "paid labour" – "domestic labour", the latter was suddenly stripped of value, which led to its total disappearance from the public eye (Johnson 1983; Hershatter 2011). It would be hardly surprising that the idea that household tasks and childrearing are women's responsibilities remained intact. What did change, however, was that now women's primary duty was placed outside of the home and the never-ending

succession of domestic chores was something they had to do on their own time. Needless to say, they received no payment, no praise, nor even gratitude for their invisible labour. This attitude, coupled with an overwhelming absence of adequate childcare facilities, led to the classic problem of the so-called *double burden*, whereby particularly young mothers had to find a way to juggle their work-unit assignments and their various family responsibilities. This was still a time when the lagging technological advancement and the predominantly rural landscape in the PRC meant that in addition to cooking, cleaning, washing and childcare, domestic work also included weaving fabrics, making blankets, sewing and mending clothes and shoes for every family member, as well as (in some areas) agricultural work (Johnson 1983; Hershatter 2011; Zuo 2016). Young mothers had an even harder time during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when the high expectations toward their political activity in local communities<sup>3</sup> placed an additional burden on them (thus creating what can be called a *triple burden*<sup>4</sup>). It was especially during this last decade of the Maoist regime that the double burden was depicted in the press as women’s “personal problem” and complaining about it was painted as a shameful lack of “true revolutionary proletarian consciousness” (Johnson 1983, p. 180). Perhaps most shocking, however, was the effect that these

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3 - Often young mothers would go to their local brigade meetings exhausted from the day’s work, with a child in one hand and unfinished needlework in the other – to catch up on during pauses or while waiting for everyone to assemble (Hershatter 2011, p. 270).

4 - The idea of a “triple burden” with regard to the fate of young married women in Maoist China was previously elaborated by Zuo Jiping in her book “Work and Family in Urban China” (2016). In Zuo’s view the three factors uniting to form the so-called “triple burden” shouldered by women were: a) “fulfilling their obligation to the nation”; b) “helping support their families”; and c) “performing routine household tasks” (Zuo 2016, p. 70). In my opinion, however, the proposed first two factors are, in fact, two sides of the same coin – namely, reasons for which Chinese women at the time chose to participate in paid labour, and therefore fall short of denoting the different types of labour that young women have to juggle with. The division I propose for the claim of a “triple burden” is: a) labour outside of the household; b) domestic work (in its wide variability); and c) mandatory political activity.

circumstances had on women's attitude towards motherhood itself. It can generally be said that, for many women in the so-called "Maoist cohort", the higher their social status as paid workers grew, the lower their duty to family descended in their list of priorities. In other words, once they began to identify with their role of contributors to the national cause through the means of their productive labour, they gradually came to place proportionately lower value on their familial roles (Zuo 2016, pp. 46 – 47, 51; Shen 2015, p. 31). The elation from being valuable members of "the masses" led many to willingly sacrifice their own health as well as their family's needs for the benefit of the broader society. In some cases this was exemplified by women well into their pregnancy working themselves to exhaustion or collapse; in others by cadre women who would leave their own offspring behind – ironically, to go work on establishing childcare centres for other people's children in some remote province (Zuo 2016). In its extremes this tendency took the shape of mothers tying their infant children to radiators, beds or other furniture<sup>5</sup>, because they had no one to leave them to during working hours. These examples, however, need not be taken as proof for some monstrous lack of motherly love and responsibility on the part of those Chinese women. For just as many of the prioritizing work over family life was not a choice easily made. As for the rest – it is more than likely that they were generally doing what was needed to survive under the difficult circumstances in which they lived.

While Chinese women under Mao's rule were busy achieving "liberation through labour" (Johnson 1983) and breaking with the idea of the sanctity of motherhood, Japanese women in the growing urban centres were doing the opposite. They were leaning into their duties as mothers and wives and enjoying the privileges of life in a single-income household. Between the 1960s and the mid-70s an important change occurred in the Japanese society: the nuclear family type – which had first appeared in the 1920s as an alternative

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5 - A fictional rendition of this practice can be found in the novel "The Vagrants" (2009) by Yiyun Li which tells the tale of a village, its people and life in China several years after the end of the Cultural Revolution.

to the traditional stem and extended family models – became prevalent in larger cities (Ochiai 1997, pp. 59–62). Significantly however, around the same period the model of the so-called “professional housewife” (専業主婦 · *sengyō shufu*) also became predominant in urban nuclear families. The *sengyō shufu* can be looked at as the Japanese version of the “American housewife” of the 1950s and ‘60s. In Japan this behavioural type was represented mostly by women in their early to mid-twenties who left their paying jobs to fully devote themselves to family life. Due to the demographic specificity of that time, at first, the shift toward the role of housewife, witnessed *en masse* among young women in the cities, happened rather smoothly. According to sociologist Ochiai Emiko<sup>6</sup>, the women who chose this new role between the 1960s and the mid-‘70s belonged to a transitional generation with singularly wide sibling networks. Owing to this particularity the women of the *sengyō shufu* behavioural type had a big support group upon which to rely in times of hardship. This, in turn, allowed them to go through the difficult years of early childrearing without having to bear the full brunt of the lonely lifestyle, typically witnessed among migrant urbanites in an industrialising society (Ochiai 1997; Sugimoto 2010).<sup>7</sup> It was only as of 1975 and into the 1980s – when the next generation of women became mothers<sup>8</sup> – that some of the women in this group began to experience the design flaws inherent to the nuclear family and its

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6 - Full names of Asian researchers (i.e. Japanese, Chinese or from within the broader sinophone diaspora) are presented in the body of the text according to Eastern tradition – Family Name first, and First Name – second.

7 - For a detailed portrayal of the process of *nuclearization* of the family system in Japan and the effects of the specific demographic factors (more specifically, the transition from a society with a high birth rate and high infant mortality into one with a low birth rate and low infant mortality) thereupon, see Ochiai, E. (1997) *The Japanese Family System in Transition. A Sociological Analysis of Family Change in Postwar Japan*. 1st Edition. Tokyo: LTCB International Library Foundation.

8 - This generation represented the final stage of the so-called *demographic transition* (into a low birth rate low infant mortality societal stage), and unlike the previous one, no longer disposed of the same kind of large kinship networks upon which to call for help (Ochiai 1997, pp. 59–62).

particular brand of “housewife”. The problems that they encountered were of two distinct categories: a) the first had to do with the women’s own perception of their existential wellbeing; b) the second encompassed the issues surrounding the mother-child relationship. What Betty Friedan called “the problem that has no name” or “the housewife’s syndrome (Friedan 1963) in the American context, was termed “the wives’ mid-life crisis” (妻たちの思秋期・*tsuma-tachi no shishūki*) in Japan (Tanaka 1995; Ochiai 1997). Similarly, this condition was connected to a perceived lack of personal identity and loss of purpose which middle-aged mothers would experience once their children had grown up and had stopped needing them. In essence, this is equivalent to the so-called “empty nest syndrome”. American housewives in the 1950s and ‘60s normally bore four or more children; therefore, the aforementioned feeling of emptiness took longer to manifest itself. Japanese mothers of the 1960s – 1980s, however, usually gave birth to two or maximum three<sup>9</sup>. Bringing up two children could hardly fill the space of a lifetime, so it did not take long until these mothers would enter into their so-called “mid-life crisis”. Since the Japanese family culture places primary emphasis on the parental role of spouses (as opposed to their intimate personal connection) (Yoshizumi 1995, p. 192), this generation of women, whose sense of identity was inextricably linked with their role as mothers, experienced the loss of this part of themselves in a major way. And if some of their American counterparts had looked for an escape in rekindling the sexual spark with their husbands (Friedan 1963, p. 280), the women in the estranged Japanese married couples turned to *day-drinking*<sup>10</sup> instead (Tanaka 1995, pp. 33 – 34; Ochiai 1997, p. 117). The second category of problems stemmed from the issue of *excessive closeness*

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9 - This tendency among Japanese mothers developed around the same time as the family nuclearization and the establishment of the “professional housewife” as the predominant behavioural model among urban women. Ochiai Emiko calls it “the two-child revolution” and explains it with the idea that “two” came to be considered as the ideal number of children per family unit (Ochiai 1997, pp. 42–43).

10 - The term used in Japan is a neologism which translates to “kitchen drinkers” (キッチンドリッカー).

of *mother and child* (母子密着 · *boshi yuchaku*) (Ochiai 1997; Sugimoto 2010: 184). The primary cause for this may be found in the isolationist way of life of professional housewives in nuclear families. However, the continued government efforts to promote motherhood, coupled with an overemphasis on the importance of a mother’s role in early child development (borrowed from western theoretical sources) played an important contributing role. The resulting distorted relationship between mother and child was detrimental to both parties. With regards to mothers, at the one end, this problem manifested itself in a type of *overambitious mother* (教育ママ · *kyōiku mama*) – a woman obsessed with her children’s academic accomplishments, and therefore constantly pushing them to strive for the top. At the other end of the spectrum, there was the type of mother who felt crushed by the weight of societal expectations and who – upon reaching a breaking point – developed *childrearing anxiety* (育児不安 · *ikuji fuan*) or even *neurosis* (育児ノイローゼ · *ikuji noirōse*). According to culturologist Makino Katsuko, these psychological conditions were usually unlocked in situations where the mother lived in profound social isolation and had little to no help from her husband (Ochiai 1997, pp. 135–137). In its most radical manifestations, this type of pathological behaviour could drive the afflicted mothers to abandon, physically mistreat or even kill their babies (Tanaka 1995; Sugimoto 2010). Lastly, the effects of said excessive closeness took a psychological toll on the children as well. In 1979 child psychologist Kyutoku Shigemori coined the term *bogenbyō* (母現病) to describe what he believed to be “maternally induced diseases”<sup>11</sup> (Ochiai 1997, pp. 50–51, 126; Sugimoto 2010, p. 184). He launched forth the idea that the series of previously unseen psychosomatic illnesses which were being increasingly witnessed

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11 - This idea invites comparisons with a similar term seen in American psychiatric literature between the 1950s and 1970s, namely the “schizophrenogenic mother”. The American term was used to express the notion that schizophrenic disorders among children developed in direct correlation with psychopathological relations with their mothers from an early developmental stage. Simply put, the mothers were blamed for the onset of their children’s schizophrenia. In essence, Kyutoku’s concept proposes the same type of logic, but uses it in an attempt to explain a different set of psychological problems in children.

among Japanese youth, were in fact caused by their mothers' lack of parental instincts, presenting either as overprotectiveness or as excessive strictness. Although Kyutoku's observations stated an obvious problem which was emerging at that time in Japan, his attempt to turn Japanese women into some sort of "pathogenic mothers" was mostly founded in gender bias and relied on anecdotal data instead of solid scientific research. His theory has long since been disproved and subjected to criticism<sup>12</sup>; however, remnants of it keep resurfacing every so often in public discussions.

Let us now shift our attention back to China one final time. If "convergence theory"<sup>13</sup> in family sociology is enough to go by, it would have been logical that the PRC should have followed in the footsteps of its Eastern neighbour. It can be said that Japan led the race toward urbanization and modernization in the first half of the last century, which in turn meant a faster-paced evolution of the family system toward nuclearization. Given its political and economic development, it was to be expected that China would go through a similar change in its societal structure – with its accompanying effects on women's roles in society, as well as on family life in general. And up to a certain extent it did. It was well into the 1980s and 1990s that the classic modern (or nuclear) family began to grow in numbers and significance in China. Not only did

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12 - Sugimoto Yoshio, for example, asserts that it might be more accurate to speak of "paternally induced illnesses", considering the father figure in the typical Japanese nuclear family was (at that time) almost completely absent from his children's lives (Sugimoto 2010, p. 185). Naturally, this kind of argument, although a clever and accurate observation – is in no way better suited to explain the very real problem of Japanese children's deteriorating psychological and overall well-being.

