



**THE REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE
SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF ANKARA
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**MATRICENTRIC FEMINIST READING OF ELISA ALBERT'S *AFTER BIRTH*
(2015) AND SHEILA HETI'S *MOTHERHOOD* (2018)**

Master's Thesis

Rabia Erdem

**Department of English Language and Literature
Master of Arts in English Language and Literature**

November 2025



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ELISA ALBERT'IN *DOĞUMDAN SONRA* (2015) VE SHEILA HETİ'NİN *ANNELİK* (2018) ROMANLARININ ANNELİK MERKEZLİ FEMİNİST OKUMASI

ÖZET

Bu tez, Elisa Albert'ın *Doğumdan Sonra* (2015) ve Sheila Heti'nin *Annelik* (2018) adlı romanlarını annelik merkezli feminizm perspektifinden incelemektedir. İlk kez 2016 yılında Andrea O'Reilly tarafından ortaya atılan annelik merkezli feminizm, annelik deneyimini, annelerin ihtiyaçlarını ve epistemolojik bir düzlemde anneliğin başlı başına kendisini merkezlendiren bir okumayı mümkün kılar. Mevcut tezde kullanılan bu teori, *Doğumdan Sonra* ve *Annelik* romanlarının annelik kavramını nasıl yeniden yorumladığına ve nasıl yeniden inşa ettiğine ışık tutar. Dördüncü dalga feminizmin kültürel ve politik iklimi içerisinde konumlanan çalışma, anneliğin çok katmanlı bir kavram olduğunu söylerken; onun toplumsal, kültürel, politik ve psikolojik esaslarla şekillendiğini açıklar. Bu bakış açısıyla diyalog halinde olan *Doğumdan Sonra* ve *Annelik* romanları, anneliği sabit ya da evrensel olarak paylaşılan bir durumdan ziyade; çelişkilerle, parçalanmalarla ve sorgulamalarla tanımlanmış bir deneyim olduğunu tasvir eder. Bahsi geçen eserler, anneliğin birçok karmaşıklık ve zorluk içerdiğini ve anneliğin biyolojik anneliğin ötesine uzanan biçimlerinin olduğunu gösterir. Tez, *Doğumdan Sonra* ve *Annelik* romanlarının analizinde tematik ve yapısal bir yaklaşım benimser ve bu metinlerin anneliğin duygusal ve bedensel karmaşıklıklarını, aynı zamanda anneliklerde geleneksel olmayan ihtimallerin nasıl kurguladığının cevabını bulmaya çalışır.

ANAHTAR KELİMELEER: *Doğumdan Sonra*, *Annelik*, annelik merkezli feminizm, lohusa depresyonu, gönüllü çocuksuz

**MATRICENTRIC FEMINIST READING OF ELISA ALBERT'S *AFTER BIRTH*
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Elisa Albert's *After Birth* (2015) and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018) from the perspective of matricentric feminism. First coined by Andrea O'Reilly in 2016, matricentric feminism enables a reading that centralizes maternal experience, mothers' needs, and motherhood itself in an epistemological stand. Employed in this thesis, this theory sheds light on the ways how *After Birth* and *Motherhood* rethink and reconstruct the concept of motherhood. The research, which is positioned within the cultural and political atmosphere of fourth-wave feminism, suggests that motherhood is a multilayered concept. It is shaped by social, cultural, political and psychological elements. In the dialogue with this perspective, both *After Birth* and *Motherhood* depict motherhood not as a stable or universally shared condition but as an experience marked by ambivalence, fragmentation, and negotiation. These works show that motherhood includes many complexities, challenges, and alternatives, including forms of mothering that extend beyond biological maternity. The thesis follows a thematic and structural approach in the analysis of *After Birth* and *Motherhood* and seeks to find an answer to how these texts fictionalize the emotional and bodily complexities of motherhood alongside its non-traditional possibilities.

KEYWORDS: *After Birth*, *Motherhood*, matricentric feminism, postpartum depression, childfree

1. INTRODUCTION

“We think back through our mothers if we are women”

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

Motherhood is not only a biological concept, but a multidimensional and historically dynamic construct shaped by a wide range of political, psychological, religious, social, and cultural forces. Its meaning has shifted throughout eras, shaped by dominant institutions, ideological frameworks, and culturally imposed norms that determine what proper mothering is. The questions of who a mother is and how she should be have been constantly reproduced. The narratives upon mothers reflect expectations on women, which reveal patriarchal power relations that seek to regulate female behavior and choices. As a result, motherhood emerges as a concept where personal experience intersects with social regulations, which blurs the boundaries between individual identity and collective norms. Therefore, understanding motherhood requires a perspective that acknowledges its multilayered dimensions and recognizes the ways in which maternal identities are constantly negotiated, contested, and reshaped within broader systems of power.

Patriarchal maternal discourses create discrimination among mother groups. They draw clear boundaries between socially approved forms of motherhood and some are marginalized or deemed unacceptable. In this framework, mothers who align with socially idealized femininity are accepted as legitimate, while those whose identities, preferences, or circumstances deviate from norms are often judged or positioned outside of societal acceptance. This exclusion becomes particularly evident in the experiences of black, queer, single, and working-class mothers. As Patricia Hill Collins points out, black mothers have historically been constrained by their portrayals as irresponsible, lazy, and hypersexual (79, 89, 156). These controlling images function as ideological tools that justify black women's subordination (69). Similarly, queer mothers are often accepted as other within dominant maternal discourse. Shelley M. Park argues that queer mothers reverse normative definitions of motherhood by suggesting that maternal identity does not need to be rooted in heterosexuality or biological reproduction (77). As she notes, maternal figures deviating from heteronormativity are positioned outside of legitimate motherhood (56). According to Linda

Gordon, single mothers, likewise, are treated not as citizens with rights but as pitied and morally judged ones (17). Working-class mothers endure another layer of exclusion, as Shani Orgad notes; they are affirmed as abject mothers leading mismanaged and inadequate lives (82). Thus, from race to class, many forces shape maternal identities and attribute values.

This hierarchy of legitimate and illegitimate motherhood does not emerge in isolation; it is produced by political, psychological, religious, social, and cultural dynamics. Throughout history, religion, for instance, has prioritized motherhood as women's primary purpose. This emphasis is rooted in the biblical command to "[b]e fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (The Holy Bible), identifying reproduction as a sacred duty. Religion has played a crucial role in sustaining ideals and shaping expectations around women's roles. In a similar vein, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch's call for pregnant women to keep their babies demonstrates how a religious authority aims to mobilize mothers against abortion (Quiñones). Political actors have also utilized motherhood for ideological and demographic aims. In the context of late-twentieth-century Britain, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher strengthened traditional maternal roles by reducing state support for childcare, food programs, and family services. She cut the free milk program for students over the age of seven, and therefore was called "Thatcher, Thatcher, Milk Snatcher" (Schwarcz). Together with social and cultural norms idealizing maternal selflessness, examples mentioned here demonstrate that motherhood is not only an individual practice, but also an ideological construct, which is organized by intersecting networks of power.

Motherhood became a central site of debate with the emergence of second-wave feminism. Theorists and activists started challenging the social, cultural, and ideological bases that had traditionally determined maternal identity. They problematized motherhood as an unpaid labor, emotional and physical sacrifice, and a mechanism that confined women to domesticity. Rather than accepting motherhood as a natural or inevitable destiny, feminists paved the way for reimagining motherhood as a choice and a patriarchal social construct. For instance, during that term, Betty Friedan revealed how wifehood and motherhood shrunk women's identities in her *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Shulamith Firestone argued in her *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) that biological role of women in reproduction oppressed women, while Adrienne Rich dissociated motherhood both as an experience and institution in her *Of Woman Born* (1976). These critical and theoretical debates shifted the direction of feminist criticism in literature as well. Feminist authors approached motherhood as a problematic concept. Angela Carter, for instance, maintains that motherhood myths make

women active agents of patriarchy (Özyurt Kılıç 94). Second-wave feminists reread previously ignored texts such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), which illustrates women's psychological collapse after birth. They also penned their own fictional works exploring the physical and emotional difficulties of motherhood. To exemplify, Margaret Drabble portrayed unmarried pregnancy and single motherhood in *The Millstone* (1965); Sue Kaufman touched everyday pressures of domestic life in *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1967); and Buchi Emecheta questioned the value of motherhood in challenging conditions in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). In this cultural and literary landscape, motherhood emerged not only as a personal experience, but as a structured and regulated institution.

Taking its power from second-wave's critiques, fourth-wave feminism (the 2010s to the present), shaped by digital networks and intersectional politics, has opened a new discussion space for the notion of motherhood. It has stressed care labor, reproductive justice, postpartum mental health, neoliberal policies in motherhood, and matrescence, while also addressing the rise of the childfree movement, environmentally conscious mothering practices, instamom culture, the struggles produced by the intensive mothering, alongside other emerging figurations that redefine maternal experience today. Organizing through online social and academic platforms¹, feminists argue motherhood into a political language and appear as public actors through manifestos and campaigns. In this feminist line, the theory of matricentric feminism, which is coined by Andrea O'Reilly, caves the way of elaborating motherhood as a distinct feminist category requiring its own policies, methodologies, and activist agenda. By introducing a new theory, matricentric feminism, O'Reilly provides a conceptual umbrella for feminists who problematize and discuss motherhood.

The return to motherhood in feminist politics has similarly affected literary production. In literature, more honest, conflicted, unspoken and dark maternal narratives have gained prominence against the myth of the angelic mother. Contemporary poetry has placed maternal ambivalence at the center of its concerns. For example, Chelsea Dingman's *Thaw* (2017) suggests psychological and physical difficulties of motherhood; Maggie Smith's *Good*

¹ The Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI) founded by Andrea O'Reilly, MotherNet, Mothers in Science, Sister Song, International Association of Maternal Action + Scholarship (IAMAS), We Are Childfree, The NotMom, No Kidding!, and the global discussions and hashtags such as #PaidLeaveForAll, #EndMomGuilt, Regretting Motherhood Movement, sparked by Orna Donath's *Regretting Motherhood* (2015), #ChildfreeByChoice, and #BirthStrike, and many other evolving networks and digital activist formations.

Bones (2017) reflects the fears and protective impulses of raising a child in an uncertain world. On the stage, April De Angelis's *Jumpy* (2011) portrays the everyday struggles of a middle-aged mother dealing with identity, aging, and conflict with her teenage daughter; Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) reflects on aging, fear, and the bonds between aged mothers. In contemporary motherhood novels, Elif Shafak's *Black Milk* (2007) represents postpartum depression and a divided maternal self; Sophie Mackintosh's *Blue Ticket* (2020) imagines a dystopian system controlling reproductive choice; and Claire Vaye Watkins's *I Love You But I've Chosen Darkness* (2021) follows a mother stepping away from domestic life to reclaim autonomy. Collectively, these works bring mothers' embodied realities, conflicts, and desires to the center of literal production. By emphasizing maternal ambivalence, institutional pressures, and women's efforts to reclaim agency within and beyond motherhood, contemporary literature aligns with matricentric feminism's insistence, which suggests that mothers constitute a distinct feminist subject whose experiences demand their own narratives, politics, and critical vocabulary.

Elisa Albert's *After Birth* (2015) and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018), the focal points of this thesis, engage directly with questions emphasized by matricentric feminism. The novels offer contemporary literary reflections on how motherhood is experienced, negotiated, and narrated today. They strikingly expose themes such as maternal rage, care labor, and voluntary childlessness. In *After Birth*, Albert challenges the image of idealized motherhood by emphasizing the problems of postpartum depression, mother rage, and loneliness. Through Ari's challenging motherhood experience, the novel traces a subtle but significant emotional growth as the woman gradually learns solidarity, accepts maternal vulnerability, and feels less alone in the demands of early motherhood. In *Motherhood*, Heti questions the decision to become a mother through an existential lens. The unnamed hesitant narrator of the work comes to a conclusion about her questionings at the end of the novel. Choosing not to be a mother, the character moves from uncertainty to certainty, and this act of claiming her own position marks a subtle but significant form of inner growth. In this sense, both novels can be seen as "matricentric feminist Bildungsromane," representing an evolving consciousness of women in terms of motherhood.

This thesis aims to examine Elisa Albert's *After Birth* (2015) and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018) through the lens of matricentric feminism. The research takes its motivation from the revisit and recentralization of motherhood in fourth-wave feminist discourse and the growing presence of maternal narration in 21st feminist literature. By

analyzing *After Birth* and *Motherhood* from the perspective of matricentric feminism, the thesis demonstrates how both novels dismantle the myth of sacred motherhood and reconstruct maternal subjectivity as a space of self-awareness, resistance, and creativity. The study adopts a thematic and structural approach, examining themes, characters, motifs, images, and metaphors, as well as narrative techniques.

The thesis is organized into five chapters. Following the Introduction, it will continue with Chapter 2, which provides historical and theoretical background for the concept of motherhood. This chapter starts its discussion from Victorian period, as that era witnessed the most significant debates on femininity and motherhood. Tracing the history of motherhood through crucial stops, the chapter ends with fourth wave feminism and the theoretical shift it generates, matricentric feminism. Chapters 3 and 4 offer matricentric feminist readings of *After Birth* and *Motherhood*, examining the works' themes, motifs, images, characterizations, settings, and narrative forms. The thesis concludes by drawing these analyses together and suggests that motherhood is not only a concept that remains within biological boundaries, but is also shaped by social, cultural, political, and psychological elements. As matricentric feminist novels, *After Birth* and *Motherhood* demonstrate that the experience of motherhood is inherently multidimensional; it enables possibilities rather than rigid boundaries, therefore, there is no motherhood but *motherhoods*.

2. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. The Perception of Femininity and Motherhood in the Victorian Period

2.1.1. The Fallen Woman vs. The Angel in the House

The Victorian period (1837-1901) was the age of paradoxes and contradictions. The era brought significant scientific and industrial advancement for humanity; however, it also gave rise to numerous problems such as social inequalities, exploitation of the working class, child labor, imperialism, moral contradictions, and gender-based injustices (Jones 50; Goose and Honeyman 16; Darwin 615; Walkowitz 15). Due to the era's internal tensions, the Victorian period has often been described as an age of hope, an age of anxiety, an age of enthusiasm, and an age of desperation (Doods xv). The era demonstrated its dual attitude in understanding women as well. On the one hand, women were harshly judged and marginalized. On the other hand, they were idealized and accepted as pure creatures and the source of morality. In line with this, Victorian society categorized women under two titles: the fallen woman and the angel in the house.

To make a general definition of the fallen woman, she was a woman who lost her honor, typically due to her illicit sexual relationship (Stockstill 539). Nina Auerbach defined the fallen woman as an enigmatic and a mute icon. She was a destitute prostitute or an errant wife without a community because of her rough nature (Auerbach 29, 33). Amanda Anderson presented the general definitions of the term fallen woman as referring to an unmarried woman who had sexual relations with men. She was an adulteress, a prostitute, a victim of seduction, and also a lower-class woman (Anderson 2). These definitions suggest that a woman in the Victorian period could be readily categorized as a fallen woman, not only due to her sexual relations outside of marriage or her adultery, but also because of her low economic facilities and unconventional, elusive, and adventurous personality. The period sought to confine women within defined boundaries and expected them to be loyal, virtuous,

moral, and also to bear and raise children. In light of these desires, Victorian society finally constructed a new type of woman: the angel in the house.

A popular Victorian phenomenon the angel in the house referred to the ideal of womanhood as a meek, selfless, devoted, and morally superior wife and mother who found fulfillment through devotion to her husband and children. Essentially, the term “the angel in the house” was borrowed from Coventry Patmore’s poem of the same title *The Angel in the House* (first published in 1854 and expanded until 1862). Patmore wrote this poem to his wife Emily and aimed to describe the perfect womankind to Victorians. The central idea of the poem is that an ideal marriage is based on wives’ obedience to their husbands. This idea is reflected in the opening line of the poem, “Lo, love’s obey’d by all” (17), where the speaker essentially frames love as submission and duty, thereby reducing it to a hierarchical relationship. This conceptualization is reinforced later in the poem: “Man must be pleased; but him to please/ Is woman’s pleasure” (74), reducing the wife’s identity to that of a caregiver whose desires are secondary to male satisfaction. The speaker does not consider the wife as an autonomous individual; but rather a moral guide, as reflected in the lines “She seem’d expressly sent below/ To teach our erring minds” (21). In Patmore’s lines, she is a quasi-divine figure whose task is to promote the family first, then to restore society. The poet idealizes the domestic sphere and gives the wife a central role as a mother. This idealization is most evident in his celebration of family life, as expressed in the lines, “Those are our children’s songs that come / With bells and bleatings of the sheep; / [...] She laugh’d. How proud she always was/ To feel how proud he was of her” (16). The speaker presents motherhood as a central part of her identity and highlights that it is a source of pride for both her and her husband.

Patmore’s portrayal reflects the broader cultural belief that “[m]otherhood provided woman with both a useful function and a sphere for her moral superiority” (Mitchell 64). In line with this belief, women were charged with nurturing the domestic realm, and their role through motherhood as the educator of humanity was regarded vital (Trudgill 71). However, their maternal role coexisted with oppressive realities. Motherhood was idealized as women’s highest calling in Victorian society, but this veneration did not translate into bodily autonomy. As British feminist and socialist Annie Besant pointed out in her *As It Was, As It Is, And As It Should Be: A Plea for Reform* (1879), a married woman had no legal control over her own body, as marital rape was not recognized:

A married woman loses control over her own body; it belongs to her owner, not to herself; no force, no violence, on the husband's part in conjugal relations is regarded as possible by the law; she may be suffering, ill, it matters not; force or constraint is recognised by the law as rape, in all cases save that of marriage. (13)

In Victorian society, women were viewed as property, and their roles, status, and behaviors within marriage were controlled by their husbands. This hierarchal structure limited women's agency and reinforced male dominance. Therefore, marriage in the Victorian period was not a private bond alone, but a social mechanism that codified women's subordination under the guise of love and made motherhood compulsory and inevitable.

In the Victorian society, women were valuable when they were mothers; however, not every mother was idealized and supported. Working mothers, for example, were harshly judged. The era warned that "working mothers separated from their infants during the working day were bound to neglect them" (Thompson 118), thus suggesting that women's employment outside the home would inevitably undermine their maternal duties and ultimately destroy family life. The Victorian construction of motherhood placed women on a symbolic sanctity by saying *the angel* while severely restricting their autonomy and reinforcing patriarchal control. The period wanted to see mothers at home, fully devoted to childcare and domestic responsibilities.

In short, women's lives during the Victorian era were strictly regulated by male-defined ideals. Patriarchal norms dominated social life and women's identities were shaped through rigid binaries. This situation limited women to moral, domestic, and reproductive functions, and reinforced the archetypes of the fallen woman and the angel in the house. The figure of the fallen woman, in particular, functioned as a moral warning—a cautionary symbol used to police women's behavior and ensure conformity to Victorian sexual norms. Within this strict moral framework, even the slightest deviation from the ideal of absolute purity could result in a woman being labeled as fallen, leaving little space for error, complexity, or redemption in the perception of female virtue (Mobaraki 120). In contrast, the phenomenon of the angel in the house embodied the unattainable ideal. It functioned how Victorian women should live, love, and serve within the domestic sphere. As a wife and mother, she had to admire her husband, obey him, and support his spiritual and physical well-being. She was a passive and non-intellectual creature, whose life revolved around domestic management and religion (Peterson 678). Victorian representations of women were dominated by images of

passivity—ranging from the desperate prostitute to the ladylike dependent housewife—all of which framed women as victims lacking agency (Thane 175). Those representations preserved patriarchal social order and constructed womanhood as something to be disciplined, idealized, and ultimately contained.

2.1.2. Victorian Male Gaze

In Victorian intellectual and cultural life, the female figure was persistently framed through a masculine lens. Across various discourses, women were depicted as beings whose value laid in beauty, purity, and compliance. The role of motherhood was heavily promoted and idealized, and this maternal ideal became central to the construction of the “good woman,” serving to legitimize women’s restriction to the domestic sphere. The male gaze worked as a mechanism of control that devoted women fixed roles, while rendering their desires, thoughts, and complexities invisible and irrelevant. The rhetoric of science and representations in mainstream Victorian print media positioned women not as autonomous individuals, but as idealized reflections of male fantasies. Through this framing, womanhood, including its maternal aspects, became an image shaped and sustained by male authority.

To extend, in the Victorian era, the medical discourse constructed the female body by framing it as an object rather than as a site of agency. Within this framework, women’s bodies and needs were treated as secondary, and they were medicalized. A telling example of this perspective can be found in the writings of British medical doctor William Acton, one of the most authoritative voices of the time. In his *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life* (1862), he disregarded the anatomy of women, prioritized male biology, and offered traditional roles to women. Although his title offers no gender distinction, the book’s content is exclusively focused on men and their issues.

In the work, Acton conceptualized femininity and motherhood in a form that extended beyond biology. He articulated a moral and social framework in which women were positioned as naturally destined to serve and obey. He asserted that every woman had an innate need to please and be agreeable to the opposite sex, and the appropriate way to fulfill

this need was marriage. He gave a role to families to train their daughters to be good wives and mothers:

I believe there is inherent in every woman's heart a wish to be pleasing and agreeable to the other sex; and as it is in a great measure the destiny of most women to be married, it seems incumbent upon parents to give girls that judicious training in early life which will fit them to be good wives and mothers; and there is, I believe, no greater happiness on earth than is to be found in the married state, where two persons of affectionate dispositions, and equals in birth and station, agree to pass the rest of their lives together, till, in fact, death, and not Lord Penzance, them do part. (130)

It is a crucial point that Acton did not refer to female sex in the work until the discussion turned into the subject of marriage. He began addressing women in the context of exploring men's sexual and emotional needs. From this position, Acton adopted an instructive and moralizing tone aimed particularly at male readers, offering detailed recommendations and cautionary advice regarding marital choices and responsibilities. He argued that a successful marriage life depended on the wife's fertility. As he stated in his work, a woman should have given birth to healthy children; she should have had a lower education and position than her husband; and a man should not have married to a woman whose mother had got divorced, inasmuch as infidelity was inherited, as well as family diseases (Acton 127, 128, 131). Considering that this was a medical book, Acton's references to women lacked scientific rigor. He provided neither empirical evidence nor medical knowledge about women. Instead, he reinforced dominant patriarchal ideals that framed women primarily in terms of their reproductive function. Through this lens, womanhood was ultimately equated with motherhood—biologically defined, socially prescribed, and morally idealized.

A similar restrictive perspective could be observed in the field of psychiatry, where women's mental and emotional states were pathologized and used as a justification for their subordination. There was the over diagnosis of hysteria and the prescription of unnecessary treatments for women. Numerous flawed and reductive arguments were advanced, causing the strengthening of gender stereotypes and power imbalances. To illustrate, the term's pioneering English psychiatrist, Henry Maudsley, argued in his essay titled *Sex in Mind and Education* (1874) that mental training in women could cause permanent injury to the brain and reproductive system; hence, women should not have received an education; they were suited for child-rearing (14). Likewise, Thomas Clouston, another prominent psychiatrist in

19th-century England, claimed the needlessness of education for women. In *Female Education* (1882), he viewed female education as a threat to women's maternal function by arguing that intellectual labor would undermine their ability to bear and raise strong sons:

Man's chief work is more related to the present; woman's chief work to the future of the world. Why should we spoil a good mother by making an ordinary grammarian? It will be said as a hereditary fact that most great men have had mothers of strong minds. I believe this to be true, but [...] very few such men have had such mothers. [...] I am inclined to believe that if the mothers of such men had been in adolescence worked in learning book knowledge for eight or ten hours a day in a sitting posture; [...] then, I think their sons would have been small and distorted men, instead of being the lights of the world. (20)

In Clouston's suggestion, there was a purpose that wanted women to be kept away from social life. Rather than being an intellectual woman and getting actively involved in life, the emphasis was on raising an intellectual son. According to this suggestion, motherhood was the true identity of a woman, and seeking more than this role was quite dangerous. During the Victorian period, supporters of this view frequently made unfounded claims for female intellectuality. For instance, one of these conservative arguments asserted that while intellectual women had highly developed capacities, most of them would die young (Thomson and Geddes 34); therefore, intellectuality was detrimental. These statements intended to deter women from engaging with intellectual pursuits and confine them to traditional roles.

Sigmund Freud's theories were deeply infused with the gender norms and misogyny that dominated the Victorian era. His essentialist approach created a gendered hierarchy. To expand the topic from this angle, Freud, in his *Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes*, claimed that women did not have the sense of justice, and their social interests and the ability for suppressing their instincts were weaker than men (257-258); therefore, according to this claim, women were intellectually and morally lower compared to male sex. In addition, Freud conceptualized female psychosexual development in connection with penis envy and the Oedipus complex. In light of this, girls were deprived of a penis because of their mothers, which led to feelings of inferiority and resentment in the world of little girls (Masson 272). Furthermore, he encapsulated women's role within passivity, domesticity, and dependence on male affection. In his letters, he stated that: "It is really a stillborn thought to send women into the struggle for existence exactly the

same as men. [...] Nature has determined woman's destiny through beauty, charm and sweetness ... in youth an adored darling, in mature years a loved wife" (Jones 118). This portrayal confined women to predefined roles shaped by their relationships to men—first as attractive young girls, then as devoted wives, and implicitly, as nurturing mothers within the domestic sphere. In Freud's arguments, there was the rejection of women's autonomous beings and minds. He approached women as enigmatic ones, often regarding their physiology, psychology, and bodily desires as less understandable. In *The Question of Lay Analysis*, his assertion for adult women's sexual life as *a dark continent* (Freud 35) displayed both his neglect and ignorance of femininity, for instance. This characterization that regarded women as wives and mothers explicitly grew the Victorian patriarchal system and misogynist viewpoint.

Discourses that portrayed women as subordinate and intellectually inferior circulated not only through scientific writing but also through male-controlled newspapers and magazines that shaped public opinion. The magazines, for instance, praised the concept of the angel in the house to their female readers. Some leading magazines of the period, such as *The Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion, Music & Romance* (1832- 1852) and *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (1852- 1879), explicitly encouraged the Victorian ideal of domestic femininity. These journals often highlighted that a woman's job was home, and her main concern should have been her husband and children. In these magazines, women were blessed because they were wives and mothers. To clearly display, in *The Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion, Music & Romance* (1832- 1852), edited by the mother-daughter team Margaret and Beatrice de Courcy, writer R. E. Thackeray praised being a wife and mother, claiming that these were the highest honors a woman could hold:

Never does woman's whole nature rise to a higher earthly beauty and dignity than when it is seen strung to its utmost tension with feelings of devotion to the husband of her heart, and discharging, in holy and humble reliance on her God, the sweet offices of mother and wife to those whom God has given her to bless and to be blessed with.
(88)

Similarly, it was possible to find writings that promoted the ideal of domestic femininity in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*. This magazine included several fictional stories whose characters were devoted wives, married mothers, and non-threatening widows. The

female characters in the magazine were always home and strictly bound to tradition. They solely cared about the members of the family and forgot their own desires and existence:

He grew up to be a fine, gentlemanly, clever lad, and then his mother did for him what she could never have done for herself —she wrote to an uncle of her husband's, a wealthy man, who had hitherto ignored her existence, and asked for the benefit of his position and influence in launching her son into the world. (162)

It can be argued that short stories and articles in the most famous magazines of the period explicitly fostered the idea of the angel in the house. They spread the idea that the roles of women were only to be pure, selfless, and pious wives and mothers. Considering this, the majority of magazines during that period did not have any mission to improve female readers' intellectual world. They limited women's minds to the domestic sphere and instilled patriarchal ideas. It is possible to assert that reducing women's ability to domestic roles and devaluating and marginalizing them socially have created a strong foundation for misogyny.

