



## CHAPTER 3

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# Non-Motherhood and the Narrative of the Self in Nuria Labari's *The Best Mother of the World*

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Best Mother of the World* (2019) is an autobiographical novel by Spanish writer and journalist Nuria Labari. The main focal point of the book is the life journey of a self-actualized middle-class Catalan woman in her thirties. After going through IVF treatment several times and giving birth to two girls with a small age gap between them, Labari's protagonist



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tries to reconstruct her identity through the lens of a new maternal experience. The main character is a modern big-city woman, who claims to never have had a ‘maternal instinct’, yet one day she was suddenly struck with an overwhelming desire to have children. Lauren Jade Martin (2017) argues that biology also plays a greatly important part, since each body dictates an individual timeline that cannot be ignored. Hence, becoming or not becoming a mother is not only a moral/ethical choice. Instead, it is rather a complex decision or circumstance related to various factors, such as the body of the individual and the ones surrounding them (the partner or the surrogate, when necessary), the time (both individual and shared), the place, the political, economic, and cultural context. Therefore, what is believed to be an individual decision might in fact be the result sum of circumstances.

After facing fertility issues and thereby requiring an ‘artificial’ way of conceiving, she feels a deep fracture both in her own consciousness and her relationships. The novel then becomes an exercise in auto-analysis. Labari’s character goes through her key experiences, related to femininity, focusing on her identity in relation to public discourse. Trying to articulate her new self, the woman rediscovers her relationship with her partner, her mother, her work, her children, her career, and, of course, herself. Yet the book ends with a twist, which is rarely seen in cultural representations of fertility struggles and renders Labari’s work unique and worthy of discussion: the main character decides to abort her third, unexpected, pregnancy. Moreover, she does not have a ‘socially justified’ reason to do that: she simply does not want a third child.

When approaching reproduction-related topics and, subsequently, the discourse surrounding them, three factors should be taken into consideration: time, space, and politics, all of which go hand in hand with individual decisions (Stuvøy 2018, 34). Labari’s novel was published in 2019 in Spain, where feminist modes of thinking are well articulated and visible even on the superficial cultural level. As María Luisa Balaguer (2019) explains, the Francoist regime framed women as passive objects with a predestined life purpose: to reproduce and to take care of others. When the dictatorship came to its end, Spanish feminist discourse re-emerged based on individual voices that aimed to de-codify patriarchal system and redefine women as active subjects (29). In recent decades, Spanish feminists have been keen to eliminate persisting forms of discrimination and violence (Heffernan and Stone 2021, 126) and to revisit women’s roles in society, concentrating on very specific issues. Nowadays,

feminism in Spain has gained a micro-focal perspective, with each voice in the feminist chorus focusing on a specific problem: migration, work conditions, reproductive choices and rights, sexual identity, public image of women, and equality in child-care, among many others.<sup>1</sup> During the II Republic and the Francoist regime, feminists had to tackle basic foundational issues, such as representing women as citizens and human beings equal to men. Nowadays, Spanish feminism has the possibility of focusing on more specific needs and demands, which means that feminism in Spain can be considered to have been successfully embedded in culture and society and feminist modes of thinking well-established. Yet it shouldn't be forgotten that social context is impactful too: feminist values will be shared more widely among middle-class, educated, urban women than in closed suburban communities. The revival of women's fiction, together with vivid feminist expressions in social media (e.g. Instagram accounts of Moderna del pueblo, Marta Piedra, and Lola Vendetta, amongst others), annual manifestations of 8M, numerous artists from pop culture (such as the singer Rosalía), all of which respond to the feminist discourse, provided the ideal context for Labari's book to emerge.

