THE OBSCURE MATERNAL DOUBLE:  
THE MOTHER / DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP  
REPRESENTED IN AND OUT OF MATROPHOBIA  

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The mother/daughter relationship has been represented in twentieth-century literature as based on a) the daughter’s gender split between a devalued femininity and a masculine ego ideal; b) the maternal (ab)use of the daughter as double; c) the daughter’s lack of adequate maternal love and mirroring. While most of these mother/daughter plots are undeniably matrophobic and/or mother-blaming, there is a small but relevant number of women’s fictional texts which represent the paradigmatic mother/daughter plots out of matrophobia by contextualizing the mother/daughter relationship in its socio-historical reality.

Stories of unmothered or badly mothered daughters are abundant in female literature and autobiography. According to Carolyn Heilbrun, the most relevant question concerning women’s literary representation of the mother-daughter relationship is why “no woman believes she has been sufficiently loved by her mother” (1990, 102). Yet the lack of mothering in so many mother/daughter plots does not necessarily imply lack of love. More often, as Adrienne Rich suggests, it conveys the daughter’s rage at her mother for being unable to offer her but a mutilated reflection of herself as a woman: “A mother’s victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches for clues as to what it means to be a woman” (1986, 243).

The daughter’s narcissistic rage at the maternal inheritance of resignation, low-expectations and a devalued self-image has been symbolized by Carolyn Steedman and Lucy Irigaray with powerfully violent images of the maternal milk: “the thin wounds across her breast pouring forth blood, not milk” (Steedman 1986, 93); “with your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice” (Irigaray quoted by Jacobus 1986, 277). These strong angry words express the feeling of intense matrophobia that has mostly characterised, as Pilar Hidalgo notes, the large and varied collection of maternal portraits in twentieth-century female fiction (1995, 110).

Indeed many contemporary novels represent the adolescent daughters’ relation to their mothers as a pure culture of matrophobic hostility. A classic example is the relation between Joan and her mother in Margaret Atwood’s Lady Oracle, which follows the common pattern of the frustrated, disappointed mother who projects all her thwarted desires onto her daughter: “She was to be the manager, the creator, the agent. I was to be the product” (313). The daughter is characteristically identified by the mother as her continuation or double. Attempting to escape the prison where the daughter feels a captive of her mother’s desire for a specular double, Joan fights a war of identity against her mother, in which “the disputed territory” is her own body (69). Joan makes of her body the opposite mirror-image of her mother’s narcissistic desire: instead of cultivating its feminine beauty, she eats steadily, stubbornly, till her body gets unattractively fat.
The daughter’s adolescent body is a matrophic battle field because, as Frigga Haug remarks, the body often becomes for women the decisive pivot around which identity is defined, by linking the female body’s beauty to “weightier” issues (1990, 172). Therefore, as long as femininity is culturally constructed around the female body (its beauty), the daughter will use it as an instrument of protest or resistance, as a site of struggle against the mother over the issue of feminine identity.

In Doris Lessing’s *Martha Quest*, Martha’s body also becomes the territory where the daughter’s war of identity against the mother is fought. Martha’s “underground rebellion” (Lessing 29) against her mother’s desire to mold her daughter in her own image revolves around the daughter’s feminine appearance. Thus, the subject of clothes “had become a focus for the silent struggle between the women, which had nothing to do with clothes…” (32).

The terrible aggressivity of the adolescent daughter towards the mother is often represented in women’s fiction as the daughter’s rejection of the mother’s passive acceptance of patriarchal expectations, and of the mother’s defeatist warning: “As I am, so you will be” (Carter 1984, 124). Martha’s matrophic violence is the result of her desire not to be “bitter and nagging and dissatisfied like her mother” (20). Yet, in spite of her determination not to be like her mother, she behaves in ways that seem to imitate her mother’s self-defeating passivity, what Collette Dowling famously called “the Cinderella Complex”: “Martha waited … she was wanting someone to take the responsibility for her; she needed a rescue” (82).

In spite of the daughter’s fierce rejection of the “obscure maternal double” (Lémoine-Luccioni 1987, 33), Martha, like many other heroines, cannot discard the mother’s shadowy influence. As Joan succinctly puts it, “How could I renounce her? … She had been my reflection too long” (Atwood 1986, 330).

As JeniJoy La Belle observes, the daughter’s experience of “finding out what she has always known - that she is her mother’s reflection” is a repeated theme in women’s literature (1988, 80). One of the best examples of this experience can be found in Antonia White’s *Beyond the Glass*. As a young adult, Clara becomes aware that her matrophic rejection of her mother, her “dread of being like her” (51) is the other side of her deep identification with her. Once, fighting her fear of recognizing her specular image as her mother’s double, she dares to look in the mirror, and, as she suspected, she sees her mother’s reflection: “the woman who looked back at her from the glass was unmistakably Isabel’s daughter” (202).

