



Open Access Repository

www.ssoar.info

Review: Jacqueline Rose, 2018: Mothers - An Essay on Love and Cruelty

Borzaga, Michela

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

Verlag Barbara Budrich

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Borzaga, M. (2020). Review of the book *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*, by J. Rose. *GENDER - Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft*, 12(1), 162-164. <https://doi.org/10.3224/gender.v12i1.11>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-SA Lizenz (Namensnennung-Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-SA Licence (Attribution-ShareAlike). For more information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>


Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der

Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Diese Version ist zitierbar unter / This version is citable under:

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-67103-8>

Rezensionen

Michela Borzaga

Jacqueline Rose, 2018: *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*. London: Faber & Faber. 238 pages. 12.99 Euro

On 24 September 2018, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern caused quite a stir when she appeared at the UN General Assembly with her three-month-old baby. Photographs of the Prime Minister kissing and cuddling her child, and of Clarke Gayford – her partner – holding the baby on his lap, while she was delivering her speech, went viral. “New Zealand Prime Minister Makes History” ran the world news headlines. What is the function of such images and what are we to make of the seemingly warmhearted headlines? And why was only Ardern “making history”? What about Gayford? The hegemonic portrait of Ardern as a white, middle-class, ecstatic mother speaks volumes about the ways in which motherhood has been disciplined, institutionalised and represented in Western cultures. These pictures, which clearly display a heteronormative, class and race bias, also raise the broader question as to which stories, images and sides of the maternal make it into the public arena and, in turn, which voices and experiences tend to remain silenced and unheard.

Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* walks us through the ‘backstage’ area of motherhood. In a way, the book is all about what the Ardern pictures vehemently try to idealise, sanitise and conceal. Internationally renowned for feminist books, Rose, in her most recent study, takes a more overtly postcolonial turn. Her key argument is that white Western dominant conceptions of mothers are mostly flawed and sentimental because simplified and strongly idealised; what we tend to get is what Rose refers to as the most “saccharine” (p. 91) side of motherhood. She sets out to explore the functions and costs of such images, the pressures and demands which lie hidden behind them, the psychic and emotional price which is being paid for them, in particular by women who live at the margins of society and whose stories and experiences of motherhood do not make it into the public arena.

By approaching this theme through an intersectional approach and different disciplinary lenses – psychoanalysis, feminism, discourse analysis and postcolonial literature – Rose succeeds in defamiliarising Western constructions and facile assumptions of motherhood. In terms of structure, however, the reader should not expect a conventional scholarly or even linear format – with a particular focus on one specific literary genre, epoch or context.

The first chapter, entitled “Social Punishment”, provides a fierce analysis of how mothers of colour have been recently depicted and instrumentalised in right wing conservative newspapers. Rose gives ample evidence of hate speech against Nigerian women, who are being targeted as ‘scroungers’ that threaten the welfare state by being given free access to the NHS – a phenomenon derogatively referred to as ‘maternity tourism’. Further disquieting statistics are provided which demonstrate how conditions have worsened for pregnant women and single mothers in the UK and the US over the

last decade. What can be taken away from this chapter is that motherhood, particularly in this age of crisis, rampant nationalism and austerity politics, is a topic that demands constant vigilance and renewed analysis.

“Psychic Blindness”, the second chapter, is the most theoretical part and provides the book’s methodological backbone, casting light on the psychic bedrock of motherhood. One of the most recalcitrant and damaging *clichés*, according to Rose, is ‘perfect motherhood’, the image of the naturally docile, virtuous and benign mother, who loves her children unconditionally and without restraint at the limit between martyrdom and masochism. Even and still in the 21st century – after a rich canon of feminist and psychoanalytic critique has been produced, Western popular discourses remain psychically blind to this matter. They refuse, censor and simplify the complex psychic experience and full emotional range that motherhood necessarily entails. Obviously, Rose’s book is not an incitement to neglect or hate children. The point is to crack the stifling mask of what we could call ‘hegemonic motherhood’, in order to release a language that allows women and society to feel and acknowledge the full emotional spectrum of what it might mean to be a mother. The chapter ends with a critical re-visitation and comparison of different approaches to the theme of ‘hate’ in key psychoanalytic texts such as Donald Winnicott’s “Hate in Counter-Transference” (1949), Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) and Élisabeth Badinter’s *Mother Love* (1981). Rose makes a strong case for re-opening a less sentimental, post-war, feminist version of motherhood. She warns against a model of motherhood that does not leave space for a reflection and acknowledgement of hate and ambivalence in the mother-child relationship.

