DAUGHTERS UNDER AND AGAINST MOTHERING

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As traditionally depicted in Western society, the mother figure plays a determinant role in shaping the attitudes of her children, both male and female, toward their future lives. The mother, given the psychological weight of maternal love, possesses an immense power to transmit cultural images to her offspring. The mother serves, in her mothering task, the patriarchal values of Western culture. As a faithful interpreter of the conventional feminine obligation to sustain men, she supports and encourages her son to develop the kind of identity the patriarchy expects males to assume; that is, the mother decisively helps her male child to gain autonomy, courage, intelligence, and independence. Maternal influence over female children, equally significant in its service to a patriarchal culture, is essentially negative. The mother's effort to inculcate in a daughter what the culture considers appropriate to woman's nature requires the suppression of characteristics –courage, strength, inquisitiveness, etc.– belonging exclusively to maleness. The mother teaches a daughter to repress and fear the very qualities she encourages a son to embody. Thus, as Kolbenschlag (1981:39) remarks: "A mother moderates and limits her daughters; she will likely reverse this pattern with her sons."

When, in fiction, the young heroine sees herself as a self-reliant, active, and creative human being, her mother becomes her antagonist, a major obstacle in the daughter's path to independence and selfhood. The cultural code sanctions the mother's traditional conception of woman just as it negates as unnatural any autonomous image the young heroine may have of herself. Thus, contrary to the hero, the heroine's access to the heroic path is hampered by forces that check female selfhood.

It is well-known that the hero starts his journey with a map in his hands, a cultural background structured by myths and rites that mark boundaries and passages and signal him as the active principle of culture. The narrative, which always leads back to Oedipus (Barthes, 1975: 47), speaks from, and to, the universal subject, man, and so has an orientation, a direction: phallic gratification.

In this Oedipal narrative the heroine is provided with no map, since she has but one fixed route open to her which leads to reproduction and the fulfillment of phallic desire. For this reason De Lauretis (1984: 133) believes her itinerary is marked from

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the beginning on her own body, since "the myth of which she is presumed to be the subject, generated by the same mechanism that generated the myth of Oedipus, in fact works to construct her as a personified obstacle." Hence, the target of the hero's journey necessarily entails the configuration of the heroine as femininity, which is no more than "a role, an image, a value imposed upon women by male systems of representation." (Irigaray, 1985:84)

A boy finds it easier to give up the mother to identify with the father because, in a culture characterized by sexual inequality and an ideology of masculine superiority, the paternal figure represents power, whereas, for the girl, becoming a woman means assuming the role of her mother, a unrewarded social condition that encourages low self-esteem. Since the mother has accepted her position and the father's position – man and woman's position in culture– she is likely to do her best to set both boy and girl onto the appropriate path. The little girl is, thus, exposed from early childhood to the suggestion of her inferiority, mainly derived from her identification with her mother, who projects an image of powerlessness, whereas the boy is made to feel his superiority because of his identification with the paternal figure.

Since Western thought operates through hierarchical oppositions, woman is compelled to embody the underside of masculine characteristics, the ones that allow heroism. Concerning this issue, Chodorow (1978:182) argues: "it becomes important for masculine identity that certain social activities are defined as masculine and superior, and that women are believed unable to do many of the things defined as socially important." Nonetheless, the heroine may develop the so-called masculine characteristics –strength, self-confidence, autonomy; she can depart on a quest of her own, and she may succeed in reaching her selfhood. But, in this case, the hero's journey is halted and the narrative bespeaks the heroine's wickedness. This is so because, governed by the same mechanism that generates femininity, and oriented towards gratification, the narrative proceeds towards Oedipus and bids the heroine to withdraw within an image that freezes her instinctive and intellectual drives. As De Lauretis (1984:134) states, "Oedipal desire requires in its object ... an identification with the feminine position ... woman *must either* consent or be seduced into consenting to femininity." (her emphasis)

The greater the personal development of the heroine, the more true she is to herself and the more critical of femininity, the patriarchal image that defines woman's nature. However, since the narrative is governed by Oedipal desire, being true to herself, in the cultural perspective that the narrative creates, means retarding the onset of femininity, as Freud held; it means "impeding the fulfillment of the male's desire, as well as narrative closure" (Lauretis, 1984:142) and, if so, the heroine is regarded as destructive and pernicious.

