

'gimmicky' ending: a self-reflexive sleight of hand tries to at once convince the reader of a certain literary originality. The arguments against it tend to conclude that as it is perceived as overdone, and any claim to originality is therefore undone, it is not worth wasting time over it. While this is not entirely an unfair evaluation – the uncomfortable familiarity is certainly present –, it remains a superficial and generalising observation. As far as I can tell, even though I have heard the argument made in a number of English-speaking institutions in various countries with only minor alterations, no one has cared to go from such speculation to critical examination of the *The Marriage Plot* and its ending. My own admittedly strange investigation, the ultimate aim of which is to generate more fruitful discussion, regardless of whether my reading is found to be appealing or not, is perhaps justified in certain indulgences by the critical vacuum around this text. The “no,” and the “yes” in the closing lines of *The Marriage Plot* freshly reveal the importance of a number of serious interpretive questions. An even basic understanding of Madeleine's knowledge on marriage-plot literature could, and to the casual reader most certainly does, provide good reason to trust her. One might even be able to conclusively demonstrate that she is justified, through a pseudo-archeological study of the “books [she] read for her theses,” from which it would be possible to infer her view on the wider marriage-plot convention. This kind of study might even reveal certain interesting gaps in her knowledge, such as texts that develop a narrative similar to the one suggested by Mitchell, which we could then conclude Madeleine either had not considered or knowingly refuted.

On the other hand, in an effort to not treat fictional characters as real people, a more pointed analysis might reveal a proclivity in both Madeleine and Mitchell to enter deeper into the meta-fictional pretence already at work. The interpolated interior monologues set a tone for the closing section whereby it could be argued that Madeleine is pushing Mitchell – whom she recognises is eager to comply – to write their story. This hypothesis would be supported by the fact a certain number of romantic requirements Madeleine feels are missing in her life would be satisfied by such a Wagner-Mathilde dynamic, as if the writing of *The Marriage Plot* were Mitchell's own *Tristan und Isolde*. The idealisation Mitchell mentions would fit into this schema very well; and in accepting that a substitute for the consummation of their love could exist in the enthusiasm of this allegedly fresh narrative, Mitchell approximates Wagner even more.² If one were to think this way, this could be considered the ideal consummation; one that leaves both parties intact, and which transcends the individual and material moment – it will generate a love *that will always and forever have been*. Furthermore, it would externalise their love, bringing it beyond the textual level into the meta-textual; at once forcing a complicity in the reader and strengthening the verisimilitude of a text that is actively trying to ground itself in the real world through all sorts of references. Yet, regardless of whether Madeleine were accidentally or intentionally lying to Mitchell in order to help create the very text we are reading, the novel highlights that the marriage-plot tradition of *The Marriage Plot* is at once that of the real-world literary

tradition, and to an internal mechanism of the text itself which (notwithstanding appearances) must be fictional and cogently authored. For if her answers are genuine, Madeleine is restricting her reply, either through a lack of familiarity with contemporaneous popular literature (where the plot described by Mitchell exists and is deployed variously), or she is familiar with these text but she is formally delimiting 'the tradition' in a manner not explicitly revealed to the reader.³

This set of problems opens a rift between the fictional and the real that *The Marriage Plot* tries to bridge through constant reference to real-world texts, events and locations; and it develops the question of canonicity through a very acute lens. For the canon of the marriage-plot as it is accepted and/or discussed by literary critics does not necessarily need to match that which Eugenides creates within the text even essentially. Perhaps, only those books revealed to us, or mentioned even, in the text actually exist within the text, and the reader is wrong in assuming otherwise. And perhaps, because the essential quality of the text is that of fiction, Madeleine's answer is justified by this hypothesis. Yet this appears somewhat absurd – as is, for example, the suggestion that the books Madeleine mentions even in the opening pages of the novel are only exist in the text insofar as she understands them, and not as the real-world texts themselves, for what contextual frame of reference would Eugenides then be suggesting? – ; and what I am suggesting is that this strange thesis, which really seems to be a misconstrued understanding of the novel – and I want to stress that I do believe it to be a really critical misreading —, is in fact the kernel of a much wider problem the novel reveals about a certain category of postmodern narrative *The Marriage Plot* belongs to (whether Eugenides realises this or not is another issue): meta-fiction that develops intertextuality with what are recognisably real-world texts.⁴ For no matter how we treat intertextuality, at a certain point the line is crossed whereby either the fictional meta-text is engaging with the real tradition or the tradition is assimilated into the meta-text.