Consequently, during the Victorian period, many different disciplines took an active role in raising patriarchal values. They clearly dominated the intellectual world with patriarchal doctrines and shaped society with the power of this ideology. As a result, each discipline presented a derogatory narrative towards women, and they reinforced domestic and traditional gender roles. Within this ideological climate, the roles of wifehood and motherhood were praised and presented as necessary duties of women. However, these roles left little room for individuality and self-determination for women.

2.1.3. Queen Victoria, the Rise of the Image of Motherhood, and the Experience of Motherhood

The British Empire reached its most powerful days during the reign of Queen Victoria. She was considered as a great woman in terms of her experience and knowledge (Jeune 336). She was called the 'Grandmother of Europe' (Lilly 214). In addition to her success in policy, she was also admirable due to her private life. She was the mother of nine children, devoted to her husband, children, and nation. She was the image of fertility, altruism, and tradition (Banks 454). In the minds of Victorians, she was an example of womanly perfection. She did not have rebellious ambitions and was domestic-oriented. She fitted the classic Victorian

acceptable woman image. Simply put, Queen Victoria was the mother of the nation; she was the angel of the Great Britain.

However, a close reading of her diaries and letters reveals a vastly different result. It is detected that, in essence, the Queen was highly depressed and overwhelmed by the demands of motherhood. This is a crucial point in terms of seeing that while motherhood was introduced as joy, women experience many struggles and darkness of it. This contrast between the idealized joy of motherhood and its often-hidden struggles is one of the central focuses of the present thesis; therefore, exploring Queen Victoria's motherhood experience provides a compelling starting point.

In order to grasp the depth of this discussion, it is essential to begin with the early stages of Queen Victoria's maternal life. Her entrance into motherhood—just nine months after her wedding— gave her a lifelong role that would intertwine with both her personal identity and her public image. While motherhood was an expected duty for an ordinary Victorian woman, for the Queen, it transcended mere obligation. She embodied motherhood as a political figure, which made her highly deserving one of admiration and praise. Through her maternal role, the public perception of motherhood was significantly elevated, and the concept itself was idealized as a noble and honorable experience.

However, the meaning of motherhood was different in the eyes of Queen Victoria. Society glorified the notion of motherhood over her and forced their women into it by giving the queen as a shining example, whereas the queen herself experienced the dark side of motherhood. Through her letters and journals, it is understood that Victoria was severely upset about her own motherhood journey. She wrote to her husband Albert's stepmother:

I am really upset about it and it is spoiling my happiness; I have always hated the idea and I prayed to God night and day to be left free for at least six months, but my prayers have not been answered and I am really most unhappy. (Misztal 19)

Queen Victoria suffered from postnatal depression following the birth of her second child, Bertie. She acted out her mentality as, "I have been suffering so from lowness that it made me quite miserable, and I know how difficult it is to fight against it" (Dolby 31). It was argued that her emotional and mental state was inherited from her grandfather. That is, the burden of pregnancy and motherhood was overlooked. Rather than handling the real challenges of childbirth and motherhood, offering such claims added more pressure on the Queen and urged

her to hide her true feelings. It was suggested that this situation in such depression might have prolonged her state (Ward 280).

The Queen's general attitude towards having children was mostly negative, even after her postpartum depression. Victoria could not get along well with the notion of motherhood throughout her journey. Although she suggested her admiration for pretty children (Dolby 41) and great delight and comfort in parenthood, especially in early parenthood (Ward 289), she did not hesitate to say that children evoke unhappiness and kill individuality in women. When her eldest daughter Vicky got married, Victoria recommended her daughter to avoid pregnancy in the first years of marriage. She strikingly mentioned that Vicky's birth destroyed the early periods of her own married life:

I cannot tell you how happy I am that you are not in an unenviable position. I never can rejoice by hearing that a poor young thing is pulled down by this trial. Though I quite admit the comfort and blessing good and amiable children are – though they are also an awful plague and anxiety for which they show one so little gratitude very often! What made me so miserable was – to have the first two years of my married life utterly spoilt by this occupation! I could enjoy nothing – not travel or go about with dear Papa and if I had waited a year, as I hope you will, it would have been different. (Dolby 52)

Though Queen Victoria advised her daughter not to be pregnant too early, Vicky gave birth to her first child just a little over a year after she got married. During her pregnancy, Vicky shared her excitement about her first pregnancy with her mother as, “the pride of giving life to an immortal soul” (Ward 287); but Victoria could not respond to her daughter with the same joy and enthusiasm:

What you say of the pride of giving life to an immortal soul is very fine, dear, but I own I cannot enter into that; I think much more of our being like a cow or a dog at such moments; when our poor nature becomes so very animal and unecstatic. (Dolby 41)

Queen Victoria revealed the dark and unspoken sides of motherhood in her letters and journals. She faithfully expressed her feelings in her motherhood journey without filtering them. She addressed a wide range of topics, from postpartum depression to the emotional toll of physical exhaustion. It is comprehended that the public raised the image of motherhood and

pointed the Queen as a role model for their daughters and wives; however, in essence, Queen Victoria highly suffered from the burden of it. According to her, there was no reason to idealize the concept of motherhood. She did not experience the honor. Instead of the joy and dignity, the true meaning of motherhood for her was, in her words, “an occupational hazard of being a wife” (Dolby 44).

2.2. The Position of Women and Mothers in the 20th Century

2.2.1. Women and Mothers in the Second World War

The most striking and traumatic event of the 20th century was the Second World War (1939–1945). The war profoundly disrupted the social order, leading to widespread social, economic, political, and psychological challenges, including uncertainty about the future, fear, depression, unemployment, poverty, and shortages of food and shelter (Broadberry and Harrison 1; Hoffmann 28; Rzeszutek et al. 8). These hardships not only affected individuals on a personal level but also reshaped societal expectations and responsibilities. In particular, the necessities of the war changed the understanding of womanhood and motherhood. The image of the ideal woman appeared in accordance with the needs of the nation, and motherhood was redefined as a duty of patriotic service (Fieseler, Hampf and Schwarzkopf). This chapter will discuss the changing position of women from the angel in the house to the woman on the battlefield during the Second World War.

To fully understand the transformation of women’s roles and positions in society, it is essential to remember how gender roles were defined in the pre-war period. As explored in the previous chapters, traditional gender roles were firmly established. Men were perceived as the strongest, most rational, and most decisive, whereas women were considered emotional, weak, and irrational. While men participated in the workforce, women were expected to stay home and care for their children. However, this perception shifted with the outbreak of the war. Patriarchal social structures in England no longer promoted the roles of wifehood and motherhood for women (Summerfield 1). Instead, they encouraged women to leave their homes and contribute to the war. This shift suggests that patriarchy sought to exploit women by utilizing them in wartime activities.

The shift in the role of women did not signal a true transformation in gender ideology. Although women took on new responsibilities, these were deceptive and temporary. This shift suggests that patriarchy now sought to exploit women by utilizing them in wartime activities. To extend, it was reported that women during the Second World War served as military nurses and auxiliary personnel in the military (Crowley and Dawson 1). Additionally, an estimated 520,000 to 800,000 uniformed women took part in the Soviet armed forces (Peri 171). However, before the war, it was unimaginable for a woman to leave the roles of wifehood and motherhood and work in such occupations. It must be borne in mind that women were deemed suitable for this profession because they were believed to be naturally fit for this duty—nurturing and care-giving were integral parts of their daily lives. Therefore, this shift did not liberate women from traditional gender roles; rather, it relocated the angel in the house to the battlefield. Regarding this view, it can be easily said that there was extensive hypocrisy in society during wartime. The true intention was not to integrate women into the workforce or recognize their contributions, but to temporarily exploit them as a resource during the war.

To operate women's physical and emotional power in wartime, some social and political strategies were employed. For instance, various posters in Great Britain and Germany were designed to encourage women to contribute to the war. Gautam argued that these posters, which were colorful and appealing, represented and urged specifically mothers to send their children to war and underscored that this was mothers' exact duty (Gautam 920, 921). In addition to these posters, songs in the Soviet Union, which was one of the most severely affected countries of the war, were also composed to keep women's energy awake for the war. One of these songs, *The Girl in Combat Boots*, presented how impressive it was to watch girls dressed as soldiers and also how 'manfully' they fought (Peri 176). Peri elaborated that this song was "a lyrical reminder of women's surprising yet successful transformation into soldiers" (176). Furthermore, the leaders of nations played a significant role in shaping public sentiment. Stalin, for instance, utilized the term "Motherland" as a symbolic representation of a nation that nurtured and protected its citizens. By defining the country through emotional bonds, he effectively mobilized individuals for war, raising their sense of duty as well as loyalty.

These campaigns resonated strongly with the public, and women responded to them with great enthusiasm. Elena Antonovna Kudina, who was a war witness and worked as a private driver in the war, shared the effectiveness of Stalin's speeches as: "[W]hen Stalin began to

... speak... He addressed us: 'Brothers and sisters...' Then everybody forgot their grievances... [...] [A]fter Stalin's speech mama said: 'We'll defend the Motherland and sort it out later.' Everybody loved the Motherland" (Alexievich 53). Another war witness, Evgenia Sergeevna Sapronova, who worked as a sergeant of the guards and airplane mechanic, described how she was deeply influenced by the pervasive wartime propaganda as follows:

[My mother] and [...] father didn't want me to go, but I lived for one thing only: To the front, to the front! To the front! These posters we now see in the museums —"The Motherland is calling!", "What have you done for the front?"— affected me very strongly. They were before our eyes all the time. And the songs? "Arise, vast country... Arise, for mortal combat..." (Alexievich 56)

The female citizens, not only the Soviets but also others, had the same motivation. They were eager for the war, especially after the effective propaganda of their nations. However, when women faced the real side of the war, they experienced physical and psychological struggles. A woman described their situation as:

The body reorganized itself so much during the war that we weren't women, air-force Lieutenant Alexandra Popova declared. As the body became militarized, we didn't have those women's things... periods... and after the war not all of us could have children. [...] When I had my third son, I couldn't even breastfeed him because I could not hold him. My arms and legs hurt so much. [...] I was afraid that I'd be hit in the legs and get crippled. I had beautiful legs. What is it for a man? Even if he loses his legs, it is not so terrible, he's a hero anyway. He can marry! But if a woman is crippled it is her destiny that is at stake. A woman's destiny. (quoted in Peri 178)

The nations manipulated women emotionally by touching their sense of sacrifice and emotional devotion, and through this, they utilized women's power in the war. Yet, under such physical and psychological loads, women experienced a shift in their sense of femininity, as the demands of war profoundly affected both their physical and emotional well-being. As stated above, women were unable to sustain their maternal functions healthily, and some even lost their chance to bear children. It can be argued that the military service ruined the lives of women.

It is evident that the concept of what it meant to be a good woman and mother has changed with the Second World War. Nations have redefined and reshaped the characteristics

of the idealized woman and mother figure in light of their own benefit. Clearly, a good woman and a good mother was the one who supported the military power and actively participated in the war. It is a sharp difference that while women were expected to stay home during the Victorian period, women were expected to work under harsh conditions during the Second World War. This shift was introduced as a new virtue to them.

2.2.2. The Concept of New Woman and its Impact on the Notion of Motherhood

The concept of the New Woman represented women's cultural, political, and social changes from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. The notion emerged alongside the suffrage movement and changing gender roles. The term referred to a woman type who was determined to gain her freedom and did not submit to social dictates. She firmly demanded radical changes for women's independence; hence, she actively engaged in politics. American literary feminist critic Elaine Showalter described the political side of the New Woman in her book *Sexual Anarchy* as: "Politically, the New Woman was an anarchic figure who threatened to turn the world upside down and to be on top in a wild carnival of social and sexual misrule" (38). From the perspective of the New Woman, the world was surrounded by patriarchal ideology; therefore, it was necessary to dismantle the former system and construct a new one, which would grant women their rights.

In her 1894 article, *The New Aspect of the Woman Question*, Sarah Grand introduced the phrase the New Woman first. She emphasized the significance of the marriage issue for the New Woman and encapsulated the problem with a kind of slogan: "The Woman Question is the Marriage Question" (276). Grand drew attention to marriage since she and other followers of the New Woman believed that marriage was the most crucial domestic institution, generating oppression, dominance, and limits for women. That is the reason why the New Woman primarily targeted fixing marriage life. An English novelist and essayist, Mona Caird, who actively advocated for the New Woman movement, defined the ideal concept of marriage in her writing *Marriage*, as follows:

The ideal marriage ... should be *free* ... Even the idea of 'duty' ought to be excluded ... it need scarcely be said that there must be a full understanding and acknowledgement of

the obvious right of the woman to *possess herself body and soul*, to give or withhold herself body and soul exactly as she wills. (197-198)

The New Woman movement suggested that marriage had to be based upon mutual understanding. Men were demanded to listen to women's words and respect women's freedom of self-expression (Özyurt Kılıç 9). The movement underscored the importance of egalitarian relations, holding personal agency, and bodily autonomy in marriage. It brought personal freedom into the forefront.

As to the perception of motherhood, the New Woman considered motherhood as constituting oppression for women. Many women following this belief rejected being mothers, which led to a dramatic decline in the birth rate. Jean V. Matthews remarked on this issue in her book *The Rise of the New Woman* (2003) as: "In fact the American birthrate had been dropping steadily since the beginning of the nineteenth century; what made it an issue now was that immigrant women still produced large families, adding to the panic feeling among many 'old-stock' Americans of being overrun" (38). As women increasingly gained independence and rejected traditional gender roles, critics and scientists began to marginalize women's choices through their discourses and theories. For instance, President Theodore Roosevelt denounced women who avoided marriage and motherhood by comparing them to the soldiers who shirked their duties. Similarly, the sociologist Edward A. Ross coined the term "race suicide," and male studies in college regarded financially independent and career-focused women as the ones denying their natural destiny (Matthews 38). Obviously, motherhood was constructed as an institution tied to national and racial concerns. Women were held responsible for the growth of the country and the maintenance of the dominant race. Being patriotic and contributing to society was equated with being a mother.

The new woman challenged the dominant ideology that equated womanhood with motherhood and defined female value through reproductive roles. She replaced traditional expectations, such as marriage and motherhood, with new demands for education and work (Marks 205). As depicted in Mona Caird's fictional work *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), the New Woman explicitly perceived the concept of motherhood as:

Motherhood, in our present social state, is the sign and seal as well as the means and method of a woman's bondage. It forges chains of her own flesh and blood; it weaves cords of her own love and instinct. She agonizes, and the fruit of her agony is not even legally hers. Name me a position more abject! A woman with a child in her arms is, to

me, the symbol of an abasement, an indignity, more complete, more disfiguring and terrible, than any form of humiliation that the world has ever seen. (Caird)

The New Woman saw mothers as akin to slaves. She argued that motherhood shrunk the individuality of a woman and occupied her whole life with its responsibilities. The new woman paid attention to why fathers did not devote themselves to their children, while it was expected from mothers a full-time care. (Showalter 49). This figure supported that motherhood was not women's innate feeling and that women could not always be devoted during childrearing. From the new woman's perspective, introducing motherhood as the nature of a woman and offering her to be entirely selfless in mothering was irrational.

Additionally, the New Woman objected to the belief that a mother was the only responsible person in parenting. Rather than parenting of one gender, the New Woman supported equal responsibility of parents. Caird criticized that being devoted, selfless, and fully responsible for childcare were attributed to women, while men were excluded from these expectations in her essay book *The Morality of Marriage* (1897) as stated below:

Nature clearly has indicated fatherhood to man as much as she has indicated motherhood to woman, and it is really difficult to see why a father should not be expected to devote himself wholly to domestic cares; that is, if we are so very determined that one sex or the other shall be sacrificed *en masse*. (7)

The New Woman laid stress on the importance of the unequal division of labor in the parenting process and aimed to reverse this view. She maintained that both men and women should have shared responsibilities. By addressing these points, the new woman challenged traditional gender roles, redefined family dynamics, and encouraged a more balanced and equitable division of labor.

In brief, the figure of the New Woman emerged to shift traditional gender roles and to create a free woman on social, economic, and political grounds. This woman kind enthusiastically highlighted the significance of education and career for women. She criticized traditional roles and redefined women's position. Cooley elaborated the New Woman as "the old woman with new opportunities" (17). According to her, the New Woman was not an entirely a new figure, but rather a continuation of women in history who had sought to make change. Hence, she was the output of the feminist efforts made up to that time.

Regarding the concept of marriage and motherhood, the New Woman aimed to break the restrictions imposed on women. She reversed the idealization of motherhood and considered childbearing as a preferable choice (MacPike 377). For her, the ideal thing was to advocate autonomy, equality both in partnership and parenthood, and self-fulfillment of women. The New Woman eliminated marriage and motherhood as a duty for women and alleviated the burden of care by promoting the shared responsibility of both parents.

2.2.3. Motherhood as a Site of Empowerment and Oppression in Second-Wave Feminism

Building on the legacy and momentum of the first wave (1848-1920) in which women's legal recognition as citizens was guaranteed, second-wave feminism (1960-1988) initiated a sharper discussion on women's position and roles in society with the slogan "the personal is political." The key focuses of the movement included issues, such as civil and political rights, gender roles, domestic violence, financial independence, equal pay, sexual liberation, reproductive rights, and abortion (Gosse 154). In each of these areas, women achieved significant legal and social advancements. For instance, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 granted women in the United States the right to equal pay, aiming to eliminate wage disparities based on sex (Rosenstock 4). Additionally, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 prohibited sex discrimination in education programs, ensuring equal academic opportunities for women and young girls (Rosenstock 7). Furthermore, women gained access to rape crisis centers, shelters, and hotlines as a response to domestic violence and abuse (Matthews 14). The second-wave feminist movement also played a crucial role in terms of securing safe and legal birth control methods and abortion. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the contraceptive pill in 1960, and The Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973 (Rosenstock 6). In short, second-wave feminism brought women's rights to the forefront, challenging gender norms and promoting for greater autonomy in both private and public spheres.

To evaluate second-wave feminism in terms of the concept of motherhood, it is important to recognize that the movement encompassed dual aspects on the subject. One perspective acknowledged motherhood as a potentially empowering experience. The other regarded motherhood as an oppressive institution that reinforced patriarchal dominance. This

section of the thesis will address these two perspectives. The arguments of Helen Andelin and Phyllis Schlafly will be presented from the angle of motherhood as an empowering experience, and the arguments of Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone will be presented from the angle of motherhood as an oppressive institution.

To begin with, regarded as a representation of the growing social and political backlash to the era's turbulence, Helen Andelin's *Fascinating Womanhood* (1963) introduces traditional values and institutions which were considered essential for women (Neuffer 2). Andelin suggested women to become dependent and childlike because to be feminine meant to be weak, fearful, vulnerable, emotional, needy, and ignorant (Meadow 107). Throughout the work, Andelin's perspective on womanhood is strictly linked to gender roles. Women's power is determined by whether they respond to domestic duties. She supported that women could reach a sense of fulfillment, joy, and power when they embraced their natural identity as a wife, mother, and homemaker (104). She praised women who sincerely undertook the tasks of home and referred to them as *Domestic Goddess* (116). Clearly, Andelin motivated the conservative movement about the roles of men and women (Neuffer 3).

While praising domesticated women, Andelin highly attacked women who considered their domestic role insignificant and sought fulfillment in men's work. She argued in her *Fascinating Womanhood* that those women compared themselves to men and found themselves less important and unhappy because they took charge of household alone and did not have a career as men did. She criticized that they often neglected their domestic responsibilities; however, their attitude was not acceptable. Someone had to do women's work and take care of children, and according to her, the logical one was the mother herself (116). She believed that it was meaningless to complain about domestic responsibilities. Instead of complaining, women should celebrated the beauty and honor of wifehood and motherhood since the glory of those was different than men; it was honor and a path to reach Celestial love (116). Andelin's arguments were quite parallel to Victorian traditional ideology. She framed domestic labor as a source of spiritual superiority and empowerment and positioned women's value in service to others. By doing this, she resisted the term's feminist wind.

Similarly, Phyllis Schlafly was a conservative figure in the second wave of feminism who fiercely opposed the feminist movement's core demands and rather supported traditional gender roles as a source of female dignity and social stability. Founded against the ERA (The

Equal Rights Amendment), which aimed to prohibit sex discrimination, an antifeminist coalition STOP ERA (Stop Taking Our Privileges) with the support of Schlafly desired to protect the traditional family concept of wife as homemaker and husband as breadwinner (Dowland 621, 622). For the members of the STOP ERA movement, there was a need to overcome selfish ambitions of women such as career, independence, and wealth (Miller 281).

Schlafly prioritized her role as a wife and mother over her career accomplishments, although she was actively involved in politics. She often presented herself as a homemaker and cited her primary occupation as a mother. She talked about mothering her children before talking about her policy achievements (Hastrup 7). Contrary to the term's feminists, such as Betty Friedan, who was a significant feminist activist in the second wave and discussed domestic life and its responsibilities as a source of depression for women, Schlafly strongly believed that birth and child rearing were something that needed to be embraced and celebrated (OAH). In her view, being a wife and mother was an honorable career (Hastrup 83). In positioning wifehood and motherhood as an honorable calling, Schlafly sustained conservative ideas of feminine fulfillment.

Accepted as an essentialist name like Andelin, she promoted natural ways to foster babies. Her practice reflected this situation as follows: "She drove miles to farms to purchase unpasteurized milk, 'fertile eggs,' and 'little jars of salmon straight from Alaska, that weren't gooped up with any kind of preservatives, from people who caught their own salmon... Yeah, I was into health food before it was cool.'" (OAH). She gave importance to *natural mothering* and tried ways to foster babies with child-rearing practices aligned with her belief in natural living. She rejected scientific intervention and emphasized unmedicalized care. Thereby, she reclaimed maternal authority from technocratic systems.

On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir, who was a catalyst name between first wave and second wave feminism and created an important act in feminist movement with her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), elaborated motherhood as a restrictive concept and believed that motherhood was an obstacle to women's liberation because of its biological and social difficulties. Beauvoir suggested that the glorification of motherhood was repeatedly remarked for women from childhood, and they were taught that their ultimate purpose was to bear children (657). Therefore, women who were raised under this mentality automatically accepted motherhood as the primary role in their lives, often did not hear their desires, and did

not search for their abilities. From a very young age, their lives were designed and limited according to a motherhood plan.

Believing motherhood was a socially constructed destiny imposed on women, Beauvoir also suggested that the experience of motherhood included joy but also uncertainty, disempowerment, and alienation. By exposing these contradictions and framing motherhood as a complex and ambivalent reality—neither sheer joy nor mere darkness—, she laid an important theoretical foundation of what would later be called matricentric feminism: a feminist approach that treats motherhood as a choice and highlights the experience not only as an empowerment but also as a complex, ambivalent reality. Beauvoir arrived at the thought that the notion of motherhood contained both joy and darkness:

[P]regnancy is [...] a drama playing itself out in the woman between her and herself. She experiences it both as an enrichment and a mutilation; the fetus is part of her body, and it is a parasite exploiting her; she possesses it, and she is possessed by it; it encapsulates the whole future, and in carrying it, she feels as vast as the world; but this very richness annihilates her, she has the impression of not being anything else. A new existence is going to manifest itself and justify her own existence, she is proud of it; but she also feels like the plaything of obscure forces, she is tossed about, assaulted. (665)

Beauvoir maintained that the conflicting perceptions within the concept of motherhood occurred because women were stuck between their bodies and society's directions. To clarify, in a patriarchal society, women alongside their feminine identities could not freely exist. They had to hide their bodies from others. The experience of motherhood provided them with freedom that had previously been denied. While women were traditionally deprived of ownership over their bodies and reduced to passive objects, motherhood became a means of granting them the right to engage in societal discourse. As a result, the passivity of women disappeared, and their bodies finally became their own. They could display their breast as a source of life, once seen as an erotic object (666). It is understood that having a child offered women the right to show their femininity. Their bodies became legitimate through motherhood. Yet, this was not an acceptable freedom understanding from the perspective of Beauvoir. She suggested that this kind of women was not liberated. They could not be defined as mothers; they were only "*breeders*" who were still passive objects of life (665).

Besides, Beauvoir handled the huge responsibility of children. She proposed that motherhood had a challenging nature. In light of this, it did not only bring physical struggles, but also caused psychological burdens. She discussed this aspect as follows:

There are also many mothers who are terrified of their new responsibilities. During pregnancy, they had only to abandon themselves to their flesh; no initiative was demanded of them. Now in front of them is a person who has rights to them. Some women happily caress their babies while they are still in the hospital, still gay and carefree, but upon returning home, they start to regard them as burdens. Even nursing brings them no joy, and, on the contrary, they worry about ruining their breasts; they resent feeling their cracked breasts, their painful glands; the baby's mouth hurts them: he seems to be sucking their strength, life, and happiness from them. He inflicts a harsh servitude on them, and he is no longer part of his mother: he is like a tyrant; she feels hostility for this little individual who threatens her flesh, her freedom, her whole self. (680)

Beauvoir interpreted the diverse ways in which mothers experienced and responded to motherhood. In accordance with this, while some felt joy in their journey, others felt depression. This concern of Beauvoir revealed that motherhood could not be instinct. If it had been instinct, it would have been elaborated as a natural act and experienced uniformly by every woman. However, as Beauvoir expressed above, some women struggle with the pain of motherhood, feeling as if their joy and freedom is sucked by the needs of the child. Thus, it is an individual and dynamic experience since motherhood could not be regarded as universal and instinctive.

While Beauvoir contributed to the discussion of motherhood by touching the inner feelings and struggles of women, radical feminist Shulamith Firestone exceeded the discussion by asserting the idea that patriarchy largely persisted due to the concepts of motherhood and women's mothering. In her groundbreaking radical feminist text, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), the debates surrounding women's reproductive capabilities and their role in care-giving were central to the discourse. For Firestone, women were systematically excluded from cultural production to be exploited in the family. Women were taught to transmit their creative energy and passion solely to their children instead of scientific and/or artistic fields. Therefore, by capturing their cultural potential after birth, the lives of women, which have already been limited, were constrained

even more severely. She went further to uncover how the emotional labor of women, especially love, was historically diverted towards benefiting men and preventing women's intellectual production as follows:

The tired question "What were women doing while men created masterpieces?" deserves more than the obvious reply: Women were barred from culture, exploited in their role of mother. Or its reverse: Women had no need for paintings since they created children. Love is tied to culture in much deeper ways than that. Men were thinking, writing, and creating, because women were pouring their energy into those men; women are not creating culture because they are preoccupied with love. (126-127)

For Firestone, motherhood was not an empowering experience, unlike what essentialists suggested. She found no enjoyment or tranquility in women's ability to bear children. She defined pregnancy as barbaric and the body's temporal deformation for the benefit of the species (198). In the view of her, at best, childbearing was necessary and tolerable; but there was nothing pleasurable about it (199). It caused women to fall behind in cultural and social spheres.

Furthermore, Firestone debated that childbirth physically hurt women; however, religion manipulatively glorified and also legitimized this pain (198). In consequence of this pain, women were accepted as brave, and their bravery was determined by the number of children (sons) they could bear (199). Thus, it can be claimed that motherhood could not be a natural and private experience. Rather than an individual state, motherhood was a social, political, and religious expectation that surrounded women.