Since ART and abortion constitute an important component of Labari's book, before diving into the analysis of the novel, I will briefly touch upon the situation of fertility-related matters in Spain. According to the data provided by Eurostat, Spain's fertility rates are low and decreasing (from 1.32 in 2012 to 1.19 in 2020) (Eurostat [n.d.](#)). As Heffernan and Stone explain, low natality rates lead to glorification of pregnancy and motherhood and the emergence of pro-natalist discourse (124): since society wants or needs to propagate itself, it becomes keen to push individuals into making the 'right' decision and leaves very little to no place for alternative life practices or experiences. Pro-natalist

<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that, as well as responding to feminist ideas, Labari's book also pertains to a specific modern literary tendency of journalists producing literary or auto-fictional texts on 'trendy' topics, which seems to be an international process (a similar example could be Caitlin Moran's bestseller *How to Be a Woman*). This type of writing, while not necessarily considered as prestigious by the literary elite, is nonetheless important in that it provides easy-to-connect discourse and content which are accessible to broader audiences. Labari's novel was published with a slightly non-mainstream, yet still reader-friendly, publishing house (Literatura random house) and contributes to the type of lively discussion on womanhood and motherhood that is characteristic of contemporary maternal, autofictional texts.

discourse also causes polarization in society: the representations of the ones who want/or have children and the ones who do not become fixed and framed. The narratives about not wanting children, abortion, or infertility become lateral, marginal ones. Labari's novel, then, seems to be intent on broadening the spectrum of images and narratives that surround motherhood.

Due to socioeconomical circumstances and increased emancipation, Spanish women start planning families later, which may also lead to reproductive challenges. As stated by Ido Alon and Jaime Pinilla (2021), "since 2008, the volume of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) in Spain has increased by nearly 50%, reaching 149,337 In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF) and 34,100 Intrauterine Insemination (IUI) cycles in 2018. Spain is the largest European ART provider and fourth globally" (1). It is also worth mentioning that, while there is social security cover for these procedures, only 10% or 20% of the centres are public and there is also a list of criteria for eligibility, where age, other children or civil status can be significant factors (Romero Caro 2022). Decreasing natality rates and increasing demand for ART might constitute factors that influence Labari's particular representation of motherhood: on one hand, she reflects on the process of becoming a mother through ART and discusses this in contrast to the 'natural' way of getting pregnant, thereby introducing alternative ways of becoming a parent into the discourse. On the other hand, the author concludes her text with an abortion, thus providing an indirect response to pro-natalist narratives.

After having been strictly banned by the Francoist regime which imposed strict catholic values on society, abortion emerges in Spanish legal discourse from 1978. However, it took several years of debate and research until the more liberal abortion laws were established in 2010, when women gained the right to abort until 14 weeks of gestation without medical reason (Márquez Murrieta 2010). In 2022, the Spanish government announced the follow-up of the abortion law and plans to allow teenagers to abort without parental consent. According to the official statistics of the Spanish Health Ministry, annually about 10 of 1000 women have an abortion, the predominant age group is 20–29 years (around 15% of total abortions), and around 85% of women choose private centres over the public hospitals (Sanidad 2022). Different issues related to abortion, such as pro-natalist concern in health sector or lack of accessibility to legal abortion for the more socially vulnerable groups seem to be widely discussed both in legislative institutions and via various types of media. However, it

seems that individual narratives of abortion, especially atypical ones when pregnancy is not a threat to a woman or the woman is not characterized by any level of social vulnerability, are not pronounced loudly enough. This might be the reason why Labari chooses to conclude her own narrative about motherhood precisely with this topic.

The aim of this chapter is to show how Labari's protagonist seeks to find her individual self while negotiating the various pressures imposed by society. As previously noted, contemporary Spanish society still incites its members to procreate, disregarding the fact that circumstances now are very different: more women become mothers later in life and use ART, while others choose abortion and childlessness. Therefore, the concept of motherhood is undergoing a shift, becoming more complex, less unilateral. Correspondingly, fragmented and individualized narratives about motherhood, as is the case for Labari's character, are emerging, yet they still have to find a valid place within official discourse. In the following analysis of the novel with its rather ironic title, *The Best Mother of the World*, I will centre on three aspects, aiming to underline the protagonist's way of negotiating infertility and motherhood: economics and ethics of non-motherhood; infertility and femininity; and abortion and the narrative of choice. Since Labari's book is written from an openly socio-critical perspective, I will use the concepts of power and biopolitics, established by Michel Foucault in his lectures, published in *Society Must Be Defended* (2003) together with Nancy Chodorow's concept of individuation, introduced in "Family Structure and Feminine Personality" (1995).<sup>2</sup> Both Foucault and Chodorow think about individual existences as the ones that are tightly interwoven in social tissue: Labari's female is also trying to understand her place in the society and keep her head above the stream of unifying narratives about motherhood. Foucault's approach will help to underline the clash between individual and official powers, while Chodorow's reflection on individuation will shed light on the protagonist's struggle to maintain her subjectivity while being cornered by the master discourse.

