

THE FEMINIST MOTHER FIGURE IN THE SECRET DIARY OF ADRIAN MOLE AGED 13 ³/₄*

13 ³/₄ Yaşındaki Adrian Mole'un Gizli Günlüğü'nde Feminist Anne Figürü

Seda COŞAR-ÇELİK**

ABSTRACT: Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ³/₄* (1982) is the first book of an eight-books set. The complete set is in the form of a diary and each book presents the title character Adrian Mole's life and changing perspectives. This article focusses on the first book of the set. Even though the diary entries contain Adrian's thoughts and reflections on various issues such as literature, friendship, love, sex, marriage, parenting and motherhood, his frustration about his mother is worthy of more attention. Adrian's mother Pauline Mole can be considered as a perfectly fitting example of a feminist mother, who wants to be economically self-sufficient, reads influential feminist books of the second-wave feminism, joins feminist gatherings and meetings, and gradually transforms her life. However, Adrian compares her mother to the maternal ideal that is a selfless, altruistic and an unconditionally devoted figure. The contradiction between the maternal ideal he has internalized as the patriarchal norm and the way his mother behaves disappoints and frustrates him. The aim of this article is to discuss patriarchal notions of motherhood and the maternal ideal from a feminist point of view and Pauline's representation as a feminist mother in the diary.

Keywords: Maternal ideal, patriarchy, Sue Townsend, Adrian Mole, diary

ÖZ: Sue Townsend tarafından yazılan *13 ³/₄ Yaşındaki Adrian Mole'un Gizli Günlüğü*, sekiz kitaplık bir setin 1982'de basılan ilk kitabıdır. Tüm set günlük şeklinde yazılmıştır ve her bir günlük, ana karakter Adrian Mole'un hayatını ve değişen bakış açısını yansıtır. Bu makale, sekiz kitaplık günlük setinin sadece ilk kitabına odaklanmaktadır. Günlüğündeki yazılar, Adrian'ın edebiyat, arkadaşlık, aşk, seks, evlilik, ebeveynlik ve annelik gibi çeşitli konulardaki duygu ve düşüncelerini içerse de, özellikle annesine ilişkin öfke ve hayal kırıklığını anlattığı bölümler feminist bakış açısı ile incelemeye değerdir. Adrian'ın annesi Pauline Mole, ekonomik olarak kendi kendine yeterli olmak isteyen, ikinci dalga feminizmin önemli feminist kitaplarını okuyan, feminist toplantılara katılan ve giderek hayatını değiştirmeye çabalayan mükemmel bir feminist anne örneği olarak kabul edilebilir. Ancak,

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** Dr., Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi, Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölümü, Bolu, seda.cosar@ibu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-0984-1071

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Adrian, annesini özverili, fedakâr ve kayıtsız şartsız kendini ailesine adanmış bir figür olarak tasvir edilen ideal anne figürü ile karşılaştırır. Bir ataerkil norm olarak içselleştirdiği bu kusursuz ve ideal anne figürü ile kendi annesinin davranış biçimi arasındaki çelişki, Adrian'ı hayal kırıklığına uğratmakta ve öfkeli dirmektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, ataerkil normların yarattığı ideal annelik kavramını feminist bir bakış açısıyla ele almak ve Pauline Mole'un günlükte feminist bir anne olarak nasıl temsil edildiğini tartışmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İdeal annelik, ataerkillik, Sue Townsend, Adrian Mole, günlük

Introduction

When published for the first time in 1982, Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾* was an instant success. The book was presented by *Daily Mail* as "The funniest book of the year".¹ This is a true observation, which still appears at the cover pages of the novel's re-editions. *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾* is the first book of what would later become an eight-books set. The entire series is in the form of a diary and that is why everything has been presented through the eponymous narrator Adrian Mole's voice and perspective. Adrian is very smart and witty for his age. This is perhaps why the entries in his diary are colorful and each entry has bits of humor and sarcasm. For example, his reactions towards different concerns of a typical teenager, his aspirations to be an intellectual and a poet, his amusing comments on various canonical works make the novel an entertaining page turner. Adrian Mole set can be thought of as a bildungsroman series. This is because in the first book, the protagonist is only thirteen (and three quarters) but he ages in each piece of the series and finally, in the last one titled *Adrian Mole: The Prostrate Years*, he is thirty-nine-and-a-quarter. As he ages, his experiences, priorities, thoughts, and perceptions also change. This article will focus only on the first book of the set, which presents Adrian's point of view as a teen. Each entry in the diary presents various funny perspectives regarding miscellaneous issues, say, for example friendships, literature, love, sex, marriage, divorce, parenting and motherhood.

