

Writing and Voicing Mothers and Motherhood: The Rise of the Maternal Narrative

Motinų ir motinystės įbalsinimas:
motiniškojo pasakojimo perspektyvos

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What compels women globally to write about their experiences of motherhood and why should we read these accounts? What can be gained from the literary encounter with the matricentric text in terms of our understanding of mothers and the institution within which they function? Why has the genre of the maternal narrative undergone a veritable explosion across several nations since the turn of the twenty-first century? More importantly perhaps, what is it that these texts so urgently want to say about the realities of mothering? Finally, how has the way motherhood is represented in male authored texts changed in the last decades? These are just a few of the questions that this Special Issue hopes to address through its collection of articles on a diverse range of maternal experiences within different social and geographical contexts. The inspiration for this volume emanated from the cul-

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minating conference of the funded EU Horizon 2020 Twinning project entitled MotherNet, comprised of a team of interdisciplinary researchers from Maynooth University (Ireland), Uppsala University (Sweden), and Vilnius University (Lithuania). Held in Vilnius between 23rd and 25th of January 2024, the remit of the conference – ‘Thinking Through Motherhood: Images, Experiences and Narratives Across Time’ – was to explore the fluctuating and pluralistic nature of mothering experiences unlike more prescriptive definitions that tend to essentialise motherhood and posit it as homogenous, static and innate. Among the various contributions to the conference exploring the topic from a wide range of angles was a notable body of work on global maternal narratives, hence the decision to compile this Special Issue which aims to showcase both the richness of matrifocal writing as well as the importance of engaging with such writing. When considered alongside one another, the articles contained within this volume demonstrate the relevance of literary narratives for understanding and critiquing motherhood and mothering as social phenomena and subjective experiences as well as the impact of national and cultural locations on how the maternal is negotiated and navigated.

The proliferation of literary, hybrid and other cultural texts on motherhood has inspired keen scholarly interest. 2009 saw the emergence of two slightly different yet complementary definitions of maternal narratives. Based on a vast corpus of texts in anglophone literature, Andrea O'Reilly, Silvia Caporale-Bizzini, and Elizabeth Podnieks define it as follows: “Matrifocal is narrative in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance, and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated and valued, and structurally central to the plot” (2010, p. 3). This definition singles out thematic and structural elements pertaining to the plot and storytelling, while also pointing to a value-based element, namely, that motherhood should be represented in a way that is considered to be important, beneficial, and cherished. In this regard, the definition carries a political agenda: first, it insists on the positive value of the act of mothering; second, it shines a light on the aspects of motherhood and mothering that are not valued by positivist, pro-natalist, patriarchal, and arguably neoliberal power regimes and are thus silenced by them. Those aspects include pregnancy loss, abortion, all facets of non-motherhood, (in)fertility treatments, post-partum depression, post-partum psychosis, pregnancy denial, and maternal ambivalence, to mention but a few. It is important to note that, according to this definition, matrifocal narratives can, in theory, be produced by authors of all genders. However, as Podnieks notes, “matrifocal literatures are sites of textual liberation where women self-consciously and outspokenly chart, confront, debate, and celebrate maternal feelings, practices, bodies, and identities” (2020, p. 176), thus suggesting that matrifocal narratives are most often authored by women.

Similarly, based on late 20th and early 21st century literary fictional texts in French, Gill Rye proposes the notion of a “narrative of mothering” which she defines as: “[m]others’ own narratives of mothering—literary texts where the mother is herself either the first-person narrative subject or, in third-person narratives, the figure whose point of view is paramount” (2009, p. 11). This definition introduces a productive methodological tool when it comes to studying maternal narratives from a gendered perspective. In addition to the theme of

