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An Attack on a Romanticized Discourse on Motherhood?

Representations of Murderous Mothers in Dutch Novels

*In contemporary Dutch society, white, middle-class, heterosexual motherhood is often normatively framed in terms of enjoyment. In contemporary Dutch literary fiction, however, the same motherhood is regularly portrayed as a problematic experience. This offers an interesting field of tension, which begs the question of how such literary narratives on motherhood relate to a discourse of enjoyment. This article seeks to unravel the relationship between two bestselling Dutch novels, both of which centre around mothers who commit infanticide, and the discourse of enjoyment. The novels are *Een hart van steen* by Renate Dorrestein (2003 [1998], translated into English in 2001 as *A Heart of Stone*) and *Met onbekende bestemming* by Maya Rasker (2003 [2000], translated into English in 2002 as *Unknown Destination*). A contextual, narratological and comparative reading of the novels is offered, leading to the conclusion that both novels are ambivalent in their relationship to the discourse but that they may be read, up to a point, as cultural critiques of the discourse of enjoyment. This is true, to a greater extent, for *Unknown Destination*, due to the fact that the reader of this novel is induced to identify with the mother who kills her daughter.*

In this article, I will analyze the representations of motherhood in the widely translated and bestselling Dutch novels *Een hart van steen* by Renate Dorrestein (1998, translated into English in 2001 as *A Heart of Stone*), and *Met onbekende bestemming* by Maya Rasker (2000, translated into English in 2002 as *Unknown Destination*). Both novels evolve around a white, middle class, heterosexual family, in which a mother kills her offspring. The starting point of my analysis is the observation that, since the beginning of the 1980s, a romanticized discourse¹ on parenthood and particularly motherhood has circulated in The Netherlands. Motherhood is represented as the result of a conscious choice

and therefore as something which ought to be pleasurable. While this idea of enjoyment is currently also expressed in relation to fatherhood, it relates mostly to motherhood. In part, this is due to the fact that the ideal of a consciously chosen, pleasurable motherhood is being (re)produced in several commercials and advertorials for baby products, as well as in popular, glossy magazines for new parents, such as *Ouders van nu* (*Today's Parents*), *Kinderen* (*Children*) and *Groter groeien* (*Growing taller*). The producers of these ads and magazines view mothers as the most important target market (for information on the target groups of these magazines, see <www.adverteren-jongegezinnen.nl>).

This discourse on motherhood is a continuation of a long-standing tendency to romanticize motherhood, extant in Dutch, post-WWII society. Despite feminists in the 1960s and 1970s having successfully protested against the so-called “pink cloud” myth surrounding motherhood (Brinkgreve), idyllic images of motherhood still persist, although their character has changed. Today’s rosy images connect the idea of personal choice to the idea of enjoyment. In her work on advice about upbringing, pedagogical historian Janneke Wubs, for example, points out that by the end of the 1970s, a normative ideal of enjoying one’s children has become central to the advice about upbringing in The Netherlands. In addition, she shows that the articulation of this ideal is linked to the idea that having a child is a conscious choice. This idea of choice has become widely accepted in Dutch society since the beginning of the 1980s, which resulted partly from the birth control pill becoming available in 1962 and, subsequently, Dutch health insurance covering the pill since 1971 (Knijn and Verheijen; Gupta). From that time onwards, educators expect mothers (and fathers) to enjoy their children, or at the very least, assume that mothers *want* to enjoy their children, since they are considered to have made a conscious choice to have them (Wubs). In addition, it is often assumed that the choice to have children and the actual practice of mothering (and fathering) can be molded, changed and controlled at will. In relation to these assumptions about motherhood (and fatherhood), social scientists Pearl Dykstra and Gunhild Hagestad speak of what Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim calls a “psychology of choice,” that is to say, a dominant outlook on life in Western societies which is grounded in the idea “that when a choice has been made, it is brought to fruition through individual agency. Not realizing the path chosen may lead to a sense of loss or failure” (Dykstra and Hagestad 1526).