Quite unexpectedly, the third chapter opens with a tribute to the Italian author Elena Ferrante. According to Rose, motherhood “is the irreducible core of Ferrante’s fiction” (p. 152); her writing, she says, is exceptional for the way in which it forcefully dismantles the stereotype of the ‘luminous’, asexual and self-controlled mother. Ferrante’s fictional worlds are full of mothers who act cruelly and compulsively, who might abandon or forget their children in order to follow their passions. By offering painstaking analyses of novels such as *Troubling Love* (1999), *The Days of Abandonment* (2002), *The Lost Daughter* (2006) and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015), Rose demonstrates that Ferrante’s oeuvre is all about de-sacrilizing the space of motherhood. The Italian writer allows herself to liberate women’s bodies and re-invent the mother as a figure by revealing its darkest and most labyrinthine sides.

The book concludes with a powerful meditation about mothers and their relationships to history. More often than not, the most basic demands of happiness – both on behalf of mothers and of children – remain unmet because of dire material and socially precarious conditions. The argument Rose makes here is that the Western image of the good and perfect mother is not only a “pernicious weight” (p. 91); it is first and foremost a white, middle-class, Western luxury, blind to harsher material conditions. At this point she once again turns to South Africa where, of course, every experience of motherhood across class and race is inseparable from the unjust legacy of the apartheid past. She pays tribute to the South African writer Sindiwe Magona, while offering a compel-

ling reading of her book *Mother to Mother* (1998). Drawing on the murder in 1993 of Fulbright Scholar Amy Biehl in the township of Gugulethu, the book is a compassionate epistolary testimony. A poor black mother whose son has participated in the killing talks to Amy Biehl's mother. In this novel, Rose argues, motherhood is lucidly rethought in the context of a larger unjust and inhuman history. Magona "gives a mother the right to her own memories and the complexity of her inner mind, even when that includes the unbearable thought that, as well as loving, she has always hated her son" (pp. 205f.). The act of murder, which is inseparable from a historical legacy of racial injustice, is given 'the dignity of a history' in the novel, brutally revealing "the public nature of her life as a mother" (p. 207).

Jacqueline Rose's book represents an important step towards giving both silenced mothers and repressed versions of motherhood visibility. From a theoretical point of view, Rose does not add new insights to canonical critiques of motherhood such as Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Élisabeth Badinter's *Mother Love: Myth and Reality* (1980) or Babara Vinken's *Die deutsche Mutter: Der lange Schatten eines Mythos* (2001). The merit of Rose's book is that it manages to re-contextualise these older studies from a 21st century perspective and within a highly globalised and mobile world. While Rose stresses coercion and the weight that normative ideas of motherhood invariably impose on women, the question of women's agency remains a blind spot, the voices of abused sons and daughters barely represented. One feels darker, more destructive and stranger drives at work which exceed questions of institutionalized motherhood. Still, Rose's book represents a vital addition both to feminist and motherhood studies. After reading this volume one comes to realise how ideological and misleading certain versions of motherhood – see the Ardern pictures – can be.

Author's details

Michela Borzaga, Dr., postdoc assistant at the University of Vienna. Research focus: English literature, postcolonial studies, literary theory, South African literature, trauma and motherhood studies.

Contact: University of Vienna, Department of English and American Studies, Spitalgasse 2, 1090 Vienna, Austria

Email: michela.borzaga@univie.ac.at