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Towards 'Feminist Mothering: Oppositional Maternal Practice in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

By Suparna Banerjee ¹

Abstract

In the present article I focus on Margaret Atwood's presentation in *Oryx and Crake* (2003) of the patriarchal construct of motherhood, paying attention also to the way this theme here is linked up with the question of the woman's/mother's agency in personal life and in society. My exploration of this theme would bring out Atwood's critique of what has been identified as the patriarchal 'institution' of motherhood and her presentation of an instance of 'mothering' that both underlines the lacunae in the sexist ideology of motherhood and gestures toward an alternative.² This alternative discourse of childrearing presents a counternarrative that both critiques and disrupts the patriarchal masternarrative of motherhood and indicates the potentiality of a gynocentric mothering that gives cognizance to the mother's needs as an individual and to the socio-political implication of motherwork.

Key Words: Motherwork, gynocentric, Margaret Atwood, feminist mothering

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is a dystopic projection of sociocultural proclivities that mark life in much of today's connected world. Technoscientific trends like genetic engineering, specifically eugenics, the neo-imperialism of big capital, and the ethos of a materialistic-consumerist culture define a world that meets its end in a bio-engineered apocalypse. Although gender dynamics is apparently not one of Atwood's major concerns here the narrator does evince considerable incidental engagement with gender-issues, especially with prescriptive and deterministic male/societal attitudes toward women and with social construction of gender and motherhood.

Set in the backdrop of a near future that resembles contemporary USA, *Oryx and Crake* subtly but unmistakably critiques the fundamentalist, anti-feminist new-Right 'Motherhood religion' that has oppressed American women since the 1980s.¹ In the present article I focus on Atwood's presentation in this novel of the patriarchal construct of motherhood, paying attention also to the way this theme here is linked up with the question of the woman's/mother's agency in personal life and in society. My exploration of this theme would bring out Atwood's critique of what has been identified as the patriarchal 'institution' of motherhood and her presentation of

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an instance of ‘mothering’ that both underlines the lacunae in the sexist ideology of motherhood and gestures toward an alternative.²

To give a sense of the context, Jimmy is the protagonist, with whose childhood the novel begins. Jimmy’s world—situated in the USA of the middle of the twenty-first century—is a dystopic one controlled in a totalitarian manner by giant biotechnology corporations that promote extreme materialism and consumerism on the one hand and contribute to rampant environmental degradation and exploitation of the poor on the other. The other main characters are Crake, Jimmy’s super-intelligent childhood friend who grows up to be the chief bio-engineer at the leading biotech company called, ‘RejoovEnesens’, and Oryx, the child porn-star both friends come to love. Unable to put up with the ethically ambiguous work that her husband does at a biotech firm (‘OrganInk’) and frustrated with the artificiality and lack of liberty of her life in the gated ‘Compound’, Sharon, Jimmy’s mother, leaves home when Jimmy is still a child. She, reportedly, tries to build subterranean resistance to the global biotechnology regime but is ultimately tracked down and killed by the ‘CorpSeCorps, the ruthless police force maintained by the corporate empire. Another such figure is Crake’s father, who, we hear, was killed in a fake accident because he protested against the regime’s wrongdoings.

This world, wherein Jimmy grows up to young manhood, ends in a virus-caused apocalypse induced by the super-scientist Crake, the friend for whose high-profile, high-secret laboratory Jimmy for a time works along with Oryx. Crake’s motivations for bringing on global destruction are not made explicit, although it is hinted that he takes revenge on the system that killed his upright father. Apparently, however, the apocalypse is brought as a by-product of the eugenical “Project” Crake undertakes on behalf of ‘RejoovEnesens’ that aims to secretly sterilize entire humanity and replace it with a spliced breed of humanoids designed to be docile, smart and beautiful. When the world ends Jimmy is the sole human survivor on a radically altered earth, living like an ape among various gene-spliced species of plants and animals and acting as care-taker and god-man to the bunch of human-animal hybrids—eugenically ‘perfected’ humans—that were created by Crake before the apocalypse. In this life Jimmy comes to be known as ‘Snowman’ to the humanoids called ‘Crakers’.

Division of labour and the (de)valuation of motherhood.

Snowman’s observations about the Crakers’ lives reveal that the sex-based division of labour—one of the most significant factors of gender inequity in patriarchy—is retained by the super-engineer Crake, who is not shown to worry about gender parity at all while envisioning his creatures. The very fact that a radical thinker like Crake cannot think beyond the prevalent norms of gender—does not even consider gender patterns as a possible item for improvement in humanity—reflects the depth and the force with which gender ideologies are naturalized in patriarchal cultures.

