Review

Divergent perspectives: The representation of the maternal subject in American postwar novels about the rejection of motherhood

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The article examines the nuanced representation of the rejection of motherhood in three postwar American novels to highlight the perspectives on maternal subjectivity. A close reading of the texts is utilized to analyze patterns of the rejection of motherhood displayed in abortion and infanticide or rejecting the traditional model of motherhood that is limited to females. This close analysis reveals the nuances in the representation of the rejection of motherhood. Although the novels highlight a feminine subjectivity that is independent from the maternal one, their representation reveals that these examples of the literary production of the seventies may not be completely independent from conservative approaches to feminine subjectivity.

Key words: Maternal subjectivity, feminism, American postwar novel-rejection of motherhood, Sophie’s Choice-Woman on the Edge of Time- Bonnie Jo, Go Home

INTRODUCTION

The biologically deterministic approach adopted by patriarchal social systems is heavily reliant on the inevitability of a maternal subjectivity in which the feminine subjectivity will dissolve upon encountering the desire to have a child. This approach relegates the feminine subjectivity to the margins of the patterns of human normalcy. It ignores the patterns when females reject motherhood to maintain their sense of autonomous feminine subjectivity. Although resistance to this approach occurs as a consequence of Second Wave Feminism, it is not eradicated as a result of it.

Analysis of some examples of postwar literary production reveals that the clash between conservative and liberal perspectives on the rejection of motherhood produces nuanced versions of representing a feminine subjectivity that is independent from the maternal one. The rejections of motherhood is highlighted to question imposed patriarchal strains on motherhood and to promote the necessity to recognize a female subjectivity aside from maternal one. This article examines the representation of the feminine and maternal subjectivity in three postwar novels that illustrate patterns of the rejection of motherhood displayed in abortion and infanticide or the rejection of traditional motherhood that is limited to women.

Before proceeding to discuss the representation of
the rejection of motherhood to highlight patriarchal social constructs of maternity or female subjectivity, a definition of maternal subjectivity is necessary. Lisa Baraitser in *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* presents a definition of maternal subjectivity that distinguishes it from female subjectivity to break the association between femaleness and motherhood. Baraitser (2009) writes that maternal subjectivity is:

An experience that resides “otherwise” than, or is excessive to maternal identities... It involves relations with a particular and peculiar other whose rate of change is devastatingly rapid, who is always, by definition, “developing”, shifting, changing, and yet it is another to whom one is “linked” in an equally particular and peculiar way, a way that has something to do with larger issues of responsibility and care but played out in the most seemingly ridiculous forums; those of the daily “thinking” about feeding, sleeping, dressing, manners, routines, good stuff, bad stuff, schools, friendships, more stuff, influences, environments, time, responsibility, freedom, control and so on.

This definition distinguishes maternal subjectivity from a “subjectivity (a mother) can call her own” (Baraitser, 2009). It specifically refers to the mother’s perspective of social rules and regulations that define institutionalized mothering. The patriarchal aspect of the maternal role stems from the association between the maternal subjectivity and femaleness.

Homage must be paid to the feminist writing of the sixties and seventies because of its role in questioning institutionalized motherhood. These writings are especially important in their time as they mark the beginnings of resistance to patriarchal social constructs of motherhood. They expose the way they are designed and executed in order to negotiate strategies to resist it. The role of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* is especially important in drawing attention to the importance of the balance between female subjectivity and maternal subjectivity. Rich declares that the idealistic demands of motherhood place mothers in a state of bondage. The author describes her need to be “salvaged” from motherhood because she was trapped in the social expectations of mothering (Rich, 1991). Rich declares that the process of motherhood is supposed to flow from a mother’s connection with her child. In a touching delineation of the author’s attempt to break away from the social rules of motherhood, she spends a summer with her children away from her husband. The author frees herself from the typical rules about care for her kids and her husband. Her children enjoy a stress free mother. More importantly, she manages to find time to write her poetry celebrating a subjectivity that is independent from maternal subjectivity. She describes the experience as one of the most liberating experiences in her life as a mother (Rich, 1991). This experience highlights the strains put on mothers to perform according to particular rules. Also, Rich draws attention to the role of the “division of labor” in associating motherhood with females as this will relegate females to subservient position of service limiting their social role (Rich, 1991).