Clara’s split between her will to avoid her mother’s mode of conventional femininity and her identification with her is characteristic of most matrophic daughters. As Adrienne Rich suggests, matophobia can be seen as “a womanly splitting of the self” between a rejected femininity and a masculine ideal (1986, 236). This gender split results from the fact that, although femininity is to be based on the identification with the mother, what our culture values most is the masculine, the father (Bleichmar 1985, 27). In this sense, matophobia derives from the opposition between femininity and narcissistic valorization. The consequence of this conflict is, as Freud observed in his essay “Femininity”, that the girl will turn away from the mother and towards the father (1986, 158). As Carolyn Heilbrun suggests, the masculine identification of women has a strong psychodevelopmental base, specially in girls with “a will to difference”, who need to appropriate the possibility of “human autonomy and self-fulfillment” they see in the male world (1979, 95).

Women’s literature in the twentieth-century often represents matophobia as the gender conflict that results from the daughter’s narcissistic desire for an image of herself as a
woman that does not partake of her mother’s inferiority and diminishment. Marianne Hirsh notes that the ambitious heroine’s plot “must, like the boy’s, revolve around the males in the family who hold the keys to power and ambition” (1989, 56).

The “unmistakable hatred” Martha Quest feels towards her mother (125) represents the repudiation of the dominant paradigm of devalued femininity. Rebell ing against it, she “ranged herself with the men”, with “the rights of the intellect” (158). The problem is, Marianne Hirsh notes, that the ambitious heroine’s allegiance to fathers/brothers does not turn out to be the solution, since fathers or brothers often turn into patriarchs, and the heroine’s fate ends up, partly by exclusion, duplicating that of the mother (1989, 34). The male intellectual brotherhood ultimately excludes Martha, which pushes her back to her mother’s path of “normal femininity”.

The adolescent Clara Batchelor, in Antonia White’s The Lost Traveller, is one of the clearest illustrations of matrophobia as a gender split. From the beginning of the novel, the reader is presented with the central psycho-developmental conflict in Clara: her intense attachment and identification with her intellectual father, and her equally intense matrophobia, which does not exclude -the opposite- the identification with the mother’s conventional femininity. Thus, although there are several scenes of struggle between mother and daughter over Clara’s apparent lack of interest in her femininine appearance, when, at fifteen, she is allowed for the first time to choose her clothes, she chooses a feminine black velvet dress. In spite of her conscious will to be different from her mother “in spite of herself”, comments the narrator (36)- Clara is drawn to her mother: “For once she had enlisted her mother’s support against her father. Claude had wanted her to have a childlike blue cashmere” (36).

Adolescent daughters often achieve identification with their same gender by idealising not their own mother but another woman (Bleichmar 1985, 201), usually the mother of a female friend (Chodorow 1984, 203). Clara idealizes the mother of her friend Patsy Cohen. Mrs Cohen is seen by Clara as a fairy-tale incarnation of a self-sacrificing domestic femininity, “the Angel in the House” made flesh-and-blood (161), which is in stark contradiction with the ostensibly masculine ideal of assertive intellectual virtues that her father still represents for her.

The reason why adolescent daughters, while partly identifying with conventional femininity, refuse to take as ideal ego their own mothers, is probably related to the cultural phenomenon of “mother-blaming”. The individual mother is blamed for issues that have nothing to do with mothering, issues that, in fact, condition, constrict and victimize the woman-as-mother. Thus, Pilar Hidalgo points out in relation to Martha Quest’s matrophobia, the daughter’s rejection of colonial ideology “tiene como centro emotivo la rebelión contra todo lo que su madre representa” (1995, 100), ignoring that the mother herself is a victim of that ideology.

In the female literary tradition of matrophobia, the worst mothers are those who fail to give adequate love and attention, with the consequent negative effects for the daughter’s narcissism. Anita Brookner’s Look at Me, A Start in Life and Hotel du Lac are classic examples of the representation of the daughter’s wounded narcissism -her lack of self-esteem and her sense of exclusion- as a result of lack of parental -especially maternal- love and mirroring. These novels are representations of matrophobia in the most negative terms possible -the mother is portrayed not only as an undesirable ego ideal or role model, but as the source of the daughter’s emotional and psychological mutilation. Frances in Look at Me, Ruth in A Start in Life and Edith in Hotel du Lac are the daughters of mothers whose compulsive self-absorption, and therefore their inability to provide adequate maternal affection and attention, has enduring damaging effects for their daughters. In all of Anita
Brookner’s fiction, the narcissistic intersubjective relationships are represented as a structure of power, based on the polarity domination/subjection. But if, as Jessica Benjamin argues, in their narcissistic dealings with each other, people always enact the roles of “master” or “slave” (1990, 12), Brookner’s matrophobic narrative shows that this power structure is most unfair and psychologically damaging in the relation between the “master”—mother and the “slave”—daughter.

