



Subversive Mothers

**Contemporary Women Writers Challenge
Motherhood Ideology**

By

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I consent to this thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if accepted for the award of the degree.

Tracey Bretag

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Acknowledgments

My son was two years old and my daughter was four when I returned to University in 1994 to complete my Honours thesis on "Representations of Motherhood in Contemporary Australian Fiction by Women". Now, at the completion of my Masters thesis they are eight and ten respectively.

I would like to thank Dr Philip Butterss, my Honours supervisor, who provided me with the initial encouragement to pursue my interest in motherhood. I would also like to acknowledge the support I received from the Women's Studies Department at Flinders University, and in particular Associate Professor Susan Sheridan, who co-supervised my Masters research for the first eighteen months of my candidature. Most of all, I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr Amanda Nettelbeck, who has provided unfailing support, encouragement, constructive criticism and fresh perspectives on my work as it developed. A special thank you to my partner Philip Norris for his patience and loyalty.

This thesis was written because I am both a mother *and* a daughter. My sense of self and my place in the world has been "radically transformed" through my relationships with my children Reece and George, and my own mother, who died in 1982. It is to these three people that my work is dedicated.

Abstract

This thesis proceeds from the premise that motherhood ideology in western culture has been constructed historically in terms of a good/bad binary. Divided into two sections, the first part of the thesis explores the way that feminist theory and fiction have used the model of the "Good Mother" as a starting point to re-theorise and re-imagine maternity. Part Two presents "transgressing mothers" who resist the binaries of motherhood ideology and ultimately redefine motherhood on their own terms.

The thesis is not based on any one theoretical perspective, but rather a range of feminist theories - post-structuralist, phenomenological, psychoanalytic and object-relations - as they relate to the representation of motherhood. Rich's hypothesis that motherhood can be divided into two distinct areas, the institution of motherhood and the experience of motherhood, provides a framework of sorts. Each section of the thesis maps the socio-cultural terrain of particular mothers, and then explores the opportunity provided through fiction for women to challenge the limitations of that landscape.

The underlying assumption of the thesis is that writing is a means of constructing subjectivity. In imagining new and complex maternal subjectivities fiction is able to take a part in shaping social reality. As a feminist project the thesis aims to contribute to a process of social change wherein the work of mothering, including the early work of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding, along with the long-term work of raising a child to adulthood, will be re-evaluated and revalued. When the binaries of motherhood ideology are dismantled and replaced with a respect for individual, evolving and sometimes contradictory experiences, motherhood will cease to be idealised or demonised.

Preface

As a feminist project, this thesis explores representations of motherhood in fiction which generate spaces where “women’s identities may be constructed in different ways which do not cast out or denigrate maternity or femininity” (Grosz 1989: 132). These spaces may be created through the strategic use of a “maternal perspective”; they may open up when alternative narrative strategies are employed (such as non-linear plots, multiple narrators, ironic inversion, and the inclusion of traditionally undervalued “women’s writing” [such as diary entries, letters, lists]); or they may emerge through the intermixing of feminist theory and fiction. Importantly, the thesis posits that fiction is one means of creating representations of motherhood that resist the good/bad binary of dominant motherhood discourse. In recognition of the impact of different cultures on the experiences of motherhood, and of the limitations of addressing them all, this thesis only investigates work by western, first world women writers.

The fourteen texts discussed in the thesis come from a “pool” of around 150 novels/ collections I have read by writers from countries including Australia, New Zealand, England, Canada, and the United States, written during second wave feminism (1970-present). The individual stories, novels and, in one case, a play, were chosen because of the way these texts subvert dominant ideology and re-imagine motherhood. I was particularly interested in fiction which explores maternal bodily experience, and not least of all, in those works for which I felt a degree of personal empathy and recognition.

Although Julia Kristeva (1981) argues that men can and do challenge the dominant discourse, Myra Macdonald (1995) contends that female control of textual production is vital if women’s voices are to interrupt the circulating discourses that constitute motherhood ideology. This thesis therefore addresses the work of *women* writers exclusively. Furthermore, responding to Chris

Weedon's argument for a "politics of identity" as a strategy of resistance (1987), this thesis looks only at *particular* texts by women that resist motherhood ideology as a political strategy. Not all females use a "resistant" voice. Not all writing by women is feminist. Not all feminist writing is by women. Not all mothers write with a "maternal" perspective. This thesis explores particular texts (by women) which exist in the "cracks" which open up when individual interest does not "fit" the position of the subject offered by the dominant discourse (Weedon 1987:112-13).

