

Nathalie Morello

Gill Rye, *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), 221pp., ISBN 978-0-87413-040-9

Since second-wave feminism, motherhood has been at the centre of feminist debates, including in France where key thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Annie Leclerc, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva have produced some of the most influential, and also controversial concepts that have had a lasting influence on how feminist studies discuss mothers, motherhood and mothering. The subject of motherhood has also inspired a rich and fascinating interaction between theory and fiction. But, as Gill Rye notes in the introduction of her book, if French women writers, mostly well established, have extensively explored the subject of daughter-mother relationships from the point of view of the daughter (Simone de Beauvoir, Marie Cardinal, Chantal Chawaf, Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, Violette Leduc, among others), it is only in the last two decades that a new wave of mostly young (post-1960) writers have started to publish fictional, autofictional, autobiographical texts that allow mothers to become subjects of discourse, and to voice experiences, feelings and behaviours, in tension, even in conflict with, the ideology of the good mother constructed and perpetuated by various types of institutional discourses: political, socio-cultural, scientific, medical, legal, religious.

Inspired by Marianne Hirsh's hope in *Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989) that literature would in the future inscribe a wider range of maternal subjectivities, Rye's book represents the first study of this very development in the field of contemporary French women's writing since the early 1990s. It explores key themes and issues that are more insistently raised in these new narratives in relation to rapidly changing family patterns and developing reproductive technologies.

In the introductory chapter, Rye clearly presents scope and methodology, and identifies loss and trauma as recurring themes, which provide the thread to give unity to her investigation. Chapter Two places the subject of motherhood in theoretical, historical, and literary context, and

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offers an excellent overview, both concise and comprehensive, of the historical developments of the realities of, and studies on, mothers and mothering in both the French and Anglo-American contexts.

Among the large corpus of primary sources read for this project, the 12 texts that feature for closer reading have been selected for their sociological and literary interest, with particular attention to form and content. They are organized around six chapters, each dealing with a key theme, which is first contextualized and conceptualized using a variety of critical approaches and tools borrowed from sociology, psychoanalysis, cultural theories. The theme is then explored through in-depth analyses of two texts deemed complementary. The first three chapters are listed under a heading entitled ‘Mothering: Loss, Trauma, Separation’. The first chapter in the section focuses on representations of mothers’ experiences of losing a child to a deadly illness (Camille Laurens’s *Philippe* and Laure Adler’s *A ce soir*); the second one on narratives that link traumatic births to past experiences of incest and rape (Christine Angot’s *Interview* and Leïla Marouane’s *Le Châtiment des hypocrites* – the only inclusion of a representative of metropolitan ethnic diversity, surprisingly scarce, as the author notes); and the third one on texts that address the key issue of separation/individuation in the mother-daughter relationship (Marie N’diaye’s *La Sorcière* and Chantal Chawaf’s *La Sanction*). The second section, entitled ‘New stories of Mothering’, focuses on changing perspectives of the family and includes three more chapters. Narratives of lone mothering are examined in conjunction with the notion of maternal ambivalence, particularly in the light of Rozsika Parker’s distinction between managed ambivalence, as arguably represented in Brisac’s *Weekend de chasse à la mère*, and unmanaged ambivalence, found in Véronique Olmi’s *Bord de mer* which ends with a double maternal infanticide. Narratives of lesbian mothering are discussed with reference to Eliane Girard’s *Mais qui va garder le chat?* and Myriam Blanc’s *et elles eurent beaucoup d’enfants...*, which examine the tension between a desire for normalization and a posture of transgression. Finally the author turns to narratives of mothering without guilt, with the exploration of another recurrent tension in a mother’s life, that of being a woman/writer as well as being a mother: these themes are considered in Marie Darrieussecq’s *Le Mal de mer* and Christine Angot’s *Léonore, toujours*.

The concluding chapter asks the interesting question of how these more recent narratives of mothering differ from those anchored in second-wave French feminist discourse, which tended

to polarize the debate around either lyrical celebration or uncompromising rejection. If the texts selected suggest that this political opposition is over, the themes highlighted of loss and separation, ambivalence and guilt, power and powerlessness, violence and aggression, self-assertion and *jouissance*, show that tensions between the pressure to reproduce conventional models of mothers and mothering, and a desire to create new ones, continue to pervade maternal subjectivities and experiences, albeit in a different historical context. Also, Rye notes, if the narratives do, in various ways, challenge dominant models of mothering, they also inscribe guilt and loss, and in many cases the loss of the child, whether real or symbolic, offering an arguably sombre picture of how motherhood is currently imagined by contemporary French women writers.

As Rye rightly remarks in the introduction, loss is a theme that is prevalent in turn-of-the-century literature more generally and is linked to the development of trauma studies, and this, along with separation and guilt, are common notions that have been extensively explored in both theory and literature. What is here effectively identified as being new is that these themes have recently entered a substantial number of literary texts written by a new wave of French women writers. Rye tentatively notes at the end of Chapter Two that the emergence of maternal subjectivities and experiences coincided with the emergence of a new generation of women writers who do not explicitly or willingly acknowledge their feminist predecessors, and also with what she terms the weakening of psychoanalysis as the dominant French paradigm. Later it is quoted that motherhood became very fashionable in France in the 90s. Given that the founding strength of this book is to offer an investigation of this new trend, further scrutiny of the underlying reasons and the significance of this identified phenomenon, which is more specific to the development of women's writing in France, would have been welcome and would have further supported the book's general argument.

But Rye's very well informed and clearly written study makes an excellent read and will no doubt and deservedly become an essential text for anyone interested in the representation of maternal voices and experiences in contemporary France. Although her study pertains specifically to the French historical and socio-cultural context, it also relates to a much wider context, as many of the themes explored are common to Western culture (all quotations are given in both French and English), and warrants a wider audience accordingly. Each chapter, although

connected to other sections, can be read on its own. Numerous and ample notes, as well as a full bibliography provide direction for further reading. These items, along with the useful index, contribute to making the book relevant and readable for anyone who is interested in maternal studies.

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