motherhood and mothering, this definition focuses on narrative techniques that invite identification with the mother characters and, correlatedly, with the embodied experience of mothering. Those definitions have given rise to other theoretical developments such as (but not limited to) “matrifocal and maternal narratives of mobility and migration” (Kačkutė and Heffernan, 2024, p. 2), which is to say “honest accounts of negotiations of motherhood in settings of mobility” (*ibid.*, p. 7). In spite of these impressive advances with regard to scholarship and the maternal narrative, there remains a considerable amount of work to be done. For example, in the introduction to their interdisciplinary discussion of representations of motherhood in literature and culture, Rye et al. note that “motherhood remains a complex and contested issue in feminist research as well as public discussion. [...] there is still so much to be said, both about mothers and by them” (2018, p. 1). A similar point is iterated by Eliane Glaser in her text *Motherhood: A Manifesto* where she describes “motherhood [as] feminism’s unfinished business” (2021, p. 10). Reading and writing texts about the maternal experience from a nuanced, realistic and inclusive perspective provides an opportunity to untangle some of the fraught ideas that continue to underpin our understanding of motherhood. For Carrie Mullins, “there remains a claustrophobia in the way that we talk about motherhood as a subject, as if it relates only to itself” (2024, p. 5). Mullins criticises the way in which the maternal experience has, for too long, been siloed as “less important” in literary discussions, in stark contrast to “the way we engage with fathers, who, by virtue of being men, represent the universal” (*ibid.*). Susan Juhasz agrees, lamenting the fact that maternal subjectivity “has largely been culturally denied in Western history” (2003, p. 407), as does Lori Saint-Marin who remarks that, due to their reproductive status, mothers have traditionally been excluded from artistic creation (1999, p. 91). Paying attention, then, to maternal narratives – the central aim of this volume – creates an opportunity to place motherhood in the spotlight and accord it the attention that it deserves. Furthermore, it allows us to tease out the subtleties of Adrienne’s Rich’s (1976) famous dichotomy which has now become central to Motherhood Studies, that is, motherhood as institution versus mothering as lived experience. For Rich, the institution of motherhood is a patriarchal set of rules, a gender regime, a hegemonic system which all mothers are forced to negotiate. To Rich, the institution of motherhood is oppressive and restrictive, whilst the authentic experience has the potential to be much more enriching, should the institution of motherhood be suitably rethought, redrafted, and the rules of motherhood rewritten from the matrifocal point of view. Recent literary and wider humanities scholarship on motherhood has thus endeavoured to listen carefully to women’s creative voices on both the institution of motherhood and the mothering experience.

In her seminal study of the mother-daughter text, Marianne Hirsch (1989) astutely observes the fact that for centuries, motherhood and mothers have been *written about* but rarely *written from* the maternal point of view. Mothers have appeared in literature as moral symbols (the Virgin Mary, the self-sacrificing angel, the fallen woman), but their own embodied experiences of pregnancy, birth and matrescence (the transition to motherhood) among others have largely been absent from the narrative form. The advent of second-wave feminism, however, generated a deep reflection on and questioning of what

it meant to become and be a mother within an institution and ideology predominantly shaped by patriarchal values. One notable text from this era that inspired a substantial rethinking of motherhood is, of course, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. De Beauvoir dedicates an entire chapter of Volume II to a rigorous deconstruction of the maternal role, drawing particular attention to the ways in which it necessitates submission, obedience and self-erasure on the part of women, conditions that are hardly propitious to artistic creativity. De Beauvoir's thought-provoking stance on motherhood laid the foundations for subsequent influential feminist theorists (for example, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous) to further probe the institution of motherhood and demonstrate the importance of liberating the maternal figure from patriarchal stereotypes in favour of imbuing her with an authentic identity and a new language. It is not surprising then, in light of the emphasis placed on an affirmative reappropriation of the maternal by a burgeoning body of feminist theory on motherhood, that women writers began to turn their attention to the possibility of the mother as a subject of exploration rather than simply an object of resentment and repression. Women's writing, therefore, soon bore witness to the emergence of maternal narratives that sought to interrogate the limiting and silencing nature of 'traditional' motherhood in favour of writing guided by maternal agency. The narrative form, it became apparent, offered the mother-writer a crucial opportunity to explore the oft-repressed complexities and contradictions of motherhood without fear of repercussion. Thus, the maternal text can be said to function as a 'transitional space' of 'becoming' that allows for alternative, inventive reconfigurations of motherhood and, perhaps more importantly, it serves as a locus of recognition. In addition, the maternal text draws attention to the imperative of matrilineal consciousness, that is, a thinking through and about motherhood that extends beyond the mere positioning of mothers as subjects in their own right. Matrilineal awareness can be defined as the incorporation of maternal genealogy into the narrative whereby previously neglected connections between mothers across generations are now valorised. As Linda Williams asserts, matrilineal writing is a process centred on remembering which, in turn, generates a sense of coherence, unity, maternal community, factors that all combine "to produce a stable [maternal] literary tradition" (1995, p. 56).