Since hierarchical oppositions constitute the mechanism by which the narrative displays its coherence, the heroine cannot at the same time play an active role and retain her feminine configuration because, by being active, she moves counter to her fate, which is determined by the hero's cultural expectancies. The puzzling fact is that the narrative seems to allow both hero and heroine to undertake any kind of activity but, when she does this, the hero is displaced from his central position. And this displacement constitutes the insolvable conflict for, as Eagleton (1983:132) points out in his analysis of modern societies, "man is the founding principle and woman the excluded opposite of this; and as long as such a distinction is tightly held in place the whole system can function effectively."

Insofar as the patriarchal culture sanctions man as the active principle of culture and phallic desire as his rightful demand, the heroine is destructive if she refuses her assigned position. She might be allowed to gain strength and achieve selfhood but, by adopting this active personality, she upsets the binary operative system that signals man as the subject, since his male identity largely depends on the identity of woman as femininity. Eagleton (1983:132) has, thus, remarked that woman is "an other intimately related to him as the image of what he is not, and therefore as an essential reminder of what he is."

Narratives seem to allow the heroine the enterprise of any active quest because the father's law, which permeates the text, does not explicitly forbid her the position of the subject. But the maternal figure does. She will consider herself a good mother if she succeeds in leading her children, boys and girls, in the right direction. Because she loves her daughter and wants her to marry and be respected, she will unconsciously try to turn her into the attractive, selfless woman every man wants for a wife. The issuing paradox is clear: the patriarchal regime, which disqualifies women as thinking beings, is tightly kept in place by the unconscious connivance of the mothers. Thus, these patriarchally perfect mothers, by repeating dogmas and words which define femininity (not woman), not only convince the young girl to accept her destiny but become the best wardens of phallogocentrism and the instrument through which new mothers are created. This maternal influence upon the little girl has been defined as mothering (Chodorow, 1978:31), a training process through which "girls are taught to be mothers, trained for nurturance, and told that they ought to mother."

From the 1960s, this relation of mothers and daughters began to be shown differently in narratives, reflecting some of the larger transformations that Western culture was undergoing. Many are the women writers who have created heroines who rebel against the coercion of the maternal figure and reach self-reliance, but only a few of them will be discussed here. However, although some heroines are successful in their confrontation with mothering and wrench themselves free from the coercive bond, others are likely to succumb to its force. For those belonging to the first group, the mother becomes the first obstacle in their search for selfhood. Those who succumb to mothering develop a deep feeling of frustration and self-hatred because the image of woman they finally adopt spells powerlessness and means their personal defeat.

Many of the heroines of Joyce Carol Oates who struggle against the mothering bond are finally coerced into accepting the feminine position. The heroines of *Them* and *Do With Me What You Will* are defeated in their struggle for self-reliance by the power of the maternal figure who claims that, by herself, a woman has no real existence. Both heroines know their human growth is being hindered and their capacities curtailed as they move towards femininity; they know they have passively accepted that transformation; they are aware that they are becoming the reflection of their mothers. They end up in the feminine position, but they hate themselves.