Expectedly, then, the Craker men are not shown to share in the nurturance of children. Although, Crake, we are told, thought that among humans “[f]ar too much time was wasted in childrearing” and “in being a child”, he obviously did not think beyond shortening childhood itself (158). Snowman illustrates the attitude of the average contemporary man when he remarks that “fire-tending is about the only thing the women do that might be classified as work. Apart from helping to catch his weekly fish, that is. And cooking it for him” (158). The home and the hearth remain the un(der)valued responsibility of the women, although, like in our own times, they participate in work outside the home too: the familiar disparity in the sharing of domestic responsibilities and the relative cultural unimportance accorded to home-based work persist

among these designer beings of the future. Snowman's attitude toward women's labour is dishearteningly revealing—and familiar. Childbearing and rearing are not regarded as 'work' by him: the average man brought up in a putatively developed near-future world still cannot attach any productive worth to these activities. On the other hand, the male Crakers are given a "special piss" that they use to mark and secure their territories (155). Snowman remembers Crake's rationale for this: "they'd need something important to do, something that didn't involve childbearing . . ."; in the absence of 'masculine' activities like "[w]oodworking, hunting, high finance, war and golf" this "men only" potent urine would serve the purpose of making the men feel important and superior to the women (155).

Both the super-scientist and the average man of the high-tech future reason according to the universal cultural ideology that defines *man* as an autonomous being separate from and in control of his natural environment—an ideology replicated in the paradigm of modern science through its insistence on 'objectivity' and 'mastery' of nature and the natural, to which realm woman is perceived to be closer than man.³ This, indeed, is the ideology that Sherry B.Ortner identified as being the foundation of the patriarchal world-view. While accounting for the universal cultural devaluation of woman in terms of the "conceptual categories" of 'nature' and 'culture' Ortner defines 'culture' as the composite of the processes of "generating and sustaining meaningful forms . . . by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them to its interest"; 'culture' is thus "broadly equated with human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature" (72).

Women's relative confinement in and identification with the realms of the natural and the familial—initiated by her natural reproductive function and reinscribed by her culturally imposed role of sole/primary care-giver to the child—is thus a function of this universal ideology of defining 'man' in terms of his opposition to and mastery of nature (Ortner 76-83). The corollary of this is that "historically and cross-culturally", "[t]he sexual division of labour and women's responsibility for childcare are linked to and generate male dominance" (Chodorow 214). Expectedly, childbearing as a female function belonging to the immanent realm of the natural is discounted from the male sphere of transcendental activities by the super-scientist in *Oryx and Crake*. In his created beings he not only keeps up the sexual division of labour but positively bolsters the gender-based disparity in cultural importance by working at deliberate ego-mollification of the male beings.

*The 'selfish' mother, the 'forsaken' child: critique of 'motherhood'.*⁴

The character of Sharon is presented, mostly, from her son's point of view; and this perspective finds her to be an unsatisfactory mother. But Atwood, even while showing Jimmy's confused and hurt feelings at what he perceives to be neglectful mothering, manipulates the narrative voice so as to advance a critique of the neo-conservative American model of perfect motherhood—the 'postfeminist' ideal that has worked to re-incarcerate women in domestic femininity (Foy 409-411). In section two, chapter three, for instance, the creation of an objective distance between Snowman and Jimmy is especially sharp.

The chapter begins with the third person narrator rendering Jimmy's boyhood experiences, and especially, his memory of a conversation he had with his mother about why she left her job. We are told about Jimmy's Philippina nanny, Dolores, who would pet and pamper him and cook the egg just the way he liked it, but who had to go when his "real mummy" started staying at home full-time; we learn also that Jimmy liked Dolores a lot and missed her (30).

Significantly, the narrator reports Jimmy's perception that Sharon's staying at home full-time "was held out to him as a treat": there is a strong suggestion that he failed to perceive why it should be so (30). Thus, the narrator covertly undercuts the perception widespread in (American) society that full-time mothering is invariably necessary and good for the child; as Foy points out, the pathos of the deprived, unhappy child is satirized even as it is advanced by Jimmy's yearning for an well-cooked egg (409 - 10).