13 - According to "convergence theory" (in family sociology) every industrial system (regardless of the political ideology driving its progress) eventually reaches a point where the *nuclear family* comes to replace the *extended family* as the most common family type within that social system (Xu and Xue 2017, p. 14). This transition to *family nuclearization* results from a necessary adaptation to the process of comprehensive industrialization of a country. In other words, this kind of shift in a society's structure is primarily the result of economic progress driving urbanization and work-related migration and has little to do with local cultural norms.

smaller family types start to become more widespread in the growing cities, but – as a result from the implementation of the One-Child Policy – the number of children per family also dropped, thus catching up to and even surpassing the tendencies witnessed prior in Japan. Interestingly, however, when it reached the point of expected family nuclearization, the modern family model in China did not unfold the same way as it previously had in the United States and in Japan. There were two important reasons for this. One was that young married Chinese women did not embrace the “professional housewife” model. Intent on keeping their independence, they searched for alternative solutions to the conflicting needs of family and work. The second one was that the Chinese nuclear family was not characterized by the same kind of isolationist conditions of life which were witnessed in their American and Japanese counterparts. This second factor could be explained with the establishment of what I see as a *hybrid family dynamic*, combining elements of the nuclear and the stem family lifestyle. More precisely, according to a 2017 study by Xu Anqi and Xue Yali – the nuclear family model did not seem to be a life-long choice for the majority of households in modern-day China. Instead, the life cycle of a typical city household would be characterized by alternating between a stem family and a nuclear family lifestyle (Xu and Xue 2017, pp. 30–31). Put simply, two nuclear families (that of the elder and of the younger generation) would either merge or live close to one another. The main goal in this dynamic was to be close enough to help each other during trying times (i.e. the years of early childcare and those where elderly care became a necessity), but not so close as to create lasting inter-generational tension. As for the life choices of post-Mao women after marriage – it seems that they neither wanted to repeat the fate of their Japanese sisters (Miyasaka and Jin 2012), nor were they willing to sacrifice their families’ and their own needs for the good of society (as did the Maoist generations). Unlike their mothers and grandmothers, the new generations of Chinese women did not place work responsibilities above motherly duties (Zuo 2016, p. 106). What came to be a more prevalent choice was the role of the so-called *full-time mother* (全职妈妈 · *quánzhí māmā*). The *quánzhí māmā* type represented a young woman who chose to extend her

maternity leave beyond the official six months granted by law – yet rarely for longer than several years – to fully focus on childcare. The new Chinese mothers apparently did not want to have to choose between motherhood and career. Indicative of the continuously growing importance of academic performance, the new mother types emerging in China were clearly marked by an emphasis on a mother’s crucial role as a child’s first educator (宮坂、金 2012: 67, 76), even if not to the point previously seen in Japan. This attitude was reflected in two other behavioural types which gained traction in recent times – namely, the *competent mother* and the so-called *hot mum*. The *competent mother* (称职的妈妈 · *chènzhí de māmā*) represents the image of a mother devoted to her children’s development, but who also carries a responsibility to society, as well as to her personal well-being (Miyasaka and Jin 2012, p. 79). This role model is imbued with the characteristically postfeminist idea of constant self-improvement through staying up to speed with the newest “scientific” research. Similarly to the Japanese *kyouiku mama*, the *chènzhí de māmā* takes her role of educator very seriously and is prepared to work hard to secure a bright future for her children. Finally, the *hot mum* type (辣妈 · *là mā*) first appeared as a celebrity fad in the 2000s. The term is a neologism based on the Chinese word for “Spice girl”, as the inspiration for it came from none other than “Posh Spice” Victoria Beckham. Initially referring to women in the show business, the image of the *là mā* gradually grew to encompass women of all walks of life who managed to combine career and motherhood, while retaining their beauty or otherwise shattering the stereotypes (Shen 2015). Reactionist against both the masculinization of women during Maoism, and the Confucianist glorification of the self-sacrificing mother, the Chinese *hot mum* seems to be the epitome of being able to have it all.

Much less than to make any kind of categorical statement about the “state of affairs” for mothers in the two respective countries in the recent 50-60 years, the above overview serves to draw our attention to some intriguing similarities but also some surprising differences between two nations, which share a centuries-long history of interaction and bilateral influence. The Japanese are

known to be particularly good at incorporating various aspects of Chinese culture and modifying them in ways as to make them their own. When it comes to the societal structures of the two countries, however, no such clear-cut statement can be made. Interestingly, their respective mores, social order and family systems in the late Middle Ages paint two very similar pictures of women’s place in society and in the family. With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the two start to manifest more and more differences. One of the most illuminating findings of this study has been the realisation that the Confucian ethical code and the official government policies regarding women (irrespective of whether they are liberal or conservative) are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. Both serve to make use of women as human resources with a predetermined value and purpose to be directed at the most pressing issues that each country faces at any given moment. But they also work in tandem whenever their interests align. It is precisely this utilitarian approach which drives women to the extremes described above. It is precisely this approach which makes it difficult to discern the actual progress having been made in the field of women’s rights, because despite the many strides forward, women remain the most flexible “tool” for remedying complicated problems with large economic implications. Even more surprising, however, is the fact that despite the above finding, by refusing to give up their social relevance and economic independence Post-Maoist women and mothers seem to be overturning the logic of the economically determined “convergence theory” in family sociology. Of course, another reading of this surprising phenomenon might be that the Chinese society simply did not meet the necessary conditions of economic abundance for the women to be forcefully pushed outside the paid workforce. Whichever holds true, the new mother types emerging in contemporary China may be viewed in a positive light, as a step toward previously unexplored possibilities for Chinese women. Far from presenting a final solution and considering the quickly evolving demographic situation in the PRC, it can be expected that they might soon face new challenges and have to keep adapting to their changing environment. Whether they manage to preserve their newly acquired “have-it-all” mentality and lifestyle remains to be seen.

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**Reproduction Policies and their  
Implications in Contemporary  
Romanian Women's Prose**

**Abstract:** *The representation of human reproduction in contemporary literature by women writers born in Romania has changed from cultural silence, which concealed the realities of the imposed pronatalist and antiabortion legislation between 1967 and 1990, to a diversity of approaches today when post-1989 literature has been influenced by the international debates over reproductive justice and publishers have increasingly encouraged women writers' work. This paper explores contemporary prose – fiction, autofiction, diaries, memoirs and poetic prose – by Romanian authors living in the country or abroad, with a view to the phenomenology of reproduction. By using literary, social and historical anthropology as research methods, it maps issues such as reproductive rights and freedom, teenage motherhood, the (lack of) access to medical information, adoption practices, psychological implications of pregnancy, miscarriage and child loss and the effects of the birth control movement.*

**Key words:** *women's writing, Romanian prose, contemporary literature, human reproduction, anthropology*

In the foreword to *Birth: Personal Stories* (2010) coordinated by Mihaela Miroiu and Otilia Dragomir, a book that contains twenty accounts about giving birth from 1955 to 2009, the editors motivate their project by calling attention to the fact that: “Maternity, in its substantial sense, and especially its debut are still absent from our public space and discourse.” (10) Addressed to men, future and actual mothers, the collection aims to convey the idea that “all people are given birth” in the same way as “all men are mortal” (10) and to diminish the inherited taboo character of motherhood. A similar collection, *Stories of Women Writers and their Children* (2014) coordinated by Alina Purcaru, gathers eighteen other accounts focused on how having a child may influence a mother’s disposition to write nowadays. In the foreword, the editor concludes that: “if writing and child rearing have anything in common, besides the intense effort involved, it seems that aspect lies in the resistance to rules, on the one hand, and the vulnerability felt in a hostile environment, on the other hand” (13-14). Both volumes are part of the contemporary tendency of bringing the private experience of bearing and rearing children to the literary public sphere, and they reflect the collective need of sharing different artistically relevant stories of essential events in everyone’s life.

The dramatic social, economic and political transformation produced in Romania in December 1989 has brought about a change in mentality regarding the role of women writers in society. After two decades of antiabortion legislation, which relatively silenced women in the 1970s and especially in the 1980s, followed by the aesthetic paralysis of the early 1990s, caused by the turbulent transition from dictatorship to democracy, marked by inflation and political confusion, national publishing houses began to pay more attention to women’s fiction and non-fiction. The international debates over reproductive justice and the developments of medicine and psychology have influenced publishers to support women’s works that question childbearing as women’s “supreme patriotic duty” (Păunescu, 2012: 154) and tackle pregnancy, birth, abortion, stillbirth, child loss, regret or rejection of motherhood, medical services, sexuality, the impact of travel on human reproduction etc.

in various psychological and sociological contexts. The current feminist movements in the country have also favoured the freedom of literary expression and the cultural critique dealing with reproduction and gender roles. Therefore, there has been an increasing diversity of narratives that cover specific themes of women's life, including the conditions of giving birth, with its prenatal and postnatal phenomenology and its implied sexuality.

In this context, what follows is a brief survey on seventeen works<sup>1</sup> of fiction and non-fiction published between 2002 and 2021, in which writers approach human reproduction from different viewpoints, structured in five sections: successful pregnancies; miscarriages and stories of child loss; provoked abortions; national and international adoption; and rejection of pregnancy. Such an approach draws on the concept of "thick description" proposed by British philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1971) and developed by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). From this perspective, literature can be viewed as a dense subjective discursive product available for cultural interpretation. Elaine Showalter (1996) is one of the earliest critics who explored women literature starting from this concept.

Relying on literary anthropology (which sees literature as a means of expressing personal and collective phenomena), social anthropology (which helps delineate women's roles in society) and historical anthropology (which considers human beings as inseparable from history), the current analysis identifies in each work the drive to give narrative shape to ideas that can change the world for the better and to make a personal history part of literary history by providing answers to questions related to the human need for stories, in the context of reproductive rights.

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1 - All the works included in the primary corpus are initially published in Romanian, except *Train to Trieste* published first in English and *The Child and the Dictator* published first in French, both available now in Romanian. Therefore, the English version of the titles of and the quotations are my translation.

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In *Train to Trieste* (2008), Romanian American novelist, playwright and academic Domnica Rădulescu describes a young woman's journey from Bucharest to Chicago via Italy in the late 1970s. Mona's passionate love affair with Mihai from Braşov, where her relatives live and where she spends her holidays, ends with a cliffhanger when suspicions arise that he works for the local secret police. Mona's father, a university professor of letters, is a rather rebel figure, surrounded by poets and artists. Seeing herself and her family cornered by representatives of the authorities, she decides to flee the country. Transplanted in a multicultural context where she works and studies to become an academic and where neoimperialism is criticised, Mona becomes aware that her idea of the American dream was rather naïve. In the mid-eighties, she marries Tom, an Irish man who studies for his PhD in psychology. Soon after they get married, they discover their cultural differences and contrasting temperaments (she is more sociable and talkative while he is more introverted), which eventually affect their marriage. She becomes so estranged that she is not sure who the father of her first son is. The birth is described in a language that is both comic and enthusiastic. Moreover, when she becomes pregnant with their second son, she asks for divorce as she needs freedom: Mona finds a position in the theatre department of a university in Indiana, while Tom still has one year to finish his PhD. Torn between her family and her career, the protagonist is an exceptional figure in a transatlantic migration context as she manages to maintain a good work-life balance and a friendly but distant relationship with her ex-husband.