Although the thesis does not suggest that there is a distinctly "feminine voice" which can be articulated and mapped, it does argue that many contemporary women writers challenge motherhood ideology by strategically figuring a "maternal perspective". This perspective, informed by over fifty years of feminist theorisation, dares to explore corporeal connection in relation to maternal subjectivity. Despite patriarchy's historical association of mothers with the body, a maternal perspective might unashamedly look at the complex, on-going effects of in-body gestation, birth-giving and breastfeeding. It does so however, with one eye firmly on the cultural, social and political context in which all "mothering" occurs.

Written in 1976, at the height of second wave feminism, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* is one such text. In advocating the dismantling of the institution of motherhood, while emphasising the body of the mother in a new and liberating way, *Of Woman Born* provided a model for both feminist theory and fiction in the 1980s and 1990s. Rich wrote:

There is...a possibility of converting our physicality into both knowledge and power. Physical motherhood is merely one dimension of our being. We know that the sight of a certain face, the sound of a voice, can stir waves of tenderness in the uterus. From brain to clitoris through vagina to uterus, from tongue to nipples to clitoris, from fingertips to clitoris to brain, from

nipples to brain and into the uterus, we are strung with invisible messages of an urgency and restlessness which indeed cannot be appeased, and of a cognitive potentiality that we are only beginning to guess at. *We are neither 'inner' nor 'outer' constructed*; our skin is alive with signals; our lives and our deaths are inseparable from the release or blockage of our thinking bodies. (1976: 284, my emphasis)

Part One of the thesis, entitled "Unsettling the Good Mother", includes two chapters. The first chapter traces the shifts in the feminist theorisation of motherhood from Simone de Beauvoir to the present day. It concludes that some feminist theory has unconsciously reinforced the binaries of motherhood ideology but that recent theory is re-emphasising the importance of maternal bodily experience as one means of challenging that binary. The second chapter explores the strategies used by some women writers to unsettle the representation of seemingly traditional mother figures. While apparently fulfilling the expectations of Good Mother ideology, the protagonists subtly subvert and defy that role. Very often the binaries of motherhood ideology are replaced with a representation of maternal subjectivity as complex, fluid and ultimately resistant to ready categorisation.

While Part One examines some of the ways in which dominant motherhood ideology might be negotiated and mediated, Part Two looks at some socially specific contexts in which that ideology is flagrantly transgressed and finally redefined. The Criminal Mothers in Chapter Three transgress by killing another person, often their own child. This chapter argues that criminal mothers have historically been judged to be under the control of their reproductive bodies – hormones, uterus, ovaries, breasts – and that the socially endorsed punishment for their crimes has been the removal of their reproductive rights. One strategy to rewrite the representation of a criminal mother is to enable her to reclaim her maternal corporeality and the accompanying connection between herself and her

child. The reproductive body ceases to be portrayed as a demon that possesses the mother, but rather becomes her source of strength and comfort.

Despite the insistence in recent feminist theory on the relevance and importance of the embodied experience of maternity, this thesis is wary of essentialising women/mothers or suggesting that women cannot “mother” if they have not experienced pregnancy and childbirth. Chapter Four explores new reproductive technologies (NRTs), and the potential of such technologies to explode the binaries of good/bad and natural/artificial which structure traditional discourse on motherhood. On the other hand, NRTs risk reinforcing the homogeneity of maternity (the role of all women is to mother), and negating maternal bodily experience by dismembering women into compartmentalised reproductive functions. No longer a “mother”, a woman can be a “gestating uterus”, an “egg provider”, a “foetal environment”, or a “surrogate”. Ultimately, the contradictions and doubts in feminist analysis surrounding the NRTs indicate the impossibility of pinning maternity to a particular category. Fictional images of mothers who use NRTs reflect the debate within feminist theory and oscillate between viewing the new technologies as either transgressive or reinforcing of motherhood ideology.

Although reproductive technologies raise a number of contradictory issues, they do provide lesbians with the opportunity to participate in the experience of motherhood without engaging in heterosexuality. Given that the Good Mother is heterosexual, married and monogamous, any representation of lesbian mothers is a direct challenge to motherhood ideology. The final chapter interrogates the cultural stereotype that lesbian sexuality and motherhood are antithetical. The fictional texts explored erase the plot of heterosexual romance, thereby allowing for the articulation of a lesbian maternal perspective.

A number of other themes might have been investigated here, including representations of “alternative mothers” (such as step-mothers, adoptive mothers,

and foster mothers), black mothers (Australian Aboriginal, West Indian-British, African-American), relinquishing mothers (those who abandon or give children up for adoption), single mothers (including teenagers, divorced women and women who choose to have and raise a child alone), abusive and complicit mothers. But this thesis is not a survey. It is an exploration of some particular representations of motherhood as they challenge the good/bad binary of dominant ideology.