Also, and more importantly, the new-Right postulation that a mother's total selflessness is what the child wants and needs is undercut by Jimmy's preference for a Sharon who enjoys her work and herself—perhaps in one of her "explaining moods", when she would be telling Jimmy about cells and microbes, or "on days when she appeared brisk and purposeful, and aimed and steady"—rather than a Sharon trying to act her role of a 'good' mother or a Sharon listless and apathetic (29, 30). This demonstrates the truth of the feminist recognition "that mothers *and children* benefit when the mother lives her life, and practices mothering, from a position of agency, authority, and autonomy (O'Reilly 11).

Through the depiction of her depression and through the Sharon-Jimmy relational dynamic, then, Atwood brings out the absurdity of the tenets of "new momism"—"a highly romanticized but demanding view of motherhood" that promulgates "the myth that motherhood is eternally fulfilling or rewarding, that it is *always* the best and most important thing [mothers] do, that there is only a narrowly prescribed way of doing it right . . ." (Douglas and Michaels 3-4). Moreover, Sharon's relations with her son Jimmy shows the complex interplay of authenticity and role-playing in the way she lives through motherhood, bringing out the tensions created between motherhood as experience and institution in patriarchy.

Societal expectations of women as mothers and the internalization of those expectations by women themselves combine to produce a state of things that not only militates against the freedom and personhood of women but also hampers the relationship itself between the mother and the child. In the particular context of Atwood's speculative future Sharon's culturally induced difficulties with motherhood—for, she clearly suffers from her sense of being a deficient mother—shows the "current United States obsession with 'family values'" persisting in the near-future and "our era's dominant faith in the inevitability of progress" is undercut (Brydon 454).

The narrative and the examination of (Sharon's) motherhood

Atwood's critique of the ideology of motherhood is furthered by the ingenuity of the narrative structure of the novel. In order to understand how this is done we would first need to take a close look at the narrative organization of the novel. *Oryx and Crake* presents a two-tier narrative, a near-future world—already dystopic—giving way to a wasteland scenario after an apocalypse that leaves only one human being living with a group of bioengineered humanoid creatures. A third-person omniscient narrator records the voice of the protagonist, Snowman, through whose consciousness the narrative is focalized. What the narrative voice renders is a relation of events in the protagonist's present, interspersed with his thoughts and feelings and memories, while dialogues are used to bring out the protagonist's own perspectives on people and events.

The narrative juggles two different temporalities and different spatial settings. The shifts in the narrative time and the setting serve to illuminate aspects of the two different worlds that Jimmy/ Snowman inhabits by letting them comment on each other, and connects Jimmy's human story with the larger global political picture of which it is a part. These shifts most often arrange

themselves into separate chapters; but they often also occur within a single chapter as aspects of Jimmy's life impinge on Snowman's consciousness through memories and/or reflections that work with the logic of association. The chief result of this narrative pattern is the creation of a gap between Snowman and Jimmy, his earlier self, and this distance is used in the novel both to advance self-realization and understanding in Snowman as also to make apparent his failure to achieve completely this understanding of the past. These last instances are brought out at those places of the narrative where there occur slippages between the third person narrator and Snowman/Jimmy.

In section two, chapter three, for instance, the creation of an objective distance between Snowman and Jimmy is especially sharp. The chapter begins with the third person narrator rendering Jimmy's boyhood experiences, his memory of a conversation he had with his mother about why she left her job; we are told about Jimmy's Philippina nanny, Dolores, who would pet and pamper Jimmy and cook the egg just the way he liked it, but who had to go when his "real mummy" started staying at home full-time; we are given hints that staying home with her son might not have been the only reason for Sharon to have quit her job; we learn also that Jimmy liked Dolores a lot and missed her (30).

Significantly, the narrator reports Jimmy's perception that Sharon's staying at home full-time "was held out to him as a treat": there is a strong suggestion that he failed to perceive why it should be so (30). Thus, the narrator covertly undercuts the perception widespread in (American) culture that full-time mothering is invariably necessary and good for the child. As Foy points out, the pathos of the deprived, unhappy child is satirized even as it is advanced by Jimmy's yearning for an well-cooked egg (409--10). Also, the new-right postulation that a mother's total selflessness is what the child wants and needs is undercut by Jimmy's preference for a Sharon who enjoys her work and herself—perhaps in one of her "explaining moods", when she will be telling Jimmy about cells and microbes or "on days when she appeared brisk and purposeful, and aimed and steady"—rather than a Sharon trying to act her role of a 'good' mother or a Sharon listless and apathetic (29, 30).