It is important to note, however, that the maternal narrative has emerged not only in literary fiction but across the entire cultural spectrum, including popular culture. As Valerie Heffernan and Gay Wilgus aptly observe, in popular culture "images of maternity influence our understanding of what it means to be a mother, affect our expectations of motherhood and of mothers, frame our experience of mothering and even inform our reproductive decisions" (2018, p. 2). What is specific about the literary genre, however, is that it seems more inclined to facilitate reflexive and personalised engagement with the theme and the diverse experience of motherhood and mothering. If popular culture and screen media throw ready-made images at people, it seems that literary fiction requires more effort on the part of the readers thus allowing for greater critical distance from the different representations and a rethinking of the received ideas in relation to the lived realities. Over the course of the last few decades, the maternal narrative has undoubtedly

established itself as a major literary and cultural trend and is increasingly the object of academic research and debate. While the maternal narrative “does not, on its own, spell the achievement of maternal agency” it nonetheless “enables mothers to voice their own experiences of mothering and motherhood” (Rye et al., 2018, p. 4). The stories that are told complicate the prescribed maternal script (as one that is only ever joyful and fulfilling), instead revealing the experience to be a multi-faceted one which can, on occasion, shift over to what Barbara Almond refers to as the “darker side of motherhood” (2010, p. xiii), that is, the existence of taboo feelings of ambivalence and regret, emotions that have ordinarily been omitted from the maternal register. Perhaps the more apt term to employ here is that of “maternal counternarrative” which Julie Rodgers describes as a form of “subversive maternal writing [...] that challenges and desacralizes many of the prominent stereotypes associated with the experience of being a mother” (2012, p. 48).

Consequently, one of the primary purposes of the maternal (counter)narrative and also this volume is, to quote Helena Henriksson et al., “to stir up debate, call attention to controversial issues and scrutinize conditions that clash with ideals and established perceptions” (2023, p. 5). Common themes that come to the fore in maternal writing and which feature in the articles contained within this Special Issue include the social and cultural expectations of motherhood, the impact of motherhood on identity, ambition, desire and the body and the quest for honesty. As a result, maternal writing, particularly in the contemporary setting, is often provocative and unsentimental, revealing motherhood to be a site not only of social, psychological and physical transformation but also, in some instances, a tool for control and oppression. The readerly encounter with the maternal narrative, then, prompts new ways of thinking about motherhood beyond the more traditional (and restrictive) institutional norms. In this respect, the maternal narrative can be seen to constitute not just a literary artefact but, moreover, an effective theoretical and political intervention imbued with the capacity to expand our understanding of mothers, motherhood and mothering. Or, in the words of prominent motherhood scholar Andrea O'Reilly, the maternal narrative offers a feminist counterpractice that deconstructs the so-called ‘rules’ of motherhood as dictated by patriarchal ideology (2008, p. 10) and privileges maternal voices that have hitherto been silenced. Correspondingly, one of the core endeavours of this Special Issue is the gathering together of a selection of analyses that challenge idealised or simplified discourses of motherhood, instead interrogating the maternal through a more candid and inclusive lens.