Frances, Ruth and Edith start their lives in a position of powerless subordination to their mothers’ narcissistic needs, to the detriment of their own needs for love and attention. As a result, the daughter does not achieve a positive self-image, self-agency and emotional fulfilment. The mother is, then, clearly blamed in Brookner’s novels for the heroine’s unhappiness as a child and for her compulsion to re-enact as an adult the type of narcissistic relationship where she is always the powerless loser, the slave of someone else’s mirroring needs.

The “sense of powerlessness and injustice” (Brookner interviewed by Kenyon 1989, 13) of the daughter in relation to her mother is convincingly justified in the narrative. In fact, the strength and innovation of Brookner’s representation of matrophobia lies precisely on its highlighting the power relations between mothers and daughters—made possible by the hierarchical structure of the institution of the family. Yet, its not insignificant weakness lies in leaving out a definition of “the rules of the game” (Brookner 1984, 38), that is, in the textual absence of the wider social context that makes possible this narcissistic power game where the daughter is always the loser. The subordination of the daughter to her mother appears in these novels as an unquestioned given, as the product of the individual mother’s personality.

Yet there is a small but relevant number of novels written by women that question whether the mother as an individual woman is to be blamed for her narcissistic (ab)use of her daughter, and/or for her inability to give enough love and attention to the daughter. They question whether the daughter’s narcissistic subordination and deprivation is really the product of the mother’s personality by showing the socio-cultural context for the lives and relations of mothers and daughters. Two brilliant examples of the representation out of matrophobia of the daughter’s narcissistic deprivation and of the mother’s narcissistic abuse of the daughter are Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea and Toni Morrison’s Beloved.

In Landscape for a Good Woman, an autobiographical cultural analysis of a daughter’s story of lack of maternal “confirmation and approval”, Carolyn Steedman argues that what makes relevant and significant many wounded daughters’ stories of absence of maternal “affection and attention”, is that these girls noticed their deprivation at the same time as they began to assess the attitude of the social world towards them, that is, “their exile from their mothers’ attention mirrored a wider exclusion” (1986, 187).

The daughter’s discourse of maternal exclusion is represented out of matrophobia when that exclusion is shown as an effect of a wider socio-cultural exclusion. This is what Jean Rhys superbly achieves in Wide Sargasso Sea, going beyond the matrophobia that characterizes the rest of her work.

Rhys’ heroines are either motherless or daughters of unresponsive mothers (Gardiner 1989, 21). In After Leaving Mr Mackenzie, for example, the mother is a classic matrophobic example of a rejecting and disappointing mother. Even in Rhys’ autobiography, Smile Please, the portrait of her mother throughout the section devoted to her is so matrophobic that it induces feelings of hostility even in the reader.

Like all stories of maternal rejection, Antoinette’s in Wide Sargasso Sea is deeply moving. At the end of the novel, Antoinette remembers her mother’s traumatic indifference: “She looked away from me, over my head just as she used to do” (147). Yet the overall
representation of the daughter’s exile from maternal approval and recognition is not matrophobic. Antoinette’s feeling of maternal deprivation is not riddled with blaming hostility.

Rhys’ own feelings of maternal and social unbelonging are represented in every one of her works. But it is only in her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, that the daughter’s exile from maternal love and attention is explicitly subordinated to the sociocultural exile that affects the mother as much as the daughter. The representation of Antoinette’s maternal deprivation out of matrophobia is achieved by contextualizing the private mother/daughter relationship in the general circumstances that shape it. Thus the social context that breeds maternal neglect is blamed rather than the individual neglectful mother blamed in matrophobic discourses.

Antoinette’s individual lack of maternal mirroring and affection reflects the mother’s social rejection and abandonment in a colonial Caribbean isle riddled with social prejudice and racial conflict. The novel starts just after the husband’s death, which leaves the mother, Annette, a poor Martinique girl rejected by the rich white Jamaicans. As a poor white woman, she also becomes the helpless target for the black people’s racial hatred.