<sup>2</sup>Chodorow's (1995) central argument is that women define themselves more in relation to other people than men do (44). While this argument might seem opposed to the modern feminist aim to represent women as independent creatures, Labari's book allows us to engage with Chodorow's perspective, as the protagonist reflects on her experiences precisely based on her social binds.

## ECONOMICS AND ETHICS OF NON-MOTHERHOOD

Assisted reproduction in Labari's novel is presented using three main leit-motifs: first, the emphasis on the artificiality of the process in contrast to the narratives of pregnancy as an almost mystical experience; second, the economic aspect in relation to the ethics; and third, the power struggle. The perspective from which Labari's character approaches ART in *The Best Mother in the World* is a peculiar one, since it is depicted from the critical socio-political lens, rather than an intimate one. Curiously enough, Labari's narrator is distinctively open about her body, emotions, and choices, yet the reader never gets to know the reason why she must choose ART. Discursive ambivalence is one of the most important descriptors of the protagonist: she combines rational, almost 'sterile' reasoning with chaotic, emotional outbursts; her critical, woke, feminist ideas are at times replaced by poetic reflection. While, on one hand, these narrative clashes create a certain scepticism towards the integrity of the protagonist, from my perspective they also generate a sense of authenticity: Labari's character seems to be a real and genuine person who shifts and changes, rather than an inflexible representation of certain ideals or ideologies.

The dichotomy of 'natural' vs 'unnatural' reproduction is depicted in the novel through the generational quarrel considering women's choice to use IVF. One of the peak conflicts in the book is the one between Labari's character and her mother, and which evolves around the spontaneity of getting pregnant. The mother argues that infertility and even the conscious desire to have children is a modern problem, while the 'traditional' way to have children is by accident: "I will seem very old to you, but these things only happen to your generation now. I never wanted to have children. Not like your generation does now, I want to say. I ended up pregnant without knowing it, without going for it or thinking about it" (Labari 2019, 14). To begin with, the mother's statement highlights the problematic of choice: in her times, having children was not something to reflect on, rather, it was something that happened to a woman. Hence, the 'naturalness' of having children is not only related to the physical side of the process, the way to conceive them, but also to the lack of deliberate decision: the woman falls pregnant as one becomes ill, without having an active say in it. This statement forms part of a traditionalist discourse, based on a collective frame of thinking instead of the individual narrative: the mother does not listen actively to her daughter, she reacts with pre-established polarized phrasing, implying that there is a right way to do things

in contrast to the modern, ‘problematic’ way. Here, we observe the tension between two generations of women and two interiorized ways of narrating themselves: the mother is ‘trained’ to assume her role without reflection while the daughter is a part of a modern, self-analytical generation. This conflict reminds us of Chodorow’s scholarship which argues that, in Western middle-class families, the mother-daughter conflict is normally a conflict between “regression, passivity, dependence” and “progression, activity, independence” (65). However, it must be noted that the independence and individuality of Labari’s protagonist are complex: her having to make a conscious decision about how and when to have children is forced on her by her body and the process itself is a regulated one. Therefore, the process of individuation becomes a real struggle.

Labari’s narrative about ART almost immediately starts with numbers: “control of ovarian stimulation: 500 euros. Extraction of oocytes: 1200 euros. Lab: 1500 euros. Transfer of embryos: 300 euros” (2019, 23), the woman enumerates in the chapter “I Can’t Have Children”. She also comments bluntly on all the additional costs and indicates prices for her prescription in a chart (see Fig. 3.1).