The novel does not seem capable of sustaining itself across the very boundary it is pointing to; yet there is an attempt to internalise the problematic, assimilate and overcome it, implicit in what could be interpreted as the text's self-awareness of the problem. While this would be a further sleight of hand on Eugenides' part (again, if he's even conscious of it) *The Marriage Plot* is at least making some sort of an attempt to address an issue that's slipped under the critical radar. And there is a sense of trying to break from the endless string of gimmick-endings implicit in the revelation this one delivers (not just of its own gimmicky nature but of the fact that this template is symptomatic of something considerably more profound) by placing a number of critical concepts literally under erasure. I've tried to stress that as the boundary between a fictional world and the real world is a compromised element of this meta-fictional novel, intentional fallacy becomes all the more difficult to circumvent in critical readings. It may be a leap to suggest this novel is pushing at one of the final boundaries between the fiction/non-fiction binary that postmodernism could potentially deconstruct, but *The Marriage Plot* may have brought the question of authorial intent full-

circle, back into the realm of the fully critically relevant: an effect that Zsuzsi Gartner seems to have picked up on in his special review, asking whether Eugenides himself is somehow trying to create a further level of meta-fiction beyond the text itself and within its critical reception.⁵

The Joycean echo in the closing word might then suggest the final line of inquiry. Eugenides, like Joyce, might be actively trying to link the text to the real world through the intersection of a personal narrative (if it can be considered as such) with the text's own separate (fictional) narrative.⁶ The result of which is highly personal and not relevant in the critical sphere as it is generally understood nowadays. These two narratives only intersect tangentially, yet they could be seen as an act of complicating the relationship with historical discourse, introducing the possibility for two-way analysis that would ground meta-fiction in the real by deconstructing all boundaries between its own fiction and the *fictionalization* inherent in all text (again, understood here in the wider sense; *episteme*, rubric or archive are terms that might be more familiar to some).

All this goes to show ultimately one thing: the question of whether Eugenides were trying to force Madeleine's reading-goggles on the reader, should not be ignored – because the solution the text as a whole provides is not as evident as it might seem. If the novel is taking deconstruction literally, placing it under erasure within the text (Madeleine rejects a number of central tenets of post-structuralist thought) and finally inverting it in choosing not to explode the fiction/non-fiction binary, but to conflate (what was once a dichotomy that has been weakened throughout the 20th century into) a juxtaposition, then it might just be trying to communicate something a lot more significant than variations on a theme, but also a tentative mechanism (certain elements of which are – I admit – ambiguously retrogressive and reminiscent of an unfortunate brand of historicism) that develops quite a forward-looking agenda.

End Notes :

1. Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Marriage Plot*. London: Fourth Estate, 2012. Print.
2. Especially as the narrative would necessarily be a vehicle through which to rationalise the trajectory his love has drawn, form its “early conception” to this, its final stage – having come meta-fictionally full-circle.
3. It should be noted Madeleine does state she believes that the age she lives in is not an age suited to traditional marriage-plots. Other things could be inferred or speculated around, but no concrete evidence for this sort of activity on the tradition is present in the text.
4. The term 'texts' is understood here in a wider sense, in a Derridean manner, as referring to not just literal textual resources but also the general media and the collective discourse of society.
5. Gartner, Zsuzsi. "Jane Austen, Meet David Foster Wallace." *The Globe and Mail*. N.p., 14 Oct. 2011. Web. 06 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/the-marriage-plot-by-jeffrey-eugenides/article558057/>>.
6. Molly Bloom's final affirmation has often been linked to Nora Barnacle accepting Joyce's marriage proposal; also, *Ulysses* is set on the day Joyce and Nora first met, an extra-textual fact that highlights the personal importance of the mundane – a prominent feature in the text).



Mothers without Mothering: The Unconventional Representation in Select Works of Toni Morrison

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Abstract: The roles of a man and a woman in this society complement each other. A male and a female are differentiated and acquire their identity on the basis of their sexual and gender roles. For a woman these roles are determined universally because of the biological structure. According to Simon De Beauvoir “a woman is not born a woman but becomes one”. Feminists consider marriage and motherhood as forms of subordination of a female to the male member of the household. The ideology of both these institutions demands submission of a woman to her husband and her subsequent adherence to the domains of her private life and gendered division of roles. Though motherhood is the most beautiful profession of a woman; it is also equated with femininity. It is natural and instinctual in a woman to be a mother. In a patriarchal social pattern where motherhood was seen as a form of oppression, it was also seen as a source of power which gave them respect and dignity in the society. This paper is an attempt to explore the novel dimensions of this theme of motherhood with reference to the works of African-American feminist writers.