However, moving to another country and becoming a mother may not always be compatible. The novel *The Immigrant from Biggin Hill* (2016) by Lăcrămioara Stoenescu relates the story of Victoria Antim, an engineer born in Romania and settled in the United Kingdom before 1989. As in the previous novel, the clash between career, freedom and family goals causes trouble. Met on a ski slope when they are students, Victoria and Gabriel become close

friends and go on trips abroad in other European countries, a chance not many young people had in the early 1980s. On such occasions, they plan to leave Romania after they graduate and get married. The wedding takes place in 1984, but the day when Victoria gives birth to a boy, Gabriel comes home with the news that he is invited to attend a course organised by British Aerospace. On the same winter night, they have to wait for the ambulance half an hour in the biting cold to take them to the maternity. Since they want a boy and doctors do not make ultrasound yet, their surprise of having a boy is even greater. Although their plan of fleeing the country becomes more and more possible, Victoria feels the future burden of raising her child without her husband before she gets the visa. In addition, Victoria's father warns them that, once Gabriel decides not to return to Romania, the officers of the secret service will consider him a traitor and begin to blame and pester her to give back the money the state paid for Gabriel's scholarship. They pretend to protect vulnerable mothers deceived by their husbands who go abroad and marry other women there, but they do so only if the women agree to divorce. If not, such women are excluded from the Communist Party, humiliated by factory workers and given lower jobs. However, Victoria is not intimidated. She succeeds in arriving with her two-year-old boy in the UK in 1987, only to find out that her husband is not happy to see them: he divorces her and marries a rich American. As soon as she can leave her son with her parents in Bucharest, she continues her studies in the UK to become a programmer and, thus, she finds a job in the industry. Patrick, the Irish interviewer who hires her, soon becomes her second husband. As Patrick has a son of his own, Victoria becomes his stepmother. In spite of all the difficulties regarding her migration from one country to another, the protagonist fulfills her dream.

Nevertheless, the number of women who move abroad before 1989 is very low, while the majority of them build their lives in their home country. As after 1966 "the state interests regarding social reproduction were in conflict with women's interests" (Păunescu, 2012: 154), they endure the state policy that forces them to become mothers.

In her analysis of the political evolution of maternity in Romania, Ramona Păunescu (2012) pointed out “the traditional patriarchate doubled by the state patriarchate” (154). The tension between the two is most evident in the novel *Charming Eyes* (2007) by Roma writer Violeta Cioabă. Set in the Western part of Romania in the 1970s, it illustrates the Roma wedding traditions passed on from one generation to another and contrasts them with modern wedding practices. Irina, a Roma girl living with her tribe in nature, near a Transylvanian village, falls in love with Mihai, a Romanian teenager from the village when he defends her against the racist microaggressions she and her friends experience when they take water from a local well. However, Irina’s father marries her with Tănase, the son of a rich Roma family. According to tradition, the wedding ceremony includes the test of virginity in which family members and friends play different roles. The novelist dramatizes the moment, explaining the girl’s disgust and unhappiness: “Irina was trembling. She felt her life was over and she had got dirty from the hands that had touched her. Her love for Mihai had been blown away. Her life had no purpose anymore.” (50) After ten years of childless marriage, Tănase is robbed and killed by local racists, but Irina is the one sent to jail. Mihai, who studied to become a lawyer, saves her in the end, they move to Bucharest, get married and have a child together. The narrative conveys an idealistic perspective of ethnic hybridity, which obscures the assimilationist project of the communist regime. Its fairy tale atmosphere contrasts with the usually dark representations of the 1980s.

Elena Netcu’s *Lenka* (2010), a novel set in eastern Romania, illustrates the conditions of becoming a mother in the 1980s and the result of choosing an unsuitable husband. A teacher of Romanian in the provincial city of V., where the communist authorities give her a job, one day Lenka decides she wants to marry and have children. In spite of persistent rumours, she marries Dinu, a worker in a local factory, a jealous man prone to nitpicking and gaslighting. Nevertheless, they have three sons together as they move from a studio into an apartment provided by the factory where he is employed. Whenever she gets pregnant, Dinu doubts that he is the

father. A mentally unstable alcoholic and womaniser, now he hits her, now he asks to be forgiven, now he questions her social network, now he is proud to walk his sons in the neighbourhood, now he takes them all on holiday, now he breaks the bedroom door with a hammer, almost killing her. When the boys are too noisy, he urges her to take them to a creche. When she moves to a relative, he becomes angry and threatens everyone. One cold night, a few weeks before giving birth for the second time, she gives him the rough-edged tongue, which makes him angry: he locks her out for the rest of the night. After she gives birth, he starts to boss around instead of helping her, causing her to lose her milk and eventually to file for divorce. While her lawyer advises her to end her marriage, the judge convinces her to postpone the decision. Pregnant for the third time, she files for an abortion, but the doctors obey the law and reject her request. Besides the ordeal at home, she feels the stress of queuing for food: the people waiting in line often exclude her because her baby is too noisy. She becomes a careless mother, unkempt and negligent over her attire. Lenka's terrible story demonstrates the total disinterest of the state in women's real problems and the effects of the communist patriarchal system on individuals.

With the regime change, besides exercising their freedom of expression, women writers dared to innovate and approach motherhood in more detail. *The Sky in the Belly* (2005) by Ioana Nicolae is a pregnancy memoir set in contemporary Romania, with echoes of the communist past and often connected with social dimensions like news about newborns and other pregnant women. The author is both serene in the imaginary dialogue with her unborn, whose response is felt through a wide range of intimate sensations, and determined to drive away any negative connotations associated with pregnancies. By mixing lyricism and medical terminology, anthropological and historical details, the writer is convinced of the importance of writing about the chosen topic for others to see the beauty and the tenderness of pregnancy: "My belly is a gallery for artists." (61) or "There is a hopscotch and a silent player in my belly." (76) When she examines the ultrasound and is told the baby is a boy, she notes: "I saw you dreaming our happiness." (96)

Originality comes both from the theme of the memoir and from its style – brief sentences, unexpected word associations, colloquial monologues – that reflect pregnant women’s brain fog and places the experience beyond the mundane. The affectionate sketches that portray the author’s mother prefigure Nicolae’s more recent novels in which her mother from rural Transylvania takes center stage. The tension between body and discourse is captured in sentences like this: “Pregnant women are a text that others keep decoding.” (118) An exception in Romanian language at the time when it was published, Nicolae’s memoir contradicts the idea that pregnant women and literary discourse are incompatible. By repositioning a traditionally private experience in the public sphere, it marks the beginning of a new stage in the history of Romanian literature by women writers.

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Unfortunately, not all pregnancies are successful. Representing miscarriages and child loss in literature is not new, but the writing style and the thematic details of the literary discourse may create new aesthetic and ethical perspectives and works relevant for the betterment of humanity.

In *All the Bookseller’s Children* (2020) by Veronica D. Niculescu, the main character Silvia Albu falls in love with a high school colleague when she is 17 years old, which changes the course of her life dramatically. Set in the 1970s in the provincial city of Pitești, her story is one about overcoming the trauma of miscarriage at an early age. Unprepared to become adults, the two teenagers know nothing about protection or possible consequences. Hearing about the death of other teenage girls from the neighbourhood does not encourage Silvia to be more careful with her own body. People in their circle never speak about prophylactic methods like contraception pills or condoms. Moreover, her family is ashamed of her carelessness and sends her to another city to live with a female relative and to continue her studies there, while waiting to give

birth. Sadly, the baby is born prematurely and dies soon afterwards. Only later does she learn about the calendar method as a form of natural family planning. This harrowing experience of early motherhood is compensated in two literary ways: through her relationship with the children who come to the bookshop where she works; and through the love of a watchmaker who supports her after she loses not only her baby but also her mother. The novel vividly illustrates the tension between innocence and experience, between fate and determination, trying to convey the message that traumas like this may be eventually overcome.

A book of poetic prose, *Sofia's Garden* (2020) by Suzana Tănase is the autobiography of a miscarriage, a trauma diary written in the context of contemporary international migration from Romania to Canada. The fragments often address the unborn baby called Sofia in the attempt to come to terms with the loss. Written in the context of therapy, it mixes tenderness and cruelty so as to test the boundaries of the self and the relationship with family members, friends and acquaintances. It absorbs both personal experiences and incidents experienced by others. The voice of the book is now young, now mature, trying to mobilise childhood memories from the origin country and reflections related to living in the destination country. Relevant from an artistic point of view is that the psychological pain is felt not only as a misfortune, but also as a chance to create a lasting aesthetic tale. Initially a baby's name, Sofia eventually operates as a generic term for the wisdom gained when suffering loss after holding unrealistic expectations.

If losing an unborn is highly distressing, the loss of a toddler is even more heart-wrenching. *An Angel's Mother's Diary* (2013) by Ana Maria Huzum is a unique work in Romanian literature. The author, a school teacher of Romanian, chronicles the therapeutic process of overcoming the trauma of losing her almost three-year-old daughter, along with her father and her parents-in-law in a car accident. In the course of one year, in which she becomes a mother again, trying to resurrect the spirit of her lost daughter, she receives professional counselling, writes on a forum to reflect on her loss, the meaning of death and the essence of life, while repeatedly going

through stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Her diary is not only a detailed heartbreaking testimony of overcoming trauma, but also an aesthetic achievement juxtaposing or combining several genres such as letter writing, dialogue, monologue, poetry, philosophical essay, realistic diary, spiritual reflection, storytelling, memories, dreams, prayers etc. “What shall I do with this terrible pain?” (18) she asks, considering her relationships with her supportive husband, her mother and her sister, her relatives and close friends, other mothers who lost their children, her innocent pupils etc. By drawing on individual and collective stories, expressing feelings in detail, trying to make sense of what happened, distinguishing various layers of loss and grief, and imaginatively aiming at several kinds of transformation, Huzum’s work is a starting point for psychotherapists, researchers and students in psychology, teachers, parents and other readers interested in mourning. Pregnancy has a double meaning in this case: first, it is the process of having a child developing in the body; second, the quality of being highly significant and of great potential for society at large.

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Perhaps the most frequent topic related to reproduction found in the selected corpus, treated either extensively or briefly, is that of the illegal abortions carried out in the 1970s and the 1980s. Roxana-Elisabeta Marinescu (2022) approached the subject taking into account the perspectives of new historicism, cultural materialism and feminism when analysing the effects of the Decree no. 770/1966 on women’s life and their representations in contemporary prose by Romanian female writers. The communist government adopted the decree in order to increase the fertility rate and ensure the economic autonomy of the state, which had decreased in the post-WW2 decades. Its enactment meant that women lacked the right to contraception and abortion on demand, which led to phenomena such as: unsafe illegal practices, high maternal mortality, generations

of institutionalised children, overcrowded homes and classrooms etc. Despite the financial rewards for large families, the interdiction of abortion automatically implied that the publication of personal stories about such aspects was out of the question before 1989. Exceptions like the film *Postcards with Wild Flowers* (1975) directed by Andrei Blaier, corroborated with the legislation and the executive apparatus, were channelled to rather support the antiabortion propaganda. As the film suggests, the youth of the time had from very little to no access to contraception, medical abortion and therapeutical counselling.