These passages of the text are written in a sterile, emotionless prose, which allies with the bureaucratic aspect of the process itself: while ‘natural’ parents celebrate the surprise of the pregnancy, the woman of the novel is dealing with receipts, payments, and forms. The woman quotes the document that her husband is asked to sign, which indicates that his “reproductive material can be used ‘twelve months after his death to fecundate Ms. \_\_\_\_\_’” (Labari 2019, 35). The use of documents and medical records demystifies the process of becoming parents, almost

– Puregon 900 ui. . . . .	359,00€
– Puregon 600 ui. . . . .	274,74€
– Cetotride. 7 viales de 0,25 mg. . . . .	248,70€
– Ovitrelle, 250 mg (1 dosis) . . . . .	50,63€
– Blastoestimulina, 10 óvulos . . . . .	6,95€
– Zitromax 1 g, 1 sobre . . . . .	3,93€
– Aзитromicina Ratio 500MG, 3 c. . . . .	5,90€
– Progefic, 60 cápsulas. 250 mg . . . . .	38,90€
Total: . . . . .	988,75€

Fig. 3.1 Fragment of the page 24 of *The Best Mother of the World*

dehumanizes those going through it, and even renders the experience vulgar: as the protagonist comments, “there is nothing dirtier than paying to be a mother, yet I put the bill into my wallet as softly as a whoremonger slips bills on some naked chest” (24). Labari’s character deliberately desentimentalizes everything related to the IVF, and, later on, abortion,<sup>3</sup> because that is how the subject is presented in the clinic: the woman assimilates and mimics the official discourse. Since she is the object of the procedure, the woman seems to be positioned on the lower scale of the hierarchy and becomes absorbed by the power that is performed over her.

The economic aspect of IVF implies an ethical dilemma which Labari’s character discusses with similar acuity: “The market is incredibly flexible when it comes to buying women’s bodies based on hours, months or even parts. By contrast, it becomes more conservative, when it comes to the negotiating parts of the unisex body. The blood or the kidneys cannot be sold, only donated. Yet the maternal milk is sold. The uteruses are being rented” (2019, 79). Here Labari reveals the regulatory aspect of biopolitics: the power over an individual body is not an individual matter after all, it is delegated (or not) to the individual by the higher system. The consumerist aspect of IVF is explained in Ingvill Stuvøy’s (2018) study on surrogacy: she argues that, unlike ‘natural’ parents, the ones that choose or must choose alternatives for having children normally face the role of the client, rather than the one of the ‘true parent’ (36). Foucault argues that regulatory systems tend to replace ritualization with regulation (247): from my point of view, the sections of the novel where Labari’s protagonist harshly discusses the lack of humanism in the process depict just that. ‘Artificial’ reproduction has little to no mystery and intimacy, it is something that is being allowed, apprised, and performed on an individual by others, hence the question about the limits of individuality arises.

Yet Labari’s character is sceptical not only about the system surrounding ART but also about herself as a subject who is actively choosing the procedure:

<sup>3</sup>Yet the prose surrounding the husband and the children is more subtle and at times rather edulcorated. When narrating her experience of becoming a first-time mother the woman says: “D1 is six months old, and Husband holds her in his arms in a corner of our room. Both are flesh, both naked, both mine. We were hunters, we were collectors, and we are the only thing that we needed to not to be cold. This is how it was when D1 came. Love shot up and drowned it all, as simple as that” (56).



“I want to have a child”, I thought. I even repeated it to the Husband’s ear. Then he caressed my hair or neck before we fell asleep.

Want+have+child=Error.

From the point of view of ‘having’ I should be ok with adoption. For example, when you want to have a dog, everyone knows that it is better to adopt. There is no difference if it’s a puppy or if it’s an elder dog, everybody knows that adopted dogs are more noble. And it’s exactly the opposite with children. [...]

I didn’t want to adopt. Yet I knew that it is bad to pay for the baby with my own genetics. Much worse than to buy a dalmatian from a breeder. Without a doubt, adoption for me was the only morally acceptable thing. But I wanted a baby of a certain breed.<sup>4</sup> (2019, 44)

In this segment of the text, the protagonist observes herself from a critical distance and recognizes that she is also part of a power-based system. Later in the text the woman concludes: “DNR is 99.9 per cent the same in every human being. The differences between us (despite sex and race) are genetic and very irrelevant. Yet thanks to the ideology of narcissism and singularity, to pay for being mother (or father) without trying to adopt a child who already exists and needs a mother is a desire whose ethics are never questioned” (Labari 2019, 45). Here Labari addresses the question that frequently accompanies discourse surrounding assisted reproduction: why not choose adoption? The comparison to animal breeding may seem cynical, yet it could be seen as a narrative strategy that Labari implements: irony implies distance, which helps to form a more individual way of thinking. At the same time, this reflection could be read as a criticism of pro-natalist politics: the decision to go through IVF instead of adoption is not criticized quite so harshly because of the biopolitical desire to increase the body of society.

