

MOTHERHOOD

THE DOUBLE TABOO

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Like absolute truth, motherhood is a mode of behaviour that encompasses positive sentiments: love, affection, tenderness, sacrifice, self denial, happiness, and altruism. Most texts glorify this feeling and overlook the more practical occupational role. Motherhood is an abstraction, an exalted act of giving, where the actual reality of the giver is neglected, and her desires, pleasures, and energies, are overlooked and ignored. Social practices, customs, and traditions do not tolerate women whose maternal role fails to conform to the norm, and such mothers are viewed as wicked and selfish.

The Mother in the Arabic Novel

The mother in the Arab world lives in a state of emotional drainage and daily subjugation despite ready made images of successful familial experiences. In controlling the future and destiny of her male and female children, she is viewed either as Virgin Mother or as a Medea.

The Virgin Mother

Mary is the self-sacrificing pure mother who devotes her life to raising and protecting her son. She gives birth without "sin", pleasure, and even without pain. Sarjun the Acadian king (2800 BC) did not know who his father was, but he claimed that his mother was one of the virgins of the temple. The pharoes believed that the mother of the "Pharoe" gives birth to him through asexual intercourse, an unnatural act on the part of the gods. She is, therefore, an ethereal and holy creature who has transcended her own body.

Arabic literary texts celebrate the virgin image of the mother. In these texts the mother is the victim, while the father is the strict executioner. Moroccan male novelists have succeeded in following this trend. Idris Shuraybi was the first to adopt such an endeavor in **The Simple Past** (*Le Passé Simple*, 1954) followed by Rashid Abu Jadra in **The Repudiation** (*La Répudiation*, 1969), Tahir Bin Jallun in **The Down Cast Eyes** (*Les Yeux Baissés*, 1994), Tahir Wattar in *The Ace* (*L'as*, 1974), and Muhamad Dhayb who writes in **The King's Dance** (*Raqṣat al-Malik*, 1968) that "our fathers are the ones who impregnate our mothers." Perhaps the harshest of these testimonies can be found in **The Plain Bread** (*Al-Khubz al-Hāfī*, 1992) by the Moroccan writer Muhamad Shukri, where the mother is crushed, annihilated, and eliminated, while the father in a state of rage kills one of his children.

A mother's attachment to her male children is not unilateral because her son reciprocates this same infatuation. In Abu Jadra's novel, the mother's absence yields sorrow and

grief: the main character goes mad, suffers from a breakdown, and contemplates suicide. Moreover, the hero in Tahir Wattar's novel is rendered insane and mute upon losing his mother. Female writers also deal with the nurturing mother (as opposed to the ravenous, predatory father), yet with less determination and insistence. Hanan al-Shaykh in her novel **The Story of Zahrah** (*Hikāyat Zahrah*, 1980) recounts: "At that point my father's image came into my mind, shrunken, lacking the Hitler-like moustache and with no watch in his trouser pocket. By now his heavy frame had lost all sign of the brute strength*with which he had beaten my mother" (p.130). Fleeing her father's violence and tyranny, Zahrah becomes attached to her mother and compares their closeness to "an orange and her navel." At the same time, Zahrah is conscious of her mother's preference and singling out of her brother Ahmad: "My mother would never give me a single morsel of meat. This she always reserved for Ahmad, sometimes for my father. Her ways never changed. Maybe she never ate chicken or meat herself" (p.7).

In her novel **The Excised** (*L'exicés*, 1982) Evelyne Accad refers to the subjugated, conciliatory, and subdued mother who is powerless and weak before the tyrannical father who locks his daughter up because she had the audacity to fall in love with someone from a different religious background. This subjugated mother has no weapons but her tears to fight the father's oppression with.