At the end of the first half of the chapter the narrative comes back suddenly to Snowman as the narrator reports his thought at the present moment: ". . . nobody needed two mummies did they"? "Oh, yes they did, thinks Snowman" (30). We are given the hint that there may be some reason for this wish of Jimmy's beyond his dissatisfaction with her 'real mummy'. (We would know the reason—Sharon's desertion of Jimmy—later in the novel). The occasion Snowman goes on to remembers is significant to his relationship with his mother:

Snowman has a clear image of his mother—of Jimmy's mother—sitting at the kitchen table, still in her bathrobe . . . She would have a cup of coffee in front of her, untouched; she would be looking out the window and smoking . . . She sounded so tired; maybe she was tired of him. Or maybe she was sick. (31)

Jimmy's sense of deprivation at being at the receiving end of what he perceived as imperfect mothering and the confusion and anxiety engendered in him by his intuitive insight into her depression are brought out by the episode remembered—that of her mother apathetically issuing out directives to him about fixing his own lunch. So much was Jimmy bothered by such depressed moods of hers that magenta, the colour of her bathrobe, "still makes him [Snowman] anxious whenever he sees it" (31). The distancing of 'Jimmy' from his present is Snowman's effort to protect himself from his painful memories of his mother.

The chapter goes on to give another rendition of Jimmy's interaction with Sharon. She has arranged a "real lunch" for him, so elaborate it frightens Jimmy and she herself is "carefully dressed, her lipstick smile an echo of the jelly smile on the sandwich". She is "all sparkling attention" to Jimmy and his "silly stories", stories Jimmy cooks up partly to act his part of the cared-for child: "He knew he was expected to appreciate all the effort she had put into his lunch, and so he too made an effort", "overdoing it" and ultimately getting her to laugh (32). The strain of the deliberate effort that Sharon puts in to act *her* part of the 'good' mother gets across to her child: "What she reminded him of at such times was a porcelain sink: clean, shining, hard" (32). Thus the narrator again chips away at the myth of perfect motherhood, by showing both the mother and the child at unease while enacting such roles; the scene also provides an illustration of Jimmy's emotional intelligence and his concern for his mother's happiness.

The chapter ends with another encounter of Sharon and Jimmy, now older and "more devious" (32). Hating and fearing his mother's depressed sulkiness, Jimmy tries to get "a reaction" of her by deliberately pestering her with questions and comments he knows would irritate her. When Sharon loses her composure and expresses her inner disquiet through convulsive crying and/or other extreme behaviour Jimmy would be feeling love for: "He loved her so much when he made her unhappy, or else when she made him unhappy: at these moments he scarcely knew which was which" (33). Through this episode of Snowman remembering 'Jimmy's mother' the narrator starts to unfold the nature of Jimmy's relationship to her. Also, a subtle critique of the neo-conservative ideal of perfect motherhood is advanced even as Jimmy's puzzlement at his mother's depression and his sense of deprivation are also compassionately handled.

Dissent, agency and motherhood.

In a capitalistic totalitarian regime like the one presented in *Oryx and Crake* the relationship between the personal and the political becomes imbued with the dynamics of the state and the individual. Hence, Atwood's treatment of motherhood in *Oryx and Crake* is bound up with the theme of women's agency both in personal lives and in society at large. In the soul-dead apathetic society presented in the novel the apparently imperfect mother is the chief figure that represents dissent. The ultimate motherly offence—that of deserting the child—is also the very act that is the locus of anti-establishment dissent and protest: "[i]t is at the site of the absent mother that the reader can locate resistance to the hopelessness of the future Atwood describes" (Foy 418). The new-Right American ideals of family and perfect motherhood are undercut by this strategic location of the most visible point of dissent in the novel.

Incidentally, it is Oryx, another woman Jimmy loves, whose voice cuts through his personally inflected self-absorbed perspective on Sharon. It is she alone among Jimmy's numerous girlfriends who refuses to be taken in by his self-pitying, opportunistic use of his mother's disappearance, "refus[ing] to feel what he wanted her to feel": "*So Jimmy, your mother went somewhere else? Too bad. Maybe she had some good reasons. You thought of that?*" (191) (italics as in the original). Thus, the woman who is mature and forgiving enough to condone her own mother for selling her to slavery in childhood becomes the one who tries to make Jimmy see his mother's act in a broader perspective—tries to bring him out of his solipsistic world-view. An imperfectly mothered, betrayed girl child develops the sensibility and the understanding that is required to appreciate that motherhood is not an absolute bond free from the contingencies of life and that a mother is also an individual player in a society.