Firestone highlighted the significance of reproduction technology to liberate women from the bondage of childbearing and patriarchal family structure (Halbert 116). She stated that there had not been enough research upon advancing the opportunities of women's reproduction technology. As she claimed, cultural codes and sexual bias restricted progress. Moreover, despite some studies, advancements in this area did not fully address women's needs (197). She attempted to demonstrate the relevant issue by noting that artificial placenta was used in order to save premature babies. However, the same technical feasibility was not utilized to transfer a young embryo. Funding was directed towards studies on transferring of almost fully developed baby (198). She mentioned the fear about new reproductive methods, which stemmed from the belief that unnatural methods posed a danger to both women's

bodies and the family structure. Under this belief system, there was no improvement in women's reproductive technologies. Their bodies sustained to be vessel of traditional reproduction technology and could not attain the benefits of modern innovations. In addition, she disputed that men dominated preventing pregnancy technologies. Birth control pills were developed for female gender and the effects were tested over them. Having contraceptive for only females was a problem since this hold women responsible for preventing pregnancy alone and they had to suffer from its side effects. Firestone put forward that reproductive and contraceptive technologies had to change and also the lying power based on male supremacy and natural family understanding must be transformed into new value systems (197).

Both Beauvoir and Firestone critically handled the idealized and medicalized images of the female body and motherhood that had been naturalized and promoted since the Victorian era. Once glorified as a biological and moral obligation, maternity was problematized as a patriarchal construct with emerge of second-wave feminists. Those focused on women's own experiences, exposing how the maternal body had been regulated, depoliticized, and limited. Thus, they brought the concept of motherhood into a central site of feminist critique.

To conclude, in second-wave feminism, there were two opposite views on motherhood. While essentialist women's groups, such as Helen Andelin and Phyllis Schlafly, accepted motherhood as a source of empowerment and a means of fulfillment for women, radical feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone accepted motherhood as an oppressive construct that caused women to lose their power and independence. However, it would not be accurate to generalize the arguments of second-wave feminists under the ideas of radicals. There were some groups, including feminist psychoanalysts Karen Horney, Luise Eichenbaum, Susie Orbach, and Nancy J. Chodorow, who advocated that the nature of motherhood did not fully correspond to oppression. They had the belief that there was a need to reorganize the perception of motherhood and eradicate patriarchal ideologies. This psychological turn in feminism (Fine and Gordon 159) created a crucial place in the field under the name of feminist psychoanalysis. The next section of the thesis will be dedicated specifically to feminist psychoanalysts and their perspective on motherhood.

2.3. Feminist Psychoanalytical Approach to the Experience of Motherhood

2.3.1. The Definition and the Development of Feminist Psychoanalysis

In the 1960s, second-wave feminists criticized traditional Freudian psychoanalytic theory. They argued that the Freudian view included a male perspective and elaborated on women based on men's perceptions. This allowed feminists to develop a counter theory that challenged the male-centered assumptions. Consequently, feminist psychoanalysis emerged.

Rooted in the second-wave feminist movement, feminist psychoanalysis similarly seeks to indicate the oppression and discrimination women faced. It examines the effects of patriarchal structures on the individual and society. Feminist psychoanalysts believe that psychoanalysis could serve as a natural ally in personal and social change since it is the discipline arguing personal details that previously remained unspoken or unheard (Eichenbaum and Orbach, *Relational Psychoanalysis* 17, 18). Therefore, feminist psychoanalysis with a special emphasis on motherhood is a perfect tool for uncovering power dynamics and raising awareness of individuals.

Feminist psychoanalysis questions, reinterprets, and sometimes totally rejects and suggests alternative discourses in psychoanalysis. It is a distinct voice in terms of shedding light on women's experiences by isolating them from the patriarchal male gaze and not women to be felt as hysterics observed in a laboratory setting during the therapy session. Feminist psychoanalysts mainly challenge gender norms, and they pay attention to the unique issues of women in social life. They handle mother-child relationship, female subjectivity, gendered biases, and the impact of culture over identities.

To extend this therapeutic framework more, feminist psychoanalysis explores women's individual psyche, the mechanisms of their unconscious mind, and their relational difficulties, while facilitating the desired and mutually agreed-upon changes. As Eichenbaum and Orbach state in their *Understanding Women* (1984) that feminist psychoanalysis investigates how femininity is constructed within patriarchal culture. It examines early mother-daughter relationships shaped women's emotional development and contributes to their sense of self in a male-dominated world. It aims to teach women to love themselves, to

be loved by other women, and to receive support in growing and becoming independent despite the patriarchal setting (107).

In addition, feminist psychoanalysis wants to understand the process through which one becomes a woman. In this context, it examines and questions the social, cultural, and political constructions along the path to becoming a woman. This psychoanalytic perspective supports that the formation of one's personality is closely connected to their sense of gender identity, which is constructed by the present cultural environment (Eichenbaum and Orbach, *Understanding Women* 25). It can be argued that the perspective of feminist psychoanalysis challenges and uproots the deep-seated vines of Freudian biological determinism. Clearly, feminist psychoanalytic therapy opposes traditional psychoanalytic models that often stigmatize femininity and foster gender problems. It probes into individuals' social experience, with a focus on infancy and childhood, highlighting the profound influence of culture in shaping the needs, desires, and psyche of individuals (25).

In this field of psychoanalysis, figures such as Karen Horney, Juliet Mitchell, Susie Orbach, Luise Eichenbaum, Nancy Chodorow, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Jessica Benjamin are particularly significant. Although Horney in her studies did not directly mention feminist psychoanalysis, her specific focus on women's psychology is categorized under feminist psychoanalysis by subsequent psychoanalysts (O'Connell 85). Her contribution to discussing the Oedipus Complex from a social and cultural view and coining the concept of "womb envy" were important steps for the further studies of feminist psychoanalysis. Moreover, Juliet Mitchell published *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* in 1974, and she introduced Freud as an enemy. Her work was detected as the first study that used the notions of psychoanalysis and feminism together. Furthermore, Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum directly used the term feminist psychoanalysis in their *Understanding Women* in 1984 and significantly expanded the scope by discussing women's internal conflicts. Besides, Nancy Chodorow applied sociology and psychoanalysis and occupied a place in feminist psychoanalysis through her discussion about asymmetric mothering practices. Lastly, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Jessica Benjamin contributed feminist psychoanalysis through their unique conceptualizations of body, language, subjectivity, and relational dynamics. Especially the contributions of Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, writing on the body as a member of *écriture féminine*, paved the way for maternal studies. Thanks to thinking and writing on bodies, the need for searching on motherhood was recognized.

2.3.2. Karen Horney and Questioning the Envy

Feminist psychoanalysis emerged as a product of second-wave feminism, and one of its most significant contributors was Karen Horney (1885-1952). Unlike a classical Freudian psychoanalysis, which developed under the shadow of 19th-century intellectual climate that positioned wifehood and motherhood as women's exact identities, Horney rejected restrictive narratives employed on women through her feminist revisions. She challenged biological determinism and instead stressed the cultural and social forces shaping personality. Revisiting Freud's concepts, such as the Oedipus complex and penis envy from a cultural angle and claiming men's womb envy, Horney put forward that the psychological distresses experienced by girls was a result of patriarchal structures and men's unconscious resentment of women's reproductive capabilities. In these groundbreaking insights, she argued that the classic model of psychoanalysis erased the power and value of motherhood in the minds of women and attempted to capture this creative potential. She highlighted that women should have reclaimed motherhood as a site of power and generative force. This chapter will focus on Karen Horney's feminist psychoanalysis and present how different her psychoanalysis approached to the female body, femininity, and the experience of motherhood compared to the classical Freudian model.

To begin with, Karen Horney meticulously studied Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis in the early years of her career, and she was regarded as a neo-Freudian psychologist as an early-career psychiatrist. In order to sustain and develop the vision of psychoanalysis, Horney even established The American Institute for Psychoanalysis in 1941, and she was the Dean of this foundation until her death. However, Karen Horney did not rigidly adhere to Freud throughout her career. It would seem likely to have a commitment since Horney was analyzed by Karl Abraham, considered one of Freud's ablest pupils, and later by Hanns Sachs, whose manner towards Freud was almost a worshipful one (Kelman 11). In fact, instead of remaining loyal to Freud and his classical psychoanalysis, Horney criticized the Freudian point of view and introduced her groundbreaking feminist perspective to the field, mainly through her *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937), *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (1939), *Our Inner Conflicts* (1945), *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization* (1950), and *Feminine Psychology* (1967), a posthumously published collection of her talks and various articles from the 1920s and 1930s. Especially when Horney departed from Germany to join the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis in

1932, Horney markedly distanced herself from Freud's ideas and published some studies harshly criticizing Freud.

To elaborate on her criticism, Horney regarded that Freud had biased arguments on women. She took her criticism from the structure of Freud's psychoanalytic framework, which argued that sexuality was the driving force behind personality development and human actions. He categorized the structure, organization, and development of personality under three headings namely as:

1. Topographical model of the mind
2. Structure of personality
3. Psychosexual stages of development

Freud underlined the crucial place of sexuality in personality development, specifically under the title of psychosexual stages. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), he put forth that personality developed through a series of stages (respectively, oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital), each centered around diverse erogenous zones. Freud argued that individuals began to explore their sexual desires during the genital stage when libido reemerged after the latent period, and this stage was the onset of adult sexuality (207). According to him, each psychosexual stage was crucial, as mental and behavioral abnormalities could arise in adulthood if a period was not completed successfully (211). Consequently, in Freud's theory, personality was formed depending on how the psychosexual stages were navigated.

Unlike Freud, Karen Horney's theory of personality development placed less emphasis on biological factors. Horney emphasized the pivotal role of culture and cultural factors in personality development and human behavior. She believed that cultural influences were largely responsible for shaping personality and attributing meanings to individuals. As she stated in her *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950), "[w]hat are regarded as personal assets vary to some degree with the culture in which we live" (88). Based on this, she proposed that even the meaning of sex emerged through culture. For this reason, it was not possible to discuss universal personality traits occurring as a result of biological stages, as all traits were developed within the context of a specific cultural environment.

Believing that culture had an influence over shaping individuals, Karen Horney argued that environmental impacts took a role in the formation of neurosis as well. Clearly, neuroses

could not be considered apart from their connection with cultural ties. In line with this, Horney defined the neurotic individual as a stepchild of the culture. She gave place this definition in her *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937) as follows:

It seems that the person who is likely to become neurotic is one who has experienced the culturally determined difficulties in an accentuated form, mostly through the medium of childhood experiences, and who has consequently been unable to solve them, or has solved them only at great cost to his personality. We might call him *a stepchild of our culture*. (290, emphasis added)

According to Freud, neurosis occurred as a consequence of unresolved unconscious conflicts. When the struggles among id, ego, and superego were not successfully managed, the individual projected neurotic symptoms such as anxiety, depression, phobias, or other types of psychological distress. Horney acknowledged the existence of inner drives and external pressures on the individual. However, she did not find those as the only reasons for neurosis. Contrary to Freud, Horney pointed out the importance of the individual's social and cultural environment. She came up with the idea that the individual's connection with society and society's impact on the individual provided important insight into the psychological development and problems of the person. By foregrounding the role of culture and its impacts upon individuals, she challenged the classical Freudian psychoanalysis and subtly questioned the concepts of femininity, the female body, and motherhood within a socio-cultural critical framework.

To continue presenting another significant point that set Horney apart from Freud, Karen Horney brought a different thesis to the theory of the Oedipus Complex, which enabled to see her socio-cultural critical approach. Introduced by Sigmund Freud, this theory indicated that a young child had an unconscious sexual interest in the opposite-sex parent and there was a rivalry between the child and the same-sex one. He coined this theory first in his letters by sharing his own experience: "I have found [...] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood" (Masson 272). Freud admitted the Oedipus Complex as an important stage in the child's psychosexual development and associated it with the formation of the child's personality, morality, and gender identity. While boys experienced castration anxiety, girls felt penis envy during this period (Freud, *Some Psychological Cons.* 187). Yet, Karen Horney remarked that the Oedipus Complex was an issue related to unequal gender roles in society (*Feminine Psychology* 77-78). In her view,

environmental and social factors, including family dynamics and parental relationships, played a crucial role in children's attitudes and behavior. She believed that little girls wanted to establish closeness with their fathers, for they were aware of males' advantages in society. That is, by being interested in the opposite-sex parent, the little girls aimed to achieve the same level of superiority as their parent, rather than seeking a sexual connection with their fathers.

Karen Horney considered Freud's claim of penis envy in the Oedipus Complex as faulty and disparaging to women. Horney did not deny the existence of penis envy altogether² but defended that just like the theory of the Oedipus Complex, penis envy was also a result of men's privileges and their greater freedom in society (*Feminine Psychology* 40, 41). In line with this, men's more prestigious positions, sexist attitudes towards women, and lower wages of the female sex could cause women to feel a symbolic yearning and inferiority (*Feminine Psychology* 62). In this context, it was not possible to speak of the existence of envy toward an organ, yet it was envy toward the social, political, and economic advantages of a certain sex.

Taking her critique of Freud's penis envy theory a step further, Horney made a bold assertion in her psychoanalysis by arguing that girls did not feel the envy Freud described, but boys, in fact, experience "womb envy." Based on her clinical practices, Horney asserted that a little girl could reveal her intense curiosity for her brother's genitalia and at the same time behave as a little woman. Similarly, a boy could wish to have breasts and a child just as his mother had, while simultaneously exhibiting boyish aggressiveness as a natural manifestation of him (*Feminine Psychology* 151). Karen Horney put forward that men had unconscious feelings of inability and inadequacy in creating and nurturing life directly. They found their role in creating a small and insignificant life. Therefore, they envied women for their capability of pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and motherhood (*Feminine Psychology* 60). In this context, the term womb envy referred to men's potential jealousy of women's biological ability to bear children.

It was discussed that men's experience of womb envy resulted in their dominance in social, cultural, and intellectual domains. Regarding this form of dominance, feminist

² Horney offered that girls envied boys' penis since the penis was an admirable tool for urination, enabling boys urethral eroticism and also the freedom of exhibitionism and approved masturbation. However, she did not elaborate girls' envy within a neurotic problem. She suggested that girls' penis envy was like a child's envy for another's sweets or toys (*Feminine Psychology* 40, 77).

philosopher and academician Eva Feder Kittay stated that when young boys learned they could not give birth –they expected they were appropriate for this ability–, they devalued women and tried to compromise their motherhood desires with their prized manhood (106). Boys, who comprehended that they did not have the power of birth, were in search of a new place where they could assert dominance and mastery. The cultural area emerged as the ideal domain for them to achieve this wish. They surrounded cultural space and attempted to be productive in the field (*Feminine Psych.* 77). In other words, as Erich Fromm put it: “Since he cannot produce with a womb, he must produce in another fashion; he produces with his mouth, his word, his thought” (233). Echoing this idea, psychoanalyst Edith Jacobson also noted that men compensated for their production wishes by occupying themselves with cultural activities. Depending on his clinical observations, he expressed that this group of men was frequently creative persons, and their creative works were the principal sublimation toward feminine reproduction (142). Thus, it became evident that the cultural sphere emerged as an arena where men could compensate for their inability to give birth by reclaiming creative power in social and intellectual domains.

Adopting a critical lens, Horney found men inhabiting the cultural sphere as a response to womb envy extremely dangerous. She articulated that men created their masculine rules within state, religion, science, and art. Controlling the outside world, they praised their position and underestimated women due to their pregnancy and childbirth, and finally, men dismissed women from the cultural sphere. According to Horney, this was men’s defensive maneuver toward the menace of women’s invasion of their domain (*Feminine Psychology* 115). As a result, it is possible to interpret men’s dominance in the cultural area not only as a means of fulfilling their desire for production but also as an occupation strategy against women’s biological and creative power.

Horney argued that it was possible for girls to experience a sense of superiority due to their capacity for giving birth. According to her, the ability to become a mother gave girls a biological superiority. Yet, this capacity was often obscured by the cultural devaluation of motherhood (*Feminine Psychology* 77). Thus, girls failed to notice their reproductive capacity as strength and instead came to perceive themselves as disadvantaged ones.

In brief, Karen Horney revolutionized the way in psychoanalysis by reversing Freud’s biology-based and male-centered theories. She offered a perspective that underscored the impact of culture and environment on personality development. She paid attention to gender

issues intertwined with culture and argued that patriarchal culture decreased the value of femininity and motherhood. Horney supported women's ability to give birth from an empowering perspective and found men's attempt to decrease the meanings of femininity and motherhood as a defensive reaction rooted in their own psychological insecurity and envy. By shifting the focal point from biological determinism to social dynamics, Horney disrupted Freudian psychoanalysis and paved the way for feminist psychoanalysis, which would be elaborated under the title of matricentric feminism later.

In this thesis, the perspective of Horney will be particularly useful in the readings of Elisa Albert's *After Birth* (2015) and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018), where the protagonists struggle to define motherhood. Horney's arguments will illuminate the characters' conflicts and cultural scripts that allow a matricentric feminist reading focusing motherhood as a site of ambivalence, resistance, and potential empowerment.

2.3.3. Luise Eichenbaum & Susie Orbach and Understanding Women's Psychology

After Karen Horney's critical studies of Freudian psychoanalysis, which introduced new ways of thinking about femininity and motherhood, Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach translated Horney's theoretical insight into a therapeutic practice. Offering their therapy approach as feminist, Eichenbaum and Orbach brought feminist politics directly to the consulting room. As a result of Eichenbaum and Orbach's studies, the special bond between women and the gendered aspects of parenting received more attention in psychoanalysis.

Eichenbaum and Orbach made a significant step in bringing women's companionship into the focus of psychoanalytic inquiry. In *Between Women* (1977), they suggested that female culture had the ability to embrace women throughout life. Irrespective of its longevity and circumstances, the companionship of two women was likely the most special bond. Within their friendships, women listened, supported, comforted, and advised each other. They boosted each other's confidence and helped one another to overcome the emotional, physical, and environmental difficulties of daily life (20). Being together with women's groups and seeing the same issues in another woman's life gave them a profound sense of solidarity, collective consciousness, and mutual strength. Therefore, it was no surprise that Eichenbaum

and Orbach wrote, “a woman without a best friend [was] a very lonely woman” (*Between Women* 21).

On the other hand, they presented that women also had urges of hurt, anger, competition, betrayal, and jealousy for each other, especially in their one-to-one relationship (*Between Women* 22, 23). According to them, envious feelings could arise from concerns about whether one had a sexual relationship or whether one worked in a satisfying and well-paying job (*Between Women* 25). Eichenbaum and Orbach, in *What Do Women Want?* (1983), interpreted these emotional dynamics between women as the new realities arising in women’s relationships (148). Women were now more liberated sexually and were taking part in working life. According to this, as women gained more confidence outside of home, their competitive and envious feelings towards each other raised (*What Do Women Want?* 148-149).

Building upon this discussion, Eichenbaum and Orbach further argued that women historically had repressed each other when one had dared to engage in sexual experience. Especially, the postwar generation had been raised with a more uniform view of sex. In their words, “[t]here were ‘good’ women and there were ‘loose’ women” (*What Do Women Want* 90). This mindset reinforced the expectation that women had to be unsullied bodies (*What Do Women Want* 90). In light of this belief, mothers instilled their values in their daughters, teaching them to remain sexually inexperienced before marriage (*What Do Women Want* 91). Obviously, mothers’ repression caused the fall apart of the mother-daughter bond and the perpetuation of the patriarchal standards of the time.

They also studied the critical role of motherhood, offering insights into its profound influence on women’s lives and identities. They first emphasized that having a child was a milestone for a couple, embodying connection, transformation, growth, intimacy, and development (*What Do Women Want* 117). Considering women’s emotions, a child brought feelings of self-esteem, confidence, accomplishment, and self-respect. After having a child, women started to find themselves as authoritative ones and no longer requested validation from their partners (*What Do Women Want* 118). However, it was also reported that some women felt themselves more vulnerable when they got pregnant. They were aware of the great responsibilities that the new world growing within them would bring. At this stage, women needed someone else’s help and depended more on their partners. This situation allowed men to feel enjoyed and rewarded, as they found a way to be a part of nurturing

process. Yet, it was also possible for men to feel frightened, controlled, or trapped because of their partners' increased dependency and the neediness of the coming child. This could lead men to be outside of caring and nurturing experience (*What Do Women Want* 118). In light of these results, it became evident that the presence of a child was able to change the inner feelings and attitudes of couples. While parenthood could bring about profound joys, it could also bring about some challenges.

In their focus, there was the point of motherhood's socially inscribed nature. They defended that the concept of motherhood extended the family unit and included societal perceptions that shaped women's roles, self-perception, and responsibilities. For instance, a woman who got married but did not have a child first started to notice the growing interest and concerns of others about her childlessness, and then, she could feel herself somewhat strange (*Understanding Women* 6). She could be received as neurotic, unnatural, immature, and selfish (Letherby 17). On the other hand, when she became a mother, she was demanded to take care of a baby's every physical and emotional need. It was considered that mothers had to make major adjustments for their children and put their needs secondary (Lee 99, 100). Eichenbaum and Orbach suggested that, due to the imbalance of giving and receiving in motherhood, it was likely that women would experience feelings of neediness (*Understanding Women* 9). The necessity of another parent who could take the responsibility of childcare became apparent. However, fathers were often not seen to take an active role in childcare. Society often failed to hold them equally responsible. There was little pressure and expectation for fathers in the responsibilities of raising children.

Their studies illuminated what happened in fathers' world when a child was born. According to them, fathers could feel excluded during the early stages of the mother-infant bond and experience jealousy because their relationship with their wives transformed—they were now mothers and not as available as they had been before (1983 63). Additionally, they argued that fathers could consciously or unconsciously struggle with uncertainty about their role in parenting. What reinforced this insecurity was the mothers' anxiety about fathers' mothering capability. Mothers unintentionally could cut fathers' confidence, which could result in their withdrawal from childcare responsibilities (*Understanding Women* 63). Besides, Eichenbaum and Orbach claimed that babies' sex was important for fathers' emotional response. To broaden this point, fathers felt themselves at a loss and agitated when they had a daughter. They did not have any idea about how to relate to her and what exactly she needed. However, they trusted themselves in building a relationship when they had a boy

(*Understanding Women* 63). Therefore, the gender of the child had an influence for fathers to engage themselves with the child and childcare process.

It was argued that mothers also developed some emotional responses based on babies' sex; however, their reaction towards babies did not influence the childcare process; rather, it primarily affected children's psychological development. To discuss this topic, according to them, when a mother looked at her infant son, she viewed him as someone whose life would take a very different path, separated from her, and filled with unique opportunities and possibilities. For the mother, the son belonged to *outside* (*Understanding Women* 41). Yet, when she looked at her daughter, she confronted the reflections of her own experiences—her childhood memories and the entire journey of her as a woman. She knew that this little girl would also follow in her mother's footsteps (*Understanding Women* 41, 42). Indeed, a girl grew up learning societal dictates, submission, and underestimating her own autonomy and potential like her mother. That is, the mother prepared her daughter for second-class citizenship during her mothering, just as her own mother had done in the past (*Understanding Women* 37).

It is so crucial point that by suggesting this, Eichenbaum and Orbach did not blame mothers. They believed that mothers who suppressed their emotional needs were unable to respond their daughter in a giving manner (*Between Women* 49). They delivered that the conflict between mothers and daughters was a patriarchal issue. Regarding this, mothers were taught to restrict their needs and desire in order to prioritize the needs of others, particularly men. They were lack of emotional nurturance and the knowledge of individualism. Therefore, they had feelings of insecurity along with uncertainty. Such women naturally struggled to raise daughters who were confident and assertive. They could respond only by annoyance and withdrawal, which left daughters confused and rejected (*Between Women* 49). As a consequence, mothers unintentionally passed on their own insecurities to their daughter. This cycle perpetuated the patriarchal norms that delimited women's self-expression and emotional growth and also it prevented the formation of an empowering bond between mothers and daughters.

Overall, just as Karen Horney conceptualized motherhood as a social and cultural construct, Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach similarly theorized it. They argued that the concept of motherhood made visible the societal roles women were expected to embody. They suggested that being a mother gave women an identity and self-esteem as well as saved

them to be recognized as lunatic, unnatural, selfish, and immature. Indeed, the mother identity for women carried the meaning of being accepted and valued in society (Stets and Lee 134). Motherhood enabled women authority, especially against their partners. From this point of view, Eichenbaum and Orbach found motherhood as an empowering subject. However, they also highlighted that it was illusionary and in fact motherhood had crushing responsibilities to women's lives, which left women feeling tired, powerless, and overwhelmed since they were accepted as the primary parent. Drawing on Eichenbaum and Orbach's ideas, Townsend found that these challenging responsibilities and the nature of motherhood itself were contributing factors and in some cases, they were even a risk factor for mothers' decision to suicide (4). In light of this result, it became even more evident that there was a need to liberate motherhood from rigid social dictates and emphasize the necessity of equal parenting.

This thesis strengthens the emphasis that motherhood is not only a biological matter but a social and psychological construct by referring to Eichenbaum and Orbach's insights. It will operate their arguments as a conceptual lens to enlighten how society impacts the protagonists' sense of motherhood. Also, the thesis will refer to their approaches to female companionship in order to understand the empowering and disruptive dynamics within female characters.

2.3.4. Nancy J. Chodorow and Reproducing the Concept of Motherhood

Until this point in the discussion, it has been understood that motherhood is not merely a biological experience, but also a cultural and social construct. From a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, Karen Horney asserted that men unconsciously envied women's capacity to give birth, which in turn led them to discredit women's motherhood. Expanding this perspective, Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach analyzed the maternal practices of women shaped by unconscious and social forces and they discussed mothers' patriarchal attitudes toward their children. In Nancy J. Chodorow's account, these narrations were further expanded. She proposed that mothers raised their daughters as second-class citizens, and girls who were raised under this attitude tended to reproduce the patriarchal model of motherhood. This section will first outline Chodorow's approach to psychoanalysis as feminist. Presenting her feminist psychoanalytic framework will help frame the theoretical intentions of the thesis. It will then focus on her arguments about motherhood.

Considered one of the trailblazing feminist psychoanalysts, Nancy Chodorow, in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989), approached psychoanalysis as a tool offering a developmental history of separateness, differentiation, and the awareness of gender difference in early childhood (101). In her *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), she considered the most important contribution of psychoanalysis to be a demonstration of the existence and functioning of unconscious processes. She evaluated that the clinical material of psychoanalysis was free associations. According to this, during the transference of thoughts and feelings, psychoanalysis brought unconscious mental structures to the conscious level, allowing individuals to reconnect the original experiences and sensations that shaped them, rather than unconsciously repeating and sustaining maladaptive patterns (59). On the other hand, Chodorow addressed that the classical model of psychoanalysis served traditional doctrines, reinforced gender biases, and also it was often antagonistic towards women in its early stages. Chodorow directed her critiques towards Freud in this regard. She wrote in her *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989) that:

Freud was indeed sexist. He wrote basically from a male norm and ignored women. He repeated cultural ideology in a context where it can be mistaken for scientific findings. He talks, for instance, about women's lesser sense of justice, of their jealousy, shame, vanity, and lack of contribution to civilization as if these were clinical findings. [...] He finds it perfectly natural that girls would find their own genitals inferior, talks of these girls' "genital deficiency" and the "fact [note, not the fantasy] of her being castrated. [...] He is quite cavalier about it and does not care much. (172, the information within the brackets was present in the original text)

Chodorow elaborated on Freud's psychoanalytic perspective as the demonstration of the internal mechanisms of gender's socio-cultural organization (177). To extend, she stated that heterosexuality was assumed as standard in Freud's studies. In his suggestions, this sexual orientation decided the family division of labor, and it composed society's gendered structure and normative expectations. She believed that this view was psychoanalysis' masculine superiority, which determined the roles and behaviors expected of individuals. However, according to Chodorow, psychoanalysis should have responded only to individuals' needs without any domination.

