

Narratives of Mothers who Mother in a Foreign Environment

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The European Conference on Cultural Studies 2014
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In the last three decades there has been a growing number of mothers' own narratives of mothering in contemporary women's writing throughout Europe and North America. Narratives of mothers who mother in a culturally and linguistically foreign environment are part of this trend, they are also relatively recent and can be seen as both a result of and a reflection on the reality of growing global mobility in the last two decades, especially in Europe. The powerful emotional link between the language and the self puts motherhood and the language of mothering in a special relationship that is essential to mother's subjectivity. Most fictional narratives of mothering in a foreign environment engage with this phenomenon to a greater or lesser degree and allow for some classification of mothers according to their linguistic preferences in relation to their children. They fall into the following types: silent mother, multilingual mother and trans-lingual mother. In this paper I will be drawing on several texts in different European languages mostly British, possibly American English and French, but also Lithuanian in order to try and understand how and why mothers fall into one category or another, how that affects their maternal subjectivities, their bond with their offspring, how it impacts their intimate experience of mothering, and how much mothering experiences and maternal subjectivities are influenced by culturally determined roles assigned to mothers in their country of origin and their host country.

Keywords: women's writing, motherhood, migration, maternal subjectivity

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Introduction

Exploring complicated relationships between gendered experience and artistic practices is one of the central principles of feminist literary criticism. Fictional texts produced by women both reflect on contemporary female experience and actively participate in constructing and/or perpetuating modes of culturally as well as socially productive subjectivities for women. As editors of a recent book on contemporary French women's writing put it "recent women's writing in France is connected to, responds to and engages with real-life issues and socio-cultural trends both within and beyond France" (Rye, Damlé, 2013:1). This is arguably true about most European countries and literatures. For the last fifty years, but especially since 1990 European women have confidently established themselves as subjects of their own fictional narratives, enjoying a plethora of different narrative voices, points of view, genres and artistic strategies to symbolize their experiences, tell their stories, express and assert their subjectivities and points of view.¹

In her book *Narratives of Mothering* Gill Rye singles out one aspect of the general trend and demonstrates that among all the different women's literary voices "mothers are becoming narrative subjects in their own right, as authors, as narrators" and that there is a growing number of "mothers' own narratives of mothering" in contemporary French women's writing (Rye, 2009:5). This too is arguably largely true about contemporary women's writing of most European countries and languages.²

Narratives of mothers who mother in a culturally and linguistically foreign environment are part of this last tendency of proliferation of mothers' own narratives of mothering. They are also relatively recent and can be seen as both a result of and a reflection on the reality of growing global mobility in the last three decades, especially in Europe. Although it has to be pointed out that these narratives are few, they are generically diverse featuring such literary genres as novels, plays, memoirs, and essays. It is important to note that they are mostly autobiographical. As such, they are an important contribution to the totality of contemporary women's efforts to experience, think, imagine, represent, and thus shape the rapidly changing nature of motherhood in the Western world.

Inspired by the afore mentioned developments in women's writing and critical approaches, my current research draws on narratives of expatriate, voluntarily exiled, and/or migrant mothers in different European languages mostly British English, French, Lithuanian, and American English. It aims at trying to understand the workings of one of the most essential and extremely complex aspects of mothering in a foreign environment, namely, the language, and its impact on maternal subjectivity. How does the language the mother speaks to her offspring – her native or that of the

¹ See Gill & Damlé 2013; Hoft-March & Sarnecki, 2009; Hutton, 2009; Mitchell, 2008; Giorgio & Waters 2007; Helimann & Llewelyn, 2007; Jordan, 2004; Parker, 2004; Gill & Worton 2002; Neumeier, 2001; Sellars, 2001; Armitt, 2000; Christianson & Lumsden, 2000; Sonya 2000.

² See for instance papers featured at the major interdisciplinary conference *Motherhood in post-1968 European Women's Writing: Cross-cultural and Interdisciplinary Dialogues* held in October 2013 at the University of London, Institute of Modern Languages Research, School of Advanced Study convincingly testify to that.

host country, sometimes, it turns out, neither of the two – affect her maternal experience and who she is as a mother? How and why mothers make their linguistic choices of mothering, how that affects their bond with their offspring, how it impacts their intimate experience of mothering, and how much mothering experiences and maternal subjectivities are influenced by culturally determined roles assigned to mothers in their country of origin and their host country.

