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Feminist Mothers and Daughters in *Top Girls* and *Yerma*

Top Girls ve *Yerma* Adlı Oyunlarda Feminist Anneler ve Kızları

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Caryl Churchill'in *Top Girls* (1982/1991) ve Simon Stone'un *Yerma* (2017) adlı oyunlarını feminist annelik kuramları aracılığıyla ele almaktadır. Bu iki oyunun baskın özelliği anne-kız ilişkisini işlemesidir. *Yerma* adlı oyun Federico Garcia Lorca'nın (1934/1968) aynı adlı oyunundan uyarlanmıştır. Çalışmada incelenen anneler, açıkça feminist olduklarını ifade etmeseler de okurların/izleyicilerin onları feminist olarak tanımlamalarına sebep olabilecek birtakım özellikler arz etmektedir. Annelerin ve özellikle de çevrelerindeki kişilerin tasvirinden hareketle bu makale, güçlü kadın ve başarılı bir kariyer ile annelik arasındaki geleneksel uyuşmazlığın yeniden üretildiğini iddia etmektedir. Çağdaş bir oyun olan *Yerma*'daki anne Helen, *Top Girls*'ün kahramanı Marlene ile aynı kuşağa ait olarak kabul edilebilir. Marlene'in kızıyla sorunlu ilişkisi, Helen'in annelik deneyimine yansımıştır. Her iki anne de güçlü kadındır fakat güçlerinin kaynağı annelikleri değildir ve bu güç, kızlarına intikal etmez.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminizm, Annelik, İngiliz Tiyatrosu, Anne-kız İlişkisi

Abstract

Through feminist theories of motherhood, this essay discusses the mother-daughter relationship, a dominant feature of two British plays, *Top Girls* (1982/1991) by Caryl Churchill and *Yerma* (2017) by Simon Stone, the latter being an adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca's (1934/1968) play with the same title. The mothers on which this essay focuses present certain characteristics and express certain views that lead the readers/audience to identify them as feminists, though they do not declare themselves as such. What this essay argues is that the portrayal of these mothers, and particularly through the attitude of people around them, reproduces the traditional incompatibility between female empowerment and motherhood, between having a successful career and being a mother. The mother in the contemporary play *Yerma* can be regarded as belonging to the same generation with Marlene, the protagonist from *Top Girls* whose problematic relationship with her daughter is mirrored in Helen's experience of motherhood. Both mothers are empowered women, yet their empowerment does not come though motherhood and moreover, they do not pass it on to their daughters.

Keywords: Feminism, Motherhood, British Theatre, Mother-daughter Relationship

Introduction

What kind of person would Hippolytus have been, had he been raised by the Amazons, a matriarchal society to which his mother belonged before being 'conquered' by Theseus, instead of being brought up in the patriarchal society of Ancient Greece? Would he still utter the following words?:

> HIPPOLYTUS: Oh God, why did you bring into the sacred light of/ day this counterfeit evil, this plague for all mankind, women?/ If you wanted to keep the human race going you should have found a way to do it without/ women. It should have been possible to go to a temple with some gold or silver or bronze/ and buy some embryos, each one priced according to its worth, and then these could be/ brought up in houses free of women. (Euripides, trans. 2009, pp. 32-33)

His furious tirade launched against women demands not only their exclusion from the whole process of procreation and breeding of children, but also implies the extinction of all women from the face of the Earth. Read beside his, Jeffner Allen's radical feminist rejection of motherhood does not appear that radical anymore:

> If woman, in patriarchy, is she who exists as the womb and wife of man, every woman is by definition a mother: she who produces for the sake of men. A mother is she whose body is used as a resource to reproduce men and the world of men […] Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers, and conversely, because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity. (as cited in Takševa, 2018)