In her novel *Them,* Oates creates a maternal figure, Loretta Wendall, whose life-dream is to hook a man who protects her, loves her, supports her. But, since her daughter Maureen has seen her scorned, abused, beaten, and abandoned by a succession of men, the image of woman she receives is tinged with bitterness, frustration and self-deprecation. Although Maureen never really comes to perceive herself as an individual, she gives up her hope of being self-supporting to incorporate the image of powerlessness her mother hands down to her together with her thoughtless joys and housewifery dreams. But Maureen knows that there is nothing behind the

image her mother induces her to internalize. To illustrate how regretfully Maureen yields to maternal compulsion and relinquishes her own self, Oates resorts to mirrors and reflections. Under her mother's gaze, Maureen paints her lips in front of the mirror but the mirror only reflects an image of man's desire: "A girl in love is standing before a mirror, very still. Her gaze is fixed upon herself. The name Maureen Wendall is attached to this reflection." (Oates, 1969:383) This anonymous image also reflects the thoughtless girl Loretta was, eager to be loved by a man. Therefore, in this reflection, Maureen sees her mother's whole life and her own future. She is aware that she is now what her mother was at her age and knows she will live, day after day, her mother's life.

In *Do With Me What You Will*, Ardis Ross succeeds in turning her daughter into a beautiful object of exchange that yields the mother high profits and ensures her economic comfort in old age. Again, the mirror plays a meaningful function by reflecting, not the woman who looks into it, but the image that culture has created for her, the image that she must internalize in order to become the object of love. Thus, when Elena has been turned into a silent, seducing, beautiful doll, her mother places her in front of the mirror so that she can admire herself: " 'You are so beautiful', she said, 'you are at the center of the world'. She stared and said, 'Elena, you are at the center of all adventures, you are what men think about' "(Oates, 1973:106).

Ardis Ross considers herself a good mother because she has made her beautiful daughter a fragile woman who counts on man for rescue. The main frame of reference Elena had about life came from her mother's sententious misogyny; she had no other image of womanhood but the devious, greedy, selfish, narcissistic one her mother proffers; she was only given her mother's low expectancies about sex and money. Hence, she was incapable of resisting her mother's loving coercion. She finally wants what her mother wants, but, alienated, she wants nothing for herself: "I looked down upon my own body and saw that it had gone into stone" (106).

Unable to feel anything for her husband she falls into a catatonic state (from which she will escape in the end with the help of another man). Nothing appeals to her; she is neither happy nor unhappy, but she hates herself. Instigated by her mother, Elena has become the perfect portrayal of femininity: "The daughter, poisoned through no fault of her own, flawed and vulnerable to the distorted narcissism that afflicted her mother before her, allows herself to sink into a kind of suspended animation. She exists, self-condemned to the repetition of Life rather than its transcendence, limited in the possibilities of the self-trapped in the coffin of immanence." (Kolbenschlag, 1981:53)

In the fiction of 1960s, many of the heroines who want to set out on a quest of their own face many obstacles which prevent their departure. They often lack knowledge of themselves because, as Ferguson (1980:132) points out, "self-knowledge is not gained simply through an internal search, for each self is situated within a complex set of interrelationships and structures that define us in ways we cannot avoid." To complicate the issue, self-introspection results in the discovery of the mythical subject, which the patriarchal culture assumes to be male. The heroine wishing to acquire centrality and autonomy needs to dissociate herself not only from femininity but also from the male systems of representation because (Firestone, 1970:39) "the tool for representing ... one's experience in order to deal with it is so saturated with male bias that women almost never have a chance to see themselves culturally through their own eyes."

Nonetheless, although heroines may fail to see themselves clearly, they manage, at least, to get a glimpse of themselves, of their culture, and what options might be open to them. Pratt (1981:41-42) identifies a variety of obstacles the heroine has to challenge in order to free herself from those systems of representation that confine her to femininity. She considers the myths of romantic love and maternal self-sacrifice among the most important.