The Radical Mary

This "virgin mother" protects the male and pities the female. Her identification with her son is so intense that it comes close to desire. This is what Hasan Bu Hadibah, the Tunisian sociologist, asserts in **Sexuality in Islam** (*Al-Jins fī al-Islām*) where he says that mothers in the Arab world become attached to their male children in an attempt to compensate for their emotional and spiritual deficiency. Such a relationship is, in his view, a perversion that features in many novels. The Lebanese novelist Evelyne Bustrus recounts in her novel "Under the Branch of a Nut Tree" (*Sous La Baguette du Coudrier*, 1988) the story of a mother whose infatuation with her son causes her to fall in love with a young man as old as he is. When her relationship is exposed and everyone finds out about it, she pushes her brother to kill her in order to preserve the honor of the family and to spare her son direct involvement in this problem. In **A Letter after Death** (*Risālah mā ba'da al-Mawt*, 1989) by Dominique Iddeh, the male protagonist looks upon his father with suspicion and misgiving and rejects marriage totally in order not to hurt his enamored mother's feelings. A mother's identification with her son reaches its peak in Tufiq Yussuf 'Awad's collection of short stories **A Shirt of Wool** (*Qamiṣ al-Ṣūf*, 1957) where the mother's desire to monopolize and possess her son causes her illness, depression

and hallucination. The seriousness of her condition leaves no room for any form of sublimation: "Amin was fixing his tie when she dragged him to her room and closed the door, looking around like a thief. She embraced him passionately and released him gazing at his forehead, eyes, hair. Then she stretched out her hand to caress his chest. Once more she sprung on him and kissed him, hugged him..." (p. 14) In the two novels by Dominique Iddeh and Tufiq Yussuf Awad, the father is practically non-existent. In the first novel he is hardly a tangible figure, while in the second he is deceased though with a long history of tyranny and oppression.

In her analytical presentation of **Mrs. Marie Rose** (*Sitt Marie Rose*, 1982), Etel Adnan links the behaviour of pampered male children to violence, wars, and rejection of the other "because Arab mothers love their children only" (p. 78), and because "true love means loving a stranger." (p.78)

Moreover, in **Even Murderers have a Mother** (*Même les Tueurs ont une Mère*), the French writer Patrick Minies refers to the pressure of a mother's presence and her domination. Does Marwan, the main protagonist in the novel, fight to please his mother and protect her, or to break her power and control?

The Medea

Medea is the fictitious evil witch who killed her children because her husband Jason prefers another woman to her. As far as Medea is concerned children are no more than objects, or tools exchanged between two partners. Once her partner neglects her, she lets out her rage and anger on their children. In the texts examined, the castrating mother, as she is referred to in psychoanalysis, appears in a bashful and diffident manner. The wicked mother is generally the father's wife, Cinderella's stepmother. Muhamad Abi Samra, the Lebanese novelist, resists this convention in **The Earlier Man** (*Al-Rajul al-Sabiq*, 1995)

and presents a mother who refuses to acknowledge her children. She is contemptuous of her situation and is disgusted with the idea that "a man defiled her slim body with intercourse." She despises her husband, wrecks the life of her children, and converts their life into a disaster and a perpetual feeling of inadequacy. In **As Green as Marshes** (*Khaḍrā' kal-Mustanqa'āt*, 1992) by Hani al-Rahib, the mother dominates her daughter, ensnares her, and gives her orders and warnings. As a result, the daughter sees her mother as the cause of all her problems: "My mother was nothing but a besieging torture to my body and soul. She not only opposed my every movement,

but also tried to halt the flowing river inside me. She argued and quarreled with me daily



"Mother and Child (Marie-Thérèse and Maya), 1938, oil on canvas. Pablo Picasso

in order to block any chances for committing 'sin.' Besides, she constantly nagged about my going to the river or playing in the neighborhood. This was a shameful act and an unforgivable crime."