Both Euripides' Hippolytus and Allen agree that motherhood is dangerous; however, for the former motherhood is dangerous for the society (represented by men), whereas for the latter women are the ones endangered by their capacity to bear children. Their observations are related to a patriarchal category of motherhood, defined by Adrienne Rich (1995) as an institution "which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (p. 13). The potential Rich refers to is the other form of motherhood, on which the institution superimposes, "*the potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children" (p. 13, emphasis in original). According to Maroney (1985), the formulation of motherhood as an institution has several consequences: it places it in the sphere of social and not biological determinism, it underlines the differences between patriarchal and matriarchal motherhood and it brings out the paradox that the burden of childbirth and childcare is

placed solely on women who have actually no control or authority on these issues (pp. 45-46). Unlike patriarchal motherhood, the matriarchal version is “thought to be cooperative, natural, sex positive and permissive, peaceful and able to integrate males on a basis of equal exchange” (p. 47); however, to return to the story of Hippolytus, not all matriarchal societies reflect this image. On the contrary, the Amazons were not peaceful (Hard, 2004, p.357-358), nor able to integrate males in their community. Then again, as is the case with other ancient narratives, they are expressions of male writers’ point of view and attitude towards women and society and as such, they present a one-sided, limited version of the world.

First published in 1976, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1995) written by a woman, that is, Adrienne Rich, marks the beginning of scholarly research on the topic. The manuscript came at a time when feminism could be described as ‘anti-motherhood’, as expressed in the views of Allen, a view which might have been a radical one, but in its essence reflects the struggle feminism had and still has in integrating motherhood to its practices and theories (Maroney, 1985, pp.40-41). This struggle is rooted in the widespread belief of the second wave feminism that motherhood was “a significant, if not the determining, cause of women’s oppression under patriarchy” (O’Reilly, 2021, p. 227). Rich’s distinction between the oppressive form of motherhood and the women’s actual experience of motherhood has been further developed by Andrea O’Reilly, the scholar who coined the term ‘motherhood studies’ in 2006. In her book titled *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Practice* (2021), motherhood is characterised as “socially and historically constructed by imperialist, white supremacist, and capitalist patriarchy” in contrast to mothering which is “a practice and not […] a fixed, stable, and essentialist identity” (p. 26); just as being a woman is not a fixed, stable and essentialist identity. Matricentric feminism, defined as “a feminism developed from and for the specific experiences and concerns of mothers” (p. 213) is, according to O’Reilly and other scholars working in the field (hooks, 2015; Maroney, 1985), a concern visibly missing from academic feminism. For this reason, it is not only the inclusion of motherhood studies within universities’ curricula that is required, but also more research into the way women, be them biological mothers or not, experience the act of mothering.

Carl G. Jung’s (2004) observations on motherhood are, surprisingly perhaps, in line with those of feminist scholars in the sense that he also distinguished between the

mother herself and “the archetype projected upon her, which gives her a mythological background” (p. 16), the latter being not far from what patriarchal motherhood means. Jung discusses the mother archetype particularly in connection to what he calls “the mother-complex” which is “clear and uncomplicated” only in daughters. The reason why in sons the complex is more challenging, though not “more serious”, is due to its entanglement with the erotic aspect in the mother-son relationship (p. 20). The mother-complex in daughters manifests itself in a number of forms: hypertrophy of the maternal elements, overdevelopment of Eros, identity with the mother and resistance to the mother. As O’Reilly (2021) indicates following Rich, “the daughter feels rage toward her mother, however, she is expected to identify with her because the daughter is also a woman who, it is assumed, will someday become a mother and wife as her mother did” (p. 60). Nancy Chodorow’s (1978) seminal work on the reproduction of motherhood argues within a psychoanalytical context that, put it briefly: “Women mother daughters who, when they become women, mother” (p. 209). Notwithstanding the fact that every mother in history since the beginning of times was first a daughter, Rich (1995) observes that the mother-daughter relationship “has been minimalized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy” (p. 226). Within a literary context, Marianne Hirsch (1989) also reveals that these female figures are “submerged in traditional plot structures” (p. 2) that give prominence to the father-son or mother-son dyads. Fortunately, steps have been taken in the past decades to tackle this issue with more research being published and more writers directing their attention to mothers and daughters.

In the context of feminist theories of motherhood, this essay discusses the representation of motherhood through the mother-daughter relationship, in two British plays, namely *Top Girls* (1982/1991) by Caryl Churchill and *Yerma* (2017) by Simon Stone, the latter being an adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca’s (1934/1968) play with the same title. My initial interest and understanding is shaped by the performances of the plays which can be accessed online via the National Theatre at Home (2020) website. In these plays there are a number of mothers whose relationship to their children as well as motherhood itself is presented to the audience as problematic. Marlene, from *Top Girls* and Helen, from *Yerma*, though featuring in plays written and set in the twentieth and twenty-first century respectively, are both the product of the cultural and social revolution that is feminism. Since feminism, empowerment and

success are traditionally viewed as incompatible with motherhood, this essay explores the way in which the two British playwrights address this conflict.