Analyses of representations of the family in Great Britain and the US show that this ideal of enjoyment is a white middle-class norm (Chambers), which is particularly articulated in relation to babies and toddlers, but not so much in relation to older children (Layne). In addition, it becomes clear that this ideal is normative: mothers are *expected* to enjoy motherhood. This also seems to be true for The Netherlands, judging from the ways in which mothers are presented in Dutch, pedagogical, glossy magazines and in ads. The normative character of what I will henceforth call the “discourse of enjoyment” becomes particularly visible when it is disrupted; when one can not live up to it. This

is illustrated by an advert concerning postpartum depression, which was published in 2005 in the national newspaper *het NRC handelsblad* by the *Fonds Psychische Gezondheid*—a national fund striving to enhance the availability of information concerning mental health. The advert shows an anguished face of a young woman with child; which is partly covered by the sentence “Ik hoor nu te GENIETEN...” (in English: “I should be ENJOYING this now...”). This sentence provides us with a cue on how to interpret this image: it refers to the normative character of motherhood as an experience which should be pleasurable, since its words suggest that this image of a sad-looking mother is not as it should be.² The fact that the discourse has a normative character in The Netherlands also becomes clear when one takes a closer look at the personal experiences of mothers that suffer from postpartum depression, who were interviewed by Marianne Cuisinier and Janny Smit-Wiersinga. These interviews show that mothers can feel guilty or frustrated when their own experiences do not comply with the prescribed rosy picture of motherhood.

Despite the fact that this discourse is widespread and has taken on a normative character, the less pleasant aspects of motherhood are represented in Dutch society as well. Dominant ideas about the mothering practices of migrant women are, for instance, rather negative. Their motherhood is often problematized in political and public debates. The same is true for lesbian mothers or mothers from the “lower” socio-economic classes. These negative images strengthen the white, middle class, heterosexual character of the discourse of enjoyment. On the other hand, however, there are also representations of this type of motherhood which are anything but positive;³ these, in fact, seem to contradict the discourse of enjoyment. This contrast gives rise to an interesting field of tension, which will be the central subject matter of this article.

Dutch literary fiction is one of the discursive domains where white, middle-class, heterosexual motherhood is actually presented as problematic. This becomes clear from an analysis which I performed on the *Nederlandse Centrale Catalogus*, a database which contains descriptions of fictional novels and stories about motherhood and/or fatherhood, published between January 1, 1980 and January 1, 2008 (and the *Acquisitie en Informatie Database NBD/BIBLION*). In 90 percent of over 550 analyzed works, motherhood and/or fatherhood are problematized in one way or another. This contrast gives rise to an interesting field of tension, which will be the central subject matter of this article.

I have decided to analyze the novels by Dorrestein and Rasker in depth, because they are two of the very few novels on infanticide published in The Netherlands since 1980. A mother who kills her child, moreover, presents an extremely disturbing, cultural image of motherhood. Another reason for choosing these books is that they have been discussed and read in relation to the broader circulating, contemporary rosy discourse of motherhood. In that sense, they were considered to be a cultural critique of this discourse by literary critics both in and outside The Netherlands (see, for instance, Buikema and Wesseling 2000; Jury Vrouw and Cultuur debuutprijs).

I will build upon these observations by the literary critics in my analysis. The two central questions which I will assess are: 1) “How is motherhood represented in both novels?” and 2) “To what extent can these novels be read as cultural critiques on contemporary, overtly one-sided romanticized images of motherhood?” In order to answer these questions, I will offer an intertextual, narratologically inspired and comparative reading. This reading will lead me to the conclusion that both novels can to a certain extent be viewed as cultural critiques on the discourse of enjoyment.

Method

As mentioned, I have opted for an intertextual approach. More specifically, the approach is based on Maaïke Meijer’s third notion of intertextuality by which she refers to the relationship between a narration and broader, cultural texts—i.e. discourses—of which the source can no longer be traced. By placing the novels in the framework of the discourse of enjoyment, as did the literary critics in newspapers, I will focus on this last variation of intertextuality. This type of intertextual analysis often goes hand in hand with a thematic reading. I also depart from a thematic questioning by focusing on the way in which motherhood is displayed. One runs the risk of losing sight of the literary character of a narration, if one adopts a purely thematic method (van Heijst). To prevent this from happening, I will explicitly pay attention to the form of the novels, for which I make use of structuralist narratology as it has been defined by Mieke Bal. Her work is aimed at the systematic analysis of the way in which a narration is structured. Bal divides a narration up into three layers, which need to be analyzed: the “fabula,” the “story,” and the “text.” The “fabula” concept refers to “the material or content that is worked into a story” (Bal 7), which consists of “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (Bal 5). The level of the “story” concerns the way in which elements from the underlying history—the “fabula”—are organized. Ball, for instance, is concerned with the organization of time, the development of characters and focalization(s). Focalization is used to refer to the perspective from which a narration is being told. Lastly, the concept of “text” is used by Ball to refer to the surface level of a narration, which, according to her, evolves around the way in which the story is actually formulated. On this level, matters such as choice of words and who is narrating become important. Next to these concepts defined by Ball, I also use the words narration and novel to refer to the whole object of study.