In a derisive tone, Mona Shatilla in her novel **The Losers** (*Al-Khā'ibun*, 1996), presents a negligent mother. The protagonist, a writer who is far from being an ordinary woman, worries about and concentrates upon her artistic profession, ignoring her daughter who eventually ruins her academic and professional career by becoming a drug addict. In **Mary the Light** (*Maryam al-Nūr*, 1995) Raja' Nihmi's main character does not fully accept her daughter because she is ugly, and the daughter reacts: "How can a mother see her daughter's ugliness ... Is she worthy of being a mother?" If the mother in **The Excised** supports her daughter against the father's obstinacy, other women participate in the circumcision of their daughters without batting an eye. (pp. 120-121) In **The Cedar's Memory** (*La Mémoire du Cèdres*, 1989), Jan dismisses all her familial obligations and disregards her children for the sake of her lover Faris. Also in **The Nobleman's Wife** (*La Femme du noble*, 1992), Flora the protagonist wrecks her marriage by deserting her loving husband and adolescent children and running off with her lover who belongs to the nobility and who neglects her in favor of his younger wives. As the story unfolds, the negative consequences of her decision become apparent. This novel portrays the baneful effects of the father's absence as well as the women's instinctual nature manifested in her indulgence in the gratification of her desires irrespective of the consequences.

Conclusion

Although the texts mentioned above do not represent all aspects of motherhood, one can draw the following conclusions:

1. Unlike the general discourse on motherhood, maternal love is not a stable and definite given. Motherhood is not an inherent and deep-seated instinct for it is affected by external variables. Not all mothers share the same maternal love, and each case varies according to the individual and the situation. In this sense, one could say that the state of motherhood is conditional since it depends on various factors such as a woman's relationship to her partner, child bearing, conception, natural inclinations, the mother's acceptance of the child's outward appearance and sex, her personal and professional comportment and demeanor, as well as her social status. In the Moroccan novels referred to and the novels by Tufiq Yusuf 'Awad and Evelyne Bustrus respectively, mothers become attached to their sons in order to fill an emotional gap, and this passionate attachment turns the woman into a possessive, untamable and destructive creature. In **The Story of Zahrah** and **The Excised** the mother is a shield used by the protagonist/daughter to protect her from the tyranny of the father. Also in **The Earlier Man**, the mother refuses to accept her miserable situation and rejects her child (even though he is a boy) because he is tiny and ugly. In **Mary the Light** the mother rejects her daughter because she is ugly, and in **The Losers**, the daughter is neglected and sacrificed for the sake of her mother's own

personal ambition. In **As Green as Marshes**, the mother oppresses her daughter in order to propagate and promote conventional patriarchal values. Similarly, in **The Excised**, mothers find pleasure in the bloody scene of their daughters' circumcision. In **The Thirty-Three Year Old Woman** (*Imra'at al-Thalāthīn 'āman*), the mother ignores her daughter because she is the fruit of an unwanted marriage.

2. The novels written in French such as **The Nobleman's Wife**, **The Cedar's Memory** concentrate on the mother's desires and needs rather than on her maternal obligations and familial commitment. This might be attributed to the fact that the Lebanese war contributed to the surfacing of women's needs and desires and brought them back to whatever is primitive and primary.

3. The Medea mother (with the exception of **The Cedar's Memory**) is accused and proclaimed guilty of neglecting her children. In **As Green as Marshes**, the emotional commitments of the protagonist never last owing to her traditional upbringing; however, only Jan in **The Cedar's Memory** escapes condemnation. Her father understands and supports her decision, and her husband merely complains when she leaves him and flees to her lover. So it is apparent that children are the external symbols exhibiting the feelings present between a man and a woman. They are also representations of how women view themselves, their bodies, and their realities.

4. The "virgin mother" as well as the wicked mother feature more in men's writings. Why is this the case? Is it because of men's high expectations and strong identification with and attachment to their mothers? Or is it because mothers are more attached to their male offspring? More than anything else, these texts enable us to understand in more depth the complexity of motherhood and the relationship between mother and child.

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