In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Emily Ellison's *First Light*, and Rebecca Hill's *Blue Rise*, the heroines have to fight those feminine myths, that the loving force of the maternal figure imposes upon the young girl, in order to give life to the inner self each perceives as the core of her being. Their caring mothers, life-devoted to bringing their daughters to the realm of wifehood and maternity, are praiseworthy in narrative terms, but, since the heroines battle for independence and selfhood, the first obstacle they have to defeat is the maternal figure itself, which bars their way to autonomy. The narratives seldom disqualify these mothers' attitudes which are perceived as correct and virtuous for, guided by maternal love, these mothers seek happiness for their daughters in exactly the same way they found their own. However, since the heroines expect help from their mothers to become independent women and find instead restriction and repression, they reject a maternal love that pushes them into placid wifehood.

Esther Greenwood, the heroine of *The Bell Jar*, soon realizes her mother prefers to ignore her intellectual capacities and her struggle for self-esteem and independence and will only show her love if she is the young, innocent girl she wants for a daughter. Within the cultural context that the narrative construes, Mrs. Greenwood is a perfect mother; a woman who has dedicated her life to bringing up her daughter; a woman who, guided by her long experience of the world, knows that her girl will make a good marriage if she displays the feminine conduct man expects to find in a woman. For this reason, a professional career is seen as a trap for a woman whereas a subservient job becomes a tool to get a husband. Hence, she wants Esther to learn shorthand so that she can work for men, be seen by men, be desired by men. She instructs her about men's evil intentions but tells her she must blindly trust her husband. She is the guardian of her virginity, but wants her to actively seduce the right man.

This mother soon becomes a jealous jailer who robs her daughter of poetic imagination by not allowing her to grow beyond femininity. Ultimately, this mothering has as its only function imposition upon the daughter of a rigid woman's training that seeks to subordinate her to man's will. Thus, Esther soon comes to believe her intellectual gifts are useless, her ambition negative, her writing meaningless. She is sinuously driven by her mother into accepting the fact that she is just an attractive young woman with no other option but marriage and motherhood.

This view of womanhood, which identifies her with every other young girl and sees nothing in her but a virginal, maternal body object of man's desire, directly conflicts with the creative image Esther has of herself and with the expectancies she has for the future:

> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor ... I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant loosing all the rest, and as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath, 1972:63)

However, since she has no external support to proclaim her truth, she is incapable of defending her individuality, she gives up writing and, finally, under mental stress, she attempts suicide. Irigaray (1985:84) accurately describes the conflict that is lacerating her soul: "In themselves, among themselves, they are amorphous and confused: natural body, maternal body, doubtless useful to the consumer, but without any possible identity or communicable value."

Esther is brilliant, well-educated, skillful in the handling of arguments but she can neither fight the traps of femininity nor her mother's sinuosity in forcing her to face an impossible choice: motherhood or individuality, love or worldly success. Through maternal love, her mother asks her to give up a bright future as a writer to become a loving wife. Lovingly she is told she will be a bad daughter, a bad wife,and later a bad mother, if she persists in seeking individuality. When she is taken to the psychiatrist, she is asked to choose either a loveless, lonely existence or a loving family. Esther feels trapped in an old, well-known story which is not hers: "the young girl will be wife, mother, grandmother ... she is twelve years old and already her story is written in the heavens. She will discover it day after day without ever making it" (De Beauvoir, 1972:336).

The narrative articulates an insolvable conflict. On the one hand it structures patriarchal principles, that demand immutable nature and unalterable positions from man and woman. On the other hand, it weaves Esther's struggle within the main fabric by unveiling the traps laid for woman by the patriarchy. For Esther, marriage means her dehumanization and consequently she rejects it: "So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state." (69) However, her practical mother becomes the best safeguard of the patriarchy. She reveals her middle-class attitude in response to Esther's mental disintegration with shame: " 'I knew my baby wasn't like that ... like those awful people. ... I knew you'd decide to be alright again'. " (119) while her deep-settled convictions emerge in her coaxing reproaches: " 'If I try to get you out,' she laid a hand on my knee, 'promise you'll be good?' " (147)

It is not only the patriarchal system as a whole but also the traditional family that is at stake if woman forswears her roles. And through a middle-class discourse that metaphorically demands the sacrifice of the individual to ensure collective survival, Esther is asked to yield to her fate. Hence, the pattern of pursuit and submission alternates until Esther finally realizes her mother is an oppressive burden, as heavy as the three myths she is so fiercely defending on her behalf: virginity, romantic love, and motherhood. By refusing to identify with her mother, she gives up romantic love as a fake dream; by refusing to make a sacrifice of her life to someone else, she rejects traditional marriage; by getting rid of her virginity, she liberates herself from feminine mystique and steps onto the heroic path ready to construct her own destiny.