Finally, I have opted for a comparative perspective. I believe that interesting aspects of the representation of motherhood come to the fore when comparing the novels. In accordance with this perspective, I will first focus upon the most striking similarities between the novels, after which I will elaborate upon a crucial difference—a difference which in my view makes *Unknown Destination* potentially into a stronger cultural critique.

Two Similarities

Before focusing specifically on the representation of motherhood in both novels, it is necessary to take a closer look at the general content and form of the books. Dorrestein was inspired to write *A Heart of Stone* by news reports about a couple that murdered their three children in the Dutch city of Hoofddorp in 1997 and who unsuccessfully tried to commit suicide afterwards. In *A Heart of Stone*, the character of Margje van Bommel is introduced: after the birth of her fifth child Ida in 1972, she massacres almost her entire family and then commits suicide. Margje, her husband Frits and three of their five children die in the family mansion in a suburb of the Dutch city of Haarlem. Only twelve-year-old Ellen and her little brother Carlos have a narrow escape and survive. Twenty-five years later, Ellen, now pregnant, discloses this tragic history of the family and acts as the main narrator and focalizer. Ellen has just purchased her parents' former house—the murder site—where she is forced to stay in bed because of pregnancy complications. Ellen hasn't properly dealt with her difficult family past and tries to find out what got into her mother back then. This novel is thus a frame narration, in which Ellen tries to piece together, in hindsight, how this tragedy could have taken place. One of the explanations that she comes up with is that her mother was suffering from an unrecognized postpartum depression, which drove her insane.

In Rasker's first novel, *Unknown Destination*, the central focus is on the struggle that Raya Mira Salomon, who is a writer by profession, is experiencing with her newly acquired status as a mother. This finally culminates in her murdering her little daughter Lizzy on the morning of Lizzy's fifth birthday. As is the case with *A Heart of Stone*, this novel, too, is constructed as a frame narrative. The history is related retrospectively by Gideon Salomon—Raya's husband—who tries to reconcile himself with the sudden disappearance of his wife a year after Lizzy's death. Another year goes by without a single sign of life from his wife, and Gideon decides to confront the past and attempts to unravel what caused Raya's leaving by reading through bits of writing, letters, poems and stories she left behind. This finally leads him to the discovery that his daughter did not die a natural death, but that Raya in fact killed Lizzy by smothering her with a pillow.

Focusing on the representation of motherhood, it is remarkable that these two novels, at first glance, portray rather idyllic images of motherhood. This is the case both for what Bal calls the "story level" (78) as the "fabula level" (175). The occurrence of these descriptions is especially striking realizing that these are novels about mothers who kill their offspring. In Ellen's recollection, prior to Ida's birth, Margje is a loving and happy mother, who loves her children unconditionally. In *Unknown Destination*, both Raya and Gideon experience the first months of Raya's motherhood as a blissful state, with Raya having a loving, symbiotic relationship with Lizzy.

The second aspect which the novels share is that these rose-coloured images

of motherhood are the point of departure for articulating representations of motherhood that are anything but rose-coloured. The disturbing reality in both novels is that it is precisely the unconditional love the mothers feel for their children that precipitates the ensuing infanticide. It is rather an excess than a shortage of love that causes these mothers to murder their children. Thus, according to Ellen, Margje is driven by her love for her children to commit her murderous acts, because she believes this is how she can protect them from the evils of the world. Also, in the case of Raya in *Unknown Destination*, it is rather too much than too little love that drives her to her deed. She feels she has lost herself in her love for her child and that the only way to regain herself is to kill her child. One could say that both novels portray symbiotic mother love without boundaries as a very dangerous thing. The analysis of the novel *A Heart of Stone* by Rosemarie Buikema and Elizabeth Wesseling (2000, 2006) provides further leads as to interpret this change in representation of motherhood throughout the novels, in light of the contemporary discourse in which motherhood is depicted as a pleasurable experience.