Twentieth Century: Empowerment without Motherhood

Named by the renowned theatre critic Michael Billington as "one of the ten best plays of the twentieth century" (Dorney & Gray, 2013, p. 116), Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* was first performed in 1982 at the Royal Court Theatre, under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark. The first act shows a celebration party organised by Marlene for her newly appointed position as the managing director of the 'Top Girls' Employment Agency. Her guests are five famous women from history and fiction who "were to some degree punished or abused by the patriarchal system throughout history" (Rees, 2020, p. 43). The second act offers glimpses of the lives of Marlene's sister, Joyce and her daughter, Angie and the work dynamics at Marlene's office. In the third and final act, during Marlene's visit to her hometown one year earlier, it is revealed to the audience that Angie is in fact her daughter. Even if the play has been widely analysed, the impetus for including it in this essay is its relevance to *Yerma* which is relatively the more contemporary play. Roughly speaking and with a bit of imagination, it can be argued that the mother in *Yerma*, Helen belongs to the same generation as Marlene. This view can be supported by a mathematical calculation – if Helen is in her sixties in a play set in the second decade of the twenty-first century[1], then she could have been of an age close to that of Marlene in a play set in the last decades of the twentieth century – but more significantly what places them in the same generation is their individualistic attitude and lack of enthusiasm for motherhood. This essay will hopefully show how Marlene's attitude to motherhood is mirrored in Helen's.

The historical and fictional women invited to Marlene's party in the long first act of the play have proved (in general lines) their success, independence and revolt against the patriarchy in their own ways. What seems to have remained however beyond their control was their children who were taken away from them. Joan, a legendary Pope of the nineteenth century, gave birth to a child during a procession as a result of which she was stoned to death and the child presumably died as well.

[1] The temporal setting of the play is not specified by Stone; however, there is a reference to the fact that Her is a member of the 'Free the Nipple' campaign, which started in 2012 and since the play was first performed in 2017, it is safe to suggest that the action is set around these years.

Isabella Bird, a Victorian traveller, did not have children, but was very fond of horses. Lady Nijo from Japan, one of the Emperor's concubines and later on a Buddhist nun from the thirteenth century had four children, one of them with the Emperor and the others conceived with her two lovers. Two of her children died and one of them was taken away by the wife of her lover who could not have children. The fourth child's fate is unclear; the only thing Nijo says is that she "felt nothing for him" (p. 124)[2]. Dull Gret, a village woman painted by Brueghel had ten children; her elder son died on a wheel and her baby was murdered by a soldier. No further information about her other children is provided in the play. The last to arrive at the party, Patient Griselda, a character in Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer's works, had two children both taken away by her husband with the purpose of testing her obedience.

These stories are indeed significant for a discussion regarding the representation of motherhood; however, the focus of this essay is Marlene's understanding of motherhood as expressed not only in relation to her own daughter and mother, but also in her quite strong reactions to the distressful narratives of her guests. The first instance when she makes a remark on one of her guests' babies is when Joan tells how she found out that she was pregnant. Marlene's immediate response is: "So the only thing to do/ was to get rid of it somehow" (p. 120). However, Joan not being used to having the body of a woman and not having other women around her, did not realise that she was actually pregnant and when her lover, the chamberlain, realised her pregnancy, as Marlene points out "it was too late" (p. 121). Later in the play when Marlene and Joyce argue about family matters, Marlene accuses Joyce of being jealous for not being as clever as she was; to this, Joyce replies: "You was *[sic]* the most stupid/ for someone so clever you was *[sic]* the most stupid, get yourself pregnant, not go to the doctor, not tell" (p. 223). It is surprising that Marlene's reaction to her pregnancy, in the twentieth century, is not that different from Joan's a millennium before. It is clear that even in the twentieth century there was a lack of education about sex and pregnancy and a general secrecy about these aspects of life.