What deserves more critical attention is the way Adrian reflects on his feminist mother Pauline Mole, who is a very controversial mother figure. First, Pauline does not represent a maternal ideal that is generally depicted as selfless, unconditionally loving, compassionate, and altruistic. Second, she is a feminist who reads significant books of the women's movement, joins consciousness raising groups and tries to be economically independent. From the perspective of Adrian, his mother Pauline is not a good mother

¹ This notice also appears in the 2002 Puffin books edition which was used in this article.

because she neglects her motherhood duties. Adrian's tumultuous relationship with his mother is worthy of attention and this article aims to elaborate on how a teenager sees his feminist mother as a corrupt opposite of patriarchal maternal ideal. To this end, in the first place, the article will explore patriarchal notions of motherhood and mothering from a feminist point of view. Following this, Pauline's representation as a feminist mother and Adrian's commentaries will be discussed.

Patriarchal Maternal Ideal from a Feminist Perspective

The notion of motherhood, the practice of mothering and their impact on the social, economic and personal lives of women are inevitable discussion topics in different feminist discourses: "Reproduction and mothering have been at the core of the feminist and women's movement ever since their emergence. And from the start, reproduction and motherhood have been highly contested issues—both within the feminist movements and beyond" (Neyer and Bernardi, 2011: 162). The most difficult part of discussing such contested issues within feminist discourses is that it would be an arduous task to make a review of how each feminist school approaches those issues (Neyer and Bernardi, 2011: 164). In other words, various feminisms, such as Liberal, Marxist, Socialist, Radical, Post-colonial or other more specific types make it really difficult to bring every gender related issue together under the category of feminism. This is mainly because each feminist standpoint questions different aspects of gender related issues, and they all offer different focal points and solutions. However, it would not be wrong to state that all feminist movements problematize the issue of motherhood as a burdensome and restrictive experience in women's lives, especially when it is constructed, shaped and idealized by patriarchal structures. Just as feminist focal points are diverse, images of mothers, mothering practices and motherhood experiences in theory and practice are multi-faceted, too. That is why, studying the historicity of motherhood within patriarchal societies can be quite challenging:

"Mothering practices and relations varied enormously within specific historical moments, but that the details of these practices and relations are lost to us in their specificity on the level of the real. An additional problem is that mother-representations in any one period are also always contradictory, multiple, many-sided; a variety of images exists at the same time, and depending on how researchers look (with what questions in mind) they may find something different" (Kaplan, 1992: 19).

The theoretical framework of this article will be limited to discussing motherhood as an institution and the maternal ideal created by patriarchal

societies. It is believed that the thoughts and emotions of Adrian towards his mother stem from the contradiction between the maternal ideal that is promoted by patriarchal apparatuses and how his mother Pauline behaves.

The experiences of motherhood and representation of mothers in literature are not fixed, they are diverse and ever-changing. Still, it can be suggested that studies about mothers in fiction can be twofold. One can either focus on firsthand experiences of the mother figure both in public or private spheres or examine how the mother figure is represented and treated by others in the patriarchal societies. The first one, studying physical, emotional, and psychological challenges that mothers face daily is worthy of doing to reveal the fact that motherhood can be a hindering and restrictive experience, especially when the multi-functional lives of mothers are considered. This way, one can see different facets of the mothering experience from the mother's point of view. The second one is more related to how other characters or the narration itself in a fictional work represent the mother figure. For instance, she can be represented as an angel or as an evil creature depending on the narrative perspective.

This article cannot focus on the firsthand experience of the mother figure because, after all, the novel does not provide the point of view of the mother, Pauline. Her personal experiences as a struggling mother, the difficulties she faced, emotional and psychological ordeal that she had to go through can only be imagined, because not much narrative evidence is presented. This is mainly because the book was written in the form of a diary, therefore it provides a single point of view of. That the book is a diary can be considered as a limitation in this sense because the reader can only see the mother from the perspective of the narrator, the diary keeper Adrian Mole. Therefore, it is only possible to refer to Adrian's perspective, which is evidently shaped by patriarchal thought. That is why he constantly thinks that his mother neglects him and blames her because she wants to be economically free, joins feminist reading groups and struggles to transform her life both in and outside of the domestic sphere.