Brydon finds Sharon's desertion of her family ineffectual as an act of protest because she is not seen to be a part of any meaningful reformatory process (449). True, Atwood does not show details of any political processes aimed at dismantling the capitalistic totalitarianism that is shown to have gobbled up the world. Still, Sharon's action signifies individual protest both against a totalitarian regime and the collective moral apathy of a people, and this in itself is valuable in the late-capitalistic global scenario wherein politics has become redundant. Her distaste for the "theme park"-like life of the Compounds expresses a sensibility at odds with the general crassness around her; and her unease with the activities of OrganInk compound signify a moral temperament that does connect the personal and the political and leads her to an act of the ultimate personal courage and rectitude.

When Sharon is face to face with the CorpSeCorps firing squad she looks at the camera and shouts—obviously to Jimmy, who is watching the proceedings on television—“*Goodbye. Remember Killer. I Love you. Don't let me down*” (258) (italics as in the original). The reference to the gene-spliced dog, ‘killer’, that his father gifted Jimmy and that Sharon took away while leaving home is obviously a code to make Jimmy recognise her; coupled with this is a reminder to Jimmy of one of the major evils—rampant gene-splicing—that led to the end of the world. Her dying exhortation to her son to not let her down expresses her expectation that Jimmy as an adult would honour the upbringing she gave him and would behave as a responsible and ethically aware individual, possibly taking forward her legacy of anti-establishment rebellion. The association of Sharon's desertion of her child with her ethical decision to leave the morally tainted ‘Compound’ life and with her subsequent political activism underlines the oppositional nature of her maternal practice. Having been an “outlaw” from the “institution of motherhood” Sharon adumbrates a model of what theoreticians like O'Reilly calls “gynocentric or feminist mothering”—one that “regards itself as explicitly and profoundly political and social” and aims at making mothering, “freed from motherhood” a “site of empowerment and a location of social change” (Rich 195, O'Reilly 3).

Jimmy-Snowman: a gendered 'man' yet a product of 'feminist mothering'.

The ideology of scientism—one that would reduce everything to its ‘natural’ causes, one that negates the non-material aspects of human existence and trashes those human faculties and attributes that do not align with the ethos of materialism—reigns supreme in the dystopic society Jimmy grows up in. The scientism that starts with customization of babies in order to ensure high mathematical intelligence continues into the next stage: parenting reflects the same predilection for raising children by the “math-and-chem-and-applied-bio yardstick” of the Compounds—the yardstick by which Jimmy, a word person, seems disappointingly “dull normal” (50). The cultivation of mental traits attuned to the needs of capitalistic materialism, namely utilitarian rationality and aggression, dovetails into gender-making. Thus, Jimmy's father always gives him “some tool or intelligence-enhancing game”, like a special multi-purpose knife, in the guise of gifts, and playfully asks him to screw in light-bulbs (50). His expectation that Jimmy would not cry when told he could be killed for getting a cough reflects conventional gender assumptions the contemporary reader readily recognizes (19-20).

Despite such an ambience, however, Jimmy develops an emotional sensitivity that is at odds with the utilitarianism and materialism that define the world around him. Complementing the presentation of Jimmy as a self-absorbed, parochial male are streaks of tenderness, sensitivity and empathy in him that run counter to his father's attempts to genderize him into a “tough guy” (17). These ‘feminine’ traits are reflected, for example, in his feelings for animals, like the

pigeons, whom he thinks of as friends and tries to amuse while visiting them with his father at OrganInk. (26). In his earliest memory of a Compound bonfire he is concerned about the painted ducks on his shoes, who would be hurt, he fancies, by the scalding disinfectant he is made to walk through (15); and the burning cattle carcasses give him anguish as they have their “heads on” and he has “done nothing to rescue them” (18). Although these sentiments defy logic, precisely because of that reason, they also hint at Jimmy’s affective and moral sensibilities which are most clearly evident in Snowman’s solicitousness for the Crakers and in his guilt for not trying to counter Crake’s plans of destroying the world. And, Jimmy’s emotional intelligence is expressed also in his understanding of his father playing “the role of a Dad” while being “secretly disappointed” with him and through his precocious perceptivity about his father’s affair with the lab-assistant Ramona (52, 50, 66).