The story which is so unbearable that makes Marlene leave the table is that of Griselda. The Marquis, Griselda's husband, marries her after she promises to obey

[2] *Top Girls* (1991). All numerical references are to quotations from this edition of the play.

him in everything. She does obey him even when he takes away her babies to be killed, first a girl and after a boy, since it was “Walter’s child to do what he liked with” (p. 131). As mentioned before, feminist scholarship on motherhood is mainly interested in mothers’ experience (O’Reilly, 2021); yet, women as mothers have been usually depicted through the lens of male writers from ancient to modern times, as is the case with Griselda, a character that appears in the works of Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer. There is however one ancient story which scholars interested in motherhood wish to retain and enhance and that is the story of Demeter and Persephone, a paragon of the mother-daughter relationship. In stark contrast to Demeter stands Griselda, who does not react to her children being taken away. Unlike Demeter who revenges herself against her daughter’s kidnapping by stopping grain from growing and manages to have her daughter back even if only for a few months each year (Hard, 2004), Griselda’s children are not returned to her thanks to her revolt against her husband; they are returned to her precisely as a reward for her passivity.

The relationship between Demeter and Persephone has often been employed by scholars to demonstrate that empowerment is the key for effective mothering (O’Reilly, 2021, p. 158) and for this to happen, there is need for “a more discordant, direct, and defiant [politic] in our critique of patriarchal motherhood” (O’Reilly, 2021, p. 208). It is not by chance that the first and the only feminist press on motherhood is named Demeter Press. Even though this may indeed be every mother’s dream, to have the power to undo harm done to her daughter, and of every daughter, to have a mother with such a great power (Rich, 1995, p. 240), is it not dangerous to aim for such an ideal? Is Demeter not an example of the ‘good’ mother, one part of the binary opposition which feminist motherhood tries to dismantle? Having Demeter as a ‘role model’ may indeed empower women, but it may also make women who do not have such a power feel guilty of not protecting their child, be it a son or a daughter, or cause the child to feel hate, anger, disappointment towards his/her mother and these are in fact emotions frequently experienced by mothers and their children.

This anger can actually be observed in Marlene’s attitude towards her mother who, according to her, wasted her life being “[m]arried to that bastard” (p. 230), the ‘bastard’ being her father. Rich (1995) defines matrophobia as “a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree

woman, the martyr" (p. 236). Marlene's lack of compassion both towards her mother and her daughter can indeed be explained through the prism of an individualistic society, Thatcherism (Rees, 2020, p. 43) and her adherence to patriarchal norms and values (Biber, 2013). Yet, it can also be inferred as a deep fear of becoming her mother, of being a victim of abuse and misery. According to Jung (2004), one way of achieving this distancing is through cultivating one's intellect:

> [R]esistance to the mother can sometimes result in a spontaneous development of intellect for the purpose of creating a sphere of interest in which the mother has no place. This development springs from the daughter's own needs and not at all for the sake of a man whom she would like to impress or dazzle by a semblance of intellectual comradeship. (…) Intellectual development is often accompanied by the emergence of masculine traits in general. (p. 27)

Jung's description seems to be written precisely with Marlene in mind. It is understood that she decided long before getting pregnant, when she was thirteen years old, that she would get out of that place and would never have her mother's life. Her sister may not be of the same opinion on the matter and as a socialist she views the situation of her parents through their poverty and poor living conditions, but for Marlene a child at that age meant being stuck in the same place as her mother. This is precisely what happens to Joyce even if she does not complain about her life and as Billington (2019) writes regarding the National Theatre's performance, she is a "fiercely proud woman". Joyce's portrayal shows that a woman does not necessarily have to remove herself from the place of trauma in order not to be a victim.

Even if what it would have meant for her to be the mother of Angie at that age is quite clear from her comments, Marlene actually avoids answering Joyce's questions of how she got pregnant or why she kept the baby if she was not planning to raise her. This contrasts sharply with her strong opinions about what women around her, who are mothers, should have done about their pregnancies and children. For her, as long as deciding not to go through with a pregnancy, abandoning a child or being a mother to it is one's personal choice, any choice is acceptable. What Marlene does not accept is men's interference in this decision. Her refusal to be a victim, her belief in choice, in the right to make a decision on one's body and the revolt against men's interference are traits that can lead the readers/audience to characterise her as a feminist. She is in control of her own reproductive system; she had two abortions and this "wasn't a