The articles brought together in this Special Issue pursue various lines of inquiry to flesh out the social, ontological, and ethical stakes of our cultural engagements with motherhood. They are presented in such a way as to foreground the scope of social concerns, aesthetic features, political positions and methodological approaches that have historically characterized maternal narratives and the critical thought which grapples with them. The volume opens with Marie Martine’s analysis of French writer Georges de Peyrebrune’s novel *Victoire la Rouge* (1883), calling attention to the contradictions inherent in nineteenth-century conceptions of motherhood, as both a natural and ideal condition for women, which served to reinforce the double standards of French society

whereby men's violence against women was sanctioned by the social prejudices against working-class females. By highlighting the aesthetic significance of repetitions in the life of Victoire, the novel's female protagonist, Martine traces the biopolitical implications of its narrative pattern, namely, Peyrebrune's depiction of "motherhood as a violence exerted onto a woman's body and consciousness", troubling our ethical understanding of the social intersections of female vulnerability, gender injustice, and maternal despair. In the portrayal of a working-class woman whose subjectivity is defined by her experience of sexual violence and social rejection, as Martine shows, we find Peyrebrune's critical intervention into the French public discourse that denied Victoire (and other nineteenth-century working-class women) voice and agency, prompting us "to reflect on whether motherhood is truly a woman's ultimate path to happiness."

Maternal happiness (and lack thereof) is also a key issue in Pauline Eaton's reading of the "dark maternal fantasies" in the work of contemporary French novelist Marie NDiaye. Her article examines the symbolic role of the tropes of Medea and Virgin Mary in consolidating the multiple forms of systemic oppression that posit motherhood as the acme of female fulfillment rather than a structure of patriarchal control over female bodies and their "troubled consciousnesses". In Eaton's analysis, NDiaye's nuanced portrayal of women who commit infanticide is shown to breach the conventional dichotomy of bad vs. good mother, exposing us to an ethical impasse that results from the conflicting demands of social justice, on the one hand, and the imperative of maternal love, on the other. Denying the reader any easy comfort of being able to pass judgment on maternal guilt, NDiaye's exploration of "the extremes of mothering behaviours and emotions" makes visible the dark recesses of maternal feelings which tend to escape the remit of traditional representations of the maternal experience.

The matrifocal perspective of Dina Eiduka's analysis of Costanza Casati's novel *Clytemnestra* (2023) reiterates the concern shared by all the contributors to this Special Issue regarding the ideological weight of archetypal female figures in our cultural imaginaries and their reinterpretation in recent works of literature. Measured against the lingering legacies of Homer's and Aeschylus' depictions of Clytemnestra as a "monstrous androgyne" and the epitome of an unfaithful wife and husband's murderer, the subjectivity of Casati's protagonist is profoundly defined by the dialectic of *wife/mother*, whereby the contemporary novel's emphasis on the political implications of Clytemnestra's grief for her daughter Iphigenia and her murder of Agamemnon recalibrate the image of "a monstrous avenger" into a more nuanced appreciation of the queen's political astuteness and maternal resilience in a world that largely consigns her agency to the domestic space. In so far as Casati's depiction of the mythical queen aims at her cultural rehabilitation, Eiduka shows it to be contingent on Clytemnestra's refusal to conform to the expectations placed on her as a wife and her embracing of mothering as a means "of empowerment and resistance to the patriarchal system", a form of defiance that gives her both agency and identity "beyond the confines of marriage".

The various legacies of social oppression that haunt the life of women in Ireland form the interpretive axis of Róisín Freeney and Orlagh Woods' critical appraisal of Anne En-

right's novel *The Green Road* (2015). Focused as the narrative is on the inter-generational history of the Madigan family in rural Ireland, its attention to women's lives and, especially, to the affective dimension of mothering that defines the novel's complex female subjects, as Freney and Woods demonstrate, speaks of the ways in which "tensions between old and new Ireland" map onto society's "correlating attitudes to women and mothers". With the maternal body serving as a conventional metaphor for the Irish nation, Enright draws on Shakespeare's *King Lear* to reframe this psychic heritage in a way that opens avenues for reimagining both family dynamics, with the Irish mammy recast as the patriarch, and the broader "politics of parenting in contemporary Irish society". In *The Green Road*, Freney and Woods conclude, the maternal body is both "a site of decay and death and restoration and futurity, a thing of violence and of beauty".