Contemporary women writers have not been indifferent to the collective gender trauma caused by the decree. The short novel *And One Could Hear the Crickets* (2019) by Corina Sabău is probably the most poignant work on the topic as it focuses on its social circumstances and psychological impact on the family members. It was inspired by a real case that occurred in 1985 when the corpse of a textile factory worker from Bucharest, who deceased after an illegal abortion, was exposed on the clothing factory premises as a warning for the rest of the female workers.

A similarly powerful account is the novel *Compliance* (2020) by Simona Sora, split into two sections: the experience of a young nurse in a provincial state hospital from Transylvania, where she is inquired in a case of illegal abortion before 1989; and her experience as a nurse in a *home médicalisé* from Switzerland. The novel presents a parallel of two medical contexts, from Eastern and Western Europe, which shows two different worlds that function according to strict rules and professional conformity, observed to the point of absurdity. The extensive use of free indirect speech summons readers to imagine the mindset of those who lived during the totalitarian regime and found ways to escape before it was too late.

Letiția Branea, the main character in *Fontana di Trevi* (2018) by Gabriela Adameșteanu, experiences an illegal abortion followed by hysterectomy, which marks her youth and haunts her destiny as a migrant from Romania to France and back. Given that her pregnancy is the fruit of a relationship in the absence of her husband, who is an asylum-seeker in Germany at the time, she does not care enough

about its possible negative consequences for her body; besides, she cannot rely on her lover, who – some time after they separate – marries another woman. The traumatic event that affects the protagonist's future is also a pretext to describe the condition of the medical staff during communism, working in a system that oppressed women. The abortion is performed at a nurse's house, but Letiția needs further assistance in the hospital, which makes it possible to compare and contrast the private and the public circumstances in which pregnancies used to be terminated. The nurse gives Letiția the telephone number of a female doctor, who helps and defends her case in front of the authorities, which leads to the doctor's imprisonment. Only many years later does Letiția find out about it and that the doctor left the country as soon as she was freed.

Apart from its main drama, *All the Bookseller's Children* (2020) by Veronica D. Niculescu features a couple who already have a boy and do not want other children, but the woman, who constantly uses the calendar as a contraceptive method, gets pregnant again, carried away by the freedom she feels when they spend several days at the seaside. Almost forty, she is allowed to have a legal abortion at the hospital, but the day she and her husband go there, their boy gets drowned in a nearby lake. The novelist illustrates the effects of the tragedy on the father and on the small local community where people learn from each other how to live with personal misfortune. The deceased boy's father is a butcher who knows that Silvia, the protagonist, went through a miscarriage and sometimes brings her meat from the shop where he works.

Shorter episodes related to abortion are present in other novels too. In *The Sky in the Belly* (2005), Ioana Nicolae meditates on the poetic memory of women's condition before 1989: "In the 1980s you did not have any choice. Pills were valleys and mountains in faraway countries. Contraception was a field with a lake or an endless wall. There was no ambulance for that and nothing to hold. Abortions used to bear the name of prison." (54)

In *Lenka* (2010), the protagonist is denied one even though she has an abusive husband. According to the current legislation, she would have needed a restraining order that would have prevented

her husband from approaching or contacting her. In Lenka's case, the local judge, as a representative of the state expected to enforce the law, is the one who persuades her not to split up, while her lawyer encourages her to do so. The novel illustrates the extent to which women were trapped in the legal and the medical system that forced them to bear children at all costs.

*The Girl from the Oblong House* (2006) by Ana Maria Sandu is one of the earliest post-1989 novels that briefly touches the theme of abortion from a completely different angle. The author imagines an embryo's perspective about to be aborted: the unborn is endowed with consciousness and contemplative power, reacting to the imminent demise by hiding in a quiet nook of her mother's uterus when the doctor tries to remove it.

The most recent book included in the corpus, *I Can't Find You Anywhere* (2021) by Laura Ionescu, is a memoir about the loss of the author's mother when the daughter is in high school. In the thirteen years between Laura's sister's and Laura's birth, her mother tries to get pregnant several times, but she goes through a few miscarriages occurred in the fifth or the sixth month. The daughter explains: "That was the price paid for the abortions performed at home, in the bathroom, together with a friend, using quack remedies when the regime banned them." (16) Another effect is that the mother experiences recurrent and severe hemorrhages whenever she menstruates. When the girl is two years old, her mother faints in the bathroom during a party held at home. The woman is about to die and dreams she is meeting her dead father, but then she hears her daughter calling her at the door, which is enough motivation to struggle and regain her consciousness. "She told me I had saved her." (58)

Such accounts show what Păunescu (2012) outlined in her political study: "abortion constituted the main individual response to socially imposed maternity through pronatalist state politics" (154). Fictional or non-fictional, they contribute to the restoration of the relationship between private and public life and contribute to the

redefinition of women's roles as thinking subjects in the social sphere, although access to modern healthcare remains limited in some regions due to underfunding, poor sexual education and religion resistance.

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Given that most Romanian women did not have access to proper medical services between 1966 and 1990 to terminate unwanted pregnancies and did not have the means to protect their bodies, the birth rates in the same interval were so high that policy makers lost control over what happened with the newborns and their families in reality. Since many women often did not possess the necessary means to raise their children either, the state offered them local care services, but their quality was so poor that, in 1989, the documentaries about Romanian orphanages shocked the world with their sordid atmosphere and children rocking themselves backward and forward as their only form of self-therapy.

The most prominent account about adoption published in Romanian so far is *The Child and the Dictator* (2018) by Marion Le Roy Dagen and Xavier-Marie Bonnot. In fact, the book is a translation from French, because Marion, born Maria Cotoară in 1976, is adopted by a French family in 1983. Her mother, Ana Cotoară, is only 17 when she meets Nicolae, a local football player a few years older than her. Unfortunately, Nicolae does not care about the consequences of their intimate relationship. Moreover, Ana grows up without knowing who her father is as her mother never tells her about it and it is her illiterate maternal grandmother who raises her. Ana's relationship with her mother is, therefore, extremely tense. At the beginning of the book, the authors mention Ana's brown skin colour: people call her Gypsy, and she does not like it, a hint at unsolved racial identity issues in a nationalist epoch that promoted ethnic assimilation. In these circumstances, Maria's premature birth seems to reiterate a tragic pattern, which, however, worsens when Ana's small family shows no interest in her newborn. "Have children and the state will take care of it." (93) That is the ideology of the

time. The baby is taken to a local creche and, on top of everything, the doctors lie to Ana that she might have cancer. Forced by circumstances and with a heavy heart, Ana agrees to let her daughter Maria be adopted. Ana feels she abandons her daughter the same way her father abandoned her. Years later, Maria's adoptive parents are told that her biological mother is dead, although they do not believe it. Ana's mother's, Ana's and Maria's destinies suggest the existence of a transgenerational trauma, an unexplored field related to interethnic and interracial relationships and the need for intersectional approaches. Fortunately, in 2015, Marion Le Roy Dagen and Laura Giraud established L'Association Française des Adopté(e)s et Orphelin(e)s de Roumanie, an organisation that takes care of those who have been through similar circumstances.

In *The Woman in the Photo* (2002), a memoir of the last three years of the communist dictatorship, journalist Tia Șerbănescu writes about her relationship with her natural mother and her adoptive parents. Born in 1945 in a village in southern Romania, Șerbănescu is adopted by a family from Bucharest. Șerbănescu's mother gives her away in order to remove "a surplus of unwanted maternity" (22), which may sound harsh when social, economic and political factors are not taken into consideration. However, by the end of WW2, her mother has already been caring for her younger siblings as Șerbănescu's maternal grandmother died before her time. The journalist explains that her mother invested so much emotion in her relationship with her siblings that, when she gave birth, she was not prepared to summon up the strength to care enough for her first born. She also points out the instability that characterised her larger rural family, marked by divorces, impulsive decisions and alcoholism. Although it is not mentioned in the book, the 1946-1947 was a time of extreme poverty caused by WW2, the 1945 agrarian reform and the drought of 1946. Therefore, moving with her new family in the capital implies more security for the child, which her natural mother understands by instinct. Eventually, growing up in a family of intellectuals, the girl has better access to education and an urban lifestyle. Her account allows us to put things into perspective and compare the context of 1940s-1950s with that of the 1970s-1980s.

The autobiographical novel *42 Cățelu Road* (2012) by Alina Nedelea takes readers on a journey from the 1970s to the 1990s and from Bucharest to Rome, using a spirited style full of black humour and tragicomic situations. Relevant for this article are the circumstances of the protagonist's birth and growth during communism. The novel begins with the death of Alina's mother, who later proves to be her maternal grandmother. Only when her grandmother dies, does her real mother, Aura, tell her the truth about her past. Aura and Virgil conceive her in 1974, when they are teenagers and unaware of the consequences of their actions. Despite Aura's attempt to kill the fetus on her own since she, as an athlete, wants to participate in the National Olympics, she does not succeed and, therefore, Alina is born in 1975. However, Aura and Virgil separate and she later marries another man. Only when Alina becomes a teenager does she find out that her real father is "a Gypsy, but a charming one" (35), which again suggests uncharted interethnic liaisons. Raised by her maternal grandparents, Alina's situation is a case of informal adoption, an arrangement among family members that does not involve any legal document: silence is enough.

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The last work under discussion, the postmodern novel *Hunter-Gatherers* (2019) by Maria Manolescu, examines a topic that has become part of recent heated public debates: a young woman's decision to have or not to have children based on her free will. The main character, Petra, whose father dies as a hero in 1989, has a tense relationship with her mother who did not want to have any children. Petra works in advertising, knows how the strings are pulled in this field and toys with the idea of writing a play in which the female protagonist is pregnant. She quarrels with the people in her life, especially men, over women's condition in the world, reminding us of *la querelle des femmes* of the late fifteenth century<sup>2</sup>.

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2 - *La querelle des femmes* or "the dispute of women" is an early-modern debate on the nature, abilities and societal roles of women. It originally referred to a literary genre developed in Italy and France which either defended or rejected women as discourse makers.

The novel abounds in intertextualities and metafictional devices that question women's role as childbearers. Echoing Virginia Woolf's seminal book *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the author writes about "a fetus of her own, that will never leave her, that will stay inside her body as long as she lives, growing more and more powerful and hungry" (198). As an artist, Petra is characterised as a hunter-gatherer in the sense that she gathers ideas for her play like a bee collecting honey and that she has a hardworking guardian in her mind that hunts any errors she might make. (159-160)

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In the preface to Ioana Nicolae's pregnancy memoir, writer Gabriela Adameşteanu (2010) concisely explains the consequences of a careless public policy regarding reproduction in communist Romania, which did not lead only to untimely death, imprisonment and orphanhood before 1989, but it also caused "a change in the parents' feelings about their expected child" (9), which the selected corpus of this article demonstrates at length. The stylistic and thematic literary diversity of the works reviewed above indicates the recovery of the pre-WW2 feminist power, partially lost during the totalitarian regime. Nowadays, when there is "a revival of the private character of maternity, without the support of solid social institutions and of child care and child rearing public policies" (Păunescu, 2012: 237), the practice of sharing stories in a literary context, the reactivation of personal and collective memory, and the open dialogue in the communities of readers of all ages and walks of life become vital prerequisites for the development of society as they may motivate people to take action.

Through the lens of soft anthropology, suitable for analysing aesthetic discourses, critics and theorists may mine literature for ready-made examples of cultural interpretation, yet being aware of its inherent fictional character. Further areas of focus, relevant for both research and creative writing, would be the literary representations of issues like racial justice in the context of

childbearing, teenage motherhood, adoption practices, sterilisation as choice or coercion, types of pregnancies (including medically assisted pregnancy and surrogacy), the mother-and-nanny relationship, childless women, rural reproductive rights, basic sexual education, telemedicine and other similar topics.