An important aspect of the patriarchal social systems that was criticized at this early stage, of postwar literary production, was the system of knowledge on which patriarchy relies, specifically Freudian psychoanalysis. Along with many other feminist writers, Nancy Chodorow’s writing is an example of the contribution of the feminist canon to exposing the tension between patriarchal social constructs defining maternal subjectivity and the females’ vision of a liberated maternal subject. Chodorow’s work is particularly important in analyzing the function of Freudian psychoanalysis in essentializing gender-specific roles in the reproduction of the maternal role. She does not limit the maternal process to a psychological function but highlights the role of social norms in which “[w]omen’s mothering as an institutionalized feature of family life and of the sexual division of labor reproduces itself cyclically” (Chodorow, 1979).

The process of female identification with the mother popularized by psychoanalysis is emphasized by many feminist writers as a part of a continuing process defining the division of labor in patriarchal social systems.

**Motherhood: A fusion of perspectives**

When reviewing evidence of the beginnings of resistance to patriarchal perceptions of motherhood located in representations of the rejection of motherhood in fiction, nuanced versions of these representations are revealed. These nuanced versions entwine both patriarchal and feminist influences on the issue of rejection of motherhood marking the meeting of the two tides, feminist and patriarchal social visions. Jeannette Eyrelly’s *Bonnie Jo, Go Home* and William’s Styrson’s *Sophie’s Choice* serve as excellent examples of the social nuances of the nineteen 1960s and 1970s. The specificity of the period is marked by the reactions to and against feminism that are clearly reflected in the model of rejection of motherhood in both novels. Both representations of the rejection of motherhood reflect examples of the birth of a genre that proves feminist influences in escapable.

*Bonnie Jo, Go Home* written by Jeanette Eyrely and published in 1972 is a young adult novel. The novel tells the story of a very shy girl who had sex with a man to make another jealous. To her misfortune the girl gets pregnant in the conservative state of Utah. She heads to New York to get an abortion before her conservative community discovers her indiscretions. In spite of its progressive attitude towards abortion, the novel is not free from conservative aspects that stand against the sexual revolution. The link between female sexuality and
reproduction is highlighted in the story as a threat if taking place out of wedlock. This patriarchal attitude towards female sexuality is highlighted in Germaine Greer's (1970) *The Female Eunuch* when she writes:

Little girls only learn about the pleasure of sex as an implication of their discoveries about their reproductive function, as something merely incidental. Much more care is taken to inform them about the approaching trauma of menstruation and the awful possibility of childbirth if they should ‘lose control’ or ‘give in’ to sexual urges, than to see that they recognize and welcome these sexual urges in the first place. So the growing girl knows more about her womb than she does about her external genitalia, and not much of what she knows is good news.

The novel adopts a didactic mission towards extramarital relationships. It reveals it as leading to imminent disaster and distress. The main character is continuously threatened with the stress of the financial ruin of her father as she is constantly faced with an abortion fee that keeps increasing daily. This position is clearly revealed in the title of the novel encompassing the imperative of “Go Home”. The situation leading to this imperative sentence is clarified further in the novel when the same sentence appears in the novel in the form of an interior monologue of the main character, Bonnie Jo, before she had sex (Eyrely, 1972). This indicates a call for self-control and abstinence lest a girl falls into the same situation where she would resort to reject motherhood. This part of her interior monologue is so important, as a didactic message, that it is elected to be the title of the novel. Thus, it indicates one aspect of the ideology of the novel where the scale is tipped towards patriarchal social systems that associate female sexuality with reproduction and limit it into the domain of marital life.