Foucault argues that every society tries to take control over the reproductive decisions of its members and specifically guide them in a direction that is beneficial for the system, often disregarding the individuals (241). As previously stated, Labari introduces the regulatory aspect of IVF while mentioning its cost, but there is also an interesting passage in the novel where she reveals the more subtle manifestations of pro-natalist politics:

<sup>4</sup>Labari is not the only one who establishes the parallel between being childless and owning a pet: it is frequently seen in social media and other cultural representations. For example, a childless character in the novel by Mexican writer Guadalupe Nettel, called *La hija única* (2020), talks about owning a dog as a ‘light’ version of having children.

Despite the doctor, in fertility clinics there are three types of women that have a say about the future of all women: actors, princesses and spouses of football players. They are always present in the waiting rooms. [...] Women that are always of some brand, women that erase images of women not born from the market. All of us: the infertile ones, the old ones and the lesbians are hypnotically going through the pages of sentimental magazines, the ones about fashion or the ones about beauty. Those are supposedly the magazines that we, women, read. Regarding the experiences of their protagonists, the thesis is always the same: to have a child is the ultimate external confirmation that you deserve to be alive. [...] Private fertility clinics are full of sentimental magazines, because they are the best marketing strategy for the business. (2019, 35–36)

In this image, the clinics are not depicted as sterile ‘sanctuaries’ where struggling people go to get help to fulfil their lifelong dreams: rather, they are portrayed as carefully strategized mechanisms, that treat their clients in a certain way to obtain certain results (stimulate the desire to have children to benefit economically). By depicting this aspect, Labari shows that the discourse surrounding women and reproduction is never innocent, it is carefully designed to trigger their subconsciousness and make the individuation harder. From this arises one of the most important questions related to identity discourse: are the ‘individual’ choices always individual? Further on in the text the woman adds: “Looking at it from the distance, I don’t know how I managed to go through it all. I’m not talking about the pinching, the hormones and the analytics, the waiting and the having to begin again, the mild clinical stumbles. I refer strictly to the sentimental magazines of the waiting room” (2019, 38). The perfect women in the magazines point to the ‘defectiveness’ of the ones that are waiting for the procedure and make them feel their supposed lack of fulfilment more keenly. Labari makes an interesting shift when it comes to the discourse surrounding infertility: it is commonly depicted as physical and emotional pain, yet Labari’s character also suffers intellectually, as she analyses the socio-political aspects of her journey and understands how women are being objectified and manipulated, how their individual power is diminished through encounters with the official discourse and power.

The depiction of the waiting room is common both in visual and textual representations of people who use ART. Guadalupe Nettel in *La hija única* also mentions a waiting room in the infertility clinic, located in a tall building that overlooks the slums: Almost a Foucauldian panopticon.

While sitting there, the woman's gaze also falls on women's magazines and brochures. The waiting rooms of fertility clinics seem to be used in fiction to underline the uncomfortable and, moreover, the public aspect of artificial reproduction: while the 'natural' conception happens behind closed doors and inside, the 'artificial' one exposes individuals and makes their experience a shared one. Again, to reference Foucault, the individual decision becomes a public one where external influences shape and, indeed, manipulate personal choices.

The use of IVF in Labari's novel is morally uncomfortable not only because the ones who are going through it are objectified, but also because of the internal hierarchies within the group: "when life is submitted to scientific efficacy, science puts a price on it, and procreation becomes another form of power" (2019, 137). Labari pushes Foucault's ideas about system vs individual choice slightly further. Instead of focusing on a stable dichotomy between the state that regulates and the individuals that are being regulated, she shows that within the regulated segment there are internal systems. Being able to decide 'what kind' of child one wants and to pay copious amounts of money and dedicate time and effort to the strenuous process automatically makes that person more powerful than the one that cannot do so. *The Best Mother of the World*, therefore, diverges from the linear cause-effect representations of fertility struggles, avoids emblematic characters, and reveals the complexity of the power struggle.