Asserting that the classical model of psychoanalysis was quite gender-based and degrading womankind, Nancy Chodorow objected to this male-centered framework and

sustained her arguments by basing them on feminist psychoanalysis. First and foremost, Chodorow was aware that feminism should have been enriched by psychoanalysis, as in this way, feminism could further deepen its insight and strengthen its claims. Likewise, psychoanalysis itself needed to be nourished by a feminist perspective in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of gender development (4). At this point, it is crucial to explore the theoretical contribution of Nancy Chodorow to psychoanalytic feminism.

Nancy Chodorow, in her *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*, argues that for Freudian psychoanalytic theorists, including Melanie Klein, Sandor Ferenczi, Harry Stack Sullivan, Karl Abraham, and Margaret Mahler, object relations, which focused on the relationship established with a parent or caregiver and analyzed how this relationship shaped an individual's personality and subsequent relationships, were at the center of development. Chodorow believed in the lack of Freudian object relationship theory since it ignored the impact of gender. She claimed that being parented mainly by a woman led boys and girls to have differently constructed selves and distant experiences as to gender and their gender identities. According to this, girls who were parented by a woman develop bisexual and pre-Oedipal inner self-object relations. They cultivated a sense of self that was deeply linked to their mothers. This psychic structure of self caused to *the reproduction of mothering*. To clarify, when girls were mothered by women, girls grew up by knowing that they would also be mothering in their future lives (184). While girls experienced this, boys experienced the development of a self, which was achieved through the denial of relation and connection. They achieved autonomy as they exceeded the mother-child symbiosis and adopted the role of fathers (Gardiner 352). Chodorow suggested that men who were mothered by women separated themselves from their mothers for their basic masculine selves. Consequently, they developed a more reactive and defensive nature, and this created the problems of misogyny, fear of women and femininity, and mother blame. These problems occurred in reaction to powerfully experienced object relations with mothers. Given that men wanted to make a sharp difference between themselves and their mothers, they broke the emotional bond and adopted an aggressive attitude. Chodorow considered that this dynamic of men finally brought about male hegemony in culture and society and resulted in systematic tensions and struggles in heterosexual relationships (184-185). In this regard, object relations played an important role in understanding the construction of masculinity and femininity and the formulation of individuals' understanding of self.

To discuss the approach of feminist psychoanalysts, they regarded the relations of self-other and the development of a self at the core of the development process. Those elaborated mothers as *subjects*, contrary to the classic psychoanalytic approach to regard them as objects whose parts were appreciated in regard to the needs and fantasies of a child (184, 185). Object-relations feminists focused more on the inner object world, integrations, unconscious defenses and struggles, and unconscious construction of self (186). This approach closely aligned with that of Lacanian feminists, as both perspectives emphasized the unconscious processes shaping subjectivity and identity.

To extend, Lacanian feminists believed that the unconscious, which was constructed linguistically, was the essence of psychic life, mainly appeared in individuals' sexual understanding (188, 189). According to the Freudian perspective, the phallus included symbolic meanings for each sex. Clearly, while its existence represented power, its absence signified lack. Lacanian feminists argued that the classic Freudian approach reinforced the sense of women's otherness and their lack of self. They added that because of this view, women were objectified and alienated.

Moreover, in the context of psychoanalytic feminism, Nancy Chodorow provided profound insights into the psychological and social aspects of motherhood, through her investigation of how mothering³ was attributed as the role and responsibility solely to women and also how women themselves internalized and reproduced maternal roles across generations. In her *The Reproduction of Mothering*, she sought to answer why women mothered:

Being a mother [...] is not only bearing a child—it is being a person who socializes and nurtures. It is being a primary parent or caretaker. So we can ask, why are mothers women? Why is the person who routinely does all those activities that go into parenting not a man? (11)

She touched upon the sociological theorists who regarded women's mothering as biologically, socially, and psychologically natural and functional (13). In their views, the reason behind women mother was fundamentally their biology. Since women could bear children, this view approved that the primary parent of children was a woman (16). In addition, this perspective supported that women had an instinct for mothering. Such claims emphasized the importance

³ Chodorow discussed the term mothering without reference to sex differences. She used this notion as similar to childcare, but with a much deeper criticism of the societal structures and expectations.

of becoming a mother for women and argued that not parenting harmed women, and it was not only women who got harmed but also infants (16-17).

Chodorow responded to those claims by suggesting that it was necessary to dissociate childcare from childbearing at first. According to her, the activity of nurturing should have been accepted as a social concept. This concept referred to the act of caring for a child regardless of a biological bond (16). Also, she rejected the idea that mothering was instinct. In her view, those arguments stemmed from early human societies that had established sexual division of labor (17). She criticized that this division of labor was still perpetuated in modern times and offered that women were now mothers, as they had always been (14). She confirmed that women were the first parents in hunter-gatherer culture due to environmental conditions. However, it was quite manipulative to offer that mothering was the instinct of women. Women mothered because they were raised in light of this psychological capacity (Hockmeyer 24). Daughters developed nurturing personalities; yet, sons did not, and this view asserted that sex differences in personality determined who raised children (Jackson 215).

To Chodorow, the actual reason behind women's mothering was now social and cultural doctrines. She defended that women grew up hearing the roles expected from them. Society and its institutions taught femininity and motherhood; little girls were introduced to adult life and its duties at an early age; they were discouraged from succeeding in school; and they were fully exposed to pronatalist stereotypes. Thereupon, girls conformed to socially constructed notions of femininity. They identified themselves with their mothers and internalized motherhood as a fundamental aspect (31). This somewhat regressive mechanism of identification let unconscious interaction patterns to be passed down from generation to generation (Westkott 17). Chodorow introduced the idea that this was the reproduction of motherhood across generations.

Furthermore, Chodorow also criticized some theorists who argued that mothers had to form strong bonds with their infants to ensure infants' physical and mental well-being. In the view of Chodorow, infants depended on parental care until they developed adaptive abilities; however, they did not specifically need mothers; rather, they expected consistent and non-arbitrary care from a stable caregiver. During the earliest period of life, infants were cognitively narcissistic; they mainly expected their needs to be met. They had a slight awareness of the connection of subject and object relation. They only differentiated the quality of experience. In other words, infants were able to separate only the pleasurable one

and the painful one during this stage (58, 61). This point of Chodorow challenged traditional theories that presented mothers' role as irreplaceable in the early development of infants. It suggested that steady and responsive care-giving—regardless of the caregiver's identity—was the crucial agent in providing a secure foundation for infants' physical and psychological development.

This thesis will approach the characters of *After Birth* and *Motherhood* in light of feminist psychoanalysis. In order to understand the basis of the theoretical lens that will be applied to the character, Chodorow psychoanalysis has been detailed.

It has been seen that in her psychoanalysis, the most important question was why women were mothers. She did not consider women's biological capacity as a sufficient reason for mothering. In her view, the reason for women's mothering was cultural and social. She criticized theories that presented women's position as essential for infants' development. She rejected this claim and put forward that the crucial thing for infants was whether their needs were met properly and constantly or not. In short, Nancy Chodorow advocated for rethinking and redefining the deep-rooted gender asymmetries in mothering.

2.4. A Theory of Mother's Own: Matricentric Feminism

2.4.1. Andrea O'Reilly and the Definition & the Development of Matricentric Feminism

First coined by Andrea O'Reilly in 2016 in her *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*, matricentric feminism emerged as a scholarly effort to center the matters of mothers, mothering practices, mother-daughter relationships, and motherhood itself. It involves the process of combining one's feminism with one's parenting (Green 83). As an output of feminist psychoanalysis, it offers a theoretical ground in which the complexities, contradictions, and transformative and empowerment potential of mothering can be explored. While mainstream feminist discourse has often elaborated motherhood either in a biological framework or in a patriarchal setting, matricentric feminism views motherhood as a central feminist concern in its own right.

At the heart of Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric feminism, there is the conviction that motherhood must be evaluated as a central feminist issue. She articulated clearly in her article

titled *Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers* as, “[m]atricentric feminism seeks to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers’ needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women’s empowerment” (14). To express her inspiration and enthusiasm for creating a theory for motherhood, she suggested that Virginia Woolf’s call for women to have a room of their own ignited a personal passion within her and “to do feminism as a mother and do mothering as a feminist” (*Matric. Feminism: Theory, Act., and Pract.* 1). She believed that “mothers need a feminism of their own” (*Matric. Feminism: Theory, Act., and Pract.* 1) since “mothers are oppressed under patriarchy as women and as mothers. Consequently, mothers need a matricentric mode of feminism organized from and for their particular identity and work as mothers” (*Matric. Feminism: Theory, Act., and Pract.* 2).

Andrea O’Reilly’s conceptualization of matricentric feminism was made possible through not only feminist psychoanalysts but also thinkers such as Adrienne Rich, and Sara Ruddick, who went one step further and produced influential studies on motherhood. In the next sections, their thoughts that paved the way for the formation of the field will be presented respectively.

2.4.2. Adrienne Rich and Motherhood as an Institution and Experience

Adrienne Rich advanced the discussion of motherhood by asserting a significant distinction between the institution and the experience of motherhood. She deeply explored ideological and structural mechanisms that regulate motherhood itself. Her work *Of Woman Born* (1976) signaled an important shift in feminist thought, which identified motherhood in patriarchal control. She detected how motherhood was shaped, restricted, and politicized within patriarchal structures.

To begin with, in *Of Woman Born*, Rich elaborated on the notion of motherhood as an *experience*, referring to motherhood as natural and personal. She regarded that mothers were complex; it was not possible to reduce them into a single definition and a fixed role. Accordingly, mothers were shaped not only by love and intimacy but also by anger, hatred, struggle, and a huge responsibility. Rich shared her reflections of her own motherhood experience as follows:

My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings toward these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. (39)

Rich bravely presented both the joy and the gloom of motherhood. She did not introduce the experience of motherhood as a purely idealized and perfect journey and also did not reduce it into a burden. Instead, she uncovered contradictions in it—the interplay between love and annoyance, affection and exhaustion, fondness for self-freedom and warm dependence on children. Her portrayal illuminated the complexity of care-giving. By articulating these factors, Rich reversed traditional motherhood narration and offered an honest portrait. In *Mother Outlaws* (2004), O'Reilly contended that mothers had to distinct themselves from the image of the good mother and become bad ones or mother outlaws in order to experience mothering (26). According to her, women-centered child-rearing would empower women. Thus, motherhood could be accepted as empowerment when it was experienced in a natural and personal way.

On the other hand, Rich discussed the notion of motherhood also as an *institution*. She asserted that motherhood as an institution was the operation of male control. It included social and cultural dictates of patriarchy and dominated women's lives (32). Rich discussed that institutional motherhood idealized mothers, whereas at the same time exploiting them (17). In this respect, the institution, such as hospitals, school, law, and policy, restrained women from making independent decisions; it excluded men from parenting; it separated private and public life dangerously; it fastened human choices and potentials into certain positions and roles (33). Furthermore, institutional motherhood demanded of women maternal instinct, selflessness, and a sincere connection to others; however, women's intelligence, self-awareness, and the existence of an independent self were undesirable (59). It overloaded the feelings of guilt and frustration under the pressure of normative idealization (Driver 118). Thus, institutional motherhood made women circulated limited agencies. While women undertook the caregiver role and embodied devoted mother identities, men did not have parenting responsibilities and found themselves as secondary figures in child-rearing. Clearly, institutional motherhood restricted women's freedom and marginalized men's involvement in

child-rearing. It fostered patriarchal understanding, limiting both genders' autonomy and defining rigid societal rules.

To conclude, Adrienne Rich made an important contribution to feminist thought by critically analyzing the concept of motherhood both as an experience and an institution. She objected to the sanctified, mythologized, idealized, and tabooed mentality of motherhood. She argued that the female body was medicalized and became a means of institution. She believed that institutional motherhood was a means of controlling women (78); it attributed certain definitions and roles to women, and as a result of this, women were confined within rigid constraints, which made control easier. However, Rich suggested that the concept of motherhood should be a personal experience. In her view, motherhood had multiple versions, each empowering and encompassing a range of emotions and complex realities. Rich's distinction enabled feminists to figure out that motherhood was not naturally or inevitably oppressive; rather, if it was freed from its shackles, motherhood could be seen as a site of social change and empowerment.

2.4.3. Sara Ruddick and Motherly Thinking

Building upon Adrienne Rich's distinction between the institution and the experience of motherhood, Sara Ruddick came up with a new philosophical perspective to maternal theory by conceptualizing mothering as a practice and a way of thinking. Rich challenged motherhood within a patriarchal structure whereas Ruddick redefined its epistemological and moral dimensions. In her seminal work *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989), Ruddick meticulously delved into mothering as a specific kind of reasoning. She explored how the maternal thinking perspective could promote social justice and peace building. With Ruddick, feminist discourse underwent a dramatic shift from elaborating motherhood in oppressive structures to recognizing motherhood as knowledge, resistance, and political agency. This intellectual shift also had a significant role in creating the theoretical foundation of matricentric feminism.

To extend Ruddick's arguments, she suggested that mothering was not only biological, but practical. She framed mothering as a practice, which aligned with specific tasks and attitudes. As Nancy Chodorow regarded mothering as a practice without implying a gender

difference, Ruddick likewise engaged with this concept by emphasizing its broader social implications while also rejecting traditional assumptions. According to Ruddick, a mother was the one who responded to children's needs and made the work of this response a part of his or her life (xii). Therefore, anyone who met the demands of children was carrying out the practice of mothering, and this person could be accepted as a mother.

In addition, Ruddick stressed the significance of treating birth-giving and mothering as distinct practices. She explicitly opposed the essentialist view that biological reproduction made women mothers. She argued that birth givers could transfer to others the responsibility of maternal caring; thus, they would not perform the practice of mothering. In such cases, it would not be appropriate to define them as mothers. Conversely, non-biological individuals could undertake maternal responsibilities by caring for and raising children. Ruddick found that their capacity to perform mothering made them recognizable as mothers. She suggested that their role was not less important than that of biological mothers, but rather equally valid and crucial (xii).

Furthermore, Ruddick coined the term "*maternal thinking*" to conceptualize a transformative understanding of motherhood. She indicated that the process of mothering was intrinsically tied to a way of thinking, knowing, reasoning, and relating to the world (xi). In Ruddick's a specific form of thinking, there were social practices of mothering and motherhood (Luff and Kanyal 1749). In line with this, Andrea O'Reilly exemplified how maternal thinking operated from an emotional side in her *Matricentric Feminism* (2016) as follows:

Mothers, in short, are the ones who do the maternal thinking: the remembering, worrying, planning, anticipating, orchestrating, arranging, and coordinating of and for the household. It is mothers who remember to buy the milk, plan the birthday party, and worry that the daughter's recent loss of appetite may be indicative of anorexia.
(27)

Ruddick stated that maternal thinking included an emotional experience; however, it also constituted an intellectual discipline. According to this statement, maternal work was the manner of mothers' thinking. It was an intellectual capacity, judgments, metaphysical attitudes, and values that mothers developed (24). This kind of thinking was shaped in light of social context and lived experiences. Ruddick refused language's philosophic fantasy (14). According to her, observation from social life was inseparable from theory. In this context,

theory depended on the community of participants and their shared actions (15). Namely, in Ruddick's maternal thinking, the central focus was on mothers' way of forming a distinctive, experience-based epistemology.

Lastly, Ruddick approached maternal thinking as a perspective that illuminated both the destructiveness of wars and the requirements of peace (136). She elaborated that becoming a militarist meant adopting a distinctive way of thinking that aligned with masculinity (145). Against this masculine view, Ruddick advocated that maternal thinking and practices were crucial resources for improving peace policies (12). In light of this, thinking itself was often the activity of solitary (14). By valuing life, rejecting violence, and highlighting maternal practices, maternal thinkers could become agents of resistance to war and patriarchal domination. In this sense, maternal thinking was not only a private practice but a potential ground for collective awareness and political action.

In brief, Sara Ruddick argued the practice of mothering as a specific way of thinking engaged in care, preservation, and responsibility. She did not include biological boundaries into the practice of mothering, but political aspects. Her mothering perspective redefined the concept of motherhood through knowledge and non-violent policies. According to her, it was possible to build peace through maternal thinking.

The second chapter of the thesis explores historical, social, cultural, political, and psychological philosophies of motherhood from the Victorian era to the modern day. It has mapped the intellectual evolution of feminist thought upon motherhood from the foundational insights of feminism to the rise of matricentric feminism. This intellectual lineage presents not only a criticism of traditional representations of motherhood, but also a generative perspective for exploring how maternal subjectivity is objected and recreated. In line with this rich theoretical framework, this thesis invites the reader to consider how contemporary fiction engages and stands against dominant narratives of motherhood and mothering, enabling new possibilities for feminist thought and maternal agency.

3. MOTHERHOOD LEADING TO DEPRESSION: ELISA ALBERT'S *AFTER BIRTH* (2015)

3.1. Elisa Albert and Her Literary Background

Elisa Albert, born in 1978 in Los Angeles, California, U.S., is a contemporary American essayist, novelist, and short story writer. Her works engage with themes such as femininity, mental and physical health, mortality, female rage, motherhood, family dynamics, and Jewish culture. In particular, Judaism appears in her texts both as a cultural motif and as a philosophical lens. Albert, who does not want to reduce her literature to a certain title, gets inspiration from her social, cultural, and religious identities. She said in her interview with Stefanie Pervos that she was raised in a Reform/Conservative house where her parents were quite secular, but at some point, they became more religious, especially her mother. Albert took her education in Hebrew school and declared that “I was pretty steeped in Conservative Jewish identity growing up” (Pervos). Expressing that she struggles to reconcile her identity with her intellectual social identity now, she does not want to be specifically categorized under the title of a Jewish writer. She thinks such a label functions as a reductive framework, which potentially undermines and marginalizes the deeper literary and philosophical concerns embedded in her works.

Albert took her first steps into writing during her years at Harvard-Westlake School, where she contributed to a humor column titled *Phat Albert*. When she became a guest on The Jewish Lens YouTube channel, she expressed her column's story by articulating that ‘Ph’ was a slang term during her adolescence, which was used to describe something cool or impressive. She added that there was a popular cartoon called *Fat Albert* in the 1970s and I brought these two references together, repurposed them, and humorously turned the joke on myself instead of letting others make fun of me. She identified this ironic stance as the foundation of her current writing tone (02:33-03:35). Following high school, Albert studied Creative Writing at Brandeis University, where she met novelist Stephen McCauley, visiting writer Jayne Anne Phillips, and poet Mary Campbell. Then, she sustained her enthusiasm for writing by enrolling in Columbia University, where she received her M.F.A. in Creative

Writing. She remarked that her first fictional piece, *How This Night is Different* (2006), grew out of her M.F.A. thesis (04:00-04:31). After completing her graduate studies, Albert held teaching positions in Creative Writing at several institutions, including Columbia University's School of the Arts, The College of Saint Rose, Bennington College, Texas State University, the University of Maine, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown.

Albert's writing was shaped by various influences, most notably feminist theory, Jewish identity, and authors from the nineteenth-century realists to contemporary feminist voices, such as Lev Tolstoy, Philip Roth, Susan Sontag, Lorrie Moore, Stacey Richter, and Alicia Erian. Especially, Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) and Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) prompted Albert to think more upon illness and paved the way for her to write on this theme (The Mindful Bard). Being inspired by these names intensely yet creating also a unique self-conscious voice, Albert adopts a style that reflects unfiltered raw realities of life. Her prose often uses first-person narration with biting irony and humor. This choice makes the work more reliable and authentically self-reflective. Declaring that she likes stories that are not being told and wants deeper, more complicated, and more authentic lives for her characters, she aims to explore the unspoken dark experiences of human nature (*Famous Writing Routines*; Rasheed and Khaleel 1598). In her writings, imperfection is not a sign of weakness but is an act of resistance and self-revelation.

Albert cultivates a literary career that spans fiction, criticism, and personal essays. She has written for various esteemed magazines, such as *The New York Times*, *The Literary Review*, *Washington Square*, and *The Guardian*. In addition, she has contributed to several anthologies—among them, *Body Outlaws* (2004), *The Modern Jewish Girl's Guide to Guilt* (2005), *Click: When We Knew We Were Feminists* (2010), *Sugar in My Bowl* (2011), *How to Spell Chanukkah* (2012), and *Goodbye to All That: Writers on Loving and Leaving New York* (2013). Her own published works include the short story collection *How This Night is Different* (2006), the novels *The Book of Dahlia* (2008), *After Birth* (2015), and *Human Blues* (2022), as well as the essay collection *The Snarling Girl and Other Essays* (2024). Albert's literary voice garnered early acclaim. She was nominated for the Pushcart Prize, was a finalist for both the Sami Rohr Prize and the Paterson Fiction Prize, and was the recipient of the Moment Magazine and Literary Death Match awards. She is currently giving lectures on creative writing at Columbia University and hosting online seminars on a series of topics, such as anti-Semitism, feminist literary tradition, female rage, bodily autonomy, and motherhood. Closely following and addressing the conflicts between Israel and Palestine,

Albert also announced that she had started working on a new novel dealing with the theme of war (*The Jewish Lens* 33:31).

3.2. *After Birth*: A Contextual Background

Elisa Albert's *After Birth* (2015) is set in a quiet yet crime-ridden neighborhood in upstate New York and is narrated by the protagonist Ari—a distinctly contemporary figure who struggles with the physical, psychological, and social challenges following childbirth. The novel captures Ari's postpartum depression and displays an unfiltered story of motherhood. Ari shares her motherhood journey with her sharp, raw, witty, ironic, and furious voice. She foregrounds her sense of isolation, rage, and longing for female solidarity. Her tone destroys romanticized maternity and brings light into the complexities of motherhood.

To frame the plot of the novel, *After Birth* centers on Ari, who is a new mother struggling with postpartum depression, isolation, and questioning solidarity. Ari lives with her husband and newborn in upstate New York. She spends her days lonely and desperate. Although a year has passed since birth, Ari still neither finds herself grounded in her new role nor connects to the community around her. Her husband, Paul, who works as an academician, fails to understand Ari's emotional struggles and remains largely absent both as a partner and as a caregiver. Therefore, Ari feels lonely and trapped day by day. She tries to alleviate her loneliness by attending mother groups that come together and share their experiences in mothering. However, she cannot find what she is looking for in them. She finds their concerns superficial and disconnected from her own sense of motherhood. Ari can reach a sense of understanding and connection with her new neighbor, Mina Morris, who is an old member of a music group, a poet, and a new mother. In the novel, it is seen that their companionship makes both of them rooted and empowered. Both are able to tolerate the difficulties of motherhood when they are together. However, Albert does not closely tie these two women to each other. Mina Morris moves from the neighborhood, and Ari has to overcome her struggles on her own again. Compared to her lonely period before Mina Morris, Ari has a much stronger psychology presently; however, it is not possible to say that she completely escapes from depression, anxiety, and the exhaustion of motherhood. At the end of the novel, Ari is presented as a woman who has gained solidarity and most importantly accepted all failures,

losses, and traumas in motherhood journey. By fictionalizing the story from this point of view, Albert creates a story that avoids idealization and instead portrays a realistic depiction of motherhood.

To look the narrative structure of the novel, Albert divides this novel into three chapters, each titled with a cold-season month—November, December, and January. The choice of months evokes the protagonist's emotional descent. It shows Ari's fall, coldness and, withdrawal from both the external and internal worlds. As the coldness of the season drives people into their small houses, Ari's experiences of motherhood also confine her to narrow physical and emotional spaces. In addition, Albert frequently applies the technique of flashback in the novel. The narrator, Ari, bends the plot and it makes the structure of the novel multi-layered. By often going back to the past, readers gain a broader understanding of Ari's story and are able to interpret her present more accurately. Furthermore, the tone of the novel is highly honest, sarcastic, and furious. The narrative is marked by use of profanity, colloquial expressions, and repetitions, all of which operate to uncover Ari's inner turmoil. The novel employs a straightforward language and an unadorned style, which aligns with contemporary feminist literature, mostly emphasizing the message of the work rather than its structure.

After Birth is the first novel in which Albert directly deals with maternal subjectivity. However, her engagement with motherhood as a central theme broadens this piece. In her later novel, *Human Blues* (2022), she similarly writes on the tensions between maternal desire and bodily autonomy—where the issues of infertility and reproductive technologies appear as a part of different context. While writing about maternity, Albert adds autobiographical traces, and the works present the author's literary interest in motherhood from social, political, psychological, and religious perspectives.

Despite Albert's thematic and structural richness, her works have received limited academic attention until now. When research has been done specifically on *After Birth*, it has been detected that the existing academic literature tends to focus on specific dimensions of Ari's motherhood experiences. For instance, Williams in her article titled “‘Effective Disembodiment:’ Female Patienthood and Reproductive Health in Elisa Albert's *After Birth* and Pamela Erens's *Eleven Hours*” has argued that the character's body is medicalized (Williams). G.S in her article titled “Resonance of Motherhood in Literature: A Critical Analysis” has touched upon the character's struggles in mothering practices (G.S). Rasheed and Khaleel in their article titled “‘I am not just a mother, I am myself’: A Study of Elisa

Albert's *After Birth* in the Scope of Postpartum Depression Theory" have shed light on the character's healing process as well as on the symptoms and effects of postpartum depression (Rasheed and Khaleel). Thomas in her PhD thesis titled "*Contemporary Narratives of Motherhood: Temporality, Reparation and Subjectivity*" has analyzed mother-child and mother-daughter relations and also explored the mother's body (Thomas). Lastly, Williamson in her PhD thesis "'An Exquisite Suffering': Representations of Maternal Ambivalence in 21st Century Texts about Motherhood" has discussed a maternal narrative that displays maternal ambivalence of the character who both embodies and resists dominant ideologies of motherhood (Williamson). It is understood that although there is a growing academic interest in Albert's illustration of motherhood, a holistic reading that closely analyzes the dynamics of the work remains absent. *After Birth* still offers fertile ground for further research.

This thesis adopts a matricentric feminist lens to examine Albert's motherhood narration. Through this reading choice, the thesis will enable a broader discussion of *After Birth* by extending the concept of motherhood in relation to social, political, religious, and gendered power dynamics. The thesis will focus on the protagonist's motherhood experience within a thematic framework by elaborating the key elements of fiction to discover how the novel constructs and conveys maternal subjectivity. By bringing these elements under certain thematic titles, the thesis aims to present *After Birth* as a contemporary matricentric fiction that narrates the concept of motherhood not as a naturalized ideal, but as a socially, politically, and psychologically charged experience.

3.3. Matricentric Feminist Reading of *After Birth*

3.3.1. Caesarean Section and Clinical Language

"The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity.

It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen.

It is usual in my life, and the lives of others."