Most fictional narratives of mothering in a foreign environment engage with the mother's language choice *vis a vis* her children to a greater or lesser degree and allow for some classification of mothers according to their linguistic preferences in relation to their children. So far I have identified the following types: silent mother, multilingual mother and trans-lingual mother. The silent mother is the mother who does not pass her own language to her children and/or does not learn the language of the host country enough to adequately communicate with her children and socialize them in that language. The trans-lingual mother is the mother who mothers in a language of the host country, the so-called "stepmother tongue" and not her own mother tongue. The multilingual mother is the one who mothers in several languages simultaneously, her native language as well as that of the host country and/or a third or fourth language according to circumstance. The scope of this paper only allows me to deal with two different linguistic mother types through two respective texts. I will look at them in greater detail now.

Silent Mother

The silent mother features in my fellow Lithuanian Dalia Staponkutė's essay *The Mother's Silence* written in Lithuanian and translated by Darius Ross (Staponkutė 2007).³ Dalia Staponkutė was born in Soviet Lithuania. With the fall of the Berlin wall she moved to Cyprus, where she started a family, taught at the University of Cyprus, translated from Modern Greek to Lithuanian and has continued to write in Lithuanian. In her essay she explores the figure of a "silent mother" based on numerous migrant Lithuanian women round the world "who are unable to talk to their children in their native language". In the essay, a long legged, longhaired Lithuanian blond married to a Greek husband most vividly personifies the silent mother. The couple are said to live in "mystical linguistic circumstances. Their children don't speak Lithuanian; the mother speaks no Greek though she's picked up a smattering of English...", which she presumably uses to communicate with both her husband and children. What is surprising in this set up is not the fact that the children do not speak any Lithuanian, but that the mother does not speak any Greek. I argue that Staponkutė's silent mother is a victim of double trauma – the one deriving from her silence in relation to her children and the one to do with her own national and historic background – and that she is unable to overcome either of them because of the powerful national myth which puts the responsibility of safeguarding the Lithuanian language and by default the Lithuanian state on the shoulders of mothers.

Throughout the essay, the silent mother is portrayed as pathologically unhappy. Her inner world is said to be "turned into permafrost", she "feels a piercing nostalgia", her "every step is marked by sacrifice and loss". She is unable to connect emotionally with the people in her immediate environment.

³ The essay in translation <http://iwpu.uiowa.edu/91st/vol6-num3/the-silence-of-the-mothers>

“Mummy, are you by any chance a mummy?” mocks the snotty child of a Lithuanian mother and a Greek father while she, during a lively Greek conversation, keeps strangely mum. [...] Children born outside the space of their mother’s native language or their mother’s homeland “disavow” their mothers as soon as they learn to walk. Children, even little pip-squeaks, manage to jump across the chasm separating their mothers from their locale with such alacrity that the mother from a strange land ends up stranded on the other side before she can even manage a gasp.

The silent mother is portrayed as absent from her family life, a mere speechless and powerless spectator of the family performance, stranded, cut off, and alone. Staponkutė’s silent mother seems to suffer from the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, including linguistic amnesia of her native Lithuanian. The mother’s inability to engage in the embodied language play with her children and partner partly originates in her failure to pass on her native language to her children and is seen here as a threat to the mother’s existence, which I would like to consider in the light of some aspects specific to Lithuanian historical and post-Soviet psycho-social context, which is marked by mass emigration from Lithuania and specifically emigration through marriage. Let us first look at a brief outline of Lithuania’s traumatising history. Up until the restoration of independence in 1990, Lithuania was always, with the exception of a 30 year period between the two wars, occupied by a foreign force or formed joint states with neighbouring countries. The 20th century during which Lithuania changed hands three times, each time one repressive regime succeeding another, and was subjected to the Soviet system for nearly half of that century, resulted in a society suffering from extremely poor psychological health (Gailienė, 2008). Moreover, neither of those regimes, especially the Soviet, was particularly sympathetic to women. Dalia Leinartė’s research shows how women’s private lives were shot through with internalised Soviet ideology which encouraged women to be educated, socially and professionally active (women in the Soviet Union had no option not to work) as well as loving and caring wives, housewives, mothers and sex objects in equal measure (Leinartė, 2010). Considering Lithuanian history, limited and unsavoury set of gender roles available for Lithuanian women, it seems to me that many, including Staponkutė’s silent mother, might have wanted to opt for a better and emotionally more fulfilling life for themselves and for their children. Seen in this light, the silent mother’s choice to be silent in her native Lithuanian, to sacrifice her children to what Staponkutė metaphorically calls the place-cannibal “which gradually replaces the mother and [...] welcomes its new ‘pupil’” even if it comes at a tremendous personal loss can be explained by her wish to distance both herself and her children from her native language-place which is marked by repression, suffering and mourning. However, the question as to why she keeps silent in the new language remains. The first sentence of the last paragraph of Staponkutė’s essay reads: “As I observe the *agonia* (the battle of the death) of my native language on my children’s lips, I behold the image of my own vanishing...”. The mother’s failure to pass on her native tongue to the children is directly linked with the idea of death, although the children, as we know it, are perfectly socialised in Greek and therefore safe in every sense of the word. As it has already been pointed out, the legitimacy of the Lithuanian state has always been in question. With the Lithuanian National movement resulting in the establishment of the Lithuanian national state at the beginning of the 20th century, the Lithuanian language became a powerful symbol of resistance and served as one during the Soviet times. Traditionally, it has always been the mother’s role to ensure the maintenance of Lithuanian. The idea of the mother as a guarantor of