Another aspect revealing the patriarchal attitudes in *Bonnie Jo, Go Home* is shown in the sexual passivity of the main character. This aspect of female sexual passivity is revealed in *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millet as part of the Freudian paradigm dictating the “position of women in patriarchy is such that they are expected to be passive, to suffer, and to be sexual objects” (Millet, 1977). Bonnie Jo’s sexual passivity is implied in her using sex not as an end but as a means to end. She resorts to sex to make her boyfriend jealous. She does not do it out of desire for that man. The objectification of Bonnie Jo takes place in the delineation of her sexual partner as a “wolf” which is typical of the sexual objectification of female as passive victims rather than active participants in sex (Eyrely, 1972).

The situation where Bonne Jo resorts to rejecting motherhood by choosing to abort her child is indicative of the socially nuanced representation in the novel. The progressive attitude promotes female reclaim of the body and choices that have to do with that body. This attitude is clearly revealed in the end of the novel when the association between femaleness and reproduction is challenged. The notion of the craving for motherhood and transformation of the female subject into a maternal subject is revised. The novel implies that females do not have an identical position towards becoming mothers. When Bonnie Jo aborts her child she is criticized by a nurse who is sympathetic to another woman who lost her child in the same hospital. The mother, whose child is dead, suffered a lot to get pregnant and have a child. The situation of the two females is juxtaposed in order to reveal the variety in females’ positions towards maternity. The nurse asks Bonnie Jo “[w]hose baby it is does make a difference, doesn’t it?” (Eyrely, 1972). The ‘difference’ here is the difference between the two women’s attitude towards motherhood and their readiness to transform their subjectivity into a maternal one. The delineation of Mrs. Crenshaw and her need for motherhood and Bonnie Jo in her rejection of motherhood challenges the association between femaleness and motherhood. It suggests that females vary in their attitude towards motherhood. This is an idea that is liberating for women from the shackles of motherhood.

Published in 1979, William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* consists of a fragmented telling of the story of a mother who sends her daughter to death in order to save her son during the Nazi occupation of Poland. The male narrator takes charge of relating Sophie’s story, her feelings, her actions and most importantly his perceptions of her. This plays a major part in the representation of patriarchal perceptions of motherhood in the novel.

On one level *Sophie’s Choice* can be seen as a textbook example of patriarchal perceptions about females. Author Sue Vice in *Holocaust Fiction* describes the novel as misogynistic. She justifies her description by the characterization of Sophie as a beautiful woman. Thus, her story deserves to be recorded (Vice, 2000). However, the misogyny in the novel lies more in the female reaction to the male body in what can only be described as a male fantasy. Sophie’s maternal subjectivity in telling her story is interwoven with the sexualization of her character to emphasize her submissiveness. Sex is synonymous with gratitude in her dictionary. Stingo, the narrator, describes his attraction to “something that was obscurely, seductively maternal” about Sophie (Styron, 1979). In one instance, Sophie is ‘smearing [the narrator’s] frenzied spermatozoa across her cheeks as if she were using Pond’s cold cream’ and describes it as “filled with these wonderful vitamins” according to her previous boyfriend (Styron, 1979). The complete submissiveness and borderline masochism is clear when she literally entrenches herself in male sexual satisfaction.

Moreover, the novel adheres to traditional Freudian concepts illustrating the social domain in which it stands which contributes to what may be perceived as apatriarchal standpoint of the novel. For instance, it
emphasizes the paternal role and marginalizes the maternal one when it comes to Sophie’s personality. Sophie’s father has an unquestionable influence on Sophie that is crowned by marrying one of his disciples. This pattern applies to Freudian concepts of a daughter’s attraction to her father because she takes an identical figure as a husband.

The novel’s model of rejection of motherhood, however, represents a nuanced version that reveals motherhood as a strain on females in patriarchal social systems but never absolves the mother who rejects her child from guilt. This literary production is specific to its period that struggles between patriarchal systems of thought and reactionary Feminism. Sophie is asked by a Nazi officer/doctor to choose between sending either her daughter or son to the gas chambers. A Patriarchal perspective of the novel is represented by her devastating guilt that ends with suicide. A guilt that is well-deserved because she betrays her responsibility as a mother who should protect her children at all cost. Sophie admits her guilt which establishes this perspective when she accuses herself of being a “collaboratrice” and admits: “I done everything that was bad just to save myself” (Styron, 1979). Her maternal subjectivity in this case is dominant, engulfing her sense of self. Her attitude is congruent with institutionalized motherhood that stipulates that “maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless” (Rich, 1991). She should never accept the fact that she is lucky to have gotten away from punishment because choosing to save herself and her son, simply makes her an accomplice in the crime. It sets her as one of the victimizers instead of being a victim. Her sense of guilt accentuates her role as a victimizer because she gave up her daughter. And the fact that she committed suicide is proof of the extent of that sense of failed responsibility and damaged maternal subject.