### INFERTILITY AND FEMININITY

Labari's reflections on infertility begin with puberty, which is quite unique when it comes to infertility discourse in general as the latter is normally focused on the 'here and now', the struggle and effort to have children and not so much on early experiences of reproductive challenges. Both in film and literature, people who are struggling to conceive are represented as stuck in the present moment of childlessness: there is no past and there seems to be no future unless their desire is fulfilled. Since Labari's aim is to represent the construction of the self as woman and the changes in her identity, she broadens the scope of information given to the readers. In analysing her encounters with infertility, the protagonist starts with her adolescent years, when a lack of menstruation was a differentiating factor and a form of social protest. She comments: "I remember myself barren from the early years. Since childhood my panties announced that, always so white. The spotless message: if you are not bleeding, you do not give

birth. I think I felt like a guy in that sense. A lucky guy, as they say. Or, more precisely, a fortunate woman. I liked the non-bleeding very much. I felt as if I were ‘the chosen one’, when at fourteen, fifteen, sixteen and seventeen I didn’t have to cover my menstrual haemorrhages. I felt sorry for my friends” (Labari 2019, 21).

This fragment of the text allows us to see how women are constantly in negotiation with the narrative around them and how the frame of thinking changes over time: in adolescence, a girl is supposedly lucky if she does not have to ‘suffer’ menstruation, but when the ‘right’ time to have children comes, she is portrayed as lacking something. Labari’s protagonist describes herself as an individual displaced from the official discourse of womanhood and explains: “I wanted to be read by men and renounced to pronounce the word ‘uterus’ for anything in this world. After all, I was almost a guy” (2019, 21). It seems that detaching from femininity is women’s way to individuation. Instead of aligning herself with others of her kind which, Chodorow argues, women are expected to do as more socially dependant individuals, she tries to ally with the group that has more power, hence, men. For her, being barren is related to intellectual work: she must be like a guy (unable to become pregnant) to be able to break through ‘feminine’ writing and be taken seriously. In this case, Labari indirectly dialogues with Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), who also stated that women must renounce having children if they want to be successful: only in Labari’s protagonist’s case, the choice is made for her, she is just a consciousness that processes it, but has little or no power over her body.

The formulation of an individual self (which Chodorow depicts as “individuation” or “sense of self” and Diana Tietjens Meyers (2001) calls “self-narrative”) is an underlying leitmotiv in Labari’s texts. Here, the previously mentioned tendency towards ambivalence also prevails. Whilst the decision to use ART is a conscious one, the urge to consider having children appears to be an innate condition, a state related to being a woman: “I was a mother long before giving birth to H1” (Labari 2019, 20). The protagonist says: “I imagined a fertile woman humid like a green mountain. But I was wrong. It was not my imagination. It is an image constructed in stone and time, made even bigger with our economic culture, like the belly of a Palaeolithic Venus” (20). On a superficial level, Labari’s position on motherhood might seem shallow (motherhood=instinct), yet there is more complexity to it: she reveals

that all women are exposed to narratives of exuberant fertile goddesses, which is supposed to form the core of womanhood. Labari's protagonist implies that motherhood is not only the fact of having a child, but rather an idea attached to womanhood that every woman must make her peace with. For women struggling with fertility, this part of one's self-construction is a particularly difficult one: "All the women that I know have a hole [...]. To be born with a hole. This is what being a woman means. And this is what not being a mother is" (24). Hence, the inability to have 'natural' pregnancies is not simply the loss of a baby, but rather a loss of identity: "Woman, you are infertile. Woman, you are not bleeding. Woman, you are not a woman. Woman, you are nothing. Woman, go disappear" (22). For Labari's protagonist, being unable to have children also means a shift in language: "When I knew that I was unable to have children, my words went blank, equal to my panties: useless" (25). It seems that, for the protagonist, being detached from motherhood is an indicator of overall emptiness, yet barrenness is not only (or not at all) a defect of the body. The woman states: "The fact that I am unable to have children *naturally* is one of the reasons why I decided to write about maternity. I think that my impossibility to get pregnant legitimizes me in this matter. Because you must be very female to be barren" (20). Here Labari's character references the image of a hole or a void: if all women are born with a void (which is Labari's key metaphor for motherhood), the barren ones are the most female of them all, because their void is never filled in a 'proper' way, and so they cannot escape it.