perpetuation of the Lithuanian language is perfectly immortalized in the sculpture by Petras Rimša entitled *Lithuanian School 1864–1904* portraying a mother sitting at her weaving wheel with a reading child next to her. It is an iconic image based on historic reality. The idea of the mother as a guarantor of perpetuation of the Lithuanian language is intrinsically linked with the idea of statehood and profound insecurities in the Lithuanian psyche to do with the fear of losing it, which in turn is associated with the fear of change of regime, violence, and trauma that issue. For the silent mother to leave her native language and swap it for a foreign one would be a suicidal act of betrayal of not only her own role as a Lithuanian mother, but of the entire nation. Having chosen a different path on a personal level, the silent mother is held back, petrified by the power of the collective punitive myth of one traumatised nation.

Translingual Mother

Let us now move to France and look at the work the French Canadian writer Nancy Huston who was born in francophone Canada, as a child and a young adult lived in the US and moved to Paris, France at the age of 23 as an exchange student, but never came back. She started writing and publishing in French and was quickly established as a French author. She now translates herself into English and writes simultaneously in English and French, often the same piece in both languages at the same time. I suggest we look at her book *Lettres Parisiennes. Autopsie de l'exil* (*Parisian Letters. Autopsy of Exile*) published in 1986 by Nancy Huston and French-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar (Huston & Sebbar, 1986). It is a collection of thirty letters exchanged between the two writers during a period spanning just under two years. As Kate Averis observes: “They write to each other explicitly on the topic of exile, in a dialogic quest to explore their exilic condition” (Averis, 2008:3-4). In this book and in her other autobiographical writing Huston often confides that her life was suddenly and radically changed after her parents’ divorce, when she was six. While her parents were busy with the divorce, Huston’s German stepmother took her and her sister to Germany for two months and on their return the mother was no longer there. In all accounts, it comes across as a traumatic and life changing event in Huston’s life. Thus, in the autopsy of her voluntary exile to Paris she writes:

I went into exile because I was sad and I was sad (at least this is how I explain things to myself now) because my mother “abandoned” me when I was six, it’s from that moment on that, according to the photos, something wounded and melancholic transpired in my look... Later I started abandoning others with implacable regularity. [...] But this time round and without knowing it (thinking that it was a passing fad: studies in Paris) I performed Abandonment par excellence, Abandonment as big that it was going to suffice me for along time, possibly for the rest of my life: the abandonment of my country and my mother tongue. Symbolic revenge to my mother who initiated the series? (Huston & Sebbar, 1986, p. 116).⁴

⁴ Translation into English here and thereafter mine. “Je me suis exilée parce que j’étais triste, et j’étais triste (du moins est-ce ainsi que je m’explique les choses maintenant) parce que ma mère m’a ‘abandonnée’ quand j’avais six ans; c’est dès ce moment que transparaît dans mon regard, d’après les photos, quelque chose de blessé et de mélancolique ... [...] j’effectuais l’Abandon pas excellence, un abandon si énorme qu’il allait me suffir pendant longtemps, peut-être le reste de ma vie: celui de mon pays et de ma langue maternelle. Revanches symbolique contre la mère qui inaugure la série?”

The personal history that preceded Huston's arrival in Paris is heavy with emotion and it is a negative emotion marked abandonment and revenge that both directly linked with the childhood trauma. Pavlenko's book *Emotions and Multilingualism* provides a number of compelling examples of people who distance themselves from their native language in order to liberate themselves from painful and/or traumatic experiences associated with and lived through in that language and reinvent themselves, construct alternative identities and lives in different languages and foreign countries (Pavlenko, 2005). Huston textual alter ego seems to fall into this category of people who use a different language in order to overcome trauma and thus preserve their sanity. Huston constructs a complicated, double, exiled, "nomadic", as Kate Averis calls it, but coherent identity for herself in France, in French as a woman (she is married to an eminent French philosopher and critic Tzvetan Todorov of Bulgarian origin, but with whom she speaks French), writer (she writes in French), and mother (she speaks French to her daughter) (Averis, 2008). Huston writes:

I've recently felt with a new force how living in the French language was *vital* to me; how this artifice was indispensable to me in order to function on a daily basis (Huston & Sebbar, 1986, p. 138).⁵

Her identity in French comes across as a survival strategy. In this context, her choice to mother in French comes as no surprise. However, this choice turns out to be less straightforward than it seems at first site. The powerful emotional link between the language and the self puts motherhood and the language of mothering in a special relationship that is essential to mother's subjectivity. Julia Kristeva's notion of *semiotic chora* helps illuminate this relationship. *Semiotic chora* is the realm of language that is tied to maternal body, the structure that makes it possible to articulate the mother's relation to the child (Kristeva, 1984). Kristeva writes: "The mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organising social relations and becomes the organising principle of the semiotic *chora*" (Kristeva, 1984:27). In other words, the semiotic *chora* is what helps construct the subject in its emotional socialisation and is essentially dependent on the mother's embodied linguistic instruction and bodily presence. For Huston, her adopted French seems to be the only language in which she can mediate the social relations and communicate with her daughter. She says:

I've tried speaking English to Léa. [...] It terribly disturbed me. [...] I stopped immediatly. It was impossible. Something swells up in me, resists and gives up. [...] It's as if my voice really became the voice of my mother. [...] books, children, I can only do them in a language that is not my mother's (*Ibid.*, p. 139).⁶

In order to develop a sustainable and linguistic relationship with her daughter, Huston's alter ego needs to detach herself from her own mother and mother tongue, to distance herself from her own mother's voice, body, embodied linguistic instruction and draw from the "artifice" of French. However, the artifice of French in Huston's

⁵ J'ai senti récemment avec une force nouvelle à quel point le fait de vivre dans la langue française m'est *vital*; à quel point cet artifice m'est indispensable pour fonctionner au jour le jour.

⁶ "J'ai essayé de parler en anglais à Léa. [...] ça me troublait drôlement [...] je me suis arrêtée net. C'est impossible. Quelque chose en moi se soulève, résiste et cale [...] C'est comme si ma voix devenait réellement la voix de ma propre mère. [...] les livres, les enfants, je ne peux les faire que dans une langue non maternelle".

case is also embodied on more than one level as an unexpected meeting with her own mother reveals. Huston includes an episode in her book in which she describes an episode of taking her mother to a hammam:

“The mother” that I rejected with my country and my mother tongue is actually a mirage. [...] We spent three hours massaging and soaping one another, the bodies (naked together for the first time in twenty five years) voluptuously surrendered to steam. I saw that the sensuality that I looked for in Europe, I’d inherited it, quite simply, from my own mother (*Ibid*, p. 193).⁷

This suggests that France as Huston’s country of choice and French as a language of voluntary exile is more than a random choice. She must have chosen it also for the properties associated with the French culture – namely sensuality – that she found reminiscent of her own mother, her own semiotic bond with her mother and therefore, French as a language of mothering is also, at least partly generated from Huston’s own bond with her own mother.

Conclusion

Mothers’ narratives of mothering in a culturally and linguistically foreign environment are part of a larger trend of multiplying narratives voices of mothers in contemporary literary field. Linguistic choices of mothering can be read and interpreted on a personal and individual as well as a national level. On the personal level, it is the mother's unique and emotional way of living her motherhood that is taken into account. As languages are naturally, intrinsically and strongly linked with national identities and narratives they hold a powerful grip on individuals, including and especially mothers. The two types of linguistic mothering I evoked today, a silent and a trans lingual mother, are both marked by trauma, in the case of the silent mother it is collective trauma, in the case of trans lingual mother, personal trauma. Both of their linguistic choices of mothering directly stem from their stories and conditions that led to their emigration and their ways of dealing with their respective traumas. The silent mother doesn’t seem to be able to overcome her trauma and remains distanced from herself and her children, whereas, the trans lingual mother reinvents herself in an adopted foreign language, namely French, which she later comes to associated with her own longed for mother.

⁷ “‘La mère’ que j’ai rejetée avec mon pays et ma langue maternels est en fait un mirage. [...] Nous avons passé trois heures à nous masser et à nous savonner l’une l’autre, les corps (nus ensemble pour la première fois depuis vingt’cinq ans) abandonnés voluptueusement à la vapeur. Et j’ai vu que l’intensité sensualité que j’ai recherché en Europe, je léai héritée, tout bêtement, de ma propre mère.”

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