Jimmy’s ethico-emotional sensitivity is indicated again in a conversation that he has with his friend Crake while watching the video-footage of a global resistance movement—the “gen-mod coffee wars”—in reaction to the forced cultivation of a high-yielding spliced coffee bean (‘HappiCuppa’) that threatens to throw small growers across the world into “starvation level poverty” (179-80). While Crake is bothered only about the “nuking” of cloud forests it is Jimmy who draws attention to the “dead peasants” —the result of the unjust and unequal war in which poor peasants are being “massacred” by the combined armies of a number of countries that support the cause of capitalistic imperialism. Jimmy cannot muster the courage to openly support the peasants because in the apolitical plastic cocoon of a ‘Compound’ that he belongs to “taking sides” is not the done thing (179). Yet the human and ethical import of the unequal and unjust war does not leave him untouched. It is this emotional and moral susceptibility that later makes Snowman suffer from guilt for not having done anything to save the world from the apocalyptic—for not being able to see that Crake was planning it. While Jimmy’s sensitivity might have been innate we cannot ignore the facts that he has been mothered by an ethically sensitive mother and has grown up in a household where debates about the morality of such biocapitalistic activities like organ-farming have been frequent.

Jimmy’s emotional insight is most evident, however, in his relations with his mother. His love for his mother gives him an instinctive insight into her unhappiness and angst. He tries to bring her out of her suffering, as we see in the chapters called ‘Bonfire’ and ‘Lunch’: he tries to get her to talk about the science that she loves and has abandoned, wanting to “try her best with him ... to keep on going”, playing more of a child than he really is mentally (21). The episode mentioned earlier, where Sharon prepares an elaborate lunch for Jimmy and tries to be “all sparkling attention” despite her unhappiness is touching as much for Sharon’s pathetic attempt to be a good mother as for little Jimmy’s understanding of her state of mind: he makes “an effort” to feign delight, although he understands these moods of hers to be out of her character: “he’d get what he wanted”, telling her silly stories, “because then she’d laugh” (32). Indeed, that is what he wants, “[m]ore than anything ... to make her laugh, to make her happy” (31). “If only he could have one more chance to make her happy”, the narrator reports him to be longing (68). And although he does not fully appreciate her concerns he continues to rue that he had possibly disappointed her.

To add a caveat, mixed in with Jimmy’s attempts to bring Sharon out of her apathy and make her feel better is the urge to get “a reaction”: he nags Sharon about the pigeons—the hybrid animals created by his father’s company—until she breaks down, and he gloats to feel his own power, “congratulating himself” for being able “to create such an effect” even as tries to comfort her (33). Even this early in his life, Jimmy, already gendered, takes pleasure in

exercising power over a woman. Indeed, Jimmy grows up to be enough of a gendered male to want to have his girlfriends in emotionally broken states so that he could “draw out of them their stories of hurt, ... apply himself to them like a poultice” and get his ego mollified (190). He so far objectifies women that to him their physical assets and “problems of [their] own” are on the same plane -- consumables to be savoured (285).

However, despite Jimmy’s ‘manly’ need to dominate and feel superior to women, in his unchosen role as the caretaker of the Crakers Snowman emerges as a mother-figure whose masculinity—biological and psychological—does not deter him from feeling tenderly solicitous and protective for those alien humanoids who are like children in their naïve simplicity. After the apocalypse he rescues them from ‘Paradise’, the high-end laboratory where they were kept by Crake and since then cares for them with a mix of resigned apathy and genuine concern. In his roles as care-taker and myth-maker to the Crakers, who perceives him both as a curiosity and an authority, Snowman seems to transcend the rigidities of the patriarchal gender system he has inherited.

Also, Jimmy’s love of obsolete, connotative words (“golden oldies”)—a trait he retains as Snowman—signals the androgynous quality of his sensibilities even as it underlines his status as the last genuine human being in a world full of schizoid, self-alienated cyborgs (191)⁵. This is because language itself (and Art generally) is presented in *Oryx and Crake* as an epitome of human culture, both material and non-material, and as a symbol of the unique wholeness of the human. Jimmy’s concern for the survival of this human wholeness—what he calls “human meaning”—is expressed in a conversation that he has with his genius friend Crake while the latter is conceptualizing the new breed of gene-spliced humanoids (166-67).

Summing up.