Sylvia Plath, *Three Women* (1962)

In Elisa Albert's *After Birth*, the practice of caesarean section occupies an important place. It influences the protagonist's psychological well-being and the sense of motherhood

and mothering practices. Ari believes that her caesarean section damaged her baby, Walker. She is haunted by the memory of the surgery and repeatedly blames herself for failing to give birth *naturally*. Clearly, the character is a woman who internalizes the cultural ideal of vaginal birth as the only legitimate one. Due to the cultural preconceptions, she feels inadequate and powerless from the very beginning rather than empowered. Therefore, the C-section becomes a reason for a deep sense of loss, shame, and trauma for her, which marks the foundation of her postpartum depression.

In the novel, Ari's descriptions of her birth experience are frequently marked by a language of violence, trauma, separation, and isolation. She does not offer her caesarean as a meaningful embodied experience but as a failure. She says: "*Surgery day*, I point out, because I have trouble calling it birth. Anniversary of the great failure." (15). In her view, the type of birth does not constitute a true experience; rather it is an event that separates her and Walker from each other:

He was born on a Tuesday after a long day of labor, but I did not "give" birth to him. He was not "given" birth. The great privilege. Instead, the knife. He was "late," they said. Late, late for a purely invented date. So he got evicted, and everything went south, and me too complacent to challenge, too stupid to question. Why so stupid? Why so complacent? They *cut* me in half, pulled the baby from my numb, gaping, cauterized center. (16, emphasis added)

The first-person narrator of the novel, Ari, reveals her passivity and ignorance in the face of medical authority. The character is like a product of science. Her body is silent, obedient, isolated, and emotionally disconnected from the experience of birth. What should have been a moment of connection and transformation turns into a site of trauma.

As stated before, Ari internalizes the cesarean section as a personal failure, as if she should have managed or controlled the birthing process but failed to do so, and this led directly to the surgical intervention. The character mercilessly places the burden on her shoulders and has harsh and unrealistic expectations:

I had been cut in half for no good reason, and no number of dissolving stitches was ever going to make me whole again. [...] I had to be vigilant. Omnipresent. I had fallen victim to a commonplace violence, and now I had this baby and there was too

much at stake. I had failed him out of the gate. Deprived him the vital, epic journey through the birth canal, my poor doped-up kitten. Poor helpless boy. (93)

Ari perceives the cesarean section as a rupture in her sense of self. From her perspective, she has lost her wholeness and it seems irrecoverable now. In her new role, she mainly aspires to become an all-capable mother, one who can overcome every struggle. By saying “omnipresent,” she reveals this desire. Clearly, Ari wants to be a God-like figure in childcare; however, this desire is not a feasible or sustainable model for motherhood. There is no doubt that it oppresses the character day by day.

Believing that the C-section deprived her of experiencing motherhood as a form of empowerment, Ari strongly holds the belief that the surgery damaged Walker. She explicitly reveals her feelings as follows: “He wouldn’t sleep. I felt convinced that the surgery had damaged him, ruined his chances for a happy way in the world” (49). The character interprets the baby’s distress and restlessness as a result of her caesarean. She blames herself and thinks that she failed to protect and nurture her baby in the way he deserved. Kelly M. Van Busum discusses that the C-section reveals feelings of fear, exhaustion, shame, guilt, and disappointment in women. In her research, she interviewed the C-section experienced mothers who had wanted an experience of birth with limited medical intervention. One of the interviewees shared her experience as follows:

[I felt] major failure. I failed in bringing him into the world the right way. In my mind, what the right way is. Just sad. I was sad about it. Kind of like your self-worth goes out the window. I had this really great pregnancy and I envisioned having him a certain way and then that one decision that I made, in my mind, messed it all up. Pretty much, I’m a failure for that. I still feel that way. (42)

In Busum’s research, it has been revealed that many mothers, as exemplified by one of them above, blame themselves for having a caesarean section. They believe that they could not manage the birth, caused something wrong, and therefore, their birth turned into caesarean from vaginal birth. However, as Kim Thomas of the Birth Trauma Association stated, “things go wrong in childbirth all the time, and it’s never the woman’s fault. It’s just that birth is inherently risky” (Lovell). Therefore, it is not fair to blame Ari for her caesarean; nor should she feel herself guilty because she has a C-section. Instead, her internalized shame, guilt, and depression should be regarded as an outcome of culture. What truly needs to be done is to

examine the structures in culture that instill guilt, a sense of inadequacy, and self-blame in women.

Ari deeply admires her new neighbor, the single mother Mina Morris. As Ari thinks of Mina, whose choice is a midwife-assisted home birth without medical interventions, she finds herself drawing comparisons that solidify her feelings of inadequacy. Ari regards Mina Morris as a true embodiment of motherhood. She believes that Mina's unmedicalized bodily birth experience makes her *a natural mother* while her caesarean makes her somehow less maternal and an insignificant product of medical institution. Ari's glorification of Mina becomes clear in the following statements: "Of course a midwife. No one's going to cut Mina Morris open like a fucking lab-rat piece of trash; she's not the type. She's gonna do it like for real do it. [...] Mina, warrior queen. [...] She actually *had* her baby" (36, 72). It is possible to see how Ari defines herself through the descriptions that she makes of Mina. Accordingly, she is far away from being a powerful mother figure; she is only a failed image.

In Ari's story, it is explicitly seen that the character regards birth as something that must be earned through naturalness by leaving no space for alternative medical interventions. She believes that a mother should be fully awake and witness the whole process in the delivery room. In other words, she expects herself to fully control every moment of birth, remain conscious, and feel the pain. She holds the belief that maternal authenticity depends on active bodily performance and emotional engagement. Yet, because of such ideas, she cannot freely experience birth through her natural senses. Instead of an individual experience, she carries patriarchal stereotypes that, as Adrienne Rich pointed out, tell women in labor that their suffering is purposive—that is the purpose of their existence; that the new life they bring is an exact value, and that their value depends on their children (162). This perspective causes Ari to be in a kind of competition, to undermine her sense of individuality, and ultimately to feel herself guilty, shameful, and less maternal. Her experience is best explained by Karen Horney's assertion that the primary obstacle preventing women from realizing their individuality and fully embracing their femininity is the dominance of male culture (1973 82, 83). In such an environment, Ari cannot fully realize or express her authentic selves. She is stuck in the rules of men and follows the path of masculine doctrines. The novel transmits the idea that through motherhood, the patriarchal system imposes its own set of rules, alienates women from their own experiences, and makes motherhood a journey that women cannot explore through their inner selves but through the shadow of male-dominated ideologies.

While Ari suffers from the oppressive and ambivalent weight of motherhood, the need for medical assistance becomes clear. However, medicine is not able to see and meet the needs of the character; rather it increases the character's distress. To illustrate, when Ari goes to the hospital for the baby's six-month checkup, she is exposed to a pediatric nurse's standardized routine questions:

At the baby's sixth-month checkup a pediatric nurse asked a series of robotic questions—*have you thought about harming yourself or the baby are there guns in your house has the baby's father ever threatened you are you depressed in any way*. I didn't say I imagined shooting myself twenty times a day. I didn't say I took strange, enormous comfort in these visions. I said *there are no guns in our house*. I said *um I guess a little depressed sort of yeah*. (23)

Albert presents the nurse's questions without using any punctuation marks. This reflects how breathlessly fast the questions flow in Ari's mind. The nurse does not truly engage with the character or make an effort to understand her. Ari is merely a mechanical task that needs to be completed quickly. The author here criticizes the fact that the current medical approach lacks practical and meaningful contact with mothers. Albert argues that medicine observes individuals within the theoretical frame; however, a human being is more than that; a human is the formation of complexities. Therefore, mothers who are approached only through theoretical knowledge of medicine remain as bodies whose needs are unmet, alienated, lonely, and helpless, and these consequences can be directly seen in the character herself.

Medicine emerges as a disciplinary apparatus that claims ownership over the birthing body, transforming it into a terrain of surveillance, submission, and control. It offers childbirth as a standardized medical procedure rather than an experience:

Birthing and care of newborn humans a specialty now, an area of expertise, hired out. Basic biological functions, ceded a generation or two or three ago and by now vanished as if the knowledge never existed in the first place. Like if breathing became specialized, or, no—like if shitting became specialized. Like if some corporation struck gold convincing us all that shitting is not necessary. (98)

In this passage, Albert employs satire to explore the absurdity of how modern medicine treats childbirth as an unnatural event by comparing birthing to basic biological functions. The passage, through Ari's voice, suggests that women have already known how to give birth;

however, it now largely holds a special field of medicine. Albert criticizes the structures of medicine in which women are made to feel incapable of performing their biological capacity and turns birthing into an unnatural process that needs a professional approach.

Looking at the stories of the other mother figures in the novel, it is possible to see that they also experience the same medical struggles. To expand, Mina Morris also suffers from the lack of care and attention. She decided to give birth at home in order to avoid the impersonality of institutional treatment; however, the character is disappointed when she does not receive the full care she expected to receive during and after birth from the midwife:

She still hasn't responded to Mina's original plea for help, hasn't so much as made an appointment for a postpartum checkup. *I can't believe I got an oblivious cunt of a home-birth midwife*, Mina says. *I was sure the whole idea of home-birth midwife canceled out the whole idea of oblivious cunt.* [...] *The midwife was driving up from Poughkeepsie, taking her sweet time.* [...] *The midwife came and went. I remember at one point watching her eat a sandwich in the kitchen, thinking what the fuck, lady?* (105, 111-112)

Mina's experience reveals that even alternatives to institutionalized medicine—like home birth—can reproduce the same systemic neglect and depersonalization. It also has its own industry and it prevents women from having a meaningful experience.

The author suggests that mothers' struggle with medicine has not been new but an ongoing matter for years. It is displayed that Ari's mother and grandmother also experienced medicine's industrial and mechanic tone. Ari's mother Janice says that: "*The doctor told me breastfeeding was 'for the natives,' [...] They had these pills you could take so you wouldn't make milk. The nurses were adamant about formula. I hardly saw you the first five days.*" (119). In addition, the grandmother undergoes harsh memories. She transmits the atmosphere of the delivery room as a site of violence, trauma, and passivity by using words such as strapping down, drugged, thrashing, crying, cutting instrument, separating, vomiting, shaking, and half conscious (159, 160). The grandmother does not have power and feels unworthy before specialists. She is quite passive and her body is under the gaze and control. The portrait of the character evokes not a moment of empowerment or life-giving, but rather one of forced submission, silencing, and rape.

The novel also explores the role and approach of medical staff in the delivery room. In the scene in which Ari's grandmother gives birth, the medical team is depicted as emotionally detached. They have a dehumanized voice:

Water, she tries to say, *water*. They ignore her. Are they angry with her? Has she done something wrong? [...] *Please*, she tries. *Oh please help me*. Now the doctor wields another shiny instrument, big impressive one, opens and closes. A kind of trap. Two masked nurses hold her down. They terrify her. (159-160)

There is a tough border between the grandmother and the medical staff. She is mercilessly under the gaze of medicine, whose cold approach alienates the character from the bodily experience of birth:

She can't see their faces. A third pushes on her belly as the doctor goes in with those steel jaws, and this is his favorite part [...] *Perfect!* says the doctor, holding it by its ankles. He smacks it so it shrieks and gasps and shakes, all purple. The doctor loves his job. Little lungs hard at work right away, yes, good, just what he likes to see. Ten fingers, ten toes. (159-160)

The doctor does not make any connection with the mother. She is like a machine that is operated by him. Her demands, needs, fears, and pain are not heard. The main purpose of him to conduct a successful delivery of a healthy baby—measured in numbers, “ten fingers, ten toes,” as if ticking off a list. Albert applies the same medical motifs in Ari's birth experiences as well. She mentions the atmosphere of the hospital and shares how Ari felt herself alienated in that setting:

Merciless hospital lights, curtain in front of my face. Effective disembodiment. Smell of burning flesh. Sewn back up again by a team of people I didn't know, none of whom bothered to look me in the eye, not even one of them, not even once. Severed from hip to hip, iced, brutalized, catheterized, tethered to a bed, the tiny bird's heartfelt shrieks as they carted him off somewhere hell itself. (16)

The passage given above, including rich images, evokes the brutal procedure of medicine. The images of merciless hospital lights (sensory image), the smell of burning flesh (olfactory image), and being an iced, brutalized, and catheterized one (tactile images) collectively display a scene of disembodiment in motherhood and medical violence. Through these dynamic details, the novel prepares a reasonable ground for mothers' emotional

fragmentation. These images also suggest that even though there is a generation gap between the grandmother and Ari, both women literally experience the same pain in the delivery room. It is proof that the language of the clinic has not changed over the years. Mothers still suffer from medicine's cold authority and birth is still not a natural experience for them.

The mothers of the novel experience a profound sense of loss, emotional disconnection, and disembodiment after childbirth. Albert strikingly illustrates the reason behind mothers's emotions as the clinic's cold approach to women's bodies. The clinic is a space where the mother characters feel themselves to be watched, controlled, and silenced. This medicalized environment operates a system in which mothers feel birth is a procedure managed and owned by others. The overwhelming existence of medical authority that Albert dealt with in the novel powerfully echoes Adrienne Rich's critique of modern obstetrics. Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, argues that birth is neither a drama nor a sudden crisis that needs to be managed by others, nor a disease to be operated on. She articulates that birth is a natural event that a mother has consciousness and control over her body. Therefore, she has a natural ability to sustain the process on her own. However, in modern medicine, the sense of abandonment, loneliness, and being depersonalized, powerless, and imprisoned are the collective memories of mothers. Rich defines this kind of birth as *alienated labor*, in which women are in the hands of male medical technology. This clearly reflects patriarchy's medicalization of birth and the marginalization of maternal knowledge (177, 180).

The portrayal of childbirth in *After Birth*, particularly through the lens of caesarean section and clinical language, reveals how medical discourse shapes and often alienates maternal experience and makes mothers feel ambivalent. The language of the clinic reflects the power dynamics inherent in the healthcare system, where mothers' voices and knowledge are marginalized. The setting, from sterile hospitals to the domestic sphere where home birth occurs, serves as a place where mothers are traumatized. In Albert's characterization, the mother characters cannot sense motherhood as a site of empowerment. They are ambivalent, tired, lonely, and lost under the pressure of male-dominated medical authority. The author demonstrates this through her figurative language and motifs. Her narrative problematizes the male dominance by exposing the coldness and detachment of authority in clinical practice. It highlights the need for a more holistic approach to maternity and invites the reader to question the medical authority over bodies.

3.3.2. Postpartum Depression, The Practice of Mothering, and the Role of A Mother

“The words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through.”

Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (1976)

Many women with postpartum depression struggle to express and manage their anger, often feeling guilty as they think they do not have the right to be angry. Sometimes that anger is directed toward the baby, which is the worst part of all for them (Blum 53). Elisa Albert offers a raw and unfiltered depiction of postpartum depression through the angry voice of Ari in *After Birth*. The author portrays the character as a woman who struggles to reconcile her individuality with the demands of her new role as a mother. Her relationship with her baby is marked by pain and distance. The character's depression causes her not to connect with her baby emotionally. Ari tries to mother Walker physically and emotionally; however, the practice of mothering increasingly puts a strain on her and triggers her postpartum depression. She needs the support of her partner, but Paul shows little engagement with the responsibilities of shared parenting. He frequently advises Ari to rest as a remedy; however, he never considers taking a meaningful role in parenting. His indifference and failure to undertake the responsibility of childcare is another reason for Ari's depression. The portrayal of postpartum depression and the male character's insistence on resting for his wife resonates with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), where the mother's mental distress is similarly tried to be solved through rest rather than genuine care and shared responsibility. Echoing Gilman's critique of patriarchal responses to women's mental health, Albert positions Ari's experience in a broader literary and cultural conversation in which the insufficiency of superficial remedies and the non-recognition of maternal pain are problematized.

The novel depicts Ari's postpartum depression not only through the character's direct statements but also through multiple layers of representations. Albert enriches the narrative of the distress by employing rich imagery and recurring motifs as well as metaphors. To extend, the novel's repeating illustration of empty domestic spaces and harsh weather conditions mirror Ari's inner turmoil. The departure of Ari's close friends from the city and the depiction of their empty and dark house are expressed by visual images. The statement, “[t]he parlor

curtains are open and the lights are off" (1), reflects the character's intense sense of loneliness and isolation from her social contacts. Since the bond she once had is lost, she is alone, isolated, and neglected now. Similarly, the depiction of the weather with coldness is the reflection of Ari's emotional stance. The novel displays this environmental element as: "Cold this week, and dark so early. Late afternoon and the light is dead. So it begins: months of early darkness and cold. November again, back around to another" (2). The days are monotonous; coldness and darkness do not disperse. This repetitive cycle reflects Ari's depressive state of mind: "It's clear that winter isn't going anywhere. We can't simply wait it out inside. We're getting antsy and there's supposedly some major storm coming tomorrow" (153). It is explicit that the outer world projects the inner distress of the character. As she feels herself becoming more isolated and detached from others, the harsh weather raises a sense of bleakness. Whenever the character suffers from postpartum depression, the novel intervenes with a cold and stormy weather image. These environmental backdrops metaphorically work to uncover her feelings of solitude, entrapment, and despair. The novel hence applies external imageries to underline the stagnation of the character in her postpartum process.

Preparing the reader for the character's postpartum depression through a metaphoric narration, the novel fully reveals the character's distress through Ari's monologues and acts of emotional separation. To illustrate, as a part of her postpartum withdrawal, Ari has difficulty in forming an emotional bond with her baby. For a while, she does not even mention the baby's name. When she talks about Walker, she refers to him with the "it" pronoun and calls him "the baby" or "Mr. Baby" (13). In addition, instead of kind, emotional, and compassionate language, Ari adopts an aggressive tone against him: "The baby toddles over, hides behind my legs. He's an awesome baby, a swell little guy. Still a baby, though, of which even the best are oppressive fascist bastard dictator narcissists" (13). By assigning hyperbolic and some politically charged words such as "oppressive," "fascist," "bastard," "dictator," and "narcissists," Ari displays her detachment from an affectionate maternal discourse.

Essentially, the character is neither regretful as she is a mother, nor does she feel real hatred towards her baby. Rather, the problem for her is the psychological weight of postpartum depression distorting the character's ability to shape affective ties and sustain intimacy. The psychological weight of motherhood is so heavy that the character cannot attach with the baby and feels alienation: "This child's mother needs to come and get him now, I said. Someone needs to come and get him. Everything hurts. I'm so tired. How's the weather out there, she wondered" (18). She refers to herself in the third person and thereby

linguistically distances herself from the maternal role. Her sudden turn to the weather, including the expectation that the harsh weather condition is over carries hope for the alleviation of her postpartum depression. Feeling alienated not only from the baby but also from herself and her surroundings, Ari finds herself in a state of emotional fragmentation:

I'm sorry. I just need. I don't know. Can I just hang out here for a little while? I don't mean to bother you guys. If you're busy. Because our house is ... I'm just kind of losing my mind? You know what I mean? Are you guys, like, super busy? (53)

Ari's claim that she feels like she is "losing her mind" is not just a figurative language of the author. It points out a realistic moment of the psychological state of the character, signaling the collapse of the self under the burden of motherhood.

Although Ari suffers from postpartum depression, the duties of caregiving still fall entirely on her. As Nancy Chodorow argues that women undertake the responsibility of mothering and they are the primary parents in a patriarchal society, Ari is likewise left with the full responsibility for the baby—feeding, holding, and soothing. In the parenting role, she is the only one who is interested in the baby's care. She tries to meet the baby's needs perfectly and particularly insists on feeding her baby in natural ways. In terms of this view, the character is in a dialogue with essentialist women figures. She objects to feed baby with formula, leave him away from herself, and share the responsibility of mothering with others: "Me and this one silent, dark-eyed woman the only ones breastfeeding; the others busy with chemistry experiments: powders, cold packs, bottles" (24). If she deviates from these strict principles, she feels guilt, shame, and a deep anxiety about whether she is truly a "good" mother. When she says "[w]ho knew motherhood could be a mostly material experience? We'd sit in Starbucks rooting around in pastel-camouflage diaper bags for chew toys and muslin wraps," (24) she reveals her motherhood understanding, which is full of care without rest and joy. The character is trapped between the tensions between society's expectations of a good mother and the exhausting realities of motherhood. Her strict adherence to these ideals shows how she internalizes the pressure of maternal standards.

The physical practices of mothering tire Ari. She reveals the chaotic and overwhelming nature of mothering through breastfeeding and sleep deprivation. Referring to herself as "[a] big old leaky funereal fountain" (49), Ari shows how her body has turned into a site of endless giving, exhaustion, which is marked by pain, and loss of autonomy. This

embodied mothering struggle is not limited only to her experience. She witnesses the pain of Mina Morris while breastfeeding and declares that:

Hurts just to look at Mina's tits, so swollen. She winces when the baby latches. This is the part no one talks about, the part that feels suspiciously like a secret. Sorry: a part. And secrets are by nature shameful. Pisses me off, watching her struggle and wince like that. (68)

Through Mina's experience, the novel brings to the forefront the challenges of mothering that are kept hidden to the forefront. Witnessing Mina's pain and evoking frustration, Ari makes a deeper critique against the idealization of motherhood. In addition, Ari's experience of sleep deprivation deepens the idea that mothering practices are demanding and often undermined in society's romanticized view of motherhood:

Why couldn't I just enjoy it? Why couldn't I be calm and at peace and fulfilled and engorged and certain and calm? Why did lack of sleep make me feel like I was going to die? And why then couldn't I simply hand the baby over to someone else and take a nap? And why, when he cried, when I had nursed and burped and hugged and kissed and changed and nursed and burped and changed again, when he kept crying, when the crying went on and he wouldn't sleep and the days unwound sunrise to sunset, when I hadn't eaten or changed clothes or bathed, when I had no one to talk to, no one to sit with, did I feel like putting him safely down in his crib and walking out into the park and sitting on a bench without my coat on until I died? Why so numb, so incapable, so enraged, so broken? (92-93)

The quote above highlights that the practices of mothering are endless cycle and the fulfillment of them is socially constructed as the sole responsibility of mothers. In line with this belief, Ari often blames herself, as she does not fit the image of society's idealized motherhood, which wants mothers always to be affectionate, awake, and tireless. She urges herself to fit into this idealization; however, by doing it, she only neglects herself.

Meeting Walker's physical needs properly, Ari also tries to boost her affective side in mothering. To fulfill the responsibilities and expectations associated with idealized motherhood as well as to prove her maternal commitment, Ari reads childcare books, seeks advice, and asks, "Who can say I'm not a good mother?" (14). She applies these books with the hope of mastering a sense of adequacy in caregiving; yet, she is quite aware that these

books do not properly see and address to the needs of mothers. She articulates her criticism by diminishing the value of childcare books as: “I keep them in an out-of-the-way drawer, like porn” (14). Through this statement, the novel underlines the fact that mothers need a special form of support that truly recognizes and responds to their realities. This need is what O’Reilly’s matricentric feminism aims to do, which is recognizing the concept of motherhood as a serious subject and prioritizing the needs of mothers on social, cultural, and political grounds from a feminist consciousness. It advocates that rather than a natural mothering trend, the actual need for mothers is a supportive space that acknowledges mothers’ struggles, respects their choices, and appreciates their experiences without idealization or judgment, which is the main need of Ari.

Taking the responsibility of mothering alone, Ari has to deal with the never-ending cycle of care without meaningful contribution from her partner, Paul. The novel portrays Paul as a physically powerful character. Ari describes him as: “Paul is your basically stoic, healthy, strictly uncomplaining non-Jew. He’s hard to ruffle. He’s never had a cold” (12). This portrayal highlights the character’s mental stability and physical resilience, which are excellent motifs implying the unbalanced nature of Ari’s and Paul’s relationship and parenthood. While Ari is surrounded by fatigue, Paul is not affected by the physical and emotional demands of parenting. As Chodorow, Eichenbaum, and Orbach criticize that men are related to the outside world and women are linked to domesticity, Paul is also defined outside of domestic life, in the university, gym, and in a group of friends. Ari acts out her resentment for this situation:

Paul was at office hours, late. Paul was always somewhere, doing something. Paul was still a part of the world. Paul was still in possession of his body, mind, spirit. It felt like he was avoiding me. I had begun to hate him a little because I wished badly to avoid myself, too. [...] Paul’s at the library, grading or something. Paul’s always somewhere, doing something. [...] But inevitably he’d have to go teach or go to the gym or something, and there was this way the sound of the door closing behind him would thud in my chest, leaving me alone with the baby, a dark dread panic rising. How *could* he? (52, 75, 94)

The frequent repetition of Paul’s physical and emotional absence illustrates how Ari is held responsible for the unending demands of childcare alone. When Paul is analyzed throughout the novel, it is hard to witness acts of parenting. He is fully engaged in the public sphere,

freely alternating his interests, joy, and his work obligations. The parenting dynamic of them shows that Ari takes up the responsibility of everyday acts of domestic life, whereas Paul normalizes the disconnection with his family: “SIX A.M. Walker’s howling. I get him, let Paul sleep in. Thank you, babe, he says from under the pillow” (123). The scene encapsulates the unequal division of labor and reinforces the idea that fathers’ paternal contribution is optional, and caregiving physically and symbolically belongs to mothers.

Though Paul does not have an effective role in parenting, society regards that Paul perfectly accomplishes his duties as a father. In the public perception, he is the image of an ideal father: “I get stopped in restaurants so people can tell me how adorable Paul is with the kid” (85). However, as discussed before, Paul’s role in parenting is quite small. Ari satirically transmits that society praises him but does not recognize that the actual labor of childcare is delivered by her: “I find myself elbowing him out of the way so I can have a turn wiping the kid’s ass once in a while. This is a pretty good problem to have, admittedly” (85). Ari humorously reveals that she is the one primarily responsible for childcare duties. Through her narration, the novel criticizes how patriarchal society flatters and allows fathers to gain extreme social credit even for their limited contributions while simultaneously normalizing and ignoring the caregiving labor of mothers.

Ari’s postpartum depression in *After Birth* is associated with the repetitive, exhausting, and often invisible and unappreciated labor of mothering as well as imbalanced parenthood. Through Ari’s satirical and angry voice, the novel dismantles motherhood’s cultural myths. It breaks the concept of idealized motherhood and destroys the figure of angelic mother, who is always devoted, affectionate, and docile. Regarding these points, *After Birth* situates postpartum depression within a social, cultural, and political context, focusing on the fact that maternal pain is not a private problem but a reality that needs holistic recognition, shared responsibility, and systemic change.

When a close reading of the text is conducted, it is seen that whenever Ari suffers from the exhausting and alienating effects of postpartum depression, the rhythm of the text flows toward Mina Morris. In that moment, the existing characters and conflicts are stopped, and Ari starts only to talk about Mina’s power and her companionship. It shows that Ari finds relief in Mina. When mothering becomes unbearable or isolating, Mina appears as a figure that Ari accesses for a sense of power, mutual understanding, and companionship.

Considering these points, the following chapter of the thesis will deepen the discussion about maternal isolation and argue the importance of female companionship.

3.3.3. Maternal Isolation and the Need for Female Companionship

“[E]ach woman is capable of truly bringing another into the world. This we must all do for each other.”

Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983)

Ari's loss of her mother while she was in seventh grade was an experience that affected her entire life. The existence of a mother, especially for a daughter, often signifies guidance, support, and empowerment; on the contrary, her absence evokes a profound sense of isolation (Onaylı and Baker 168; Edelman xxv). After losing her mother, Ari is excluded by her friends. They stop talking to her, and a subtle hierarchy among them is created: on one side, girls empowered by their mothers; on the other side, Ari as a child left alone with her father, who is unable to sense what a growing girl really needs. Sustaining the feelings of loneliness and vulnerability throughout her life, Ari needs her mother the most when she becomes a mother. She seeks companionship from those around her; however, none of them are able to understand or share the physical and emotional weight she carries. Thus, she remains lonely in the unfamiliar terrain of motherhood and experiences a deep maternal isolation. This solitude is gradually disrupted through the bond established with Mina. Through their shared experience, Ari finally finds connection and companionship. This chapter will discuss how Ari experiences maternal isolation and how female companionship helps her overcome it.

Having already experienced a traumatic birth and postpartum depression as well as facing the absence of a partner's support, Ari is devoid of maternal guidance and solidarity. The novel exposes Ari's need for help in mothering both symbolically and materially. To illustrate, she dreams of her late mother, Janice, whose presence in the dream implies Ari's unconscious longing for maternal support. The appearance of the mother as a ghost in the novel also highlights how Ari deeply craves the comfort and guidance that only a mother figure can provide. This yearning is explicit when Ari talks with Paul's mother on the phone:

“*I need help*, I told her. *I can’t do this*. [...] [S]how me how. Demonstrate so I might learn” (18). However, Paul’s mother fails to provide the necessary support, which increases Ari’s anxiety and urges her to seek help elsewhere. She calls her father and painfully says that, “*an extra pair of hands*, I begged, *we just need an extra pair of hands here*” (50). Yet, when he and Ari’s stepmother, Sheryl, arrive, their visit turns into another disappointment:

[H]e and Sheryl parked themselves in the living room, held the baby, took endless photos of themselves and each other holding the baby. [...] Sheryl lost herself in her device. The kettle was on for tea. The kettle began to scream. *A woman in a room has as many people to take care of as the number of people in that room*, Marianne once wrote. I underlined it. *Water’s boiling*, Sheryl noted, but didn’t move. (50, 51)

Ari’s experience exemplifies the painful disruption between the deceptive celebration of motherhood and the actual conditions of mothering. As McConville shares in her observations, women receive congratulations when they become mothers; however, they are not backed up and are left largely unsupported when it comes to the actual, ongoing labor of mothering (1). The character faces this reality in the very early period of her motherhood experience. Expecting her isolation to be alleviated and to receive physical and emotional support from others, Ari is condemned to a profound loneliness in the labor of motherhood. She is burdened not only with the harsh responsibilities of mothering but also with the passive adults who occupy her space without offering assistance. Hence, even though Ari is surrounded by many people, she cannot prevent herself from feeling overwhelmed, desperate, and isolated. Since those around her fail to understand her struggles and offer genuine support in sharing the responsibility of caregiving, the character is led to maternal isolation.

Unable to find support from her family members, Ari tries to find a solution in her maternal isolation by joining mothers’ groups following the advice of her doctor. Spending time with two different mother groups, she firstly attends a group of mothers approaching motherhood as a performative and consumer-oriented experience. These mothers often distance themselves from the physical and emotional realities of birth and caregiving and treat birth as something to be managed and controlled, rather than a transformative experience. When Ari asks them whether they feel good about their “birth experience,” they start to ridicule her: “They examined me crossly. One giggled. *Birth Experience*, she said. *Sounds like a ride at Disney*” (25). It shows that these mothers are disconnected from the natural and emotional aspects of childbirth. Their perspectives contrast with Ari’s own view, which

approaches motherhood from a holistic point of view and values the emotional and physical aspects of childbirth.

Ari perceives the distinction between herself and the mother group upon recognizing that those mothers are caught up by neoliberal discourses of maternity. To define this mother group shortly, they are within the framework of consumer culture and the marketing of motherhood, and they are purely ignorant of their bodies and bodily experiences. To illustrate, one mother recounts that she was given a muscle relaxant by mistake during the C-section, and this mistake nearly caused her death (24). Despite this terrifying experience, the mother does not complain about systemic medical neglect. Instead, she says: “[W]e got a free room out of it and they were suuuuper nice ‘cause Dave said they were worried we might sue” (24-25). The novel shares another mother’s memory that she was sent home two days after surgery, passed out in septic shock, and while they took her to the emergency room, they had to leave the baby with a neighbor whom they barely knew (25). This mother could not receive proper postpartum care or an appropriate discharge policy. Although she is traumatized, she does not question the systemic failures that endanger her life. A different mother regards themselves lucky since they avoided the physical consequences of vaginal birth, remarking, *“I’m glad we just went with the C, [...] I hear those things really mess up your vag”* (25). Considering their memories together, it is understood that neoliberal logic teaches these mothers that birth should be under the control of medicine rather than a natural and personal process. Adopting this belief in their birth experiences, they do not complain about the fatal mistakes of medicine and are grateful for compensations or conveniences offered in return. As a result, although they share collective traumatic birth experiences, they lack the critical awareness to frame them as systemic problems. Ari, who also has a traumatic birth experience, seeks connection within this mother group; however, she cannot establish the sense of solidarity she hopes for and feels isolated.

Trying her chance in another mother group, Ari once again becomes frustrated. While the previous mother group were explicitly the followers of neoliberal understanding of mothering, the present one is also an adherent of neoliberal ideology; however, they mask themselves behind illusionary feminist ideas under the guise of individual choice and empowerment. Ari criticizes these mothers for approaching mothering practices as individual choices; however, in essence, neoliberal consumer society shapes and limits such choices. Therefore, what is presented as a matter of personal preference is, in fact, the product of the neoliberal system. She ironically remarks that, “Yes, ladies. Congratulations: you have

choices. [...] How noble of you to plug your kid with some processed milk-derivative shit marketed by the same people who brought the world Oreos” (27). She continues with an even sharper irony: “[H]ow very feminist of you, yes, *every woman* makes her choices, absolutely, what glorious freedom we enjoy. Way to stick it to the man. How empowered you are, subverting a basic function of your body. May I shake your hand? You show that body of yours who’s boss!” (27, emphasis added). By saying “every woman makes her choices,” Ari exposes what Angela McRobbie identifies as a *conservative mode of feminism*, in which young women are encouraged to accept themselves as the subjects of modern states and cultures but forget others who are less fortunate (27). In line with this, the second mother group see themselves as empowered women but remains blind to the structural inequalities. They do not have the feminist consciousness that would allow them both to problematize their own negative birth experiences and to acknowledge the struggles of women who do not have the same privileges.

Ari believes that it is not possible to reach solidarity without leaving and destroying the tools of patriarchy. Referring to Audre Lorde’s talk titled “*The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*”⁴ (1979), the character says to the second mother group that, “What shipshape shiny master’s tools you’ve got there. How’s the dismantling of the master’s house working out?”(27). The novel attacks so-called feminist groups for reproducing patriarchy’s oppressive structures through consumerist and hierarchical practices, rather than problematizing and annihilating them. Inspiring the novel with her argument, Lorde insists that using the patriarchy’s instruments can never create transformation for women who perceive these structures as their fundamental source of stability. She warns that institutional structures do not liberate women but menace them:

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support. (112)

By being in dialogue with Lorde, the novel criticizes the second mother group in terms of their adherence to patriarchy. Their clinging to it for a sense of safety and legitimacy disrupts the expected bond between mothers and leads them to maternal isolation. Although isolation is a personal matter, Ari’s experiences and claims demonstrate that it is more than a personal

⁴ “The Personal and the Political Panel,” Second Sex Conference, New York, September 29, 1979.

problem; it is political. As Lorde suggests, “[s]ee whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices” (113).

The character is especially furious with women since they do not support her in her mothering journey despite their knowledge of how demanding it is. Feeling quite lonely, Ari shares her resentment by saying: “*Because they didn’t prepare me. Because they didn’t help me. Because they let me do this alone. [...] How could they let me fall down this rabbit hole? They knew what was going to happen*” (130). The novel underlines mothers’ need for female companionship. The character is deprived of collective mothering and consequently experiences motherhood as one of profound isolation. The support of others and togetherness are the most significant things in the experience of motherhood. It is so crucial that when mothers have insufficient support, mothering becomes difficult and the unmet expectations of mothers result in loss of self-esteem, disappointment with the role of motherhood, and isolation (Westall and Liamputtong 72, 77).

Ari’s encounter with Mina Morris helps her to overcome maternal isolation. Their togetherness transforms their mothering experience by providing companionship and solidarity. Through their bond, both of them reach collective mothering, which makes the challenges of motherhood more bearable. Revealing her need for female companionship many times, Ari believes that “[w]omen without sisters are at a marked disadvantage” (155). She embodies the need for togetherness as she seeks maternal solidarity: “*We’re supposed to have mothers, I say. We’re supposed to have sisters. But what if you don’t have a mother? What if you don’t have a sister?*” (69). The answer to her question lies in the bond she builds with Mina. The friendship she cultivates with her serves as a substitute for a mother and sister. It provides the intimacy and support that she longs for. Before the connection between Ari and Mina, even the narrative often illustrates coldness and darkness, which indicates Ari’s isolation and depression. With Mina’s presence, however, this imagery changes to warmth and renewal: “*They sound familiar, I think*, he said in the spring, when the department announced Mina was coming. It was a nice night, almost warm, the worst of winter receding” (7). Mina’s arrival is linked to the end of an isolating season. Spring metaphorically functions and implies that Mina will lead Ari to find a sense of hope.

Experiencing the hardships of mothering, Ari and Mina accompany each other in their motherhood journey. Defining themselves as “*war buddies*” (182), they share the emotional and physical responsibilities of maternity. Although maternal labor is often naturalized as the

responsibility of the biological mother, it becomes a shared practice between them: “Zev’s asleep, my milk still dribbling down his cheek. *He was hungry*, I say, and Mina does the laugh-while-crying” (84). Ari frequently becomes the one who eases Mina’s responsibilities and creates a space for her: “I’ll bring banana bread, witch hazel, fenugreek, arnica, oregano. [...] Everything she needs” (76). Similarly, Mina also takes a role in supporting Ari: “I nurse Zev. Instead of pumping, Mina has the bright idea to nurse Walker [...] I hold the fort while she goes to the bathroom; she holds the fort while I make lunch. We stretch, we breathe. Walker plays, shows me things, is chill, eats, sacks out. We rest” (104). Their togetherness makes childcare so manageable that Ari asks whether she needs a nursemaid:

We set up camp at my house or hers. [...] The days feel wonderfully full. Walker’s occupied and content. I begin to wonder if I need Nasreen’s anymore. *I could have ten children like this*, I say, meaning together, as a team. Sitting around, eating, talking, blankets on the floor. I mean, no fucking problem. We say *um-hmm I know oh my God totally right that’s normal yeah*. (104)

Ari’s statement “as a team” captures the essence of solidarity. It transforms maternal isolation and displays female companionship in mothering. As Ruddick emphasizes that power is not only individual strength but also having collective resources (37), Ari and Mina gain their power through their collective maternity. They embody the feminist practice of mothering by affirming motherhood as a form of togetherness and resistance, which is against the patriarchal ideal of isolated motherhood.

Ari’s journey through maternal isolation highlights the intersection between personal and political structures. Ari is lonely in her motherhood experience as the state remains largely absent in addressing genuine policies to support maternal well-being. The character hopes for help from family members, yet they are emotionally distant and inattentive. In addition, most mothers around the character are influenced by patriarchal ideology. They are not able to sense motherhood as an experience but sense it through medicalized narratives that reduce their bodies to the control of institutional motherhood. Consequently, they cannot answer the needs of Ari. Eichenbaum and Orbach suggest that “[w]omen’s role as nurturer and mother has always provided women with the skills and opportunities to relate and not fear emotional connection” (2012 28-29). The connection between Ari and Mina illustrates this claim, as their togetherness becomes a space where maternity generates intimacy, awareness, and a refusal of isolation. They create a strong bond and reverse the patriarchal understanding

of mothering, which is framed as the sole responsibility of a biological mother. Hence, sharing the difficulties of mothering practices and emotional challenges of motherhood, Ari and Mina reject patriarchy's propaganda that isolates mothers and prevents the formation of companionship.

3.3.4. The Politics of the Maternal Body

"I take out a naked milk-filled breast and expect the man to turn away or pretend to turn away since I'm uncomfortable, insecure, and still fumbling my way through this action, but it's a necessary one and it's happening."

Szilvia Molnar, *The Nursery* (2023)

The body of a mother emerges as a deeply political site where biology and ideology meet. It is not only a biological entity, which is characterized by pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding, but also a cultural being, which undertakes social expectations and gendered discourses. In *After Birth*, the maternal body is complicated by patriarchal and medicalized frameworks. It holds nurturance, vulnerability, trauma, and resistance. The novel reflects the physical body that bleeds, leaks, and recovers while simultaneously demonstrating the body as a product of society. However, it transcends its social identity side by claiming sexuality and sexual desires, which move from social limits to the individual self. The novel includes the idea that the maternal body is ambiguous. It is hard to define and confine it to a certain space. This chapter will explore the layered politics of the maternal body by tracing its representations from the raw physical descriptions to the social embodiment.

The novel depicts the maternal body by referring to the unfiltered images of the body. By doing so, the work dismantles the idealized holiness of the maternal body and presents a more realistic narration, which underlines the physical and emotional challenges that come with motherhood. Ari says after her C-section, "*My infected incisionoozed, tight phony grin of a sadistic monster. The necessary course of antibiotics. I had died*" (17, emphases added). In the narration, she frequently turns back to her post-natal memories and highlights the state of the body: "*Last year we drove down to the city with Walker in the brand-new offgassing car seat. My incision was still giving me trouble. I was still moving like a ninety-five-year-old*" (58, emphases added). The novel has a medicalized maternal body image, which is wounded and impaired. It hosts trauma and pain. Also, as a natural result of maternity, it leaks and falls

out: “I pulled the cloth diaper out from under my shirt, where it had been stemming the leak from my other boob [...] *It’s a whole new lease on life*, she says. *I lost, like, a fistful of hair. Is that normal? Completely. Hormones*” (60, 74). Considering these images, the maternal body narration of *After Birth* tears up the purity of maternity and offers a Kristevan reading of the body as *abject*. Ari’s account of her recovery makes the state of abject explicit:

A week post-surgery I was still incredibly fucked up. Guttled like a fish. Hurt to move, but I tried to lay off the painkillers, ’cause they made shitting impossible, then you were supposed to start with the stool softeners. Five days postpartum my incision opened slightly and I had to go back to the fucking hospital, get the sutures reinforced. A fever dream. In the wrong kind of pain entirely. Everything hurt. (75)

The novel exposes bodily fluids, leaks, wounds, and dysfunctions that create disgust for readers. As Kristeva suggests that the abject is not the absence of cleanliness or health but is an annoyance to a system, order, and an identity (4), the body of Ari, as the demonstration of abject, annoys angelic cultural scripts of motherhood. It overthrows the romanticized notion of the maternal body and illustrates the raw corporeality of motherhood. Thus, the work foregrounds what Adrienne Rich identifies as motherhood as an experience. It truly shows the transformation of the body after birth.

Medicalized and wounded body images destroy the idealization of the maternal body, whereas nurturance and bodily transformative images carry the body into a living and dynamic being. The novel includes many scenes in which the mother characters nurture, which opens up a space for the body to reclaim itself as vital. Yet, nurturance does not only operate as the reflection of a living entity but also operates to demonstrate the unspoken difficulties of bodily caregiving. These images clearly signify how the maternal body suffers when responding to the physical demands of the baby: “Hurts just to look at Mina’s tits, so swollen. She winces when the baby latches. This is the part no one talks about, the part that feels suspiciously like a secret. Sorry: a part. And secrets are by nature shameful. Pisses me off, watching her struggle and wince like that” (68). Ari’s wonder for Mina reveals that the nurturing maternal body undergoes unspoken difficulties. The character points out that breastfeeding is painful and it is not expressed in words. Ari shares her own experience as follows: “I could feel my tits in my elbows. Walker was sleeping in the porta-crib, and I had to wake him to nurse him, which he tolerated, but then he would not go back to sleep. We sat grimly in a chair by a window until dawn” (72). In addition to the abject narration of the

maternal body, the painful realities also reverse the myth of angelic motherhood. The body is broken as a result of hormonal transformations, and it is deformed both physically and emotionally.

The text shows that the meaning of the female body changes after birth for each individual. While it stands for a threat against the possibility of another baby for a couple, it is something that needs to be covered and hidden from others. To elaborate, the relationship of Ari and Paul sharply changes after the birth of Walker. Paul withdraws from their sex life and approaches Ari as a *thing* that would endanger him: “Paul refuses to come inside me. [...] He says he’s not ready for another kid” (85). Thus, instead of a partner, Ari is reduced to a reproductive body, which leads to feelings of fear and anxiety and also causes avoidance. Moreover, Ari’s maternal body is unfavorable in the family circle as well. It is received as uneasiness: “My father was obviously uncomfortable with my exposed tits, wore a stupid transparent look of disgust, and left the room whenever possible to avoid looking at me” (51). Ari’s father’s reaction shows that the culture seemingly celebrates motherhood but rejects its visibility. It creates disgust and discomfort; thus, attempts are made to render the maternal body invisible. The novel satirizes the effort of hiding the body through the hooter hider sent to Mina by her sister. Mina compares the cloth to a burqa, and this comparison exposes the cultural regulation and oppression directed at the maternal body. It is understood that for the partner, the maternal body represents a threat for reproductive potential. For society, on the other hand, it stands for a shameful and annoying *thing* that needs to be hidden. In both cases, the maternal body is treated with fear and discomfort, and its essential needs are not honestly addressed.

The tone of the novel is honest, furious, and provocative in the writing of the body and its demands against the attempts of hiding and ignorance. Ari rejects the erasure of sexual subjectivity and the reduction of herself to the maternal body. By explicitly stating her sexual desires and fantasies, the character claims her agency as a sexual subject. This assertion, however, is not limited to the marital relationship. She is mostly interested in other men, rather than her husband, which is another break from the societal norms and the myth of a good wife and mother. To illustrate, she dreams of having sex with Will and sexually praises the stepson of Nasreen: “In another life Will and I might rip each other’s clothes off with our teeth and make a whole new world out of entirely different problems. [...] At pickup I am fleetingly overcome with wanting Nasreen’s stepson. Built, broad, twenty-five, tattoo sleeves in brilliant colors on both arms, radiates sex” (183, 169). Ari finds pleasure when she is out of

her maternal title. When she goes to the faculty party, she regards this event as a chance to stop her maternal role for a while and exist only as herself: “An opportunity to put on decent clothes, something I don’t have to yank down or up for boob access. Maybe a piece of jewelry, maybe go totally nuts, dab something shiny on the lips” (30). By explicitly articulating sexual desires and reflecting happiness for being out of maternity, the novel insists on female subjectivity. It disrupts the social expectations that desexualize, discipline, and orient women into the roles of wifehood and motherhood. Contrary to the narrations limiting women characters to the domestic life circle, *After Birth* fictionalizes mothers as capable of existing beyond institutional motherhood, displaying them not merely as mothers but as multidimensional identities.

Yet, the explicit expressions of Ari about sex are fragmented. When she dreams about having sex or has an obscene conversation with someone other than Paul, the narration is either interrupted by the acts of the baby or the text is intertwined with the baby’s needs:

Fifty-one, tall, floppy hair, runner’s body, lined face, piercing gray eyes, strong hands, cool dirty sneakers. I regularly imagine fucking him for a long afternoon in a highway motel where the bleach doesn’t quite cover the smell. The baby puts his hand near the oven, admonishes himself with an approximation of “hot!” and looks for approval. [...] Bryan is watching me nurse Zev. Mina is taking a nap. *Does Paul suck on your tits?* If I say yes, I’m kinky and disloyal, but if I say no, I’m a prude. *Do you want to suck on my tits? Sure! Sorry. Come on. You have the prettiest little nipples.* I bare them at him, pleased. [...] I sing a soft Misogynists refrain to baby Zev, who’s got all kinds of fascinating new expressions: not shy and won’t apologize. It’s fantastic, these babies and my boobs. (14, 133)

Bringing sexuality and caregiving together resists the cultural construction of motherhood, in which maternal identity is supposed to be asexual and purified from desires. Ari’s fragmented but consistent expressions of sexual desires alongside maternal duties show that female sexuality does not disappear with motherhood but coexists with it. This choice in narration dissolves the sacred boundaries of maternity. It shows that the body of a mother is both the site of desire and the space that answers the baby’s needs. Thus, the fragmented and discontinuous structure of the narrative reflects the nature of Ari’s subjective experience.

Society tries to keep the maternal body within the sterilized conservative framework, but it does not refrain from inflicting violence, trauma, and collective wounds upon it. Ari’s

grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, embodies this paradox. She is forced into sexual intercourse during her stay in the concentration camp. Her body is exposed to trauma, and this affects her both psychologically and physically. Ari declares that: "My mother's mother was prone to miscarriage. She had a bunch, I don't know how many. More than a few. Maybe it was genetic, maybe it was war trauma, maybe it was psychic" (43-44). The grandmother's body becomes a tool for her survival during the war. It is marked by "She survived by sucking Nazi cock. Nineteen years old. Survived with her mouth full of throbbing Nazi sausage" (140). The violence damages the well-being of the grandmother. After the war, she still suffers and cannot escape from the harsh memories: "She wakes from nightmares in which the incinerated siblings shriek for help from a black sinkhole. Nightmares in which an SS officer lines her up with her primary school mates and massacres them all with a hailstorm of bullets coming from his very tiny dick" (158). This trauma finds a place in her bodily experience. She has to use medicine called DES not to miscarry. She can carry the pregnancy to term thanks to this drug, but it simultaneously leaves destructive traces upon the next generation: the daughter develops cancer and the granddaughter is under constant medical surveillance because of the possibility of facing a similar health problem. Even after years have passed, the haunting memories of trauma remain an unbearable burden for the grandmother. She still suffers and finally succumbs to this weight: "Eighteen years later she sticks her head in the oven. Amazing she made it that long. The perfect baby girl, my mother, got a call on the Wellesley dorm hall phone. A Survivor no more" (161). It shows that though the maternal body is called sacred and idealized as the bearer of life and continuity, it is disregarded and violated. Rather than respect and admiration, the maternal body is a site of regulation, control, and trauma, exposing the paradoxes embodied in patriarchal constructions of motherhood.

After Birth breaks the idealization of the maternal body. Society approaches the mother characters as sanitized, pure beings; however, they are imperfect. They violate societal perfection by smoking and using drugs. Therefore, contrary to the romanticized mothers, they are toxic ones. Also, they are broken, as they reveal the medicalization of the body, the natural practices of nurturing, and the war traumas. While it is expected of them to hide and repress bodies and bodily desires, they instead embrace and explore them. By doing all these things, the mother characters of the novel damage the angelic mother figure. They blur the boundaries and leave the question in mind whether the mother's body is the domain of sanctity or evil and pleasure. The narration of the novel suggests that the maternal body is

complex; it is sometimes fragile, wounded, and violated, and sometimes resistant, self-affirming, and seductive. Thus, it is not possible to compress it into limited definitions and expectations. As Oakley argues, “‘ideal’ motherhood is perhaps achieved only where people are not typical” (23), Ari and other mother figures display their diversity in maternal experience. They exceed the perfect, sanitized images and thereby undermine the institutional motherhood.

3.3.5. Structuring Motherhood: Space, Safety, and Socioeconomic Cost

“I saw clearly the mothers of the old neighborhood. They were nervous, they were acquiescent. They were silent, with tight lips and stooping shoulders, or they yelled terrible insults at the children who harassed them.”

Elena Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name* (2012)

It is hard to define the concept of motherhood only within a biological framework. Motherhood is a multidimensional notion that is affected and shaped by the material, cultural, psychological, spatial, and economic circumstances surrounding it. The conditions of the private spaces, the plans and safety of the neighborhoods, and economic resources structure the position and conditions of mothers. This section will mainly discuss the setting of *After Birth*. It will analyze the mother characters’ spaces and uncover that their private spaces of them are haunted by patriarchy, and the neighborhoods are quite dangerous to settle down in, as they are not supportive of family life. Additionally, this section will argue that the economic levels of mothers and the financial matters influence their maternal care. By discussing maternal experience within this framework, it becomes clear that motherhood is a socially, culturally, and economically mediated practice, not merely a personal experience.

To start analyzing the private space first, Ari’s house hosts institutional motherhood, embodying the character’s physical and emotional confinements. The novel strengthens the haunted image of the house by patriarchy by adding some significant animal motifs. It is suggested that the sounds and appearances of the raccoon and the bat stand for patriarchy. As patriarchy invades and corrupts the lives of individuals, the raccoon and the bat also disturb and damage the households and the house itself. It is significant that these animals specifically appear when Ari dreams about unconventional things for a mother, such as having sex with

someone other than her husband. In this sense, these animalistic motifs break the image of the desiring mother and bring the character under the focus of social norms, implying an ideal of pure and self-sacrificing motherhood. Ari, who does not submit to the image of angelic motherhood, draws attention to the symbolic representation of patriarchy by saying: “We’re not to rest until the raccoon is gone. The ways in which he might destroy our lives and house are many” (18). Reflecting her uneasiness about the presence of such animals in the house, Ari shows how the private space can turn into turmoil. The house becomes a place where the desires of the character and the norms of society collide.

Looking at the public space of the novel, the neighborhood atmosphere of Ari depicts a faded city image marked by neglect, where once elegance existed, but now it has been left to decay due to inadequate care and attention. The setting, which is a disrupted and filthy neighborhood, is not appropriate for the everyday activities of life with an infant. It does not include parks for children or places for mothers where they can easily meet and communicate. The public sphere offers limited mobility for mothers: “My weeks structured around a very occasional trip to the drive-through donut place near the mall, baby dozing in the back” (2). The character wanders around uncanny places with the baby, and the activities that the space offers do not match the requirements of a nurturing environment. She visits the cemetery with Walker, for instance: “Idling in the crappy old Jewish cemetery across the highway, heat cranked, reading names on crooked headstones” (2). Also, the public sphere is designed without regard to the needs of life with children, as seen when Ari finds herself trapped in her car with her sleeping baby and unable to meet her basic bodily needs: “Baby stirs. I panic. [...] Fast asleep. Good. Crucial. The nap is everything. But oh my God do I have to pee” (182). The character’s experience demonstrates the lack of accessible and supportive environments for parents. Even when she goes out of her house, she is confined to another closed place because of the absence of child-friendly public facilities and the baby’s fragile care routines. Furthermore, the public sphere not only dismisses mothers physically but also socially. Ari and other mothers are made to feel like outsiders in ordinary public places, as stated: “We’d sit in Starbucks rooting around in pastel-camouflage diaper bags for chew toys and muslin wraps while women without babies gave us endless dirty looks” (24). It is understood that the public sphere reduces mothers’ mobility and visibility. The absence of child-friendly spaces isolates mothers and makes everyday life a struggle. As Leslie Kern suggests that since the structure of the city is not designed for mothers and children, women’s

engagement with the city is still shaped by barriers. The city of men says: the city is not really for women (37, 5, 10).