According to Buikema and Wesseling (2000; 2006), *A Heart of Stone* can be seen as a cultural critique on the morality of upbringing, as formulated by Benjamin Spock and Penelope Leach. Spock and Leach emphasize that parenthood, in particular motherhood, is, and indeed ought to be, pleasant (see also Hays). In addition, they argue the identity of mother and child coalesce symbiotically, making mothers realize *naturally* what is good and pleasing for their child. Moreover, Spock, and particularly Leach, describe motherhood as an all-embracing activity that keeps women busy seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Since the identities of mother and child amalgamate, this all-encompassing type of fulfilling motherhood is not seen as strenuous for mothers. Although these two Anglo-Saxon experts published their work before the 1980s, their ideas on upbringing are influential to this day and they have contributed to the rise of the modern discourse of enjoyment surrounding motherhood in The Netherlands.

The image of motherhood put forward in *A Heart of Stone* is strongly reminiscent of the ideas of Spock and Leach. However, according to Buikema and Wesseling, this image is put forward in order to be deconstructed later on. This is realized through depicting motherhood as something that cannot be safely combined with certain desires on the part of the mother. In *A Heart of Stone*, these desires are mainly sexual. Ellen, for instance, implicitly links Margje's experience of her sexuality to her murderous deeds, when describing her mother's behaviour. Thus, one can read that once Margje realizes she has to kill Ida, that "her crotch burn[s] and throb[s]" (224). In addition, Margje is described as a mother who wants to act in the best interest of her children, but who nevertheless fails to do the right thing naturally. In this way, Dorrestein brings the message across that one should not assume that the interests and desires of mother and child are similar, nor that a mother acts naturally in the best interest of the child. Buikema and Wesseling claim that Dorrestein is as

such offering a critique of the idea that motherhood is and should be all-encompassing. In fact, the novel presents this type of motherhood as dangerous, since the interest of mother and child are not axiomatically the same, as Spock and Leach assume.

Buikema and Wesseling's (2000; 2006) analysis is convincing. The desires and needs of mother and child are indeed presented as incompatible. However, I believe that the parts in the novel which depict the mother-child relationship in this manner can definitely also be read as *ex negativo* confirmations of the idea that motherhood is supposed to be an all-encompassing identity. After all, the murders committed by the mother emanate from the mother giving way to her own (sexual) needs and desires. From that point of view, the novel can also be read as containing the warning that mothers should always first and foremost be a mother, in contradiction to what has been claimed by Buikema and Wesseling. In this sense, the novel would be borrowing elements from an established, patriarchal discourse on motherhood, in which "good" mothers are constructed as passive and "non-sexual" (O'Reilly 12).

Although Buikema and Wesseling (2000; 2006) do not discuss *Unknown Destination*, their analysis can also be made productive to this novel, since similar events occur. In *Unknown Destination*, motherhood is also described in a romanticized way, reminiscent of the practice of mothering as envisaged by Spock and Leach. And once more, this description is, in turn, quickly problematized by letting the desires of mother and child collide. In this novel, motherhood is repeatedly represented as something all-encompassing, which is irreconcilable with the work of being a writer. According to Raya, "child and writer" are "in a permanent state of war—a war to the death" (213). In order to be a writer again, Raya believes this can only be achieved by killing Lizzy.

So, in the end the desires of mother and child coalesce in *Unknown Destination*, as is also the case in *A Heart of Stone*. Also, unconditional, "natural" mother love does not automatically make this mother, Raya, take her child's best interests to heart. On the one hand, *Unknown Destination* could therefore also be read as a critique of the morality of enjoyment surrounding motherhood, particularly as articulated by Spock and Leach. On the other hand, as is the case with *A Heart of Stone*, one can consider this narration about the incompatibility of motherhood and creative work as a patriarchal warning against deviations from the all-encompassing model of motherhood; after all, the mother who gives in to her own needs turns out to pose a deadly threat to her child.

The Crucial Difference

Despite the two strong similarities between the novels, I would like to defend the view that the critical potential of *Unknown Destination* is stronger than of *A Heart of Stone*. This is due to the distinctive way in which the mother character in *Unknown Destination* is constructed, which makes the reader more inclined to identify with her. A lack of identification with the mother can have

a strong impact on the meaning of these novels, in relation to the discourse of enjoyment. After all, once the mother is not considered to be “one of us,” she will turn into an individual exception to the norm and as a result the norm is more likely to remain intact. In the next paragraphs, I will therefore focus upon the elements in the novels that either enable or hinder identification with the mother.