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**Rahime Sariçelik**

## **Motherhood in Turkish Novels in the Early Republican Period**

The Western-type novel appeared for the first time in Turkish literature in 1860. According to writer and scholar Guzine Dino, the Turkish novel was born in a historical period when the country set off a new orientation involving all its institutions. (Dino 1973, p. 19-20) The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the awareness of the elite of the progress of Western civilization marked the cultural evolution that would manifest itself in Türkiye and which would inaugurate a new era in its literary history. The first novelists and short story writers aimed at educating a society in need of change; in other words, encourage their readers to understand what Westernization meant. These writers, conscious of their role as pedagogues and their national mission, attached much more importance to the socio-political context of their works – that is to say, to the different forms of knowledge they conveyed through their writings rather than to purely literary issues. In his book *Makaleler IX, Yeni Gün -Yeni Türkiye -Cumhuriyet Gazetelerindeki Yazılar* (Articles IX, New Day -New Türkiye -The Articles in the Cumhuriyet Newspapers), the author and sociologist Ziya Gökalp asserts that the novel can solve difficult sociological problems. He states that a writer who disregards sociological aspects cannot be a good writer and that the Turkish novel can solve problems in the family just like the European novel. This was the writing style of that period. (Gökalp,1980, p. 178- 179)

The new Republic of Türkiye gave much value to the family and motherhood. During the 1930s, the motto was that “every mother should give birth to a soldier”. In his speech, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk,

who founded the Republic of Türkiye, reminded citizens of the importance of the education of women, as their goal was to raise new generations.

“Our women are obliged to be much more intellectual and to possess much more knowledge than our men. If they want to be the mothers of the nation, they must be like that” (Arsan, Borak, Kocatürk, 2006, p. 319)

In this study, we will try to examine how the message of women and motherhood, which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk wanted to give to the public in his speech, was understood by the writers in the new nation-state he founded. Also drawing up on the fact that novels are seen as sociological works, this article aims at understanding the relationships between men and women, gender roles, and the perception of Turkish society through the novel. For this purpose, we will consider two seminal works by two writers of the republican period: we will analyze Halide Edip Adivar’s novel *Tatarcık* (Phlebotomus) (1939) and Reşat Nuri Güntekin’s novel *Çalığışu* (The Wren) (1923).

## Introduction

The foundation of the Republic by Atatürk in 1923 led to numerous reforms, while the concept of Kemalism appeared at the same time in the press and in literature. The writers of the time conceived their work as teachers who were responsible for educating Turkish society. They made themselves, in their novels or in their short stories, the spokespersons of the new ideology by insisting either on the positive side or on the negative side of the new reforms. Although all these reforms took place within the framework of a political system based on one party, the objectives of the latter were to improve the lives of the people of Anatolia. It would, however, be interesting to wonder if these works succeeded in making the people of Anatolia more visible as their authors claimed to do.

The objectives of the Republic were to create “the new family”, “the new woman” and “the new man”. It is for this reason that the republican authors speak of the freedom of women by comparing it to the freedom women had during the period of the Young Turks<sup>1</sup>. By creating “a new woman”, the Kemalist ideology introduced a new concept that differentiated it from the thought of the Young Turks. This time, the new ideology would no longer save sexuality. To tell the truth, Kemalist writers could not manage to hide their old prejudice as Ottoman citizens; their way of thinking about sexuality remained very traditional. Therefore, we will be interested in discourses on sexuality, namely the discourses produced on gender relations. I believe that it would not be wrong to say that Turkish novels and Turkish short stories of this time constitute true works of sociology thanks to which we can today understand the Turkish society of the time. And this is the reason why we can easily understand the notions of “new woman” and “new man” by carefully reading the works of very famous authors of that time.

### **What about female writers?**

A feminist writer, Fatma Aliye Hanım, known for her books on philosophy, on *Islam*, women’s rights, and history, but especially famous for her novel *Muhadarat* (1892), deals with the question of the human rights of women through the prism of Islam. Indeed, she constructs the identity of the modern Ottoman woman within the framework of Islam; the ideal woman is described there as a good wife and a good mother. Thus, she lays the foundations of the thought of the republican feminists who will later be writers such as Halide Edip Adivar and Nezihe Muhiddin. During the period from 1923 to 1980, a period that encompasses the time interval at the heart of our research work (1923-1950), women writers, whether they be intellectuals or bureaucrats, shared the ideas of male writers on motherhood and marriage. Indeed, even if we examine the beginnings of feminism in 1920, the real feminist movement would materialize at the beginning of the 1980s.

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1 - Named after the revolutionaries who seized power in Türkiye in 1908.

Halide Edip A. and Nezihe Muhittin, both of whom were famous women during the Republican era, were humiliated for their “femininity” after they had demanded the right to vote and seats in parliament. Halide Edip was even compared to a “male and female creature” (Sancar, 2014, p. 170). When Halide Edip wrote a book against Atatürk, her Jewish origin was stigmatized, and her sexuality became the target of criticism. In 1928, Orhan Seyfi wrote the following sentences in the newspaper *Milliyet*: “Can a creature that is both feminine and masculine like Madame Halide Edip bear the ambiguity [which is inherent in her]?” (Sancar, 2014, p. 170) In his article dedicated to Atatürk’s revolution titled “Atatürk ihtilali”, Mahmut Esat Bozkurt similarly says: “Mrs. Halide Edip attempts to guide Atatürk. Instead of meddling in men’s affairs, she would do better to occupy herself with literature and her pretty novels. Thus, it would be more beneficial for the country” (Bozkurt, 2014).

Therefore, what messages did Halide Edip A., the writer of the new republic, give in her novels? If we analyze Halide Edip Adıvar’s 1939 novel *Tatarcık*, (Phlebotomus) we find that the characters that represent “new Republic women” are created upon the basis of the various issues on which the writer insists on emphasizing. Lale, the female character of the novel *Tatarcık*, is the only daughter of Osman Kaptan and Lalezar Hanım. In this novel, Lale is nicknamed as Tatarcık. As former inhabitants of Istanbul who previously lived in konaks and having failed to adapt to the social changes of the Republic, Lale’s family comes to settle in a village by the sea.

In order to talk about Lale, Halide Edip’s novel uses expressions such as “like a man”, and “like a boy” to “masculinize” her. The writer mentions Lale’s masculinity all the time: even in the face of her father’s death, Lale does not react by crying like the rest of women. Her female body is ignored and loses its sexual attraction; it is rather rejected with phrases such as “The behaviour of this young body is very similar to that of Tatar Osman ...” (Adıvar, 1989, p. 22). At the same time, by constantly saying that Lale gets dressed as if wearing a costume, the author wants to clarify that the clothes of the new women have changed. Lale also looks down on women who don’t wear suits. She is invited to parties because other women keep her

next to them to show their femininity. For them, a woman in a suit is not attractive as a woman. The character of Lale, whose “sexuality is not highlighted”, is more precious than the rest of the characters for the writer. This is why Zehra, a very beautiful woman who uses a lot of makeup and acts in a coquettish way, is often underestimated by Lale, who is in turn appreciated by the author and by her suitor Recep. Zehra is defined as a type of woman who only likes to flirt (Adivar,1989, p. 54): she is in everyone’s eyes a girl to be flirted with (Adivar,1989, p. 77). Zehra does not care about the “republican ideal” and wants to get married, and that’s why she is not liked by the main characters and author (Adivar,1989, p. 83).

The writer constructs her male characters as the male models of the new nation. Recep’s character matches that of Tatarcık: he too was “desexualized” to modernize the country. One sentence about Recep is particularly noteworthy: “He doesn’t like women’s topics at all. It pisses him off a lot.” In the novel, the dialogue that takes place between Recep and Haşim, the hero of the novel, teaches us that this new type of woman is a great threat to men.

- “- I tell you in all friendship Recep, be careful of Tatarcık.
- Why?
- A dangerous type... A type of woman who feminizes our country.”
- On the contrary, she seemed to me to be a man.
- That’s exactly why it’s dangerous... Because of them, young people can no longer find work. Wherever they go they’re told there’s no room” (Adivar,1989, p.75).

Although Halide Edip is a feminist, she wanted to solve women’s problems with militarist and nationalistic approaches (during the war she rose to the rank of sergeant major and was awarded the Independence Medal for her services). Her nationalist side aided and nurtured the patriarchal government she thought she

was fighting against by defining the new woman the Republic wanted to create. For writer Halide Edip, the role of new women is that of mothering the nation: according to her, a woman has meaning not as an individual but as a mother.

One can also gain insight into the novelists of the republican period through medical views on women, as Zafer Toprak explains:

“The more the Republic advances, the more we will feel the need to control women. They were quick to find a scientific pretext for this. It was important to control the female body and biology. In medical circles, these ideas have been popular. Thus, it was emphasized that woman was a different “creature” from man and that it was necessary to intervene from time to time in the name of science. This question was discussed in the 19th century in medical circles in the West” (Toprak, 2015, p. 356-357).

### **What about male writers?**

Nazım Hikmet Ran, one of the most famous poets in Türkiye but also outside its borders, liked to defend the Turkish people against their rulers and as a result, he spent a large part of his life in prison and exile. In an article entitled “Ana” (The Mother) (1934), Hikmet stated that he preferred to know his daughter dead rather than alive if living in a state of infertility. He thus considered women who preferred not to become pregnant for fear that their beauty would suffer as beautiful mummified young girls who had already died even though they were still virgins. In his eyes, “the woman is not a mummy, she is a mother” (Hikmet Ran, 1991, p.177) and if this is not the case, we look at her with pleasure but never with respect. In doing so, he reflects the ideas of his time.

For Ömer Seyfettin, another important Turkish writer of the time, the woman is above all and simply a mother. In a review of Seyfettin, Erişenler quotes: “Ömer Seyfettin passionately recommends

the Turkish woman [to become a mother]. He does not advise her to become a tailor, civil servant, heroin, or wife. There is only one profession. It's motherhood. Ömer Seyfettin attaches as much importance to motherhood as to honor." (Erişenler, 1972, p.36)

Reşat Nuri Güntekin lived through the First World War, the War of Independence, and the early years of the Republic. He was interested in the war of the Balkans and Anatolia, where he often travelled as an inspector for the Ministry of National Education and which he vividly describes in his novel *Çalokuşu* (The Wren) (1923). Reşat Nuri Güntekin dwelt on Anatolia much more than other writers, although he failed to sufficiently represent its people. In *Çalokuşu* we can find a character we can classify as "new Republic women" and who bears many similarities to *Tatarcık* (Phlebotomus).

*Çalokuşu* tells the story of Feride, a woman from Istanbul who is jilted by her fiancé and devotes herself to teaching, traveling through Anatolia from city to city to earn a living. Feride is simply an example of the modernization process. This novel speaks both of the past and of the future that it is being built with the help of an ideal republican woman. Feride will therefore embody this ideal woman and the writer will use Necmiye as her antagonist, whom the author describes as a weaker woman, while Feride is more like a man. Feride's attitude is not perceived as normal by those around her and thus we see growing social pressure around Feride, since the characters in the book who represent society remind Feride that they expect her to behave as a woman should (Güntekin, 1991, p. 59).