The public sphere has physical and social limitations, and it also poses many dangers for children. The novel's depiction of the younger generation's visible addiction to drugs underlines an atmosphere of insecurity. Such an environment creates a sense of vulnerability, anxiety, and fear for the future of children. In this setting, children are at risk because of widespread violence and neglect in public life. The novel includes the news of a two-year-old girl left bleeding and dying in the street and a six-year-old boy accidentally shooting himself. Ari is shaken by children killed in accidents and asks in full anger: "How is it so fucked-up easy to die and so fucking hard to get born? [...] I would really like someone to explain it to me. I mean, what the fuck? Someone had to give birth to that boy. What the fucking FUCK?" (56). The scenes of violence and the indifference of the public raise the feelings of fear and anger in Ari. She faces the fact that the world is so brutal, hostile, and unsafe for a child. While she anxiously wonders how to protect children, Paul does not have a similar concern. He cannot understand Ari's desperate mood and just suggests that: "Why don't you go take a nap or something?" (56). What Ruddick calls maternal thinking operates here. Paul lacks maternal consciousness, which prioritizes the needs of vulnerable children for their well-being and safety (*Maternal Thinking* 17). Through the lens of maternal thinking, Ari problematizes the dangers and risks that children face. Her anger and anxiety articulate the questions and doubts of being a mother in such an environment.

The novel highlights the significance of economic reasons in shaping maternity and maternal practices as well. Various birth types, hormonal drug therapies, infertility services, and commercialized childcare products in the narration point out an economic base of motherhood. By echoing Rich's concept of motherhood as an institution, the novel shows that giving birth has its own industry in the capitalist system. The medicalization of childbirth, the costs of hospitals and midwives, and insurance policies are indicators that motherhood is a profit-driven concept in modern society. The issues of baby food and caregiving services also underscore the cost of motherhood. The novel covers the absence of governmental support for nutrition and care services for babies. Mina Morris, as a single mom, is expected to pay the cost of formula alone, and Ari, working part-time at a co-op market, is required to meet the expense of the babysitter. Their expenses indicate the question of whether the basic needs of a child, such as food and nursing, are the responsibilities that should be undertaken by the state or by individuals. Feminists centralize this question in their debates to problematize the

neoliberal policies that leave mothers alone financially and emotionally. Philosopher and theorist Nancy Fraser points out that institutional arrangements often tend to depoliticize care. In line with this, official-economic institutions in male-dominated capitalist societies create impersonalized and private ownership for personal matters (62). In such a context, individuals' needs are narrowed down: care-related demands are restricted to the boundaries of the household and prevented from being evaluated within political concerns.

The livelihoods of mothers are another issue that the novel focuses on. It is depicted that the mother characters have to navigate their economic conditions in order to provide for their families and themselves. For instance, Nasreen, the babysitter of Walker, has to migrate from Pakistan and live separately from her children to provide income for them. On the other hand, Ari works part-time at a co-op market to manage the expenses of everyday responsibilities. Nasreen's migration indicates the global economic and social inequalities that force mothers to leave their homeland and children behind, whereas Ari's position at a co-op, despite her academic background, indicates how mothers are left behind in their career. The burden of motherhood and gendered social orders hold Ari back from academic life and allow her to work in a low-paid job that neither matches her qualifications nor fulfills her wishes.

The novel covers a crucial detail showing that men and women face unequal opportunities in sustaining their professional lives when they become parents. Although both Ari and Paul are successful in academic life at the beginning of their careers, their paths diverge significantly later. While Ari struggles to gain recognition in academia, Paul can progress in his position without any hindrance. This contrast demonstrates that mothers are more likely to encounter barriers in professional life than fathers. It is suggested that motherhood appears as a penalty for women in business life (Correll, Benard and Paik 1298). Even though it is supposed to be a natural experience, it turns into a structural disadvantage in a patriarchal society, keeping women away from social and economic life.

After Birth makes the reader question being a mother in an environment that is physically inadequate, socially unsafe, and economically market-driven and fragile. It destroys idealized motherhood by demonstrating harsh realities. It shows that it is not possible to sustain the figure of an endlessly resilient mother in such an environment, where the well-being, safety, and welfare of mothers are not supported. The novel breaks this all-enduring figure and creates a vulnerable, conflicted, alienated, and overburdened mother type as a result of a neglectful society. Thus, *After Birth* highlights the importance of providing support

and resources for mothers in order to create a healthy environment for both children and mothers themselves.

3.3.6. Feminist Theory Meets Maternal Chaos: Theory on the Page vs. Theory on the Flesh

“Nothing could have prepared me for the realization that I was a mother, one of those givens, when I knew I was still in a state of uncreation myself. That calm, sure, unambivalent woman who moved through the pages of the manuals I read seemed as unlike me as an astronaut. Nothing, to be sure, had prepared me for the intensity of relationship already existing between me and a creature I had carried in my body and now held in my arms and fed from my breasts.”

Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (1976)

Feminist theory has been discussing motherhood as an issue since the second wave. In the first years, feminists approached it as a trap to the independence of women. In their theories, they did not present motherhood as a bodily experience. They argued that motherhood kills individuality and reinforces traditional gender roles. The concept of motherhood gained academic ground with the systematic research of Andrea O'Reilly. She collected and discussed maternal narratives, practices, and theories within a feminist discourse called matricentric feminism. Previously ignored in feminist discussion, motherhood has begun to be recognized as a complex experience that intersects with various aspects of a woman's identity and societal expectations. The protagonist of *After Birth*, Ari, approaches the concept of motherhood from a matricentric perspective. She embraces bodily autonomy and accepts motherhood as an experience. She criticizes earlier feminist theory for its abstraction, neglect of maternal needs, and inability to reveal the physical and emotional difficulties of mothering. This section will argue for the conflict between earlier feminist theory and maternal experience in *After Birth*.

Finding especially second-wave feminists dismissive of women's natural experiences, Ari believes that there is a need to celebrate the female body and its generative capacities. For her, motherhood is an experience inseparably tied to the body. Postpartum pain, exhaustion, bleeding, breastfeeding, hormonal changes, and emotional breakdowns are reflections of the profound meaning inherent in motherhood. While motherhood carries such meanings, second-

wave feminists' arguments, which offer women's liberation through rejecting biological determinism and treating motherhood as an oppressive social institution, is not able to understand Ari's living reality holistically. That is why Ari interprets Shulamith Firestone's statements as abstract and disembodied. She cannot see Firestone's ideas as having a real-life counterpart: "Some second-wave bullshit about how biology isn't destiny. Defeat the female body and be liberated from it. I'd like to send around a paper on this with a long, involved academic title. The entirety of the piece would just read: Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit!" (165). Ari's critique of second-wave demonstrates her need for a feminism that does not ignore the maternal body but instead acknowledges its realities. In line with this, what she longs for is precisely matricentric feminism's claims. Thus, Andrea O'Reilly's suggestion that motherhood is the business of feminism in relation to mothers' needs for women's empowerment (2019 14) resonates with Ari. Believing that maternity requires social, economic, and political recognition, Ari echoes the principles of matricentric feminism.

The novel criticizes how feminist theoretical discourse is unable to recognize maternal labor through the relationship between Ari and her supervisor, Marianne. In their connection, it is evident that Marianne, a professor in the department of Women's Studies, fails to understand the maternal burden of Ari. She expects her to fully concentrate on and study for the thesis; however, the only thing that Ari can do is complete the household chores and maintain maternal responsibilities. Furthermore, from the professor's perspective, the concept of maternal care remains outside feminism's scope. To illustrate, when Ari tells Marianne that she is a wet-nurse for Mina's son and considers this act feminist, the professor responds with hesitation. The doubt of Marianne exposes the exclusion of maternal labor from feminist theory. The professor's approach alienates Ari and her experiences.

In short, *After Birth* draws attention to the gap between earlier feminist theory and the living realities of motherhood. The protagonist's criticism discloses second wave's ignorance of the physical, emotional, social, and political dimensions of mothering. Ari voices the bodily and emotional experiences of motherhood. Embodying a matricentric feminist lens, the novel highlights the need to consider motherhood as a legitimate site of feminist knowledge. By centering emotional and physical maternal labor and care at its core, the text challenges earlier feminist discourse to acknowledge of the everyday experiences of mothers.

3.3.7. Reclaiming Motherhood: Maternal Narrative Authority

“If I started to write about the experience, I could turn my blackened milk into ink, and as writing had always had a magical healing effect on my soul, I could perhaps inch my way out of this depression.”

Elif Shafak, *Black Milk* (2007)

Elisa Albert's *After Birth* occupies a unique place in the narration of motherhood, providing a raw look at the challenges of motherhood. The novel successfully covers the unspoken dark sides of motherhood—birth trauma, postpartum depression, the physical and emotional difficulties of mothering, and the lack of communal support for mothering. By touching on these points, *After Birth* offers a realistic narration to readers. It reverses the angelic motherhood narration, and while doing so, the novel includes quite a disruptive tone, which is articulated through profane diction, rhetorical anger, and accusatory addresses to institutions. The repetitive language of the novel regarding maternal ambivalence dismantles social and cultural expectations.

The novel destroys the traditional motherhood image not only through its language but also through its intertwined stories and fragmented structure. Albert divides the novel into three different chapters; each is titled with the name of a month. The first one, November, has particular importance in terms of referencing the month when Ari's mother died. Starting the novel in this way sets the tone for Ari's devastated entry into motherhood, where she is left alone with the crushing responsibilities. This narrative choice also brings to mind the idea of the symbolic death of the character. It implies how Ari suffers and struggles to navigate the complexities of motherhood without guidance and support. The novel evokes compelling emotions, and readers find themselves immediately immersed in the trauma and depression of Ari. Thus, contrary to the traditional novel, which typically begins with exposition and gradually builds tension, *After Birth* directly opens with climax. As a result of this, the rhythm of the text is strikingly fast at the beginning. The tension becomes stabilized only when Ari establishes a relationship with Mina and finds serenity thanks to her. Their togetherness and companionship initiate a narrative shift that slows the pace of the text and balances the earlier tone of isolation and desperation. Considering all these points, the novel disrupts the traditional motherhood image through its structure, which reveals the character's traumas and

the complexities of motherhood. The text rejects a linear structure and offers intertwined stories and sudden shifts, which mirror the nature of motherhood.

The novel becomes multilayered thanks to its various images and motifs. As discussed in the previous chapters, the work includes many reproductive and nurturing images, which serve to demonstrate the difficulties of motherhood and mothering. These images reveal the challenges of motherhood and the devastating impact of institutional motherhood. Moreover, animalistic motifs offer a symbolic reflection of emotional unrest, embodying the invasive presence of patriarchy. The raccoon and the bat, intruding into the domestic space, break the sense of safety that the home is supposed to provide. All these elements show that motherhood is often under external threat. Patriarchal forces corrupt maternal subjectivity, cause trauma, and transform motherhood into a fragmented experience.

In terms of the character's development, Albert constructs Ari's growth from a state of isolation and despair to a more resilient position; however, she does not grant the character absolute liberation and solidarity. Instead, she reminds readers of the ongoing weight of motherhood in loneliness and highlights the contradictory feelings. Toward the end of the novel, the author depicts Mina's departure from the neighborhood, which raises a sense of separation, isolation, and anger. Although Ari experiences devastating and isolating moments once again, she is no longer imprisoned by these emotions completely. This shows that Ari is able to manage the crushing burden of motherhood since female companionship has transformed Ari's experience. When the novel closes with Ari's words, "I'm better" (194), this statement does not claim full recovery from institutional motherhood, happiness, or freedom from maternal burdens. Rather, it offers a capacity for survival. Thus, the novel underscores that motherhood cannot be fully liberated from its inherent burden, yet it can be made more manageable through solidarity and companionship. Albert does not end Ari's story with an idealized happy triumph. She suggests a more honest depiction of maternal survival—wounded, traumatized, fragmented, but nonetheless enduring.

Overall, Elisa Albert's *After Birth* reclaims motherhood by uncovering the dark and unspoken sides of it. By exposing birth trauma, postpartum depression, crushing maternal responsibilities, and mothers' isolation and alienation, the text presents a more realistic narrative of motherhood to its readers. Albert dismantles the sacred and self-devoted mother image and replaces it with a mother figure who is quite furious, demanding, and sexualized. The novel's narrative authority precisely comes from its refusal to idealize motherhood. The

raw and authentic narration of Ari's experience becomes a strategy of survival, resistance, and authority.



4. MOTHERHOOD LEADING TO POSSIBILITIES: SHEILA HETI'S *MOTHERHOOD* (2018)

4.1. Sheila Heti and Her Literary Background

Sheila Heti, born in 1976 in Toronto, Canada, is the daughter of Hungarian-Jewish immigrant parents. Her mother was a pathologist, her father was an electrical engineer, and her younger brother, David Heti, is a stand-up comic (Adams). Heti attended St. Clement School in Toronto for high school, then studied playwriting at the National Theatre School of Canada, and later pursued art history and philosophy at the University of Toronto. From an early age, she developed interests in writing, acting, and philosophy. Raised Jewish and identifying herself as Canadian, Heti considers both herself and her family neither strictly religious nor patriotic (Ferri). Her works frequently engage with themes of Jewish heritage, immigration, cultural identity, and broader questions about the social and bodily practices shaping women's lives.

Heti's literary voice emerged during her school years, when her English teacher encouraged her to write with confidence and imagination (St. Clement's School). She began writing plays at the National Theatre School and produced short stories at the University of Toronto, later collected in her first book, *The Middle Stories* (2001) (Margo). Heti has noted that Franz Kafka influenced her early writing, particularly regarding alienation, isolation, uncertainty, and the self. Her literary sensibility further developed through the absurdist and existentialist works of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Eugène Ionesco, and later through the sexually and psychologically charged novels of Marquis de Sade, Henry Miller, and Anaïs Nin, which shaped her engagement with the body, psyche, and artistic freedom (Harrod). These influences forged Heti's distinctive style, merging existential inquiry with societal observation.

Heti has established a professional literary and academic career by contributing to major magazines and teaching in various significant institutions. In the early years of her writing career, she worked as an interview editor at *The Believer Magazine* (2010-2014) and conducted many interviews with a series of writers, critics, and artists, such as Elena Ferrante, Dave Hickey, Agnès Varda, John Currin, and Alanis Obomsawin. She believed that

interviews became a chance for her to meet many writers and see their instructive insights into writing techniques (Harrod). She also contributed to many literary magazines, such as *The New Yorker*, *n+1*, *The Paris Review*, *The New York Times*, and *Harper's*, with her essays, short stories, and reviews (Heti). Alongside her editorial and fictional and non-fictional works, she held academic positions, Writer-in-Residence at Western University (2011-2012) and Alice Munro Chair in Creativity (2023-2024), where she gave lectures on creative writing and literature (Heti). By investigating fiction and nonfiction in different platforms with an introspective and experimental style, Heti has developed a unique literary voice and career.

The writing of Heti demonstrates how life itself becomes a part of art and how storytelling works for the expression of the fluid nature of selfhood. Blurring the boundary between the lived experience and the creative invention, she transforms personal experience into an artistic experiment. In her works, the self is a process, not a static identity—often changing, fragmented, and never completed. To develop the self, Heti often adapts the forms of metafiction⁵ and autofiction⁶. She appears as a character and her direct experience makes the work an emotional and honest portrait. It is claimed that through her writing strategies, personal experience not only turns into a space for creativity but also turns into a domain for feminist expression of self (Demeyer and Vitse 7). By applying these techniques, Heti destroys the God-like position of the author, replacing authority with vulnerability and fragility. Instead of creating a world controlled by an omnipotent and almighty one, she creates a world in which she is inexperienced and unaware, searching for meaning and a form within the process of writing as a character.

Looking at her works chronologically, Heti first brought out her short story collection, *The Middle Stories* (2001), which includes a fantastic and absurd voice. She followed it with *Ticknor* (2005), a historical novella that re-fictionalizes the connection between real people: William Hickling Prescott and George Ticknor. Heti's international recognition came with *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), a semi-autobiographical experimental novel that intertwines real-life events and philosophical interrogations. In the subsequent years, she shifted her focus from fiction to nonfiction with *The Chairs Are Where the People Go* (2011), a collection of conversations with Misha Glouberman that explores the subtle dynamics of

⁵ Metafiction is a form of fiction that the author consciously integrates its own writing process into the text, reminding the readers that they are engaging with a fictional work rather than objective reality.

⁶ Autofiction is a genre that combines autobiography and fiction.

urban life, and *Women in Clothes* (2014), co-written with Leanne Shapton and Heidi Julavits, analyzing how clothing shapes female expression and identity. Her later works focus on existential and metaphysical concerns. *Motherhood* (2018), shortlisted for the 2018 Scotiabank Giller Prize, interrogates the personal and societal dimensions of reproductive choice. *Pure Colour* (2022), winner of the Governor General's Award, explores death, time, and love, reflecting on what it means to live, to die, and to sense the world as an artistic creation. Her most recent work, *Alphabetical Diaries* (2024), is an experimental journal that rearranges sentences from different time periods alphabetically, demonstrating how language shapes memory. Across her oeuvre, Heti consistently challenges the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, ordinary experience and art, and the self and societal expectation.

4.2. *Motherhood*: A Contextual Background

Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018) is an experimental novel that deals with the moral, emotional, bodily, and creative inquiries of a woman's decision about whether to be a mother. Told through a fragmented, essayistic structure, the novel has an unnamed narrator reflecting autobiographical details. Heti's *Motherhood* is an example of autofiction, merging autobiographical materials with fictional ones. Through a self-revealing narrative, Heti transmits the private matters of womanhood into a fictional framework. By questioning the meaning of production—biologically and artistically—*Motherhood* exposes the capacity and limits of the female body, existential and social dimensions of motherhood, partner relations, medical authority, reproductive choices, and the bond between a mother and a daughter.

To look closer at the novel, *Motherhood* unfolds philosophical questions posed by an unnamed narrator, who is a writer in her late thirties. She is stuck between the desire for artistic freedom and society's expectations to bear a child. Living in Toronto with her partner, Miles, she has spent several years by asking both herself and others whether she should be a mother. Through a series of philosophical questions, memories, dreams, and ritualistic techniques, she attempts to find an answer for herself. Although the character is quite sure about not to be a mother even at the beginning of the novel, she continues her questions till the end of the novel. In a way, by asking these questions, she tries to affirm the legitimacy of her choice to remain childfree. The character's efforts demonstrate how difficult it is to assert and internalize a childfree identity both at the social level and in her inner conflicts.

Heti interweaves the work with the narrator's movements through domestic and external spaces, alongside her bodily cycles, reflecting the narrator's physical and emotional states with the natural rhythm of the body. The author structures the chapters around the narrator's everyday experiences. She centralizes the body within chaos as a living subject. Compatible with the character's mind, the narration is fragmented. The novel does not follow a strict plot; it has an essayistic form that elaborates on motherhood from a philosophical level. Thus, it does not include rising action or climax. The plot is developed through the narrator's introspections, recurring questions, and reflections on both personal and cultural dimensions of motherhood, allowing the thematic concerns rather than events to take resolution. Discussing quite a personal matter, *Motherhood* has a dark, doubtful, and uneasy tone. It exposes its readers to the discomfort of rejecting motherhood.

Motherhood approaches the concept of motherhood through the lens of fourth wave of feminism and includes many significant formal and narrative elements. In recent years, the academic field has begun to recognize Heti's literature. When these studies are analyzed closely, it is seen that *Motherhood* is her most discussed work. The studies often deal with the novel's engagement with the discourse of choice, possibility, politics, and social dimensions, as well as narrative structure. For instance, Mark Currie, in his article titled "Maybe baby: uncertainty and decision in Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*" (2020), has elaborated on the narrator's uncertainty about having a child (Currie). Kathleen Reeves, in her article titled "From Choice to Possibility in Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*" (2023), has pointed out that Heti's narration of motherhood is feminist, yet motherhood is still circumscribed by patriarchy (Reeves). Heather Houser, in her article titled "White Women Wondering and the Contortions of Childfree Writing" (2025), has approached the novel from a linguistic level and analyzed the work from a political, racial, and social perspective (Houser). Gregory Gulbranson, in his master thesis titled "*Autofiction's Interrogation of Neoliberal Subjectivity*" (2021), has studied autofictional narratives of *Motherhood* (Gulbranson). Kathleen Reeves, in her PhD thesis titled "*Motherhood and Freedom in Women's Writing After 1970*" (2021), has interpreted motherhood as multiple possibilities available to women (Reeves). Although the studies are limited in number, they are quite diverse in terms of the subjects they examine. This growing body of scholarship highlights the significance of *Motherhood* in contemporary feminist writing.

This thesis will analyze Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* through a matricentric feminist perspective to trace how the novel handles motherhood from a social, political, and

psychological perspective. The thesis will discuss the novel's fragmented and circular form, created by pauses, hesitations, and recurrent questions, which reflects the narrator's internal struggles. It will offer voluntary childlessness as the novel's central matter and suggest how difficult it is both to accept a childfree identity and to secure its acceptance within society. On this basis, the present thesis introduces *Motherhood* as a contemporary matricentric fiction that presents a maternal-counter narrative, extending the meaning of motherhood from biological level to the alternatives.

4.3. Matricentric Feminist Reading of *Motherhood*

4.3.1. Reproductive Choice among Biological Clock, Medical Authority, and Partner Relations

“She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on.”

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)

Sheila Heti approaches the female body from a feminist perspective in *Motherhood*. In traditional gender-based narratives, the focus is often on the young female body, idealized for its beauty, sexual desirability, and fertility. Such narration defines the body as a vessel for pleasure and reduces femininity to reproductive capacity. Yet, in Heti's writing, the female body is treated as a living subject. She writes for female sexuality, and this narration does not objectify the body through aestheticized erotic descriptions or limit it to motherhood. Rather, she reflects female desires as an interior, lived experience. Through this approach, Heti establishes a feminist perspective in *Motherhood*, turning the female body into a site of authenticity and aligning physicality with female sophistication. In this section, the problematic nature of reproductive choice in *Motherhood* will be discussed, examining reproduction through the internal and external pressures of the biological clock, medical authority, and partner relations.

In *Motherhood*, readers encounter the fragmented, cyclical, and indecisive body of a woman in her late thirties. The character questions whether she wants to have a child. Aware that her biological ability to conceive is diminishing, she faces a pressing decision. Once she

states, “[t]ime is running short on making certain decisions” (21), her body becomes a site of anxiety. Reflecting on maternity, she reaches ambivalence: “On the one hand, the joy of children. On the other hand, the misery of them. On the one hand, the freedom of not having children. On the other hand, the loss of never having had them” (1). The character approaches having a child holistically, recognizing both the challenges and sacrifices that motherhood entails, while also accepting its potential joys. As Rich notes, accepting or rejecting motherhood evokes complex emotions and forces a woman to choose between motherhood or individuality, freedom, and creativity (163-164). The narrator, similarly, is torn between desire and the weight of motherhood, understanding that the decision shapes the meaning of life and identity.

The unnamed narrator of *Motherhood* is obsessed with the idea of time and its passage. The obsession is evident as she introduces herself and other women by their ages. Women’s age functions as a marker of identity, reminding them of fertility and societal worth. As a middle-aged woman, she feels as if she is late for everything: “I was old, all the boats were far off, away from the shore, while I was still making my way to the shore, I hadn’t even found my boat yet” (1). Unable to choose a definitive path, she fears realizing too late what she truly wants: “No one wants to be one of those women—to realize what you want when it’s practically too late. Who wants to be seen by the world as having been wrong about such a basic thing?” (181). Her fear is not only biological but also social, shaped by societal judgment. Society amplifies her internal struggles, and she experiences the silent pressure of being constantly observed. *Motherhood* portrays the biological clock as both a physical reality and a social mechanism controlling women.

The pressure of time passing intensifies when the narrator visits a fertility clinic to freeze her eggs. She realizes that this procedure would mean “freezing [her] indecision” (128). Thus, rather than empowering her, medical intervention intensifies uncertainty. Furthermore, the clinic asserts traditional norms: “*Congratulations—it’s good news!* She smiled warmly and said my ovaries were young, *like fresh figs*” (127). Here, fertility is framed as a cultural success and motherhood as an unquestionable desire, yet the narrator does not wish to become a mother. When she learns she is medically capable, she bursts into tears, revealing the paradox between personal choice and medical authority. Although medicine accepts fertility as a kind of success, for the character, it becomes a source of pressure, distress, and threat.

The novel also critiques medical authority by exploring how the female body is subjected to control under the guise of medical care. The narrator recounts an early abortion experience. She is emotionally exploited and could not access accurate medical information in the clinic: “The doctor who examined me advised me to keep the baby. He showed me the sonogram, even though I didn’t want to see it. He told me it was too early to get an abortion” (31). The character’s vulnerability and ignorance are utilized against her. Later, she realizes: “[H]e was lying; he wanted me to change my mind. You don’t have to wait for an abortion. But I was too young then, and too all alone, to see it” (32). Read through Rich’s statement of “hands of iron,” the doctor’s intervention is institutional and disciplinary, positioning the woman’s body within a patriarchal framework. Here, the doctor’s gender intensifies the power dynamics, reflecting male dominance. The clinic represents a space where women’s bodies are observed, judged, and restricted by patriarchal control. It circulates the “good woman/ future mother” script. Thus, the scene frames abortion not as a private decision but as a site where institutional medicine produces policies.

Through its focus on choice and identity, *Motherhood* shows that the female body is never purely personal but a site where private indecision intersects with societal expectations. The novel demonstrates that an acceptable shape of womanhood exists, marginalizing those outside it. For example, in a dream, her partner Miles emphasizes intellectual rather than physical attraction: “*You have a Robarts sort of energy, which is attractive, but you don’t have the sort of body a man would want to do anything with*”⁷ (59). The character’s self-worth and desirability are mediated by external judgments, revealing the internalization of societal body standards. She subtly regards that a woman is not valuable enough for her intellectual capacity. To be praised, she must embody the physical image that society accepts as feminine.

Extending her critique of how the female body is observed and standardized, Heti’s narrator demonstrates the ways in which society tries to shape women’s reproductive choices. The novel situates reproduction within a social mechanism that it becomes less a matter of a personal issue. Due to societal judgments, it becomes a public domain where every person is entitled to impose their opinions. To illustrate, when the narrator goes to see her friend Mairon, Mairon declares that: “*One day you will call me and tell me you’re pregnant! She said I seemed very fertile*” (33). The novel operates such statements as performative acts in the Butlerian sense. As Butler suggests that gender is an identity constituted through repetitive

⁷ The author refers to Robarts Library, which is located at the University of Toronto.

acts (179), the narrator is also expected to have such an identity, which is constructed by repeating social norms. In Mairon's discourse, maternity is presented as a norm that should be fulfilled by every woman. However, this approach reduces women's identities to reproductive functions. As Beauvoir writes, "[v]ery simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her" (45), the narrator faces the pressure of being defined by her reproductive capacity.

On the other hand, the narrator is equally exposed to the counter discourse that discourages motherhood. Following the visit of Mairon, the narrator runs into her former professor, who discloses the other pole of societal interventionism by saying: "*Please, don't have children*" (34). Trapped between conflicting societal instructions, the narrator experiences the impossibility of autonomous decision-making. Every possible decision result in different judgments. In this tension, the novel displays how female autonomy is not a personal subject but a collective concern that is shaped by external voices. It leaves the narrator with a sense that whatever she decides on, she will inevitably be considered as faulty. The character also reaches this result by articulating: "[A] woman will always be made to feel like a criminal, whatever choice she makes, however hard she tries. Mothers feel like criminals. Non-mothers do, too" (44). Through this recognition, *Motherhood* makes the cultural mechanisms visible that female experience is positioned between desire and guilt, choice and judgment.