Labari also tries to debunk the myth that being able to have children is a continuum and fertility is something given for life: "In the end, all of us will be barren. It does not matter if the woman has given birth to four, five or twelve children, we are all condemned to the same end. Do not be fooled, to have a child also means to dry. One day, a child will look into his mother's eyes and will announce to her that she will never be fertile again" (21). In this fragment, we can see that infertility for Labari is not an 'issue' or a medical state, that one must go through and then, hopefully, come to the other end of and forget about. (In)fertility in a broader, metaphorical sense, is a definition of a woman that she is predestined to struggle with her entire life, the axis around which the feminine identity twirls: it seems to be, in fact, the core element to the process of individuation of every woman.

## ABORTION AND NARRATIVES OF CHOICE

As observed in the previous section of this article, *The Best Mother of the World* overtly challenges the cultural myth of motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment of womanhood. In her text, Labari endeavours to deconstruct the representation of pregnancy and abortion as completely opposing experiences: one related to birth, and the other, to death, as is the case for pro-natalist discourse which claims that abortion is akin to murder. In Labari's narrative, the choice to take part in the process of having children is as strong (and valid) as the choice to not to do so. In an atypical fashion, the abortion forms a parallel narrative to the one that centres on the desire to have children: the woman chooses abortion just as she chose IVF ("I chose the goodbye" she states (Labari 2019, 197)) and must go through the protocol and formal procedures to achieve the goal. Once again, the woman is presented with documents and questionnaires, her behaviour is regulated, but the aim this time is the opposite. Similar to the discussion of IVF, there are two main leitmotifs: money ("The intervention costs 354 euros with local anaesthesia and 454 with deep sedation, a type of general anaesthesia that does not require to intubate the patient" (208)) and power, embodied by figure of the doctor. In the chapter entitled "Interruption",<sup>5</sup> Labari presents the dialogue with the doctor who will perform the abortion:

- Did you use any contraception?
- No.
- Is anyone forcing you to make this decision?
- No.
- Would your significant other support you if you decided to continue with this pregnancy?
- Yes.
- Do you have children?
- Yes.
- Ages?
- Five and two and a half.
- Civil status?
- Married.

<sup>5</sup>The name of the chapter itself is significant: the woman interrupts the pregnancy, but also her own perpetuation as a new mother, she stops reinitiating herself into motherhood.

- Previous abortions?
- None.
- Would you have resources to maintain this child?
- Yes.
- Have you been sleeping well since falling pregnant?
- Yes.
- How would you imagine this baby?
- I lost various embryos implanted in vitro. It is clinically premature to talk about a baby of six weeks of gestation, doctor. There is no baby. (206–207)

In the dialogue, one can sense explicitly the power struggle at play: to acquire the right to go through the procedure, the woman is forced to engage in a conversation that she does not feel comfortable with, as is evident from her short answers. The conversation is controlled by the medic who selects very specific questions and seems to be leading the woman towards rethinking the abortion, as if it was the logical thing to do or in line with a certain norm. Foucault argues that biopolitics imply that society is seen as a mass with unified needs and desires, not as individuals (2003, 245), which means that official institutions will tend to have one type of discourse which will be applied to all. The dialogue presented by Labari depicts just that: the universal questionnaire shows how medical language is not interested in the individual situation, it is designed as a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model. The doctor never reacts to woman’s answers, only ticks a box until the woman interrupts the procedure by inverting the roles: she is the one reminding the doctor about the ‘proper’ way of talking about the embryo, since she has already appropriated the discourse of the doctors with whom she interacted during the IVF.