The extent of the patriarchal perspective of motherhood goes beyond the self-punishment that Sophie inflicts on herself by her submissive attitude towards males and sexuality or her guilt and subsequent suicide. The failed maternal subject is externally punished by what is describes in the novel as a “golem”, an element that punishes Sophie for her sin (Styron, 1979). The ‘golem’ is in fact a name that Fink calls Nathan because of his erratic behavior and violence with Sophie. In Jewish mythology, the Golem “denotes an artificial man, blessed with supernatural powers, that runs out of control” (Glinert, 2001). Lewis Glinert in his description of the myth of the Golem states that “what predominates is not a Frankenstein’s monster but a rather noble creature, undone by tragic circumstance” (Glinert, 2001). This creature is violent yet noble. This connotes a sense of justice to his actions.

The choice of this Jewish mythological creature reflects specific points about the position in the novel about Sophie’s choice. First, it reflects that it should be punishable because it is unnatural for a mother to be an accomplice her daughter’s death. The unnaturalness of her behavior is punished by the unnatural behavior of her boyfriend who is supposedly inhibited by this creature. Her act of the rejection of her daughter is marked as unnatural by the unnaturalness of the creature sent to punish her and finally coerce her to kill herself.

The concept of the unnaturalness of infanticide discussed by Lorraine Daston in her lecture entitled “The Morality of Natural Orders: The Power of Medea”. Daston traces the history of the myth of Medea, who kills her children because of her jealousy of her husband’s new wife. She traces the representation of these mythin ancient and modern dramas only to conclude that the concept of the unnaturalness of the act of matricide is directly related to the conflation between reproduction as a part of nature and the institutionalization of reproduction rendering infanticide unnatural act because it opposes religious and civil laws. She writes:

Nowhere in Euripides’ Medea, nor in Seneca’s Latin reworking of the play (1st c. C.E.), is the act of infanticide described as “unnatural,” although a mother’s murder of her own children was later to become the very archetype of an unnatural act. In both plays, abuse is heaped upon Medea for her atrocious deed, but it is condemned as “unholy” [εργον ονοσιωτατον], “horrida” [δεινον], and “savage” [αργιου] in Euripides, and as “abominable” [nefas], impious [impius], and a “horror” [horror] in Seneca—not as “against nature” [τραγα φυσιν, contra naturam]... In contrast, later dramas based upon Euripides’ and Seneca’s plays almost all brand Medea’s act as “unnatural”...

...only through a slow process of diffusion and amalgamation with Judeo-Christian elements did the moral category of the unnatural take root, applied above all to perceived threats to the family, whether from parricide, incest, or nonprocreative sexuality. Christian commentators identified the natural order with God’s creation and thus with divine sovereignty; hence to defy nature was to defy God, and by the tenth century C.E. the older Roman category of nefandum had converged with the newer category of crimes contra naturam in the arch-transgression of heresy. By this convoluted trajectory, nature (here understood as universal nature, the entirety of creation, but with special emphasis on reproduction) was equated with divine authority, and subversions of natural order with crimes against God. These damaging associations made crimes contra naturam the most abominable of all crimes (Daston, 2002).

Infanticides portrayed as an unnatural act because it collides with laws encouraging reproduction specifically, institutionalized concepts about childcare as part of the process of reproduction. Although Medea’s act is more deliberate than Sophie’s, the choice to reject the motherhood of a child is made by both. Their failure to
observe the socially acceptable task of mothering and protection of their children is made more prominent by the death of their children as a result of that choice. That failure brands their choice as unnatural because it defies institutionalized rules of the mother-child relationship, thus it is branded as such. A patriarchal attitude towards motherhood is clearly revealed when an unnatural act of the failing mother, Sophie, is punished by the harassment the Golem, Nathan. An unnatural punishment is only fitting for an unnatural crime.