problem" (p. 224). If she wishes, she may have a baby, though she has been on the pill for a long period so she's "probably sterile" (p. 224). For a brief moment, it appears that she is willing to take Angie with her if Joyce does not want her anymore: "I'll take her/ wake her up and pack now" (p. 223) and this would make sense if she truly believes that she may not be able to conceive again. She is not really willing though and does not actually want a child, for when Angie visits her at the office, Marlene's reaction shows a lot of awkwardness and impatience to get rid of her (Churchill, National Theatre at Home, 2019). Angie simply does not fit in Marlene's world. This is evident even from her physical appearance which is in contrast with that of the women in Marlene's workplace. They are all, including herself, very fashionable, dressed in pastel colours, whereas Angie looks out of place with her vibrant coloured clothes. Unlike the mother who feels awkward in the presence of her daughter, Angie puts Marlene on a pedestal as revealed by the way she looks at her and by the way she speaks about her with her friend. Marlene's presence seems to be the centre of her world, which leads her to run away from home to be with her. Yet, Angie never mentions to her that she knows she is her mother probably for fear of rejection.

The question that has to be posed is whether Marlene can be called a mother or not. O'Reilly (2021) advocates for the more inclusive use of the word 'mother' not as a noun but as a verb. As such, for one to be a mother, giving birth to the child is not compulsory. This stresses the performative function of motherhood as being something that is done and not a biological and natural feature of women. Can then the verb also be used in a manner of exclusion? That is to say, does the fact that Marlene gave birth to a child make her a mother? The answer would be no; just like not giving birth does not mean that one is not a mother, in the same way the act of giving birth does not make one a mother. Does she then have the right to interfere in the way Joyce, the woman mothering Angie, raises, educates or speaks about her? When Joyce asks Marlene what will happen to Angie who is weak and scared and does not fit in the image of a determined person Marlene advocates for, she says: "You run her down too much. She'll be all right" (p. 233). Yet, her answer does not reflect her true thoughts about Angie since she knows very well that a person like Angie will not be all right in a world dominated by people like herself.

Twenty-First Century: From Empowered Mothers to their Daughters

Adapted from Federico Garcia Lorca's (1934/1968) play with the same title, Simon Stone's *Yerma* premiered at the Young Vic in 2017 under the direction of the playwright. The play tells the story of a woman who cannot conceive, the word 'yerma' meaning barren in Spanish. The female protagonist is simply referred to as 'Her' in the playtext and this may imply that she is reduced to something belonging to her, in this case, the desire of having a child. This desire appears to belong to her only as her partner is at ease with not having a child. The moment she realises this, after numerous IVF procedures and financial disaster, is the moment she stabs herself in the womb, hoping to go towards the child who clearly does not come (Stone, National Theatre at Home, 2017). This scene is present only in the performance, the stage directions of the text do not describe the suicide, just imply it in the words "I'll be coming/ To you." (p. 105)[3]. Although this essay does not discuss the play as an adaptation, it should be mentioned that in the Spanish text, Yerma does not commit suicide; instead, she kills her husband upon learning that he does not really want a child. As noted before, everything is about her in this adaptation, even death.

The scenery throughout the performance is barren to reflect Her's feelings. The only scene where the home is furnished, looks full and warm is when a baby is present. Only when they hold a baby, who is in fact her nephew (though the audience is not aware of this at that moment), does their life seem complete. This small intrusion in the play is meant to show how the couple's life could have been if they had a baby. The remaining scenes focus on her desire, efforts and emotions involved in the whole process of conceiving followed by the disappointment and despair each time her womb stays empty. In the meantime, people around her get pregnant or get someone pregnant by mistake, while on the pill, with no effort whatsoever. This contrast serves to reflect how frustrating this must feel to Her.

Before being a mother, any woman is a daughter and as daughters, Marlene and Her are at the opposing ends of what Jung calls the mother-complex. In Marlene, the complex manifests itself as a resistance to the mother, whereas in Her the hypertrophy of the maternal elements dominates. Yet, she is actually very conscious that she is more than her reproductive system (p. 15) and feels embarrassed to open the subject of having children. She is in fact a funny, open-minded, clever person, with

[3] *Yerma* (2017). All numerical references to quotations from this play are from this book.

a successful career as the senior editor for Life Style and Culture magazine. She is also a feminist, as evidenced by her involvement with the 'Free the Nipple' campaign. She decides what to do with her body, does not shave her armpits, but shaves "down there" (p. 7); while younger and in another relationship, she decided to have an abortion though her partner wanted her to keep the baby. She also decides to put her body through twelve IVF procedures.