Labari depicts the hypocrisy of language in medical institutions in relation to reproduction: while during IVF, the embryos are mere particles that are bought and their failure is treated more as a discharge than an actual loss of a human being, the pre-abortion embryo is considered to be a baby and abortion implies a concrete loss. This part of the novel also contrasts vividly with the beginning of the chapter “The Failure and the Chewing Gum”, where the woman explains how during IVF, the doctors were reluctant to answer her questions and avoided guaranteeing any success, quite the opposite in fact:

The doctors don't guarantee anything by definition. My doctor has black hair and wears it in a braid in such a manner that there is not a single loose hair by the roots. Her hair is as tense as an arrow before shooting. Her words are arrows. "It depends on the age of the woman and the causes that lead to the procedure. Generally, there is 45–50 percent of pregnancy possibility per cycle, although there are exceptions. The average rate of pregnancies after three cycles is approximately 75 per cent. And the percent of abortion in every cycle is 15 per cent. If the transferred embryos are not frozen ones, the average percentage of pregnancy for every trying is 25 per cent, and the one for de-vitrified embryos is 35 per cent." I count my possibilities to save the 30000 euros that would cost me to access the 80 per cent possibility to become a mother. (Labari 2019, 34)

In the abortion interview, the six-week foetus is already a baby and the doctor uses a language that implies its future (asking about the maintenance, for example). By contrast, when discussing IVF with the person who clearly desires to have a baby, the doctor merely gives statistics and emphasizes the possible loss, showing a refusal to connect with the patient and adopt her point of view. Both in representation of abortion and that of IVF, the discourses of the doctors and the patient are parallel, they do not share the same language and expression, since the patient is interested in her individual needs and desires and the doctors are acting according to the norm. The embryo in IVF seems to be narrated as a possible failure, while the pre-abortion foetus is treated as an undeniable success (or a blessing in a traditional wording) that the woman refuses to accept. Again, Labari indirectly points to the guilt that women seem to be predestined to experience: the discourse surrounding abortion is formulated in a way that pushes a woman towards the 'right' path (from a pro-natalist perspective). Therefore, the medical system, which we normally tend to understand as objective and just, is shown as manipulative, a system that tries to dominate the individual.

In the short segment of the book concerning the abortion and its parallel narrative about IVF, Labari emphasizes the discursive difference surrounding different aspects of non-motherhood. Also, she continues with her representation of motherhood as a dynamic condition, when depicting a woman's right to decide when to stop 'renewing' herself as a mother. In this manner, Labari also challenges the stereotype that people who struggle with infertility want children almost obsessively: no matter how nor



how many<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, Labari proclaims a woman's right not to experience abortion in a dramatic way: "after the intervention we do not know what to do. We are not too affected; we are not that kind of people" (2019, 210). With this statement, the protagonist once again dissolves typical representations: abortion is not depicted as something that breaks a woman's life and consciousness and inevitably implies loss and tragedy. Perhaps Labari's woman assumes her abortion so calmly because she is already content with her life or, perhaps, because she has already interiorized that, no matter what, the maternal void is always within her.

### CONCLUSION

Labari's novel responds to the topic of infertility and childlessness in a very specific way. Instead of reproducing the common polarization between childless people and the ones who have children, people who struggle to conceive and those who have never encountered such issues, she opts for a multidirectional approach. The complex protagonist of *The Best Mother of the World* embodies the struggle to conceive, the difficult process of negotiation with new motherhood and the active decision to limit the number of children in the family all at once, showing that life might be more complicated than a 'pure' experience of having children/deciding not to have them/struggling to have them. *The Best Mother of the World* explores how childlessness grows into motherhood and then back into non-motherhood, and shows how these shifts impact the identity of a woman. Together, the focus on (in)fertility as a pragmatic issue grows into a reflection on barrenness as a core quality of womanhood, which, in turn, becomes an existential concept.

Labari approaches motherhood and non-motherhood as concepts that are bound together. Depicting non-motherhood as a composite phenomenon, the author is acutely aware of the different factors that affect women's experiences when facing reproduction-related decisions. In the novel, Labari shows the economical side of ART, depicts societal pressure and generational conflicts, and spots the incongruities of medical discourse: all of which frame women's experiences of non-motherhood. Combined together, these aspects show that being or not being a mother is not always (or only) an individual choice that women make by themselves and for

<sup>6</sup>Although one may also argue that here Labari falls into a rather cliché representation of family: big city, middle class, two children with a 'reasonable' age difference between them.

themselves, nor it is made ‘on the spot’: both being and not being a mother require negotiation with one’s surroundings and oneself. Hence, *The Best Mother of the World* allows the reader to see that motherhood is not a singular, homogeneous theme; it is a constant anxiety and inherently complex.

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