All such accusations stem from the patriarchal expectations attributed to mothers because, as Adrienne Rich defines in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, motherhood can be seen as an institution in which "patriarchal thought has limited female identity to its own narrow biological specifications" (1995: 27). For this reason, biological reproductive roles are difficult and almost impossible to question, and thus, once they become mothers, women find themselves confined in the

institution of motherhood with predetermined roles as selfless givers. What is more, one should also underline the fact that most of the time the institution of motherhood is run by a single person, the mother only. This created the concept of intensive mothering phenomena, which defines mother as irreplaceable homemakers and caregivers both in domestic spheres and elsewhere. Intensive mothering pictures a volunteer super woman with perpetual energy who is willing to fulfill daily sustenance of all family members in a motherly fashion that is assumably innate to her. This is perhaps one aspect of motherhood that almost all feminist schools discuss in the same vein:

“Feminists refuted the common assumption of motherhood as something innate to women. They showed that the association of maternity with woman’s ‘nature’ conflates biological and social motherhood and denies that motherhood is work. When motherhood is framed as ‘nature’, social motherhood (that is the care work done by mothers and the rearing of children) appears as women’s ‘natural’ responsibility and at the same time as performed out of ‘natural’” (Neyer and Bernardi, 2011: 162).

As an inevitable consequence of such rooted patriarchal thoughts, the denial of motherhood as a biological obligation or a social role can be considered as a transgression. This is primarily because the maternal ideal is indeed a patriarchal construct. The short poem below perfectly exemplifies the maternal ideal that is supposed to be unconditionally giving as a selfless being:

“There was a young man loved a maid
Who taunted him, “Are you afraid,”
She asked, “to bring me today
Your mother’s head upon a tray?”

He went and slew his mother dead
Tore from her breast her heart so red
Then towards his lady love he raced
But tripped and fell in all his haste.
As the heart rolled on the ground
It gave forth a plaintive sound.
And it spoke, in accents mild,
‘Did you hurt yourself, my child?’” (Richepin qtd. in Chodorow, 1999: 10).

The mother figure depicted in these lines can be thought of as an epitome of an idealized, altruistic mother. Although the lady in the poem asks for the head of her lover’s mother, he brought the lady his mother’s heart. Apparently, he associates his mother with heart not with head even though he was asked to bring the head as a sign of his unconditional love for the

lady. Another important point is that the heart was alive even after it was torn apart, and it was still caring for her son. Here, the dichotomy of heart and head may give the impression that mothering is done by heart and not by head. Also, it can be inferred that the mother figure is expected to subordinate her head to her heart. Therefore, eventually, even though the mother is dead, her heart is symbolically beating for her son.

In patriarchal societies, the maternal ideal pictures a similar mother figure who unconditionally commits herself to her family and children. She is a figure who plans her life prioritizing her children's needs and gradually forgets her individuality. It would not be too much to state that this is the norm for mothering practices in patriarchal societies. Such maternal ideal and maternalistic expectations are also constructed in such a way to keep women busy with mothering and in time this makes them invisible from other walks of life. If they somehow manage to be multi-functional (working mothers, for instance) then they must put tremendous amount of effort into their daily routines to balance work and family life.

Adrian Mole's mother Pauline is far from being even close to the maternal ideal depicted in the above lines. As a matter of fact, by looking at the picture that Adrian presents in his diary, Pauline can indeed be considered as an antonym for such an image because she is an unconventional mother as a feminist.

Pauline Mole as an Epitome of a Feminist Mother

In a time when devoted, self-sacrificing, happy faced born-to-be mom kind of women images are boosted through various media devices such as TV, magazines, newspapers and the like, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾* presents a controversial mother figure who endeavors to get employed to be economically self-sufficient, tries to find sexual satisfaction, devotes time to join feminist groups and activities. Adrian's parents are on the brink of a divorce (but later in the novel they reunite), so it can be assumed that Adrian is also struggling to survive in an unstable family. Still, the entertaining and witty tone of the book veils the family trauma that they all might be suffering from in different ways. The entire book is full of really amusing comments about various things, including literary classics, one of which is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Adrian sarcastically refers to *Madame Bovary*, which gives hints about the relationship between his mother and father: "My father should take lessons from Great Literature. Madame Bovary ran away from that idiot Doctor Bovary because he couldn't supply

her needs” (Townsend, 2002: 80). This is not only a funny comment, but also a smart analogy revealing the relationship between Adrian’s parents.