One last point reflecting the patriarchal attitude towards the rejections motherhood in Sophie’s Choice is revealed in the particular choice of the gender of the rejected child. Sophie tells the officers “take my little girl!” (Styron, 1979). Her choice indicates a pattern that exists in patriarchal social systems that result in the internalization of feminaleness as a weaker, inferior gender. This weakness is a consequence of the association between feminaleness and motherhood that socially confines females to the darkness of the private realm. Mothers in patriarchal systems treat their daughters as “narcissistic physical and mental extension of themselves” (Chodorow, 1978). Rich refers to this process in the mother-daughter relationship as the passing of an “affliction” of motherhood from mother to daughter (Chodorow, 1991). Sophies choice in this case is necessary to prevent the continuity of her affliction. She makes the choice on the bases that she chooses the inferior child, the child that has less of a chance of survival, the child who will repeat the cycle of pain because she has a similar gender as her mother. Sophie’s choice is a sign of the tradition that perceives females as inferior with no glimpses of hope for a better future.

The historical significance of the writing and publication of Sophie’s Choice in the seventies is that it proves the far reaching influence of feminism on the literature of the period. Inspite of being branded as misogynist and the clear indications of patriarchal attitudes in Sophie’s Choice, the novel reveals influences of the Feminist movement active in the period. The model of the rejection of motherhood in Sophie’s choice indicates the impact of the feminist movement on the literature of the period. The officer who asks Sophie to choose between the death of her son or daughter is an officer/doctor in the SS brigade. Sophie discovers later that he “was a steadfast churchgoer and that he had always planned to enter the ministry” (Styron, 1979). The delineation of the multi-layered authority of the officer underscores the imbalance of powers between him and powerless Sophie.

The officer’s authority lies within the domains to which he belongs. The officer assumes a patriarchal authority because he is male. He assumes a political authority because he is an officer in the SS force. He represents the medical authority because he is a doctor. And lastly, he represents a religious authority because he planned to be a minister. The multiple layers of his authority against Sophie’s lack display the extent of social injustices against women and particularly mothers. All the authorities portrayed by the officer represent the institutions dominating motherhood and setting the rules for mothers to follow. The extremenness of what is asked of Sophie as a mother represents the extreme demands placed on motherhood. The image of the male/officer/doctor/minister screams of the burdens placed on mothers to perform and outperform themselves.

The maleness of the officer brings to mind an authoritative aspect of patriarchy that exists to rule converging military power with male power. This complete domination is termed by Kate Millet in Sexual Politics as “interior colonization where males despotically rule females and “patriarchy as an institution is a social constant” placed against feminality (Styron, 1979, p25). The image highlights what Millet calls an association between “patriarchy and force” (Millet, 1977). This force in Sophie’s situation is a force over life and death.

The choice of the officer as a doctor is influenced by feminist writings that expose the medical authority as a male domain monopolizing power over body and mind. The fact that the officer/doctor forced her to choose between the deaths of either her children connotes the power of the doctor over female reproduction. In her criticism of this monopoly of males in the medical field Rich insists that “men had gradually annexed the role of birth-attendant and thus assumed authority over the very sphere which had originally been one source of female power” (Rich, 1991). The specific choice of the profession of the officer in Sophie’s Choice implies the far-reaching power of the doctor on female reproduction and power over life and death. His authority is questioned when the knowledge he applies in his work is clearly flawed as it is based on racial purity. The sharp shift of his vocation from one of healing to one of death and “butchery” adds another layer to the irony of his authority as a doctor (Styron, 1979).

The representation of the officer as a religious man is of special importance. It adds its own set of implications on the questioned patriarchal authoritias an injustice placed on Sophie and mothers in general. The doctor is reported to be passing through a crisis of faith because of the burden on his conscience brought on by the amount of killing he has to do. The doctor selfishly chooses to include Sophie the mother of one of his victims in his sin of killing the innocent.