In the novel, we see that the notion of marriage attains a very high level of respectability as Feride's engagement further increases the pressure on her. She receives warnings from her maternal aunt and several other people: "You are already an engaged girl" (Güntekin, 1991, p. 83). Marriage gives women another status and Feride expresses this situation as follows: "overnight, I am transferred to a more important room in the house, because my status has evolved" (Güntekin, 1991, p.84). The special status that marriage gives to women is a characteristic of Turkish society: the woman who is called in the book "Mademoiselle Le Tailleur" tells Feride that she has grown up and will soon be married (Güntekin, 1991, p. 99).

Feride, the “new woman”, encounters several types of difficulties in Anatolia where she becomes a teacher, as she realises there is a price to pay for being a beautiful woman. In her workplace, men annoy her by giving her nicknames such as “silkworm” (İpekböceği) and “rose jam” (Gülbeşeker) (Güntekin, 1991, p. 270). One day the headmistress hears rumours in the village about Feride’s beauty and summons her: “My daughter, there is a saying that beauty is bad luck. You are beautiful and alone. As you are new here, you should have protected yourself better” (Güntekin, 1991, p. 284 -185).

Feride is an intellectual woman who comes to awaken Anatolia, but towards the end of the book, tired of the pressures exerted on her, Feride says to İhsan Bey who is in love with her: “I am a woman and I no longer know what to do in the face of all these difficulties”. (Güntekin, 1991, p. 332). Because of her beauty and the difficulties she has experienced as a result of being single, Feride marries a military doctor, Hayrullah Bey, who is older than her and whom she sees as her father, so Feride ends up becoming a victim of men’s desire to create a “new woman”. This desire is present in the novels of the early years of modernization as a basic ideological factor; Feride’s marriage is carried out to protect her from the outside and its threats. Hayrullah Bey says to Feride: “Feride, you have no possibility of living with me or with yourself. Unfounded doubts will poison your life. This nasty stain will follow you everywhere. How are we going to act? How are we going to protect you? In that case, I will keep you at home to defend you” (Güntekin, 1991, p. 359).

As we see in the novel, without the help of the man, the new Republican woman cannot live on her own. Feride’s character is that of a woman who couldn’t shake off her traditional role and could not discover her independence. Thus, she is the subject of criticism in certain circles, although the writer defends the character of Feride as he created it: “At the time, the joy and freedom of young girls were not seen as a good sign. Single girls from foreign schools and families were not looked upon favourably. They were seen as bad housewives, bad citizens, and bad people. I wanted to show that you should not be afraid of girls from Istanbul who were educated, happy and independent. I meant that when the time comes or

during hard times they could do better than the hardest ones” (Önertoy, 1984, p. 20 -21). It seems that the writer created the character of Feride, “the new woman” and made her a victim of society; expressions such as “when the time comes” or “the hardest” imply that Turkish women in the Republican period can take the form desired by the patriarchal society.

The Republican writer Reşat Nuri also tried to illustrate the Kemalist thought of the “mother of the nation” and the “saviour of the fatherland” by creating Feride as an example of this “new woman”, although he also had a tendency, like Halide Edip, to humiliate women who put themselves forward thanks to their sexuality. He thus used the character of Feride to draw attention to this kind of woman by making Feride say about Neriman, a widow who is approaching her thirties: “she was very beautiful. What I hated the most about her was that she was way too flirtatious” (Güntekin, 1991, p. 34). Feride, the female protagonist in *Çalınkuşu* (The Wren) (1923), allows us to understand how marriage, far from being just a feature of Turkish society, profoundly changes the status of a woman.

As the new Kemalist and nationalist state during the period of the Union Party considered the family very important, it had to reorganize it. This is why the period of Atatürk is associated with the establishment of a new family comprising a new man and a new woman, about which Atatürk spoke a lot. As we have already specified, Atatürk says in his speech that the first duty of women is to be mothers, because women are also mothers of the nation. And indeed, what the nation needs is for women to give birth to soldiers. When he becomes the defender of Westernism and secularization, Atatürk intends to reform the status of women. And when the *civil code* of 1926 (Türk Kanunu Medenisi) comes into force, it reinforces *The Family Code* (Osmanlı Aile Yasası). The 1926 *Civil Code* aimed to give women more freedom and promote equality with men, in line with the intention of the new Turkish state to create a modern family. However, the excerpts from the novels that we have analysed give us a completely different picture. The *Civil Code* didn't give new rights to women on paper: in fact, it never granted them the same freedom as men, not to mention the sexual freedom of which the

latter kept the monopoly. Women were and remained above all mothers or housewives. The expression “to be the mothers of the nation” shows that the independence of women is not among its concerns; the meaning given by the new man of the Kemalist regime to the new woman can be illustrated by this motto: “Nations are built on families” (Caporal, 1999, p. 66).

### **Conclusion**

We can say that the Republican woman was transformed into a real “childbearing machine” when she was already a working woman. The expression “childbearing machine”, which is borrowed from Wilhelm Reich, has been used in a more or less identical way in each society, as the mission of “motherhood” imposed on women has always existed (Reich, 1972, p. 170). Due to its biological structure and fertility, the female body has always been used by nationalist societies around the world. Finally, we have seen to what extent feminist women have allowed themselves to be influenced by the notion of motherhood promoted by nationalism.

As Simone de Beauvoir said, “Maternity becomes a sacred function” (De Beauvoir, 1976, p. 119). This is the case in Türkiye, where Kemalist schools have taught “specialized motherhood” to women. It is very difficult to have a nuanced image of what motherhood could represent at that time, as this institution has especially consecrated the roles played by women during childbirth and childcare. Considered as bearers of the values of the new Turkish nation, not only are women seen as mothers, but the woman is seen as the mother of the nation. The mother raises her children while being aware that it is her mission to transmit the cultural codes of society to future generations. Motherhood has even become the symbol of honor in nationalist ideology. Interestingly, consciously or not, and with the conviction that every woman should be a mother or the mother of the nation, some feminist writers also supported this idea.

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**Rosalba Castiglione  
Dr Gözde Doğanyılmaz-Burger**

## **Mothers under Patriarchy: Mothers and Children Trapped within Violent Relationships**

### **Introduction**

The present chapter draws attention to how patriarchal ideologies are not only arguably the main cause of male-perpetrated DV (DV hereafter) within heterosexual couples but also the main reason many mothers (and their children) struggle to run away from abusive partners (and fathers).

Whilst patriarchal attitudes affect the whole globe, the present chapter focuses on Italy and Türkiye, two persistent patriarchal and religious (mainly one-faith) societies (Galizzi *et al.*, 2023; Ozdemir-Sarigil & Sarigil, 2021; Ros Velasco, 2017), where the emphasis seems to be placed on preserving the ‘traditional’ patriarchal family at all costs.

The chapter briefly defines patriarchy, discussing its link with violence against women (GBV - Gender Based Violence), hence domestic violence. The relationship between patriarchal ideologies and the instrumentalisation of religion is also briefly discussed, considering religious prevalence in Italy and Türkiye: examples from both the Bible and the Qur’an will be briefly illustrated.

The chapter then discusses what happens when mothers contemplate or decide to divorce their abusive husbands both in Italy and Türkiye. In Italy, patriarchal attitudes are obvious in family

courts, and more specifically in the (mis)use of the unsound parental alienation syndrome (PAS hereafter) within child litigation, which is against the Istanbul Convention and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In Türkiye, it seems that women/mothers are ‘silenced’ through a lack of research on female perspectives and experiences of DV and PAS, as the focus is on male perspectives (van Bergen, 2021; Torun et al., 2021). Furthermore, women who seek divorce from their husbands might face stigmatisation (Kelebek-Küçükarslan & Atasü-Topcuoğlu, 2024). Finally, the chapter summarises the main arguments and presents hopes for future policy and practice.

## **Motherhood under Attack: How Patriarchal Ideologies Shape Mothers and Children’s Experiences of Domestic Violence in Italy and Türkiye**

### ***Patriarchy, Religion, and Socially Constructed Gendered Roles***

Patriarchy finds its historical roots in ancient societies, where power and authority were concentrated in the hands of men (Duncan, 1994). Early agricultural societies often practised patrilineal inheritance, where property, wealth, and social status were passed down from fathers to sons. The eldest man, or patriarch, held authority over the household, making decisions and controlling resources (Brumfiel, 1992; Trigger, 2003). Women were generally excluded from positions of power and had limited rights and autonomy (Moghadam, 2004). The transmission of power and resources from father to son was crucial in perpetuating patriarchal systems (Lerner, 1986).

In addition, patriarchy has always had a reciprocal relationship with the interpretation and instrumentalisation of religious beliefs (Ozdemir-Sarigil & Sarigil, 2021). Many ancient religious texts, such as the Bible or Qur’an, which represent respectively the dominant

religious confessions in the Italian and the Turkish contexts religious prevalence (Ozdemir-Sarigil & Sarigil, 2021; Sawe, 2019), include passages that might seem to assign subordinate roles to women whilst positioning men as authority figures (Barlas, 2019; Ruether, 2001; Wadud, 1999). For instance, some passages of the Bible might be instrumentalised to set up a hierarchical structure within the family, where men are positioned as the head of the household. In 1 Corinthians 11:3, it is written: *“But I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God”* (Holy Bible: New International Version, 2011). However, there can be different interpretations of the same Bible; indeed, some scholars (e.g., Bøsterud, 2021) argue that the Bible promotes gender equality by displaying role models such as Mary, mother of Christ. In the same way, certain interpretations of the Qur’an denote women as having a secondary status compared to men. Surah Al-Baqarah (2:228) states: *“And due to them [i.e., the wives] is similar to what is expected of them, according to what is reasonable. But the men have a degree over them [in responsibility and authority].”* (cited in Sahih International, 1997). This verse is often understood to suggest that men have a higher level of authority and responsibility over women, reinforcing a patriarchal framework where men are considered superior, and women are expected to be subordinate. Commentaries such as those by Al-Tabari, and traditional interpretations as examined by contemporary scholars (e.g., Adel et al., 2025; Alfani et al., 2025; Fidhayanti & Muhammad, 2024) portray men as superior and women as subordinate, especially within the family structure. Feminist scholars argue that such readings distort the ethical balance of the verse and reflect historical male-dominated frameworks rather than *Qur’anic intent* for justice and equity (e.g., Adel et al., 2025; Erwani & Siregar, 2025; Fidhayanti & Muhammad, 2024).

By *Qur’anic intent*, these scholars refer to the overarching moral vision of the Qur’an—emphasising mutual dignity, spiritual equality, and justice between genders, as seen in verses such as Qur’an 4:1 and 33:35 (Sahih International, 1997), which affirm the equal worth and responsibility of men and women in the eyes of God (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002).

As further discussed below, gendered power dynamics, plausibly derived from the interpretation of sacred texts and/or from traditional patriarchal structures, clearly influence socially constructed gendered roles and rules, which influence men's and women's societal expectations and behaviour (Avishai et al., 2015; Dankwa, 2018; Godal & Hatta, 2024). Progress has been made regarding women's rights and empowerment; nowadays, for instance, most women can legally own properties, possess assets, and inherit properties, which was historically restricted to men (Gandhi, 2018; World Bank, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2022). However, patriarchal principles still shape relations through socially constructed gendered roles and norms (Mshweshwe, 2020). Women continue to face systematic barriers, including gender discrimination, unequal pay, and limited representation in positions of power and leadership (Mshweshwe, 2020). The latest Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2022) shows that significant gender gaps persist across various dimensions. According to the above report, it is estimated that it will take 155 years to close the political empowerment gender gap (women's participation in politics), 151 years for the economic participation and opportunity gender gap, and 22 years for the educational attainment gender gap. Progress toward closing the health and survival gender gap remains undefined, which is alarming. The above findings highlight the ongoing challenges in achieving gender equality and the need for continued efforts to address gender disparities in various spheres of society. Amongst the latter are family and family courts, as further argued in the next sections.