It would not be wrong to say that Adrian’s mother and father are complete opposites. The father figure is presented weak, pitiable and he is most of the time drunk. He is unemployed and spends his days drinking at home. The mother, on the other hand, is strong, self-sufficient, and very assertive. Throughout the diary, Adrian writes about his resentments and disappointments mostly for his mother and not for his father, who is unemployed and drunk. This might partially be because he is going through adolescent period and his life is often full of turmoil due to this physical and psychological transition period. Yet, most of the time, Adrian’s frustration and disillusionment stem from the fact that his mother, in his words, “is not like the mothers on television” (Townsend, 2002: 12). It can be assumed at this point that mother images that appear on television represent what is desirable in patriarchal societies: a loving nurturer and an unconditional giver. Such images of women boosted in patriarchal societies shape perceptions about motherhood and condition everyone to think similarly because what is/is not desirable is presented via different mass media devices. Such conditioning especially affects women as Pat Mainardi states in “Politics of Housework”: “Women have been brainwashed more than even we can imagine. Probably too many years of seeing television women in ecstasy over their shiny waxed floors or breaking down over their dirty shirt collars. Men have no such conditioning” (1984: 51). What is more, thinking, feeling, behaving otherwise is considered even a crime because in patriarchies, it is believed that women’s roles as wives and mothers, are natural givens: “women have been increasingly convinced of their ‘maternal instincts’ and the ‘naturalness’ of their roles as mothers, they were told by a whole movement of male experts how to be good mothers” (Sokoloff, 1984: 262).

Pauline Mole is no such woman, which is why Adrian thinks that his mother is not even close to being like all other motherly women on television. In the first place, she wants to work to make money to be self-competent. Adrian is frustrated because of his mother’s wish to work as he thinks he will be neglected with a working mother. His tone turns aggressive every time he refers to his mom as a working woman:

“My mother is looking for a job!

Now I could end up delinquent roaming the streets and all that. And what will I do during the holidays? I expect I will have to sit in launderette all day to keep warm.

I will be a latchkey kid, whatever this is. And who will look after the dog? And what will I have to eat all day? I will be forced to eat crisps and sweets until my skin is ruined and my teeth fall out. I think my mother is being very selfish” (Townsend, 2002: 17).

Apparently, Adrian’s concerns about his mother’s employment are all related to the domestic chore that is attributed solely to women. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow writes that “women’s activities in the home involve continuous connection to and concern about children and attunement to adult masculine needs, both of which require connection to, rather than separateness from, others” (1999: 179). When women work outside the home, this perpetual connection is interrupted. Idealization of maternal duties make it difficult for women to be employed because they had to work both in and outside home. Especially the domestic chore is always invisible because “in our capitalist and patriarchal society the work that women do goes unrecognized, whether it is done for wages or not. Housework is not defined as work at all, but rather as a ‘natural’ activity, or an expression of love” (Hartsock, 1984: 267). No one will deny that combining professional life with childcare requires extra-ordinary effort. When a woman fails to balance work and family life for some reasons; she is accused of neglecting her domestic and maternal duties. There are many entries in Adrian’s diary about Pauline’s absence at home: “My mother has got an interview for a job. She is practicing her typing and not doing any cooking. So, what will it be like if she gets the job? My father should put his foot down before we are a broken home” (Townsend, 2002: 19). Seemingly, he is conditioned to think that for a woman, domestic duties and especially children should always come before job (Townsend, 2002: 53). The way he pictures a working woman is chaotic: “it is lousy having a working mother. She rushes in with big bags of shopping, cooks the tea then rushes around tarting herself up” (Townsend, 2002: 28).

Even though Pauline Mole has no voice in the novel, from the picture delineated in the diary entries, it is apparent that she can be thought of as an epitome of a feminist of the 1980s. She frequently joins feminist groups² and reads seminal works of the second-wave feminism: “My mother is reading *The Female Eunuch* . . . My mother says it is a sort of book that changes your life. It hasn’t changed mine, but I only glanced through it. It is full of dirty words” (Townsend, 2002: 27). The funny thing is that Adrian thinks this is a sex book and, a few days later, he writes: “My mother is reading

² Even though it is not clearly stated in the novel, the implication alludes to feminist consciousness raising groups, which were very popular starting 1960s onwards.

another sex book, it is called *The Second Sex* by a frog writer called Simone De Beauvoir. She left it on the coffee table in the living room where anybody could have seen it, even my grandma!” (Townsend, 2002: 39). His mother’s reading choices bother Adrian and whenever his mother does something extraordinary and unconventional, he puts the blame on the books that she reads. As mentioned earlier, his parents are on verge of a divorce, the atmosphere at home is very tense and his parents quarrel a lot. At one point, when his mother’s language turns sharp and harsh, Adrian writes: “It is a terrible thing to hear your own mother swearing. I blame it on all those books she has been reading. She hasn’t ironed my school uniform yet, I hope she remembers” (Townsend, 2002: 41). This remark again evokes the maternal ideal pictured by patriarchal thought. Adrian’s disappointment stems from the fact that his mother has nothing to do with this idealized mother figure.