Keywords: African-American, Motherhood, Power and Oppression.

Motherhood is a dominant theme in the postmodern feminist writings. As understood, the role of a mother in any society has an emotional and strong sense of bonding which makes it a core human relationship in the family. Mother is the preserver, builder and the custodian of the new generation. For a woman, Motherhood is a cherished ideal and the provider of a new cultural base. It is the sole basis that has individuated the lives of women in the society. When a woman becomes a mother, she is not doing only an act of giving birth to the child, or merely 'reproducing life'. She is actually fulfilling the social role of giving birth to children, raising them and educating them socially and morally to take their place in this world, in a culturally acceptable manner. In this way her role as a reproducer of life acquires importance as she also reproduces socially and culturally accepted individuals of particular class, caste or culture. V. Geetha in her book 'Patriarchy' has commented on the role of mother with her reference to the Hindu mythology where Lord Shiva also sees Earth as an embodiment of primal energy, of *prakriti*, or female power. Its exploitation for greed and growth was thus similar to the exploitation and subjugation of women's body for her reproductive powers. It is a naturally attributed role of a woman to be a mother, not a socially constructed or gendered role. A female body is seen as a metaphor for a germinal: both

the earth that holds the seed and nurtures it. (Vgeetha) Anti- thesis to this image is another image of a woman where she is seen as dreadful and fearful as Goddess Kali who eats up her own children, yet she is considered to be divine and sacred who is worshipped in her shrine. This paper is an attempt to analyze the image of a black mother in view of this Indian context which portrays her as both malevolent and dreadful, and also as a warrior who fights with an insatiate to conquer her foes. The true role of black mother cannot be studied and interpreted if we fail to perceive it in the backdrop of a racist society. There are several socio-cultural factors along with classism, economic conditions, poverty and, most important the psychological factors which influence the psyche of a black mother. When we consider the gender specific roles of a white woman, the role of a mother, are confined to their roles of homemaking, caretaking their children, nurturing their husband and maintaining household. They hold control over their own distinct domain, acquiring social importance and influence. The functions and roles of a mother, wife, preservers, transmitters and custodians of culture, further strengthen their identity in the traditional society. Motherhood, thus provides centrality to a female's role in her family and the society.

According to the psychologists motherhood is an identical pattern that is inherited directly from the mothers. As for a child the mother is the first figure of attachment even in the state of prenatal passivity. She is the one who is responsible for nurturing the child from the foetal till the time the child is an independent individual. It is her duty to bear the responsibility of her child's emotional, social and psychological developments in their process of becoming individuals. Sometimes this relation is strengthened with the history of oppression associated with the mother, which is shared with the child and, thus becomes a part of her character trait. Such adverse conditions faced by women make her a strong person when she acquires the strength to resist the pressures of the society. The same spirit is inculcated through her in her children who are taught to bear the burdens and handle the pressures of the society. This kind of a study is usually relevant with reference to the study of motherhood related to the mothers of color. In some cultures, women of color and native women are aware of the boundaries that surround their world. The mothers, grandmothers and older mothers of their groups form the backbone of their society, and we recognize their contribution to the society which is celebrated, with their all-consuming power. They demand no reward or recognition from the society in return. If motherhood is seen as a source of power; it is also seen as a way of controlling and dominating women in a patriarchal society. This kind of control over the female body also results in the absence of feelings of love and affection from the mother replacing them with other intense feelings such as dislike, joy, rage, satisfaction, anxiety, pleasure, fear, wonder, ambivalence, and sometimes even a desire to be rid of the child followed by remorse and guilt. As Ruddick argues' mothers can run the gamut of feelings from intense love to an intense desire to get rid of her child, but it is their actions that count and these

actions are a result of their commitment to their relationship with their children- their “preservative love” (Ruddick 70-71). Feelings of power are combined with the feelings of love, responsibility and concern for others that govern the thoughts and actions of these mothers. They display the power of their role in exercising control over the community which is very clearly evident in the context of African- American mothers. There can be no general theory about motherhood as there are several socio-cultural factors and a common history of oppression that they share; the individual as well and the mother both influenced by race, class, age, family, structure, religion, sexuality and economic position affecting her ways of mothering her children.