Dr. Jemand von Niaemand was undergoing the crisis of his life: cracking apart like bamboo, disintegrating at the very moment that he was reaching out for spiritual salvation... how could one believe in God after practicing one’s science for months in such a loathsome environment? Awaiting the arrival of countless trains from every corner of Europe, then winnowing out the fit and the healthy from the pathetic horde of cripples and the toothless and the blind, the feebleminded and the spastic and the unending droves of helpless aged and helpless little children, he surely knew that the slave enterprise he
served (itself a mammoth killing machine regurgitating once-human husks) was a mockery and a denial of God... Was it not supremely simple, then, to restore his belief in God, and at the same time to affirm his human capacity for evil, by committing the most intolerable sin that he was able to conceive? Goodness could come later. But first a great sin. One whose glory lay in its subtle magnanimity—a choice. After all, he had the power to take both. This is the only way I have been able to explain what Dr. Jemand von Niemand did to Sophie when she appeared with her two little children... (Styron, 1979). The doctor acknowledges the fact that he 'had the power to take both'. However, he chooses to use his force to include others in his guilt.

The fact that he chooses the mother of the child to share the guilt with him indicates the burdens of institutionalized motherhood. The rules placed on motherhood and the choices they have to make to insure the survival and best care for their child bordering on the unreasonable is implied in this choice offered to Sophie. Rich touches on this issue of the social burdens on motherhood in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution. She describes these burdens as the 'manipulation of the relationship between mother and child' (Rich, 1991). Sophie's motherhood is manipulated into taking a choice of killing her child just like every mother is manipulated into choices that deform their maternal experience.

The influence of feminism is also shown in Sophie's Choice when the tested maternal subject, forced into rejecting motherhood, seeks to liberate itself from imposed guilt. Lisa Baraitser in Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption suggests a dynamic aspect of the maternal subject that marks it upon various experiences of motherhood. Baraitser writes "the self 'never returns to itself from the Other'... From the mother's perspective, we could say that as the infant destroys her, she is marked by the other, contending with self-loss, through which, according to Butler, an altered self may also emerge" (Baraitser, 2009). Baraitser relies on the philosophy of Levinas when she concludes that maternal ethics and sense of responsibility are a result of the redefined sense of the self that is exposed to the other. She quotes Levinas to draw conclusions about what she calls the "shift into the ethical domain... that is, the ways that the maternal subject tends to collapse in the face of the fragile and developing child" (Baraitser, 2009). Levinas writes:

The moral subject arises in subjection, 'despite itself,' introjected deeper than its own synthetic activities, suffering an 'immemorial past' never contracted to the present, the trace of diachrony, to the point of obsession, substitution for the other, turning the self inside out, hostage to and for the other, for the other's need, for the other's life, to be sure, but also for the other's responsibility (Baraitser, 2009).

The fact that this sense of responsibility is associated with the maternal subject and the maternal subject is associated with femaleness reveals that maternal responsibility is inescapable. It implies a constant sense of responsibility which will result in a constant feeling of guilt if this responsibility is not observed properly. This dynamic, yet burdened, maternal subject is revealed in Sophie's Choice. It is revealed when it tries to adapt itself to the new changes and rid itself of the guilt. Sophie's maternal subject at first tries to adapt itself to pressures imposed by motherhood. Sophie declares, "I am, you see, a very uncomplete person" (Styron, 1979). She asserts that she is trying to supress a part of herself by hiding it from others and assuming a lack in that self, making it incomplete. This lack is shown in a suppressed maternal subjectivity in order to expel her sense of failure as a mother in protecting her children. The guilt, however, is constant. Sophie, again, insists on her incompleteness inspired by the suppression of her maternal subject along with her supressed guilt when she asserts"

I have lived long with this very, very strong guilt which I can't lose... I still have this strong guilt. Funny, Stingo, you know I have learned to cry again, and I think perhaps that means I am a human being again. Perhaps that at least. A piece of a human being, but yes, a human being (Styron, 1979).