In the diary, Pauline appears mostly when Adrian struggles to accept the way his mother re-envisioned her life as a counter-figure to the maternal ideal. Particularly when he talks about his mom and how she re-organizes her life, he sounds very sarcastic, unhappy and he complains a lot. Pauline’s transformation as a feminist wife and mother can be seen clearly after she joins an assertiveness training activity: “My mother has gone to a woman’s workshop on assertiveness training. Men aren’t allowed. I asked my father what ‘assertiveness training’ is. He said, ‘God knows, but whatever it is, it’s bad news for me’” (Townsend, 2002: 50). After the assertiveness training, Adrian writes, “[S]he said ‘the worm has turned’ and ‘things are going to be different around here’ . . . Then she went into kitchen and started making a chart dividing all the housework into three” (Townsend, 2002: 50). Apparently as Pauline becomes aware of unfair division of labor at home, she tries to change it, but Adrian finds such direct changes in his life very frustrating and hard to cope with.

Although Pauline is not at the center of Adrian’s diary, she plays a very important role in the entries either with her absence or with her transformation as a feminist. As mentioned earlier, the diary as a genre presents a single point of view, which can be unreliable at times. It is a personal narrative, and the perspective can be biased and one-sided. Adrian’s diary does not offer an outlet to reveal the firsthand experiences of Pauline Mole as a mother. In this sense, she is voiceless, she cannot speak for herself, but she is spoken about. In *Motherhood and Representation: The*

Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama, Ann Kaplan perfectly describes how voiceless mothers can be:

“The Mother was in sense everywhere - one could hardly discuss anything without falling over her - but always in the margins, always not the topic per se under consideration. The mother, that is, was generally spoken, not speaking; she was usually discussed as an integral part of a discourse (because she really is everywhere) that was spoken by an Other. She was a figure in the design, out-of-focus; or, if in focus, then the brunt of an attack, a criticism, a complaint, usually in the discourse of a child (male or female) or in that of an adult (male or female) concerned to attribute all ills to the mother” (1992: 3).

This is exactly what happens in the case of Pauline Mole, whose life and struggle are presented not as a whole but only in bits from the perspective of his teen son. She has been criticized either because of her personal transformation as a feminist mother or because of her absence. Still, Adrian Mole’s reactions towards his mother never turn into an explicit conflict between the two, perhaps because he has an introvert personality. Towards the very end of his diary, however, Adrian’s inner dispute regarding his relationship with his mother reaches its peak: “My mother has had all her hair cut off . . . She doesn’t look a bit maternal anymore. I don’t know whether to get her anything for Mother’s Day or not. She was going on about it last night, saying it was a commercial racket fed by gullible fools” (Townsend, 2002: 252). Again, the word “maternal” is crucial here. Apparently, the maternal ideal presented as a norm by patriarchal standards has been internalized by Adrian, who cannot imagine a different mother figure. In his eyes, his mother does not match this ideal not only with her attitude and involvements but also with her physical appearance.

Conclusion

This article has discussed an example of a literary representation of a feminist mother, who can be taken as an epitome of the second-wave feminists. Even though the feminist mother figure Pauline Mole is not at the crux of Sue Townsend’s *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾*, her presence can be felt strongly through Adrian’s emotional turmoil. Because the book is a diary, the reader has no idea about Pauline’s firsthand experiences as an on and off working mother. On the contrary, Pauline can only be seen from the perspective of her teen son Adrian. This gives the reader an opportunity to think about the maternal ideal that Adrian has developed in his mind, which causes his disappointment and frustration.

Adrian is upset with his mother because of many reasons; she reads books that he finds very strange, she joins various women’s groups because

of which she claims a fair division of labor at home, she wants to work to be economically free, and she even leaves home at some point. It should be reminded that this is the perspective of a teenager, but Adrian Mole collection is an eight-books set. Each diary may represent a different Adrian because as he ages his thoughts, feelings, and perspective regarding all the issues dealt with in this article would sure change. Thus, studying the other diaries to see how Adrian's relationship with his mother take shape as he gets older and more mature can be considered as a prospective study.

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