### ***Socially Constructed Gendered Roles, Power Imbalance, and Domestic Violence***

The above-mentioned socially constructed gender roles and norms continue to reinforce traditional expectations of women as caregivers and men as breadwinners, often placing the burden on women to balance work and family responsibilities (Mohajan,

2022). Patriarchal ideologies perpetuate, therefore, power imbalances, positioning women in passive and submissive roles while granting men power and control in various spheres, including households (Kabeer, 2016). These ‘traditional’ power dynamics, which clearly determine experiences and opportunities available to women, are often enforced through various means, including systemic discrimination, stigmatisation, and even violence against women (GBV) (Kabeer, 2016). GBV is defined as any acts of violence, coercion, or discrimination that occur based on an individual’s gender identity or perceived gender roles (Skinner et al., 2005). It encompasses various forms of violence perpetrated against individuals due to their gender (Donato, 2020). The Council of Europe (2023) defines GBV as encompassing all physical and psychological acts committed against individuals because of their gender, including sexual violence, coercion, and control. The global prevalence of GBV dramatically highlights the lingering effects of patriarchal norms and attitudes: According to World Health Organization (2021), approximately one in three women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by a non-partner in their lifetime.

Within the realm of GBV, DV is a significant form of violence that occurs within the domestic sphere, particularly in intimate partner relationships and family units (Koçak & Aygör, 2025). DV can manifest as physical, sexual, or emotional abuse inflicted by a partner or family member upon another household member. It is important to note that DV affects individuals of all genders, although women and girls tend to be disproportionately affected (World Health Organization, 2021). It is crucial to bear in mind that DV not only affects the direct victim but can also profoundly affect witnesses, such as children, where they are present (Edleson, 1999). Children exposed to DV can experience severe emotional, psychological, and developmental consequences: witnessing violence between caregivers can have long-lasting effects on their well-being and perpetuate the cycle of violence in future generations (Holt *et al.*, 2008). It is, therefore, essential to address the impact of DV on mothers and their children, providing support and interventions to break the cycle

(Holt, 2017). However, mothers and children might find hostile, patriarchal environments if/when trying to escape DV, as further discussed below.

The next section aims to shed light on how patriarchal ideologies are reflected in the general perceptions of motherhood, also influencing mothers' (and children's) experiences of DV.

### ***Patriarchal View of Motherhood***

In patriarchal societies like Italy and Türkiye, motherhood is often defined and regulated within specific gendered roles and expectations (Glenn, 2016). As mentioned above, traditional gendered roles assign men the role of the primary breadwinners and women as responsible for childbearing and child-rearing. Therefore, men are expected to provide for the family financially and assume roles of authority and decision-making outside the domestic sphere (Arendell, 2000). It is believed that women are expected to prioritise their roles as mothers and caregivers, dedicating themselves to the care and upbringing of their children (Korkut & Eslen-Ziya, 2011; Salonen & Koivisto, 2024). Patriarchal rules surrounding motherhood involve the idealisation of the self-sacrificing maternal figure while devaluing women's other identities and aspirations: mothers are expected to prioritise their motherhood duties above their own needs and desires (Luhr *et al.*, 2022; Yavorsky *et al.*, 2015). If they do not, they might be portrayed as inadequate or neglectful mothers (Guendouzi, 2006). This division of labour derives from the patriarchal power structure discussed above but, at the same time, continues to reinforce patriarchy (Grinza *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, socially constructed gendered roles continue to limit women/mothers' autonomy, career opportunities, and personal aspirations like patrilineal inheritance did in ancient societies.

Mothers continue to face societal pressure and guilt for pursuing their own goals (barring motherhood), which can hinder their personal and professional development (Zimmerman *et al.*, 2008). As a result, mothers might become strongly dependent on their male

breadwinners. As further discussed in later sections, whilst mothering in a patriarchal society is certainly challenging, it is even more so for mothers who find themselves navigating the intersection of motherhood and GBV within the domestic sphere (DV). Mothers are indeed burdened with the responsibility of ensuring their children's well-being and happiness, even in the context of abusive relationships (Hester, 2011). They face the conflicting pressures of protecting their children from harm while also being expected to maintain a cohesive family unit, regardless of the abusive behaviour of their partners (Hester, 2011). The next section focuses on what happens if/when mothers decide to end their abusive relationships in patriarchal societies such as Italy and Türkiye.

### **What if Mothers Want to Divorce Due to Domestic Violence?**

Mothers who decide to end their abusive relationships might face gendered family court decisions and/or stigmatisation due to strongly embedded patriarchal ideologies (Kelebek-Küçükarslan & Atasü-Topcuoğlu, 2024). To exemplify this, the sections below discuss mothering through DV in the Italian and Turkish contexts.

#### ***The Italian Context: Patriarchy Has Entered Family Courts***

In Italy, patriarchal ideologies seem to be strongly embedded within family courts. This is especially clear when looking at divorce due to DV and related child litigation cases. As argued by Feresin (2020) and Romito *et al.* (2017), whilst the Italian legislation does not explicitly mention PAS, the latter is often used in family courts, where mothers try to end their relationships with abusive partners. Feresin (2020) investigated the above tendency by conducting a qualitative study with thirteen abused mothers who have been through divorce and child custody decisions, fifteen social workers,

and fifteen psychologists. According to the above study, mothers are denoted as the main carers for their children; they should protect them from violence, even when their father perpetrates it. Mothers are accountable for whatever happens to their children. However, if protecting offspring involves divorcing from abusive fathers, then mothers are seen as frustrated and vindictive women who are making false accusations, despite evidence showing that the contrary is true (most reported cases of child abuse represent the truth as shown by Feresin, 2020). The process of transformation from a lovely, nurturing, and protective mother into a diabolical, vindictive, manipulative, and unreliable mother is unclear. Abused mothers do it all wrong. In family courts, abused mothers might become alienators, and abusive fathers might become victims.

Most child litigation cases end up with mothers being accused of PAS, hence being victimised once more (victims of their abuser and victims of family courts and professionals, who blame them of alienating their partners through false accusations) and children's voices being generally ignored (Feresin, 2020). Fathers' violent behaviour is utterly forgotten as attention is shifted towards fathers being or feeling alienated from their families. One wonders if fathers being alienated might not be a 'straightforward' consequence of their violent behaviour. Yet, professionals too often assume that mothers try to undermine the relationship between children and fathers by making false accusations against the latter. As highlighted by Meier (2009:243):

In the majority of these cases, fallacious psychological or custody evaluations and PAS opinions contribute to courts' dismissing the abuse claims and characterizing the protective mother as an alienator.

This implies that children are stripped away from their (abused) mothers to be given to their violent fathers, either with sole custody or equally balanced shared custody. As brilliantly illustrated in the Three Planet Model (Hester, 2011; Radford & Hester, 2006), mothers live in a dilemma: they are expected to report their abusive

partners (criminal justice planet), to protect their children (child welfare planet), yet to preserve their families, facilitating mediation, visitation, and contact with their abusive ex-husband in case of divorce (family court planet).

Whilst the use of PAS is not mentioned within the Italian legislation, a series of family laws support its use within family courts, as further discussed below.

### ***Patriarchal or Family Laws?***

When mothers try to escape abusive relationships, they arguably face a series of patriarchal/gendered family laws. Law 54/2006, that is, the 'Joint Custody Law', establishes the right of the child to have both parents, arguably at all costs (Feresin, 2020; Ros Velasco, 2017). The above law is consistent with the 'good-enough parent' theory, according to which the presence of both parents should be considered important for the optimal development of the child, as long as both parents are 'good enough', where 'good enough' is not specified, hence open to the subjective interpretations of professionals (Choate & Engstrom, 2014). The relationship between the 'good enough father' and the 'violent husband/father' is unclear (Radford & Hester, 2006).

No parent should therefore be 'alienated', that is, if one considers wanting to divorce from an abusive husband/father as a form of 'alienation'. Another family law further underpins patriarchal attitudes within family courts - that is, the Pillon Decree 2018. The latter states that parents seeking divorce must go through and pay for compulsory mediation with professional family mediators, even if divorce is due to DV; the main goal of mediators must be to ensure the family unit is preserved and that children are equally shared between parents (Feresin, 2020) as if they were 'parcels'. As argued by Gostoli (2018:n.p.):

[Family] Law is based on a need that we believe to be vital: making sure that the familial conflict does not reach the court...law starts from two assumptions: that women lie when they report violence...and that the child's rejection of one of the parents is due to the other one exercising psychological manipulation to generate "parental alienation"

In a country like Italy, where in 2020, about 58% of femicides were committed by male partners or ex-male partners (Statista, 2021), Italian family laws do not seem to consider GBV dynamics and mothers' and children's experiences of DV. Family laws contestably fail to protect mothers and children. Allegations of DV are dismissed in the first place, prioritising the right of children to both parents (law 54/2006), hence the preservation of the family unit, arguably at all costs. Little or no attention is given to children's rights to be heard and to be protected (UNICEF, 1989) and to The Istanbul Convention, which was ratified by Italy (together with 36 European countries) in 2013, and which aims at preventing/fighting against the globally recognised phenomena of GBV and DV (Council of Europe, 2023).

Whilst both fathers and mothers are certainly important for the optimal development of the child, that should not override allegations of DV made by mothers (and children). As highlighted by Radford & Hester (2006), professionals should acknowledge that DV is a gendered phenomenon, with women being usually the victims and men being usually the perpetrators. If allegations of DV are made, protection measures for victims should be put in place, without forgetting that DV does not necessarily end once mothers and fathers stop co-habiting. On the contrary, post-separation violence is rather common (this should be considered, especially when making decisions around shared custody). Professionals should also bear in mind that DV has a long-term impact on mothers' and children's mental and physical well-being (Radford & Hester, 2006). Mothers and children who seek justice should not, therefore,

be re-victimised by institutions through the (mis)use of the empirically unsound PAS. The validity of the latter is further discussed in the next section.

### **PAS: Are Mothers Alienated or Alienating?**

As mentioned above, mothering is not easy, and mothering through DV is certainly more difficult, as mothers find themselves wanting to protect themselves and their children from abusive husbands and fathers (Radford & Hester, 2006). However, if they seek justice through institutions, they might be diagnosed with PAS, and their children might be stripped away from them.

PAS was introduced by the psychiatric Gardner in 1987 (Gardner, 1987), to indicate a syndrome that affects mothers who try to convince their children that their father is abusive, to obtain some form of 'vendetta' against their husbands. Gardner suggested that most allegations of abuse made by mothers and children are false – a 'mere' product of mothers' PAS.

Gardner provided no guidance on how to recognise true allegations from fabricated allegations (due to PAS); he failed to provide criteria for understanding whether a child is hostile against their father due to the latter being violent or because of their mother presenting PAS (Meier, 2009). It is important to highlight that Gardner based his arguments on his own clinical practice, so his work is self-referential (Hoult, 2006; Meier, 2009). Besides, he worked within child litigation cases related to allegations of child sexual abuse made by mothers, but he also admittedly believed that Western societies were too punitive against paedophilia, considering sexual activities between adults and children a natural and beneficial occurrence (Gardner, 1991; Hoult, 2006). As pointed out by Meier (2009) and Hoult (2006), Gardner also believed that women gained gratification from being beaten and from receiving men's sperm. Gardner had strong positionalities in terms of gender and family dynamics, and his own positionalities, rather than empirical evidence, seem to have dictated his theories, including PAS.