It has also been proved that the biological mother is not always the nurturer of the child. In the African- American culture the concept of other mother, grandmother and other older ladies of the community, who take the responsibility of those children whose mothers go out to labor in the fields, or take care of the household of white families is a common practice in the community reflecting the strong bond of maternal care and affection. It has been remarkable to note that since past decade many researchers, novelists, poets, writers and critics have produced significant and new material based on the true experience of black women as mothers facing the impact all kinds of socio-psychological factors. The consideration of Nancy Chodorow in her most popular book *The Reproduction of Mothering* is very relevant in this field, that the mothering role is the root cause of female dependence and subordination to men. Black women are socialized to become independent women due to extreme circumstances of poverty and racism and teach their female offspring to perform other adult tasks of the household. My point of consideration in this particular paper is that what makes the relation of a black mother and her daughter so different? Each mother or daughter is a woman biologically and socially; but, she is a female first. It is not only her narration or experience, but her encounters with the world around her which makes her feel the universal experience of femaleness. But there is something unique about the Black mother- daughter relationship that has never been said before. Mother is the first influence on the identity of her daughter. As her identity in this world of Blackness against the Whiteness is so diverse, amazing and binding her with the community; so is her relation with her children also. There are wide-ranging differences in her role in the society and the world around her with regard to the socio-cultural, political and economic factors. The relationship between a black mother and daughter could be of a friend or a competitor; they can be challengers, or even share a synergistic relationship. Such relationship also provides them the space to resist the influence of their mothers; and at the same time see themselves in the image of their mother's identity. Yet this resistance is needed to maintain their own identity. There is a “turbulence and tenderness” that characterizes the Black mother-daughter relationship at various points in the life cycle (Scott xv). There is a message about womanhood which the daughters of these Black women

receive from their mothers who belong to varied social class and family backgrounds.

The true analysis of black mother-daughter relationship remains incomplete if not compared and contrasted against the backdrop of white motherhood. The roles of mother in the White society acquire a special place in the context of gender symbolism when we analyze the customary role of a mother. Females as mothers can be divided into two groups- one who see motherhood as a source of power and other who see it as oppression. Mothers are not mothers only by reproducing and raising their children. They can also be mothers without fulfilling the traditional role of mothers and, 'refusing to be the mothers'. In postmodernist times, motherhood as an institution is divided into two groups; first where it is seen as dismantling the power of a female and, the second traditionalist point of view where we perceive motherhood as an institution completing the existence of a woman. The tenet has been challenged by the White women themselves wherein they believe that compulsory motherhood should be abolished and it can be enjoyed only by choosing not to be mothers. This third view stands between the above two dichotomies where mothers can be the real mothers only when they are not just mothers (Collins 43). The analysis of a black woman or any woman of color as a mother becomes a difficulty within these three themes. The roles and duties of a mother within the nuclear family are limited within the household sphere and confined to rearing children, is not possible for the Black mother because she lacks a proper family structure. The lack of economic resources and the missing identity in the White society further increases their difficulties in meeting the expectations. Secondly, there cannot be any discipline about role segregation, since the black women and men share the economic and the social responsibilities equally without the family structure prevalent within these African-Americans. Thirdly, we cannot find the good mothers who perceive motherhood and economic dependency on men to be the judging criteria for good women. In her fiction Toni Morrison has attempted to depict the brutal realities of the life of a slave woman. Such atrocities of her life do not allow her to enjoy the institution of motherhood as believed in the traditionalist view. The relationship between a slave mother and daughter is an overarching issue in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Marianne Hirsch rightly argues that in *Beloved* Morrison has "opened the space for maternal narrative in fiction" (Collins 32). The novel is a fiction created by a historical fact which is the real story of a slave woman Margaret Garner who ran away with her four children and her husband. It is not a slave narrative but an exposure of the story of those anonymous slaves and especially the yet veiled and hidden story of the slave women who had shameful and traumatic experiences. Very few novelists have dared to expose the real interior lives and psychological bruises of these slave women. *Beloved* is a novel where Morrison is concerned about by what means "the historical events are filtered through the psychological process". The slave mother is brutally detached from her children before she could see them growing