Although written later, in the 1980s, the narrative of *First Light* also revolves around the struggle of a young woman against her religious, self-sacrificing mother who thinks nature itself prompts woman to become a selfless helpmate to husband and children. Mrs. Betters counted so much on religion to socialize her daughter that Mercy soon inferred that being a woman meant self-sacrifice and self-denial, and religion was merely a weapon used to turn a girl into her mother's reflection. Although she sincerely loves her mother, and in many ways resembles her, she abhors the thought of being like her and therefore she becomes her frantic inquisitor in everything concerning feminine

nature and woman's roles. Her search of selfhood starts rather as a result of her deep fears of womanhood, as her mother had defined it. Since she loathes to become the woman her mother is, and has no other female model to follow, she simply gives up the feminine roles and moves to the so-called man's position.

Early in her youth, Mercy rejected religion, romantic dreams, marriage and everything that prevented her from becoming an individual. She obtains a doctoral degree, becomes a professor, and develops high self-esteem. But her mother refuses to recognize any of her intellectual achievements and blames her for not being like her sister, a dumb girl with a boring marriage and a routine life. Mrs. Betters despises every intellectual gift a woman may have or any recognition she may gain in the world simply because they are foreign to feminine nature. Therefore, up to the moment she dies, she is proud of her elder daughter, who never had a thought of her own, while she rejects her younger one on the grounds that she has given up a home for a professional career.

Although Mercy never gains her mother's recognition, she is proud of herself and satisfied with her life. Up to the very end of the narrative, she is appalled at the thought of being like her sister and her old friends: "Priscilla was like all the rest of the younger women in the room who had pleased their mothers by becoming their mothers." (Ellison, 1986:37) She is glad to have escaped their fate, for they are all doomed to be sheer reflections of their mothers, fated to live their mothers' lives:

> Eventually they became older than they were, and they began to look drawn from the inside out, their mind underused ... their eyes glassed over from one-dimensional used and the corners of their mouths pulled down to their knees. And all the while they planted within their young daughters the seed to the same things. (38)

Contrary to Esther, Mercy had no feminine myths to overcome because she rejected femininity in her childhood; she did not have to defeat the maternal figure because it had no power over her. The patterns of pursuit and submission are absent in this narrative because womanhood is so negatively articulated that Mercy practically had no option but to choose male attitudes and a career in the outer world. She achieves her aims and becomes a brilliant professor but she will never enter the realm of love and reproduction, which she actually abhors. Moreover, her success in the outer world, outweighed by her failure to bond with women, only leads her to the lonely, blank space defined by Heilbrun (1979:89) as the "honorary male." The narrative, therefore, structures both the indignation of a woman who feels a deep contempt for woman's roles and the bitterness of a daughter who resents a mother withholding the maternal approval a son would have had under her same circumstances, and persisting in denying her the trust she blindly bestows on man.

Mercy excelled in every task she undertook, but her mother could not be proud of a daughter who chose a professional career rather than a happy home because, by so doing, she scorned the woman's roles to which she had consecrated her entire life. From the position of the subject, in whole possession of worldly privileges, Mercy could not forgive her mother for denying her the recognition she would have willingly granted to a man with fewer merits than she had.