To argue that her obsession with having a child is rooted in her relationship to her mother, as a need to create a strong mother-child connection she did not experience with her, may seem a simplistic way of approaching the character. However, even if they do not necessarily have a hostile interaction, her mother Helen does not seem that attached to her. She is an academic, a woman who puts herself first and moreover, a woman who "could have done without it [her daughter] too" (p. 42). Helen even considered killing herself when pregnant with her, though she says nothing about her pregnancy with Mary, Her's sister. This discussion opens in the part titled in the performance 'SHE LOOKS FOR ANSWERS' (Stone, National Theatre at Home, 2017), the scenes being captioned in a Brechtian style (Clapp, 2016). The answers she looks for are presumably related to her difficulties in conceiving. The question she addresses to Helen is not included, but from her answer it can be deduced that she wants to learn about her own experience with pregnancy. Helen's words are a reflection of the kind of feminism characterising her youth:

> HELEN: I hated the idea of getting pregnant. Being colonised by someone's sperm. Eugh. You know that film *Alien*? Well that's a very accurate representation of what my pregnancies felt like. Waiting, horrified, feeling this creature growing inside me, until the day where it forced itself out of me, screaming demandingly, expecting me to satisfy its every whim, a parasitic succubus". (p. 38, emphasis in original)

Helen is interrupted at this point by her daughter who is clearly disturbed by the vivid description. It should be noted that Helen is not portrayed as a bitter or mean woman; she is just being open about her experience. After a detour on the topic of food, Her suddenly wants to know why her mother never held her/them. The only instance she remembers is after she fell off the bike and her mother patted her "awkwardly like you'd pat a stranger's dog" (p. 40). Helen is shocked by the accusation and says that she always held them. Challenged to hug her in that very moment, Helen cannot find any reason to do it, but gives her a truly awkward hug nevertheless. The reason she gives

in seems to be simply to avoid embarrassment at work as she says: “Come on then. Otherwise you’ll write some bloody article about how your mother didn’t want to hug you and then all my colleagues will be bringing it up at academic board meetings and sniggering” (p. 41). Helen’s career is very important to her and this is underlined a few times in the play. Apart from the instance just mentioned, towards the end of the play when John has to go on a business trip and leaves Her with Helen, she makes a point of the fact that it was not easy to find someone to take over her lectures. Even if she is too busy to read her daughter’s blog, she understands John’s need to go on this business trip. She comes to take care of her daughter, but it appears that she does not even know how to make an avocado toast or how to use a coffee machine. Helen cares much about her own career and seems to have adopted a patriarchal sense of success, which is defined above all by individualism. However, her daughter’s inability to conceive does not bother her, which gives us an idea about her worldview. Helen, much like Marlene, is individualistic in her attitudes and despises the mother instinct as, to her, it seems to be associated with the old image of self-devoting, weak woman.

From the perspective of patriarchal motherhood, good mothers are expected to be “nurturing, altruistic, patient, devoted, loving, and selfless; they always put the needs of their children before their own and are available to them whenever needed” (O’Reilly, 2021, p. 22). If this is what a good mother looks like, then Helen is definitely not one. When Her is missing and Mary desperately tries to reach her on phone, she admits that they did not speak for a long time and the reason it was difficult to reach her was that she needed a break and turned the phone on flight mode. While Mary and John desperately try to find her, Her is at a festival together with her assistant and there, she harasses different men to impregnate her. A woman played by the same actress as her mother offers her help which creates a kind of contrast with her own mother’s behaviour. Helen was perhaps not aware of the exact state of her daughter, but she knew that she is not well; still, she put her own needs before her daughters’ and was not available when Her and Mary needed her. In a way this image resembles that of Marlene who abandons her daughter to be independent and not trapped like her mother, but is this alright from an ethical point of view? The answer would be no; just as feminist scholars on motherhood emphasise, the aim should be for both mothers and daughters to be empowered just like in the story of Demeter and Persephone, which is not the case in these two plays.