Scepticism is set as a catalyst for Sophie's supressed maternal subject. It flushes it out, tests it, and tries to relieve it from its burdens. However, the altered maternal subject welds itself into a sense of responsibility and guilt. Sophie tells Stingo:

Often I cry alone when I listen to music, which remind me of Cracow and those years past. And you know, there is one piece of music that I cannot listen to, it makes me cry so much my nose stops up, I cannot breathe, my eyes run like streams. It is in these Handel records I got for Christmas, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' that make me cry because of all my guilt, and also because I know that my Redeemer don't live and my body will be destroyed by worms and my eyes will never, never again see God... (Styron, 1979).

She does not think that she can redeem herself because she is forced by the same maternal subject to give up one child to protect another. Her faith is tested against motherhood. For her, faith represents the rules that stipulate her guilt. It is her dilemma. If she believes she believes in her guilt. If she denies faith she denies the materiality and reality of what happened to her.

Down with traditional motherhood

The socially nuanced representations in both Bonnie Jo, Go Home and Sophie's Choice is contrasted with what Billie Maciunas describes in 'Feminist Epistemology in Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time' as "revolutionary
changes in Knowers, ways of knowing, and the world to be known" represented in Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time (Maciuunas, 1992). Piercy's novel is based on the envisioning of a radical Feminist social change proposed by Shulamith Firestone in The Dialectic of Sex. The revisionist views of Firestone target the social reality of women in patriarchal societies and set the association between femininity and reproduction as the source of women's subordination. In her book, Firestone suggests "the freeing of Women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology", "full self-determination" and "economic independence" for women and "the total integration of women...into all aspects of the larger society"(Firestone, 1970).

Piercy's novel endeavours to refute theories that insist on the association of femaleness and mothering that were produced as a reaction for Firestone's book. Kathy Rudy in "Ethics, Reproduction, Utopia: Gender and Childbearing in Woman on the Edge of Time and The Left Hand of Darkness' reviews some of these reactionary writings to Firestone's book. One of which is Renate Klein's suggestion that as a result of eliminating the link between females and reproduction "women as a group might be obsolete" (Rudy, 1997). Firestone's ideology, however, does not target the biological function of females as it targets the social mechanics behind that function that relegates women to a lower position. By readjusting that function Firestone envisons a social change in the reality of females that will eliminate gender roles. While the writings of Rich suggest that the reproductive function is a source of power that is overturned by patriarchal institutionalization Firestone's suggests the elimination of this gender based power structure altogether (Rich, 1991). This can only be achieved, according to Firestone, with the harnessing of technology to perform the reproductive function for man (Firestone, 1970). Firestone's proposal is not a rejection of motherhood as it is a rejection of its social reality.

This vision of the rejection of the social reality of motherhood displayed in Firestone's theory is moulded into the plot of Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time. The novel revolves around Connie, a woman who suffers under the strains of institutionalized motherhood. The troubled social reality is related to the reader through the fragmented recollections of Connie. First, she marries an abusive husband because she is financially incapable of earning enough money to support herself and her child. Second, her child is taken away from her because she hit her as a result of Connie's drug abuse. Finally, she is admitted into a mental hospital where she suffers from experimentations on her brain. Connie, however, resists her reality with envisioning a better future that revises a state of motherhood that failed her. Connie imagines a future where embryos grow outside of human bodies, where a gender classification does not exist and where science is invested in the service of all and not just the elite.

Connie’s rejection of motherhood is linked directly to her social reality. This reality is made unbearable due to two factors. The first is patriarchy where she is abused by her husband because of her financial dependence on him. Connie’s family life becomes so unbearable to the extent that she projects the abuses she receives on her child. She hits her child, which results in breaking her arm. Her child is subsequently taken away from her and she is admitted into a hospital for child abuse (Piercy, 1979). Her reality as a mother is ignored because of her gender and society's perceptions of its weakness and its responsibilities. Connie is cornered by the requirement of her role into a depressed and abusive state resulting in hurting her child.