Again, Buikema and Wesseling’s interpretation offers a first direction for the analysis of *A Heart of Stone*. They point out that the critical potential toward the discourse of enjoyment has been partially restricted by the effect of the introduction of a postpartum depression as an explanation for Margje’s deeds. This would also open up the possibility for the reader to cast aside Margje as a “degenerate” mother. As such, the depiction of her motherhood would not so strongly undermine the morality of enjoyment. Now, it must be said that, in contradiction to what Buikema and Wesseling claim, the introduction of the postpartum depression could also evoke compassion for Margje on behalf of the reader. However, I think that this possible effect on the reader is hindered by the fact that Margje barely focalizes. After all, according to Bal (see Van Buuren 22), the reader is less inclined to identify with characters who do not gain much focus, because their internal thoughts are unknown, or only indirectly known. This emotional distance between the reader and Margje is intensified by the hyperbolic, Hitchcock-like style characteristic for Dorrestein’s novel. The novel is filled with grotesque and uncanny scenes, such as the one in which Margje mutilates her baby daughter’s vagina with an apple corer. Although that may undermine its critical potential in light of the discourse of enjoyment, there is at least one aspect of the novel that counters this effect. There are namely many references to the omnipresent violence against children. The family keeps a file of newspaper and magazine clippings at home and Ellen regularly quotes from these, citing instances of violence against children. Furthermore, Ellen often refers to several ancient Greek tragedies she has learned about in secondary school, in which violent family relationships form the central theme. The numerous explicit references to other violent family situations make it more difficult to interpret the act of the mother as the exception of the rule. This makes it far more difficult to simply dismiss the mother’s violent act as an isolated instance. These references thus partially counter the isolating, individualizing effect of the reference to postpartum depression. Despite all this, the representation of the mother as “insane” and her not focalizing a lot, do not make such a reading self-evident.

This does not hold true for *Unknown Destination*. The murderous mother in *Unknown Destination* cannot be written off as abnormal. Although she may come across as somewhat strange, she is not depicted as insane by her husband, the main narrator. In addition, Gideon quotes large parts from her letters, whereby Raya is given ample space to focalize, which, in turn, allows the reader to identify with her more readily. The novel’s style also contributes to this identification, which is not hyperbolic, as in *A Heart of Stone*, but poetic.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, the infanticide only comes to light at the end of the novel, this in contrast to the “actual,” “chronological sequence” (Bal 214) of events on the fabula level of the narration. This is why, when first reading the novel, one is not negatively influenced by the knowledge of the murder Raya commits. Gideon’s search actually mirrors the experience of the reader in this sense. For a long time, Gideon, too, presumes that his daughter died a natural death. This discovery of Raya’s deeds a year after her disappearance does by the way not result in rage or grief on Gideon’s behalf, as one might expect, but in understanding. This is the result of his previous willingness to find out what moved Raya—a willingness which, and this is crucial, precedes the discovery of the murder. Due to the mirrored reading experience, the reader can easily develop similar feelings for Raya. This will stimulate the reader to have a critical look at the web of rosy and all-encompassing notions of motherhood in which Raya felt trapped.

Conclusion

I have argued that white, heterosexual, middle-class motherhood has been frequently represented as a conscious choice and in relation to this has been romanticized in contemporary Dutch society. In contemporary Dutch literary fiction, however, this type of motherhood is regularly portrayed as a problematic issue. This offers an interesting field of tension. I have entered this field through an analysis of representations of infanticidal motherhood in *A Heart of Stone* and *Unknown Destination*. In doing this, I have raised the question to what extent these novels can be considered to be cultural critiques of the discourse of enjoyment. Both novels can be read in various ways and as such, turn out to be ambivalent in their relationship to the discourse of enjoyment. Still, they can be interpreted as critical cultural expressions in the context of this discourse and, more particularly, directed at the work of Spock and Leach. However, *Unknown Destination* has a greater potential for being read as such than *A Heart of Stone*, mainly because the novel allows for a more readily and unexpected identification with the mother who kills her offspring.

A different version of this article was published in Dutch as “Een kritiek op een geromantiseerd vertoog over moederschap. De moordende moeders in Een hart van steen en Met onbekende bestemming” in Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies 12.2 (2009): 3–14.

¹With discourse I refer to Foucault’s use of the term, when he refers to the whole of regulating ideas that structure the representations (in words and image) as well as the actions surrounding a specific topic.

²By which I do not want to argue against the importance of medical help for women that suffer from postpartum depression.

³Pedagogical journals, advertisements and fairs aren't monolithical in this respect either.

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