Helen's elder daughter, Mary, goes through more than one pregnancy. Her first child is a boy to whom Her feels quite close in the beginning, but as her obsession with having a child increases, she avoids seeing him. Mary is tormented by her struggle with taking care of him and sees herself as an "unmotherly mother" (p. 45). Mary's next pregnancy ends up in a miscarriage, an event which Her admits in her blog that made her feel relieved. By the end of the play when she is desperately searching for her sister, Mary is heavily pregnant again. Her husband offers no help; quite the opposite, he is just like another child she has to take care of. In order to keep her unfaithful husband at home, she buys him a PlayStation. When the mother and the two sisters discuss about this marital problem, Helen urges her daughter to leave him, to which Mary answers: "We can't all be first wave feminists" and her mother remarks: "Or any of the other waves" (p. 20). This short dialogue supports the idea that Helen is in fact a feminist, just like Her and unlike Mary. In a sociological study titled *Feminist Mothers* (1990), Gordon stresses the fact that in order to characterise a mother as feminist it is important that she defines herself as one (p. 4). However, in literary works such as the plays discussed here there are very few examples of women actually uttering the words 'I am a feminist'. Instead, their words, actions and reactions are crafted by the authors in ways that suggest if they are feminists or not.

Feminism in all its variations emphasises that biology is not destiny. Her knows this very well, that is why when she opens the subject of having a child, she underlines that she is not her reproductive system. As years pass by however, and the disagreements between the couple increase day by day, she tells John that she simply cannot let go: "I CAN'T my body is not letting me I can't I can't let this go I can't" (p. 64, emphasis in original). The reason why he cannot understand what she is going through is because he is not getting the messages she is getting, "Every single second of every single day" (p. 64). When they start trying to conceive she is 33 years old and the reason she wants a baby is not that she is very fond of them in general, but might regret later on if she did not. Just like Marlene, she had an abortion and has been on a pill for a long time and she views these factors as part of the problem. She had an abortion at 23 because she wanted to focus on her career and thought that she would have a child later. Now, she feels tricked; as hooks (2015) observes, this is the case with many women in the last decades for whom the possibility to work offered them financial independence, but "it has not adequately fulfilled human needs" (p. 134). In

an attempt to fill in this empty space, they turn to family and motherhood. Unlike them, the previous generation of women under the direct influence of the women's movement, like Marlene and Helen, could have done without children as well.

Conclusion

In the past, literature regarding women as mothers moved along the dichotomy of good/bad mothers. In contrast, more contemporary works tend to present a complex and less stereotypical image making it difficult to choose between characterising a woman as a good or a bad mother. Recent feminist scholarship on motherhood has contributed to this change of attitude to some degree. The contemporary play discussed in this essay, *Yerma*, is a representative example of such complexity. Helen is a part of her daughters' lives, in her own way, a way which works well for herself. Though her behaviour towards her daughters may be characterised as guided by self-centeredness, she is not portrayed as an evil or resentful mother. She does not actually do something to hurt her daughters nor does she actually complain about the fact that she brought them into this world and raised them. In changing the approach from 'or' to 'and', the construction of Helen's character problematises the traditional image of motherhood.

The plays discussed in this essay share a number of similarities: the fathers are absent since the focus is on the mother-daughter relationship and this relationship is presented as thorny. The daughters are however the ones criticising their mothers, that is to say they are dissatisfied with their mothers whereas the mothers (with the exception of Mary) do not find any fault with their mothering. Feminist scholars on the field argue that mothering is the opposite of patriarchal motherhood and one way of empowering women as mothers. The mothers Marlene and Helen are indeed empowered women who nevertheless are not empowered through being mothers. They are white, middle-class, college-educated reminiscent of the women involved at the beginning of the women's movement. They are empowered exactly by the fact that they reached adulthood in a time when women were thought to have the same rights as men and when motherhood appeared as an obstacle in benefiting from these rights. Marlene manages to be a successful woman in men's world by leaving behind everything that she associates with weakness, the place where she saw her mother being abused by her father and most importantly by abandoning her daughter. Helen

on the other hand, did not abandon her daughters, but apparently, they have never been the centre of her life. Nor does she comply with the ‘good’ mother image. The fact that they are empowered women does not mean that they raised empowered daughters, thus being far from the Demeter-Persephone ideal. Yet, deconstructing such ideals, which served their purpose at a given time, no matter how inspiring they appear, may be a step towards the discovery of what is unique about every experience, be it that of a mother, a father, a child or simply a human being

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