The second factor is science that deems her unfit to be a mother and uses her for experimentation. Her reality as a mother is not improved by science. Instead, it is made unbearable by it. Connie suffers from an involuntary hysterectomy because doctors at Metropolitan needed "practice" (Piercy, 1979). Her status a patient does not grant her the right to take decisions concerning her body. The power in this case is in the hands of scientists who forget the humanity of the patient which negatively affects their ethical judgement.

The ethical failures of society and science are rectified by Connie's imagination by which traditional motherhood is rejected. Kathy Rudy in 'Ethics, Reproduction, Utopia: Gender and Childbearing in Woman on the Edge of Time and The Left Hand of Darkness' justifies Connie’s dream of an ethically improved world when she states that "ethical positions can be fashioned not in the realm of reason but rather on the site of imagination" (Rudy, 1997). Connie dreams that she is contacted by a character named Luciente from the future. Luciente shows her a future where women are liberated from their reproductive function which eliminates gender roles as is professed by Firestone. When a fetus is grown outside of a woman's womb, the gender role that is associated with females is eliminated resulting in a gender neutral world.

This adaptation of science for the sake of eliminating gender classes is taken further when males are injected with hormones to help with the task of breastfeeding (Piercy, 1979). This gender neutrality applies itself to language as well as the division of labour. On the level of language Rudy discusses how gender specific pronouns are eliminated in Luciente's world because sex is no longer associated with reproduction (Rudy, 1997). On the economical level of the division of labour, both males and females are equally required to perform duties that typically belong to the privaterealms like mothering and duties that belong to the public sphere like fighting wars.

The novel suggests another adaptation to the state of motherhood which will better its social reality also suggested in The Female Eunuch. This adaptation suggests that mothering can be a community role where mothers will help each other especially economically in what she calls "household cooperatives" (Greer, 1970).
This revised version of community motherhood in Piercy’s novel stipulates that mothering is a task that should be taken by 3 mothers and not just one which releases mothers from the demands of mothering.

This revised version of mothering is incomprehensible to Connie because she is confined in her social reality. When she learns of this system of three mothers she applies it to her own frustration with mothering. The thought of having three mothers suffering from the frustrated institutionalized motherhood is painful to Connie. Her “[t]ears burned her lids. Angelina, Angelina, if you had three mothers like me, you’d be dead” (Piercy, 1979). This highlights the grip that the patriarchal system has on Connie that she, ironically, fails to navigate her revolutionary imagination.

Piercy’s feminists perspective in Woman on the Edge of Time resists institutionalized motherhood and encourages the rejection of its current state. It suggests the possibility of a maternal subjectivity that is not exclusive to females, nor is it exclusive to one person. This model of maternal subjectivity liberates the experience of motherhood from its burdens which poses this model of motherhood as a possibility in the future. The novel provides another variant of the post-war literary production that can be categorized as Feminist literature. The placement of the novel as a Feminist Utopia is due to its treatment of the issue of the “sexual construction of society” (Rudy, 1997). Unlike Rudy who describes the novel as a utopia, Maciuñas criticizes the perception of Woman on the Edge of Time as Utopian novel because she is optimistic of the possibility of such a future (Rudy, 1997). She insists on the possibility of this future “given the intentionality of people receptive of change” (Maciuñas, 1992).

**Conclusion**

Judging by the examined texts that represent the rejection of motherhood the study can observe the nuances within their discourse that reflects both conservative and feminist approaches to the rejection of motherhood. However, the last text inspired by radical feminism is the least influenced by the conservative stance on the rejection of motherhood. Piercy’s work clearly challenges biological determinism by challenging traditional motherhood and reinventing it by introducing a maternal subjectivity that can be adopted by both males and females. The genre of Woman on the Edge of Time may have afforded the novel the space for this representation. Its genre as science-fiction provided a shift that can never be achieved in realistic novels like Bonnie Jo, Go Home and Sophie’s Choice. Both these novels have to represent the nuances reflected in the social and political discourse they convey. In spite of their nuanced representation of the rejection of motherhood, both novels represent a feminine subjectivity that is independent from the maternal one by suggesting the rejection of motherhood as a possibility for the feminine subject.

**Conflicts of interest**

The author has none to declare.

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