Through the daughter’s own narrative voice, Jean Rhys subtly but persistently highlights the unbreakable link between maternal and socio-cultural rejection. Thus, the first two sentences in the novel are a declaration of the social unbelonging that affects both mother and daughter: “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks” (15). On the second page of the novel, they are presented as the target of racial hatred by “the black people”. While both mother and daughter are rejected, the emphasis is on the mother’s victimization: they “jeer at her”, “especially after her riding clothes grew shabby (they notice clothes, they know about money)” (16).

On the third page of the novel, the reader is first introduced to maternal rejection, but set in the context of the mother’s excruciating pain at social rejection:

*My mother ... Standing by the bamboos she had a clear view of the sea, but anyone passing could stare at her. They stared, sometimes they laughed. Long after the sound was far away and faint she kept her eyes shut and her hands clenched. A frown came between her black eyebrows, deep ... I hated this frown and once I touched her forehead trying to smooth it. But she pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her ... She wanted peace and quiet.* (17)

Antoinette clearly interprets maternal rejection as an effect of her mother’s social rejection. In her discourse, her mother is an object of pity, never the brunt of attack or criticism. Significantly, Annette, in spite of her need for “peace and quiet”, has some love to give, but she gives it exclusively to her son Pierre. This preference for the male child reinforces the daughter’s rejection, the fact that, as her own helpless mother, she is being excluded as a female in a patriarchal society. Like other daughters’ stories of maternal and cultural exclusion, Antoinette’s shows that, in the end, “women are the final outsiders” (Steedman 1986, 95).

Antoinette’s discourse of socio-cultural exclusion progressively acquires the sinister connotations of self-alienation, despair and paranoia. Maternal rejection does not loom so large when compared with her internalization of the social representation of her as “a white cockroach” and a “white nigger” (85), that is, when compared with her social unbelonging.

As in many other mother/daughter plots, Antoinette ends up functioning as her mother’s double, but, in this novel, “the obscure maternal double” is, like maternal rejection, represented out of matrophobia. It is not the mother’s desire for a double that turns Antoinette into her reflection, but their common socio-cultural circumstances, which make
both mother and adult daughter react in the same way: Antoinette will also want, above all else, “peace and quiet”, and, when she loses it (via Mr Rochester), she will follow her mother’s path to madness.

Like Wide Sargasso Sea, Toni Morrison’s Beloved sets the mother’s destructive attitude to the daughter in a destructive environment, highlighting the mother’s marginality, victimization and powerlessness. The difference is that, whereas in Rhys’ novel it is the mother who speaks for her mother -unwittingly colluding with matrophobic representations, where the mother is always part of a discourse spoken by an Other, an absent presence-, in Morrison’s novel it is the mother herself who attempts to explain the incomprehensible crime to her daughter. Sethe murders her baby girl, Beloved, because she loves her too much to let her return to slavery. This fatal distortion of mother-love is doubly represented out of matrophobia, for not only does the narrative avoid judging and blaming the individual mother but it shows the story from the mother’s own perspective.

Some feminist theoreticians have in the last two decades deplored the absence of cultural products that offer women-as-mothers a realistic reflection of their own felt experience, the absence of “primary sources from women as mothers” (Rich, 1976: 16), insisting on the need to recognize the authority of maternal experience and, therefore, the need to represent the mother’s own speaking subjectivity (Kristeva, 1977: 179; Parker, 1995: 10-11; Kaplan, 1992: 3-5). Marianne Hirsch turns to fiction for an articulation of maternal subjectivity and finds that the one rare tradition that does feature the mother’s subjectivity prominently and complexly is the tradition of black American women writing since the 1960s, where, even when the portrayal of powerful maternal figures oscillates between celebration and ambivalence, as in Toni Morrison’s fiction, the mother/daughter relationship is written out of matrophobia because it is set in the shared context of marginality and oppression, “deeply rooted in racial history” (1989: 176-8). The historical contextualization of the mother/daughter plot is highlighted by the construction of narrative time, a device used by other contemporary black women writers that portray the mother in her historical context (Christian, 1985: 227). Toni Morrison begins her novel in the middle of the mother’s story (in 1871, post-abolition times), then takes us back in time, through flashbacks, to the Mississippi slave plantation where she grew up, before she brings us back into the present. Through the historical contextualization of the mother, Morrison undertakes the demystification of the stereotypical “black mammy” without falling into the patriarchal trap of matrophobia. In Sula, another novel that allows the mother’s speaking subjectivity to emerge in its historical reality, when Hanna reproachfully asks her mother, Eva, “did you ever love us? … Did you ever, you know, play with us?”, Eva’s answer, as Angels Carabi suggests, explains her apparently deficient kind of love -exclusively centred on physical care- as historically constructed: for a black mother, poor and abandoned by her husband, “they wasn’t no time. Not none … What you talkin’ bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through your thick head … ?” (in Carabi, 1988: 114).