Despite the above significant critiques, it is not clear why family courts in Italy (and beyond) have been so receptive to PAS, which dominates custody litigation. One wonders if PAS is used to ‘punish’ mothers who dare make allegations against their husbands, hence their children’s father. Abused mothers who seek justice for themselves and their children risk being diagnosed with PAS and being separated from their children (Feresin, 2020), as per Gardner’s (questionable) recommendations (Meier, 2009).

Remaining within the Italian context, very few studies, such as Lavadera *et al.* (2012), claim that most child litigation cases (based on a sample of 96 cases from 2000 to 2006) end up with mothers having custody, despite being the alienating parent. Lavadera *et al.* (2012) also state that the alienating parent is usually the children’s primary carer. One wonders, therefore, if children ‘estrangle’ the alienated parent because the latter is abusive and/or because the alienated parent is absent and/or because their mothers have ‘brainwashed’ them against their fathers. Additionally, for the reasons discussed above, the criteria used to diagnose PAS should be heavily scrutinised.

In March 2022, The UN Women’s Commission on the Status of Women denounced the (misogynistic) use of PAS in Italy and in the world, asking for urgent action to protect mothers and children (Francica, 2022). In June 2023, the United Nations urged governments worldwide to take urgent steps to protect mothers and children who go through child custody battles (OHCHR, 2023).

The next section discusses how embedded patriarchal ideologies shape women/mothers’ experiences of DV and divorce in Türkiye.

### **Domestic Violence, Motherhood, and Divorce in Türkiye**

Women/mothers in Türkiye experience more DV than men due to the gendered power dynamics discussed above (Arai *et al.*, 2021; Kızılırmak *et al.*, 2022; Yüksel-Şahin & Çanakçı, 2022), with

an obvious impact on their mental and physical well-being. In addition, as mentioned above, witnessing DV can significantly damage children's health and well-being (Arai *et al.*, 2021). Besides, research shows that DV is not usually limited to intimate-partner violence, but it also includes child abuse (physical/emotional/sexual) perpetrated by the same perpetrator of intimate-partner violence (Fantuzzo & Fusco, 2007; Holt *et al.*, 2008; Kimball, 2016; James-Hanman & Holt, 2021; MacMillan *et al.*, 2013; Waugh, 2002; Radford & Hester, 2006). Children might also engage in behaviours that could physically hurt them, such as trying to prevent violence between their parents (Davies *et al.*, 1998; Co-ordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse, 2014).

For mothers who experience DV, divorce can provide an escape from their abusive relationship and the opportunity to rebuild their lives with their children (Kelebek-Küçükarslan & Cankurtaran, 2020). It allows them to set up boundaries, regain autonomy, and create a safe environment for themselves and their children. Strikingly, 75% of divorced or separated women in Türkiye have been victims of physical and/or sexual violence (Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, 2015). This is twice the rate of violence among all women in Türkiye. Whilst many factors might lead to divorce, DV still is one of the main causes of divorce in the Turkish context (Coşkun & Sarlak, 2020).

Like the Italian context, a predominant focus in parental alienation studies is on divorced families (e.g., see Dolanbay, 2022; Torun *et al.*, 2022a; Turgut, 2021; Uçar, 2022; Ulutürk, 2019; Yurdakul, 2022). The existing research on PAS in Türkiye has focused on examining the experiences and emotions of fathers who may feel alienated from their children (e.g., see Üner-Altuntaş & Ziyalar, 2018; Torun, 2011; Torun *et al.*, 2022a; Torun *et al.*, 2022b). Research fails to acknowledge that the alleged alienation experienced by children may be a natural response to the abusive environment rather than a result of mothers alienating their male partners. Children's refusal of their fathers may stem from the harmful behaviour they see and experience rather than being influenced by their mothers. Concerningly, there is a noticeable gap in research about understanding

the perspectives and experiences of mothers and children within the context of DV and PAS. Very limited attention has been given to understanding the challenges and struggles faced by mothers (often primary carers and main victims of DV) seeking divorce from abusive partners and who might have been accused of PAS.

Those Turkish studies that have tried to shed light on mothers' experiences of divorce in such a deeply patriarchal society have revealed that mothers face indeed enormous struggles (Çil, 2019; Karakaya, 2018). The decision to divorce may have significant consequences for women's social status and economic well-being due to the deeply ingrained gendered beliefs and roles discussed above (Çil, 2019; Karakaya, 2018). A range of factors contributes to mothers' reluctance to divorce in Türkiye (Kucur & Kelebek, 2021). These include financial dependence on the husband, fear of the husband's reaction to divorce, threats made by the husband (e.g., death threats or not being able to see their children), opposition from the child/ren, and the fear of losing custody or visitation rights of their children (Çil, 2019; Can and Aksu, 2016). Concerns about their children's future (their safety, their education, and future because of financial constraints) and societal pressures also play a significant role in a mothers' decision-making process (Can and Aksu, 2016). Moreover, mothers may face financial obstacles that prevent them from pursuing divorce (Karakaya, 2018). In addition, they often experience feelings of fear, helplessness, and social stigma associated with divorce (Karakaya, 2018). This means that women might decide to endure abuse within the marriage to protect themselves and their children from stigma or due to threats from their partners (Karakaya, 2018).

The patriarchal attitudes and gendered power dynamics in Turkish society contribute to the difficulties women face pre- and post-divorce. Mothers who decide to divorce can experience violence from their male partners during the divorce process and even afterwards (Radford & Hester, 2006; Saunders & Oglesby, 2016; Spearman *et al.*, 2023; Thiara, 2010). They may face social isolation and negative reactions from society. This is because, consistent with Hester's (2011) Three Planet Model and with the Italian context,

societal norms and stereotypes often blame the mother for the breakdown of the family, even when she is the victim of abuse (Aslan & Şeker, 2013). This reflects the power imbalance and societal views prioritising men's perspectives and definitions within male-dominated societies (Maundeni, 2000).

Considering the above climate, the courage to leave an abusive relationship and pursue divorce challenges societal expectations and disrupts the status quo (Farhadi Babadi et al., 2024). It can trigger discomfort and resistance from others, including other married women, who may perceive mothers who divorce as a threat to their own marital stability, given that they challenge established gender roles, hence 'traditional' motherhood and family structure:

A woman with a strong adherence to traditional sex roles may resist restructuring her new family as a single-mother family, since she believes either that a single-mother family is a deficient one or that it is inappropriate to take on sex roles traditionally accorded to men (like being disciplinarian, breadwinner, etc.) (Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013:58).

This fear or insecurity can contribute to negative reactions and a sense of alienation toward the mother seeking to escape DV (Can and Aksu, 2016). Not only mothers in Türkiye are more at risk than fathers to be victims of DV (as discussed above), but they might also be alienated from the whole society because of their choice to run away from an abusive relationship. Therefore, deeply rooted patriarchal ideologies arguably make it almost impossible for mothers to escape abusive relationships through divorce (Coşkun & Sarlak, 2020; Yaşar-Ekici, 2014). In Türkiye, DV, specifically GBV, remains a prevalent issue, yet comprehensive state policies to address the problem are lacking (Arkadaş-Thibert *et al.*, 2017; Balta-Peltekoğlu & Tozlu, 2017). It is worth noting Türkiye's recent withdrawal from the above-mentioned Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2023), which has raised concerns about the potential impact on the rights and safety of women in Türkiye (Çamurcu, 2022).

To summarise, patriarchal norms and related gendered roles and societal pressures not only make motherhood (and womanhood in general) challenging but also contribute to women's/mothers' decision to stay in unhappy marriages in a patriarchal society like Türkiye. The next section briefly summarises the above arguments and highlights hopes for the future.

### **Conclusive Thoughts and Hopes for the Future**

As discussed above, DV is a gendered phenomenon that sees women as the main victims and men as the main perpetrators (Council of Europe, 2023; Hester, 2011). These dynamics are possibly related to historical patriarchal ideologies, culture, and the interpretation of religious texts, which denote women as submissive and passive and men as assertive and decisive (Essien & Ukpog, 2012). In patriarchal and religious societies, such as Italy and Türkiye, heterosexual couples are often expected to divide their labour accordingly: women are expected to take responsibility for domestic chores, childbearing, and child-rearing, and men are expected to assume financial and decisional power. Thus, motherhood can certainly bring about self-sacrifice and guilt, especially if women dare to have inspirations other than motherhood. Women should find accomplishment within their roles of mother and wife. Unfortunately, patriarchal ideologies persist within the context of DV, leading to the stigmatisation of mothers who seek divorce and the misdiagnosis of PAS when they fight for custody due to an abusive and violent father (Fitzgerald, 2023). As if mothering through DV was not challenging enough, mothers who decide to end their abusive relationships seem to be blamed by both societies and institutions. If allegations of DV are made, institutions, such as family courts, seem to prioritise the preservation of 'traditional' families and fathers' alienation rather than the protection of victims.

GBV is an international human-rights emergency, accounted for by different global agencies (e.g., Council of Europe, 2023), but the Italian and Turkish legal systems (amongst others) seem to give

little attention to global gendered power dynamics, approaching allegations of DV made by mothers with patriarchal attitudes and unsound theories.

Whilst balancing the rights of both parents while prioritising the child's best interests and considering the history of DV can be complex, professionals should keep gendered power dynamics in mind and avoid using any theories that lack empirical evidence, especially considering such a sensitive matter. The safety and well-being of victims should be prioritised in the first place. Mothers might otherwise decide to remain in abusive relationships (with clear implications for children) to avoid patriarchal attitudes, disbelief, victim-blaming (Epstein & Goodman, 2019; Lorenz *et al.*, 2019), and possibly being separated from their children because of PAS. Understanding mothers' experiences and perspectives is also crucial for developing comprehensive interventions, support systems, and legal frameworks that address their unique challenges. It is, therefore, essential to shift the focus of research towards a more gender-inclusive approach.

Judges, lawyers, and court professionals (and beyond) should undergo gender-sensitivity training to recognise and challenge patriarchal biases ingrained within policy and practice, which generate injustice and violate human rights (Ros Velasco, 2017). The above steps are necessary for a safe, fair, and just legal environment (Holmes & Jones, 2010). There also needs to be coherence across different agencies: the three planets (Hester, 2011) must be aligned to provide the right support to mothers and children victims of DV.

It is important to note that the impact of patriarchal rules and biases can vary across different areas and legal systems (e.g., Zaccour, 2018). An in-depth analysis of specific cases, local practices, and legal frameworks are necessary to fully understand and address the influence of patriarchy in court decisions related to child custody in the context of DV.

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By bringing together various perspectives, this collection seeks to highlight the multiplicity of maternal experiences and to challenge the dominant cultural narratives that often marginalize or silence certain voices. Motherhood, as this volume demonstrates, is not a monolithic experience but a deeply personal and socially constructed role that is constantly negotiated and redefined. This volume aims to move beyond idealised and reductive representations of motherhood, offering instead a more nuanced, critical, and empathetic exploration of the maternal experience. It is with this purpose in mind that *Beyond Natural: Interdisciplinary Discourses on Motherhood* attempts at illustrating ongoing discussions on motherhood from different approaches. By drawing on the insights of literature, cinema and TV, cultural studies, law and economics, we hope to contribute to an ongoing conversation about motherhood that is as diverse and multifaceted as the mothers themselves. Through this interdisciplinary dialogue, we seek to challenge dominant narratives, address systemic inequalities, and imagine more just and supportive frameworks for all those who mother.

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### **Interdisciplinary Discourses**

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