The heroine of Rebecca Hill's *Blue Rise* differs from the two previous ones in that she is already married and has one daughter, nonetheless she will have to struggle

against the power of mothering. She was likewise brought up by a deeply religious, perfectionist mother and was denied in her early youth the education her brothers had. Once married, her husband allowed her to attend university as long as her studies did not interfere with her duties as a wife and mother. However, the moment she was ready to build up a successful career in the outer world she discovered her life and her doings had to be subordinated to her husband's. Since she was determined to have a life of her own, she opted for a divorce and sought her mother's support.

However, Mrs. Hinton disapproves of her daughter's intellectual training, of her seeking economical independence, of her wishing to build up a career in a field allotted to man because, with this attitude, she negates the essence of womanhood, which, in Mrs. Hinton's views, is marked by endurance and selflessness. According to her, choosing one's destiny is a man's privilege and, hence, forbidden to woman: "You are not a man, you are a woman. A wife and a mother. No daughter of mine is going to leave her husband and ruin her children. You won't do it. I would kill you first." (Hill, 1986:156)

Jeannine's mother thinks of the children not yet born as real because, in her views, the only destiny a woman can have is a biological one: reproduction. Jeannine's wish to choose her own destiny just means to her mother rejection of womanhood, the denial of wifely duties and, necessarily, avoidance of mother-identification, which is precisely what Jeannine is trying to elude: "You want me to be like you ... You want me to make my life a sacrifice to somebody else, so that I can be like you. I can look like you too." (107)

The narrative progression towards gratification halts at the very moment that the heroine refuses to occupy her position. Although the hero retains his characteristics as long as the cultural environment acknowledges his values, which Mrs. Hinton does, he becomes powerless if woman escapes femininity. By rejecting motherhood as the means of her personal realization, Jeannine disrupts the whole patriarchal network. By demanding an individual identity, she asks for subjectivity and, hence, she displaces man from his central position. The narrative structures this female struggle for individuality with the maternal figure as the guardian of man's rights. In defense of femininity, which Mrs. Hinton identifies with womanhood, Jeannine cannot but be the reflection of her mother.

Mrs. Hinton loves her daughter beyond words, though she is unable to see her as a free human being. In her view, Jeannine is above all a wife and a mother and she has to accept the fate *nature* has allotted her: " 'That husband of yours is an executive, and he needs a wife that understands him. He needs somebody that knows how to make him feel like the king of the world.' " (103) But Jeannine negates this conception of womanhood and sticks to her dreams, to her own activity, to her dealings in the outer world, which for her mother means sheer immaturity: " 'You are supposed to grow up, you are not supposed to cry for the moon after you grow up.' " (81) Mrs. Hinton defends a truth that deprives woman of individuality: " 'You have a child, and you have to think of her. You don't have a life anymore.' " (104) But Jeannine lays more emphasis on her own life than on her marriage; it is her life that matters and she will not submit to the law her mother defends.

The heroines who succeed in escaping destructive mothering and arrest the projection of phallic desire in order to set out on a quest of their own are bound to reject culture (patriarchy) because it automatically reprobates the woman who starts a search for selfhood. Up to the 1960s, patriarchy defined female independent selfhood as

"theologically evil, biologically unnatural, and psychologically unhealthy" (Pearson and Pope, 1981:6) because its survival depended on woman's acceptance of femininity. The Oedipal narrative rejects the projection of woman's heroicism because it displaces the hero from his position. Thus, she is either heroic in the subject's position or woman in the feminine position. Anything else is seen as sheer contradiction.

The maternal figure, who could help the daughter to assert her own vision of the world and of herself, was colonized by the patriarchy and became its best safeguard. The mother has the potential force to guide her daughter in her emancipation from femininity, if she, once liberated from the patriarchal law, could see in her daughter an autonomous being. But to do so, she herself need be a fully developed woman, the one Jeannine wants to become. We might speculate Jeannine will achieve her task; we might speculate she will succeed in providing her daughter with a very different model of motherhood, and, if so, both together could well start a heroic quest for what has been foreseen as "motherselfhood." (Werlcok, 1989:181)

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