Jimmy, of course, does not quite measure up to the ideal Sharon apparently aspired to achieve through her mothering of her child; he seems indeed to have let her down. He ends up as an employee of ‘AnooYoo’, a biotech firm working on anti-aging cosmetics/procedures that con people, and does not sympathize with rebellious groups like the environmentally active ‘God’s Gardeners’; he also tries to dominate and manipulate his girlfriends. However, Jimmy/Snowman’s empathy and nurture, his ethical sensibility, his love of connotative words and his appreciation of and concern for ‘human meaning’ mark him as different from the other men we meet in the novel. These normatively ‘feminine’ supra-rational qualities develop in him despite his father’s gender training and despite the influence of a patriarchal culture that thrives on a sexist organization of gender. Apparently, Sharon’s deficient ‘motherhood’ has produced an individual who, if not free from the pernicious impact of gender socialization, is yet able to evince a salutary ‘femininity’ that subverts the sexist gender dichotomy fostered by patriarchy. Sharon’s ‘imperfect’ motherhood, then, must have been a non-sexist one that did not destroy her son’s inherent ‘feminine’ qualities.

Also, Sharon’s maternal sin—her desertion of her child—enables her to escape the morally ambiguous world she was trapped in. By thus getting involved in subterranean political activity aimed at subverting the inequitable and repressive capitalistic order Sharon—an “outlaw from the institution of motherhood” emerges as a woman who tries to combine mothering with activism: the patriarchal narrative of obsessive and oppressive motherhood is disrupted. Thus, Sharon’s maternal practice illustrates the paradigm of what has called ‘feminist mothering’. As Gordon’s study of ‘feminist mothers’ has shown, two of the “particular factors” making up a

maternal practice that resists and opposes the patriarchal ideology of motherhood are non-sexist childrearing and the mother's involvement in political activism (*Feminist Mothers* 149).

Sharon's career in the novel is an instance of what Badinter has called the process of "negotiation between the woman and the mother" (5). That negotiation is not wholly successful or complete—Sharon does suffer from maternal guilt and anxiety and Jimmy is less than the ideal non-sexist man. Yet, through Sharon's maternal practice and its product Atwood presents an oppositional discourse of childrearing that both critiques and disrupts the patriarchal masternarrative of motherhood. This counternarrative also indicates the potentiality of a gynocentric mothering that gives cognizance to the mother's needs as an individual on the one hand and to the socio-political implication of motherwork on the other.

Notes

1. The rightist-fundamental ideology of motherhood that emerged in the USA in the 1980s has been a part of the ‘backlash’ against feminism that has been recorded in Susan Faludi’s eponymous book. ‘The Motherhood religion’ is a phrase used by Judith Warner as the title of Part II of her study of this oppressive cult of motherhood (*Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*).
2. As we know, the distinction between patriarchally normative ‘motherhood’ and the experience of ‘mothering’ that can potentially challenge and subvert institutional motherhood was first theorized by Adrienne Rich in her epochal book on the subject (*Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*). This distinction has been developed into a discourse of oppositional (‘feminist’) mothering by scholars like Andrea O’Reilly and Tuula Gordon, among others.
3. Modern science, as conceptualized in seventeenth century Europe, sharpens this conceptual schism basic to cultural thinking as has been shown by feminist theoreticians of the philosophy and sociology of science, like Carolyn Merchant, Evelyn Fox Keller and Brian Easlea. Nature, in this ideology of science, is conceived as a female ‘thing’ to be possessed and controlled by man whose affective detachment from his ‘object’ effects a divorce between the rational-material (construed as male) and the affective-ethical (construed as female) categories of experience and values.
4. The title of this section of my article refers to the title of Chapter 4 (Part II) of Warner’s book cited above in Note 1.
5. The hybridized creatures called the ‘Children of Crake’ or ‘Crakers’ exemplify what Harraway has called ‘cyborgs’, for “[t]he cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed” (“A Cyborg Manifesto 151). Even the pre-apocalypse world in the novel is populated by soul-dead human beings who exist only as cogs in the vast machine of global capitalism. However, Atwood, unlike Harraway, does not seem to celebrate the ontological confusions between the human and the mechanical/animal despite their potential for subverting the oppressive polarizations created by Western patriarchal thinking and praxes. Atwood’s humanistic vision seems less sure of the positive implications of cyborgification of humanity and deplores the posthuman “pollution” of both human and animal “uniqueness[es]” (Harraway 151 -52).

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