Beloved shows blatantly the danger of the mother’s excessive identification with her daughter as her double, but it is their socio-cultural context of extreme narcissistic deprivation that is blamed for the potentially destructive narcissistic dynamics between mother and daughter. Morrison represents Sethe’s fatal maternal love as historically constructed. Growing up as a black slave in America, the mother’s main psychological deprivation is lack of self-love, the result of her cultural lack of recognition, visibility and valorization. Forced out of self-love, Sethe nurtures a fiercely possessive love for her children, the only part of herself she can identify as good and valuable, as she herself admits to her lover, Paul: “She (her daughter) was my best thing” (273).
The daughter’s murder is shown to have been committed rather than by an individual mother, by a history of slavery, as part of a process of cultural murder of the Afro-American self-esteem, self-recognition and self-possession. Sethe’s fatal maternal love is represented out of matrophobia and within “the bottomless hunger engendered by slavery” (Sage 1992, 184). Sethe’s self—hungry for self-possession and self—valorization—will literally turn into the ghost of her Beloved, whose insatiable hunger reflects the mother’s endless deprivation. The ghost of the daughter is, then, both one of the most awesome incarnations of “the obscure maternal double” in women’s writing and one of the least matrophobic.

If *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Beloved* represent out of matrophobia the worst effects for the daughter of her relation to a victimized mother, Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” will reverse matrophobia altogether.

In “The Bloody Chamber”, as in other of Angela Carter’s liberatory utopian fiction, Carter represents reality by showing desire. The reality is that most adolescent daughters in white middle-class culture are matrophobic to some extent; their desire is for a powerful mother that, like mythical non-existent Demeter, rescues her daughter from the pitfalls of adolescence. The “indomitable mother” of the adolescent protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber” is powerful enough to descend, like Demeter, to the underworld, and rescue her daughter, who fell into the realm of Hades—the dark buried chamber of male perverted desire.

It is “the maternal telepathy” that sent the mother to rescue her daughter (40). Ellen C. Rose suggests that this “maternal telepathy” symbolizes the strong bond which allows the mother to be the daughter’s heroic rescuer (1983, 221). It follows that the girl’s identification with her mother is unambiguously positive. This mother is, exceptionally, the daughter’s ideal ego: “When I thought of courage, I thought of my mother” (38).

“The Bloody Chamber” is, among other things, Carter’s representation of the daughter’s desire for a bright maternal double and her celebratory reversal of the matrophobic hostility of white middle-class daughters into a positive empowering relationship, but the fact that this happy twist in the mother/daughter plot is written in the genre of utopia can be read as a symptom of the difficulty of a realistic rendering of the anti-matrophobic revolution in the mother/daughter relationship. Carter purportedly set herself up in “the demythologising business” (1983: 70), including the myths around woman-as-mother, and, although she undoubtedly achieved her feminist aim in her fiction at large—in *The Passion of New Eve*, for example, she turned the myth of Mother Earth inside out—she collided with patriarchal mythology in the fairy-tale tradition that, like “Cinderella” and “Sleeping Beauty”, represents good and powerful maternal figures as doting fairies rather than as biological mothers. With the exception of “The Bloody Chamber”, in those texts which figure the positive mother/daughter relationship as central in the development of plot and character, the powerful maternal figures are adoptive. Lizzie in *Nights at the Circus*, (non-biological) Grandma Chance in *Wise Children* have the aura of benevolent fairies with the power to bestow on their adopted daughters the liberatory but unlikely gifts of maternal self-esteem, self-agency and ambivalence-free love.

What the texts analysed here demonstrate is that, when the mother/daughter relationship is represented as being solely tied to psychological structures—usually the narcissistic dynamics between mother and daughter as individuals—, the discourse that results is matrophobic, unless it is utopian. As *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Beloved* illustrate, it is only by focusing on the relationship as deeply rooted in its socio-historical reality that it can be realistically void of the discourses of “mother-blaming” that characterize the vast majority of white middle-class women’s fiction. *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Beloved*, written from “the
other side” of the dominant culture, set in marginal worlds where survival is hard and which, therefore, are not prone to “mother-blaming” (Debold, Wilson, Malavé, 1993: 54), create plausible mother/daughter plots where the daughter’s negative inheritance of a victimized mother is convincingly portrayed out of matrophobia.

WORKS CITED


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