As a shared thread of matricentric reasoning in this Special Issue, attention to the ambivalence of maternal experiences also grounds Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska's enquiry into the politics of motherhood which drives the fantasy plot of the Witcherverse in both Andrzej Sapkowski's novels and the Netflix adaptation. Drawing on Erin Harrington's concept of *gynaehorror* and a close reading of the tensions between maternal and non-maternal identities presented across the two media, the article heaves into view the conceptual contradictions resulting from the Netflix adaptation's "reimagining [of] originally non-maternal characters through a maternal lens". In contrast to Sapkowski's novels, which deploy fantasy, Gothic, and horror tropes to recalibrate the material and ethical possibilities for female agency, women's reproductive rights, and non/motherhood, the TV series sidelines this critical impulse to restore privilege to "conventional female identities rooted in idealized motherhood" and the patriarchal ethos of maternal martyrdom. In this respect, as Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska notes, *The Witcher* franchise's reinstatement of the pro-natalist order, all the while seemingly championing the values of reproductive autonomy and voluntary childlessness, fails to live up not only to the novels' original conceptual premise, but also to the TV medium's capacity to challenge "the patriarchal assumption that all women inherently desire motherhood".

This Special Issue closes with Lori Arnold's comparative analysis of the cultural construction of bad motherhood in Kelly Barnhill's novel *When Women Were Dragons* (2022) and Jessamine Chan's novel *The School for Good Mothers* (2022). Concomitant with both writers' use of speculative fiction – alternate history in Barnhill's fiction, dystopia in Chan's – to frame their critiques of traditional maternal imaginaries, is their satirical grasp of the contemporary anxieties about motherhood and the biopolitical mechanisms that states employ to discipline subjects such that they conform to the social ideal of maternal care. Guided by Sharon Hays' notion of *intensive mothering* and Rickie Solinger and Loretta Ross' concept of *reproductive justice*, Arnold pries apart the dichotomy of good vs. bad mother, showing how Barnhill's and Chan's novels use the affordances of speculative genres to expose the intersection of maternal stereotypes, neo-liberal ethics and racial logics in the social organization of life in late modernity. In so doing, Arnold argues, Barnhill reimagines the white history of second-wave feminism in the US, with the dragons metaphorizing the power of *queer*, rather than racial, solidarity against narrow conceptions

of motherhood, while Chan offers a more incisive indictment of “the systems that force the women of color into the category of bad mothers” and exacerbate their vulnerability to social discrimination. Framed this way, as Arnold suggests, both novels also register worrying shifts in contemporary political rhetoric, where the discursive construction of motherhood bears on the ideological conscription of spaces, bodies, actions, and affects into the service of power relations which run the political infrastructure of late modernity.

When approached as a whole, this Special Issue demonstrates the extent to which maternal narratives are inherently multi-faceted. Indeed, this is a primary concern of maternal writing, namely, to veer away from the homogenous patriarchal script of motherhood and instead depict the experience as one that is diverse and constantly in flux. The maternal narrative, as highlighted by this Special Issue, is propelled by deconstructive strategies which aim to challenge the predefined codes and rules that for too long have constrained definitions of motherhood. At the same time, there is a recuperative undertow to maternal writing in that it endeavours to set out a new framework that places mothers at the centre of literary discourse and renders their experiences visible. In the context of a myriad of systems (cultural, historical, social) that have relentlessly denigrated and impeded free expression of motherhood, it is quite remarkable to note the quality of the maternal narrative (evident in this Special Issue) and take account of how much it has achieved. An overriding strength of the maternal narrative is its capacity to formulate new meanings of motherhood while also referring to and interrogating old meanings. As the editors of this Special Issue, we hope that the contributions gathered here will incite our readers to reflect on their own understanding of the maternal and, in turn, produce new meanings of their own that will contribute to the reshaping of motherhood as institution and mothering as experience.

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