Beyond the prescriptive voices directing her to be a mother or to refrain from motherhood, the narrator's experience reveals a different negotiation for bodily desire and autonomy itself. The character recognizes that she is no longer noticed and attracted by strangers. This situation cheers and liberates rather than upsetting her:

Coming back from the bank today, an old man in his garage did not look at me, even though I passed close by. It made me glad, for I never much enjoyed being looked at anyway. How freeing to escape the grip of that world, and move into another realm entirely—one not so dominated by men's desires, but to breeze past their desires.
(266)

The novel points out how the male gaze surrounds and confines the lives of women. It depicts that the male gaze disturbs, limits, and controls young women. The narrator touches that it is not possible for a young woman to reach the intellectual world if she is limited by men's desires. She believes that "when a woman is no longer attractive to men, can she be left alone

for enough moments to actually think” (266). These reflections resonate strongly in Deborah Levy’s fictional writings that ageing enables women to claim self-possession, mental space, and creativity. While Virginia Woolf urges women to have a room of one’s own for intellectual freedom, Heti’s narrator displays that ageing can provide this room organically. As the character’s body moves outside of male desire, she secures a temporal room to think. However, this freedom understanding should be read as highly problematic, as it comes from a patriarchal system that polices women’s bodies and grants them a sense of agency only through invisibility. It is so clear that patriarchy dismisses an ageing woman and accepts that when a woman loses her fertility, she also loses her sexuality and attraction. In other words, patriarchy defends that reproduction is the basis of women’s sexuality (Üstün et al. 25). These ideas deeply embrace patriarchal beliefs and confine women’s identities to biological determinism and social expectations.

The novel challenges patriarchy’s ideas of ageing through the narrator’s complex bodily experiences. The character, though socially accepted as a woman without her sexual desires, is deeply connected to her body. The detailed scenes of sexual intimacy with the partner illustrate a woman who does not withdraw from sexual life. Contrary to traditional narratives of desexualized middle-aged women, Heti’s narrator is quite sensual. Her body hosts pleasure, conflicts, and self-expression. In addition, the character’s rejection of motherhood also functions to reverse the traditional narration of the female body. The body experiences sexuality, yet it does not result in traditional reproductive outcomes. Ultimately, as an ageing woman, the narrator senses all her bodily transformations, desires, and fragilities. Instead of receiving her bodily changes as loss, the novel celebrates a feminist writing of the body, which does not accept patriarchal associations of womanhood with fertility but accepts the female body as an autonomous being.

Having established a feminist writing of the body, *Motherhood* also turns the body into an agency through which the dialogue between the characters is reflected. The novel functions the female body to reflect the connection between the narrator and her partner. The body becomes a witness to their intimacy and conflict. When the narrator and Miles fight, the body exposes it. The narrator’s statement, “when I went to wash myself off, I found a bit of red blood on the tissue, like a teardrop” (215), transmits that the body mourns silently, performing a gesture of pain and sorrow. Here, the body expresses what the narrator cannot verbalize, serving as a site of emotional communication that reflects intimacy and struggle.

The body in *Motherhood* expands into a terrain where reproduction and autonomy are tied through unequal gender relations. The work highlights how time, as a social and biological force, has a different impact on men and women when it comes to reproduction. To illustrate, the narrator mentions her irregular periods and tells time captures women's bodies and choices: "Time is always ticking for women. Whereas men, apparently, live in a timeless realm. In the dimension of men, there is no time—just space" (194). In this sense, time functions as a gendered burden. It is only the narrator who confronts the pressure of societal judges and the biological clock. While a man does not feel the pressure of time on himself, a woman highly experiences its limiting forces. That is why she reflects deeply on this issue.

The character's matricentric questions are not always found understandable by her partner. He sometimes finds the narrator's questions quite meaningless: "Miles never fantasizes about other lives, and he can't understand this part of me. *What a waste of time*, he once said. *If you're not actually going to do anything about it*" (210). Yet, as she states, Miles simply rests on his biological privilege. He is far away from such time-pressed interrogations: "But in some ways life is easier for him. It will always be easier for a man to know what he wants, and live his life accordingly. It is unfair of him to compare himself to me" (210). The narrator bases her doubts about whether to have a child on her conception of freedom. As she reflects, "Whenever I try to explain myself, he always says, *What's holding you back?* I cannot point to anything. What holds me back is my actual freedom" (210-211). It is concluded that reproduction means different for each sex. It may mean losing freedom for a woman, whereas it may not refer any struggle for a man. Thus, the question becomes not simply whether to have a child but becomes what a child would bring or steal from a woman.

In short, *Motherhood* focuses on the female body from a feminist perspective. It uncovers patriarchal institutions that capture the body. The novel exposes and challenges these institutions by prioritizing female experience and needs. The work problematizes the pressure of the biological clock. It illustrates how female biology is manipulated by societal judgments, the power of medicine, and partner relations. Building on that insight, reproduction is not a private preference but a structurally constrained decision. However, by refusing motherhood, the narrator challenges these forces, presenting a radical alternative to traditional expectations.

4.3.2. Literary Production vs. Reproduction

“‘All right, if you want to become a moon woman, I’m not going to stop you,’ Miss Ambitious Chekhovian says. ‘Go and get pregnant, gain all the pounds, and worry about breast-feeding, then raising the child, sending him to school, sending him to college, and before you know it, you will forget all about literature and writing.’”

Elif Shafak, *Black Milk* (2007)

Sheila Heti’s protagonist is caught between literary production and reproduction in *Motherhood*. She believes that literary creation is also a form of giving birth and elaborates reproduction holistically, not merely at a biological level. The character finds creativity and joy in literature, while simultaneously experiencing fear and a sense of identity loss in contemplating motherhood. She explicitly considers that a child occupies a woman’s life and may drive her away from the literary world. For her, it is literature, not a child, that grants pure joy and achievement. This section examines the character’s perspectives on literary production and reproduction, arguing that the novel presents writing as an alternative to biological motherhood and frames motherhood as a potential trap for an independent identity.

At narrative level, the text positions motherhood as a threat to the character’s individuality and independence in writing career. The character approaches having a child as an ambivalent experience. She cannot imagine what she will exactly face if she has a child: “Raising children is the opposite of everything I long for, the opposite of everything I know how to do, and all the things I enjoy. How not to give up all your ideals as you move through life. But also, how it’s okay to change” (185). She regards that motherhood brings unforeseen transformations to a woman’s life. She is ignorant of these changes and afraid that those may capture her literary identity and freedom: “I wonder if all of my thinking about having children is connected to losing faith in the bigger ideas—art, politics, romance” (184). In this frame, motherhood remains an indefinite setting. It creates stress, anxiety, and leads to risks for the continuity of freedom and an identity as a writer.

Bounding her writer identity tightly, the narrator is highly aware of women artists who cannot sustain their art lives after they become mothers. When she talks to a friend of the family, Sylvia, the protagonist points out Sylvia withdraws from art, implying the harsh responsibilities of motherhood: “Those first years were hard— *it’s still hard a lot*, she said. She’s not doing her art. Their three kids have grown” (81). When the character talks with

Miles about women artists having children, he confirms the impossibility of sustaining art and maternity together: “He said that one can either be a great artist and a mediocre parent, or the reverse, but not great at both, because both art and parenthood take all of one’s time and attention” (35). Miles’ words are not only his external observation but also a reflection of the narrator’s fears, as she believes she cannot divide her energy between art and motherhood and must devote it entirely to one.

Comparing often art and maternity, the character asks whether creating through the mind replaces creating through the body. In the view of her, literary production is a different form of biological creation. She suggests that as an author, there is no difference between herself and her cousin with six children, as she says: “My religious cousin, who is the same age as I am, she has six kids. And I have six books. Maybe there is no great difference between us, just the slightest difference in our faith—in what parts of ourselves we feel called to spread” (85). By acknowledging writing as a spiritual act of giving birth, the protagonist praises literary creation, depicting that both require devotion and continuity. This resonates with Hélène Cixous’s concept of *écriture féminine* in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, where writing becomes an act of feminine creativity and expression and she argues “[t]here is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink” (881). These lines theoretically back up Heti’s character’s construction of self as a subject who gives birth through writing. The language of biological motherhood and the language of literary fertility come across, and writing emerges as a form of creation.

As it has been mentioned before, the text demonstrates writing as the main joy of the character. She creates her own room to think, exist, and overcome the pain thanks to her pen. Writing becomes like a shelter for her that she can find tranquility. When she starts writing, time bends and the world steps back; time slows down, the room extends, and the suffering becomes bearable:

I had such a nice time the next day, pacing in the sunlight before my 4:30 lecture, realizing how much writing has given me, and feeling so lucky that this passion was mine—right there, in the center of my life. And you are never lonely while writing, I thought, it’s impossible to be—categorically impossible—because writing is a relationship. You’re in a relationship with some force that is more mysterious than yourself. As for me, I suppose it has been the central relationship of my life. (93)

The novel's idea of "writing is a relationship" indicates a Woolfian approach. As Woolf writes in her diary, "I can write and write and write now: the happiest feeling in the world" (96), the narrator also approaches writing from an intimate perspective. She thinks that writing is a shell that protects and makes her feel safe. When the door is shut, it eliminates danger. It does not bring loneliness but productivity. Thus, Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) resonates in Heti's *Motherhood*: "[A] lock on the door means the power to think for oneself" (115).

Literary production does not only create joy and protection but also creates a symbolic continuation of generation. The narrator suggests that writing lets ancestors circulate beyond their own time. Thanks to her literary power, the protagonist is able to deliver lineage without a biological reason. Thus, literature becomes a way of creating and celebrating a generation. As she puts it, "I want my grandmother to live in everybody, not just in one body from between my legs" (200), writing enables the character's family story to be heard. As a result, she gives birth and continues her family heritage not through a biological way but through literature.

Overall, *Motherhood* creates a tension between literary production and reproduction, revealing the impossible balance between artistic freedom and maternal duty. By blurring the distinction between literary creation and biological motherhood, the novel positions literature as a form of generative act. Writing grants the protagonist identity, joy, and the ability to transmit lineage, while motherhood, demanding time and attention, represents a potential interruption to her creative world. Ultimately, literary production becomes a means of emotional fulfillment, intellectual freedom, and self-possession, offering a radical alternative to conventional expectations of female reproduction.

4.3.3. Motherhood between Existential and Social Changes

"The most important force in the remaking of the world is a free motherhood."

Margaret H. Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (1920)

In *Motherhood*, the narrator positions the decision about having a child at the center, where existential motives meet social determinations. Scenes of coin tosses, fateful signs, menstrual tracking, writing a book upon motherhood, conversations with a partner, clinic,

family members, and friends complicate the character's process of decision-making and intertwine personal and social stances. These mentioned matters raise the tension and blur the meaning of choice, reflecting ambivalence and betweenness. Building on the earlier analysis of how reproduction choice is constructed by the biological clock, medical authority, and partner relations, as well as the tension between literary production and reproduction, this section brings internal and external conflicts of the character. This chapter will focus on the concept of motherhood between existential and social dimensions.

The concept of motherhood means a legitimacy of self-esteem for the unnamed narrator of *Motherhood*. In her view, maternity would affirm her value. It would mark her normal, confirm her capacity to birth, and also display her as one who is admired and desired:

Do I want children because I want to be admired as the admirable sort of woman who has children? Because I want to be seen as a normal sort of woman, or because I want to be the best kind of woman, a woman with not only work, but the desire and ability to nurture, a body that can make babies, and someone who another person wants to make babies with? Do I want a child to show myself to be the (normal) sort of woman who wants and ultimately has a child? (22)

The character interprets motherhood as a social worth, which is surrounded by institutional frames. She regards maternity as an accreditation of femininity. Being a mother means not only to bear a child but also to bear an acceptable woman type, to pass a femininity test. Thus, the desire in question is shaped around the hope of establishing an acceptable female identity rather than a pure wish to have a child. The character's psychological stance has a return in real life. The study of Donath et al. reveals that the uncertainty of women about whether to be a mother is quite related to their well-being and self-esteem (Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 3). Women's wish to desire for motherhood underlines the needs for success and acceptance. Supporting this result, one of the participants expresses her feelings as follows: "*My expectation of this process ... I have some sort of an internal expectation that by the end of the group process, I will want children, because that is much easier in our society. I kind of want to want*" (10). Accordingly, the narrator's statements also stages around the image of being an accepted woman in society from various aspects.

Although motherhood promises admiration and social validation, the character does not follow its seductive returns: "The feeling of not wanting children," she says, "is the feeling of not wanting to be someone's idea of me" (22). She regards that being a mother

would result in wearing a ready-made societal template of femininity. She explicitly rejects positioning herself in this frame: “Parents have something greater than I’ll ever have, but I don’t want it, even if it’s so great, even if in a sense they’ve won the prize” (22-23). Her rejection is not only simply to childbirth but to the societal norms that define womanhood. Furthermore, her decision not to be a mother is not a new matter for her; contrary, it is the echo of an older truth:

When I was younger, thinking about whether I wanted children, I always came back to this formula: if no one had told me anything about the world, I would have invented boyfriends. I would have invented sex, friendships, art. I would not have invented child-rearing. (41)

From the very beginning, her longings have always addressed toward building connections with people and artistic creation rather than generation continuity. In this sense, she enacts what Élisabeth Badinter identifies as a child-free woman, who prioritizes personal fulfillment and regards motherhood as a burden and the loss of freedom, energy, pleasure, money, intimacy, and an identity (125-126). Therefore, the character’s refusal is not a lack but a deliberate act of protection—a way of preservation of self and individual desires.

Even though she refuses maternity and tries to protect her individuality in that way, she cannot escape sadness and still suffers from the burden, which comes from the rejection of motherhood. She articulates that: “There is a kind of sadness in not wanting the things that give so many other people their life’s meaning” (23). She experiences alienation due to her childfree decision. She finds herself quite outside of a normative circle. Compared to others, rejection of having a child explicitly evokes the feelings of missing some significant points of life: “Why is my body doing this inside me every month, and how many opportunities could I miss? How stupid am I really?” (151). The narrator’s question poses not only a biological anxiety but also a symbolic fear of loss. Each menstrual cycle suggests a missed chance. This cycle raises tension between the decision and timely limited body, and every month becomes a concrete result of *failure*. She doubts and directs her questions to whether she decides on being a child-free woman through her own free will, sterilized from personal manipulations: “*What if I’ve suppressed my desire for children so much that my desire is unrecognizable to me?*” (83). She is afraid of adopting others’ ideas. Trying to find a pure personal idea, she deepens her questions and tries to find an accurate answer for herself by consulting different methods.

Believing that her friends have already found a true position and she is not, the character tries to reach an accurate answer for herself by turning to the signs, symbols, and divinatory elements, which test the decision across chance and language. By doing this, the character tries to decrease the impact of her free will and wants to hide behind a spiritual power. Significantly forming the structure and the narration pace of the novel, I Ching system⁸, for example, provides a mysterious frame that the character is able to ask her questions. This divinatory device brings a philosophical lens to the novel. The character can diversify her questionings and reach various approaches about the meaning of motherhood. The usage of this ritualistic technique demonstrates that every answer includes the seeds of another question. The character's consultation clearly carries her new point rather than closure. Similar to I Ching, the novel also includes tarot cards, fortune telling, and dreams to the character's search for meaning ahead of rational inquiry. These practices present an alternative knowledge, which operates symbols and reflection of the subconscious, desire, and fears. Considering all these ritualistic elements, the narrator shapes a cosmos where intuition dominates and questioning itself becomes valuable.

While reaching the end of the novel, the narrator gradually withdraws from divinatory elements and embraces her decision of being child-free. She considers the meaninglessness of depending on divinatory systems to justify her desires: "Even if you said yes, it wouldn't matter. You don't mean anything to me. [...] You are complete randomness, without meaning, and you are not showing me the way [...] and not being so insecure that I should need you to tell me what's what" (131). Thus, she no longer expects validation from external forces but claims authorship over her own life. When she reaches this result, it is biologically late to decide on motherhood. However, the character's concerns do not depend on biological reasons. She decides not to be a mother through personal view without the rigid boundaries of biological capacity:

Admit it when you have waited too late, when the time for something is passed. It can be too late not only for biological reasons, but because the moment has honestly passed. When the sun has set, the meal you eat cannot be called breakfast. I'm in the afternoon of my life. The time for children is breakfast. (267)

⁸ I Ching, also known as The Book of Changes, is an ancient Chinese text, dating back over three thousand years. Traditionally, people consult it by tossing coins or using yarrow stalks to create a pattern of six lines called a hexagram. Each hexagram points out a particular situation and offers guidance. It does not predict the future but shows how change is being formed. It is believed that prophecy is created by the energy of the person (Jung 33-61).

The character's statement points out the novel's most significant reconciliation between choice and identity. She senses time on a psychic level. Thus, she approaches the fulfillment of the meaning of a period, rather than a biological passing. The metaphor of "breakfast" above indicates motherhood within the promise of early life, and "the afternoon" implies a mature and aged period. Accordingly, her mood of possibility has already closed the path of motherhood.

The narrator celebrates her childlessness. This result does not bring sadness, grief, or regret to her. She receives relief: "I feel so relieved that it has passed—like a storm passing over my soul. The storm has passed and the clouds have given way to a brighter day, lighting up the world all around me" (266). Considering this, menopause functions as an epiphany, a moment of self-realization that solves the narrator's complex struggles upon motherhood. After tiring years of questioning, consulting various methods, and testing truly wishes, she finally reaches a calm shore. Her expression, "I experience biology's forgetting about me as an immense relief, as a sort of bliss" (267), tells how she senses this as liberation. After menopause, she is sure that she could protect herself from the institutional doctrines. In Rich's terms, the narrator transcends the socially directed ideals and moves toward motherhood as an experience—a form of liberated and self-defined understanding of motherhood grounded in feminist consciousness.

Considering the patriarchal setting of society, it is quite hard for the character to arrive at such an epiphany, which demands rejecting socially imposed ideals of motherhood. In a patriarchal social order, motherhood exists as a control mechanism. It urges women to endless duties, keeping them occupied and creating profit. The narrator discloses this logic by wisely asking who benefits when women are mothers. In line with this, she specifically draws attention to anti-abortion doctors:

[N]ot that they want this new person in the world, but that they want that woman to be doing the work of childrearing more than they want her to be doing anything else. There is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. There is something at-loose-ends feeling about such a woman. What is she going to do instead? What sort of trouble will she make? (32)

She sheds light on how medicine treats women as a possibility of danger and turns motherhood into a form of control. As Foucault asserts, "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political

strategy” (1), what appears as concern for life is essentially the mask for the desire to dominate women. In this sense, the childless woman is a threat, not because she lacks a child but because she might think, reject, write, organize, and destroy the controlling mechanisms.

The text reveals that institutional motherhood persists across generations. It has a strong root that captures individuals and sustains its rules. These practices have passed through tradition and manipulated individuals by limiting their sense and shaping their minds. The novel illustrates this matter in Shabbat dinner as follows:

[T]he girl who made chicken the way her mother did, which was the way her mother did: always tying the chicken legs together before putting it in the pot. When the girl asked her mother why she tied the legs together, her mother said, That’s the way my mother did it. When the girl asked her grandmother why she did it that way, her grandmother said, That’s how my mother did it. When she asked her great-grandmother why it was important to tie the chicken legs together, the woman replied, That’s the only way it would fit in my pot. (42)

The brief family memory portrays how tradition inhabits and makes its rules mandatory for the next generation. As mentioned in the passage above, it begins as a simple necessity and then evolves into a rigid practice and it no longer carries a significant reason. The narrator builds a bridge between this family tradition and motherhood as: “I think that is how childbearing feels to me: a once-necessary, now sentimental gesture” (42). In light of this, the text refers to this scene to illustrate how institutional motherhood operates in a similar way. Read alongside Rich, it creates conditions and prescriptions in which choices are blocked (58-59). Women adapt the doctrines of the institution about motherhood, circulate them across years, and then it becomes a norm that is quite hard to break.

The social climate of the novel presents that a woman could reject motherhood only if she has a more convincing life plan to replace it. Society demands to replace motherhood with another purpose, which is something equally meaningful: “You have to have some big plan or idea of what you’re going to do instead. [...] And you had better be able to tell it convincingly—before it even happens—what the arc of your life will be” (51). Society always chases her and wants to hear the character’s life plan as a whole. However, the character does not offer concrete reasons. She quits to prove her values or to express her choice through another goal.

While existential and social dimensions strain her gradually, the character could overcome them by extending the meaning of motherhood. As it has been discussed before, firstly, authorship becomes an alternative form of creation. She replaces writing with maternity. Secondly, she approaches the concept of motherhood by embracing it from different angles. To clarify, she believes that it is also possible to be a mother without a biological bond. In her view, motherhood is beyond the body. It is an emotional and moral capacity for care: “The whole world needs to be mothered. [...] There are lives and duties everywhere just crying out for a mother. That mother could be you” (168). Through this perspective, she transforms the meaning of motherhood from a biological bond to a moral responsibility, practiced through care, empathy, and thinking. This view of motherhood enables Rudick’s “maternal thinking.” As she suggests that maternal thinking aims to alleviate the needs of children and maintain connection (1995 130-131), the protagonist of *Heti* also follows this mindset. She believes that this form of maternity is more meaningful and valuable: “If I really wanted to have a baby, it would be better to adopt. [...] That would be a more worthwhile contribution to this world than adding one more troubled person from my own troubled womb” (178). By voicing this, she suggests motherhood as an ethical and social concept. In this framework, motherhood does not demand a biological bond, which allows the narrator to claim maternity and maternal care.

The protagonist of *Motherhood* experiences motherhood between existential and social dimensions. She embodies a tension and transforms this tension into a space of self-revealing. The character’s journey from uncertainty and trusting on external validations to self-powered identity is the flight from institutional motherhood to motherhood as an experience. The novel demonstrates how the idea of motherhood is deeply rooted in societal norms and patriarchal expectations. Considering that institutional motherhood occupies places and manipulates individuals in various ways, it is hard for them to find their accurate identities and personal desires. Rejecting biological determinism and refiguring creation and motherhood, the narrator of *Motherhood* claims an authentic self and puts forward the concept of motherhood beyond biological reproduction. By rejecting the traditional model of womanhood and motherhood, the character constructs a new form of femininity within the frame of matricentric feminism.

4.3.4. Negotiating the Mother-Daughter Bond

“I believe I am writing about my mother because it is my turn to bring her into the world.”

Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* (2007)

In *Motherhood*, Sheila Heti negotiates the mother-daughter bond as a site where inherited sorrow, female lineage, expectations from parents, and the burden of maternity collide. The novel presents motherhood as an intergenerational dialogue. The bond between mothers and daughters is always dynamic; it never cuts. Their connection is the reflection of the unresolved grief and a familial history marked by loss, exile, and survival. In the novel, mothers are the secondary identities of their daughters, carrying their own personalities, desires, and rage within them. Each daughter grows through the unfinished emotional work her mother leaves behind, and the mother becomes the terrain the daughter must reinterpret in order to bring both herself and her mother into being. This chapter will elaborate on the bond between mother and daughter not only as an interpersonal relationship but also as a site where cultural expectations, female inheritance, gendered responsibilities, and intergenerational silences converge.

Motherhood describes the experience of motherhood in a radically different way from traditional expectations. The mother of the narrator is portrayed as a character who is emotionally unavailable, overworked, and psychologically burdened. Rather than cheerfully nurturing, which is accepted as a natural motherhood, she is unable to display a traditional mother portrait. She is often desperate and melancholic. The narrator mentions the emotional state of the mother in detail: “My mother cried for forty days and forty nights. As long as I have known her, I have known her to cry. [...] She could never tell me what was wrong except to say, *I'm tired*” (15). Thus, she is not able to be an affectionate, self-sacrificing, energetic, strong, and joyful mother. Instead of this, she is a traumatized, wounded, and emotionally distant mother. This mother figure is the reflection of the broken of the angel in the house myth. She explicitly reveals her exhaustion and emotional depletion, reversing the idealized motherhood and the expectation of endless giving. While patriarchal understanding evaluates this form of a mother as failure, the matricentric feminist lens regards the feelings of exhaustion, grief, and withdrawal are the consequences of the institutional pressures placed on mothers. As Sarah LaChance Adams argues in her *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What a*

“Good” Mother Would Do (2014), such feelings are the natural dialogue between a mother and a child. They enable maternal ambivalence to be evident and legitimize the mother’s needs and desires (5). In this way, the narrator’s mother reflects what Adams describes, demonstrating a mother who honestly struggles rather than fulfilling an idealized role.

The mother has psychological distress and needs a space where she can be alone. However, her haunting familial history and mother identity do not allow her such solitude. She often dreams past and feels the pressure of the responsibility of motherhood, causing an increase in her depression level. The mother takes drugs to manage her psychological imbalance. For the narrator, the shifts in the mother’s behavior long remain an unsettling mystery. When the narrator realizes in her adulthood that her mother’s shifting moods align with a psychological disorder, she understands how challenging the situation is for the mother: “I felt I could identify any memory of my mother as either being on the drugs, or off them. On them, she is more cheerful, warm and delightful. Off them, she is sad and withdrawn” (256). The narrator mostly recalls the mother through her emotional changes instead of consistent maternal care or an intimate relationship. Since she is neither completely absent nor reliably exists, this tension forms the core of the narrator’s emotional memory. As a daughter, she is confronted with profound motherly pain and experiences unpredictability. Simultaneously, the mother struggles to regulate her shifting emotions. Thus, the work brings mother and daughter together in a shared space of vulnerability, where the mother’s fragmented and broken feelings and the child’s developing, fragile self intersect.

The novel voices the roots of the mother’s depression to a deeper emotional history. It bases the reason of the mother’s depression on the trauma and guilt she carries after leaving her ill mother in Hungary to start a new life in Canada. After her death, she frequently remembers her and remains haunted by an unresolved grief: “Along with the terrible grief, my mother felt so guilty, as though by abandoning her mother, she was the murderer. Around this time, her nightmares about her mother began” (73). The character blames herself for leaving her cancer-stricken mother behind, feeling she abandons her when she needs her most, and so she considers herself responsible for her death. Although it is the mother who encourages her daughter to move, and there is no rational connection between the mother’s death and the daughter’s moving, the daughter cannot dissociate herself from a guilt complex. This situation develops and creates trauma for her.

It is possible to interpret the character's gloomy mood as the result of the belief that she fails to embody the devoted, ever-present daughter she feels she is expected to be. Andrea O'Reilly illuminates in her *Matricentric Feminism* that such guilt stems from a cultural model of mother and daughter relationship. O'Reilly regards that daughters need a healthy dose of selfishness; otherwise, they are occupied by the patriarchal motherhood understanding, which demands daughters to be selflessness and devoted without limit (158). Read through a matricentric feminist lens, the character's suffering and her self-blame are gendered. The mother's loss affects the character profoundly, yet what creates the real trauma in her is not attending a full-time care for the mother. As Eichenbaum and Orbach argue in *Understanding Women*, while sons do not feel the regret of not caring with their mothers, daughters overwhelmingly internalize a sense of responsibility. Sons build their own lives and remain distant from domesticity; however, daughters are tightly bound to the maternal circle; they learn their roles as nurturers, and their first children are their mothers (57). This dynamic that Eichenbaum and Orbach mention resonates in the novel. In the character's profound guilt, there is the culturally imposed ideal of daughterhood. She mourns as patriarchal expectations oppressively surround her and govern her emotional life.

The mother's deep sense of tiredness is also shaped by the burden of motherhood, a role that requires continuous physical and emotional labor and leaves her depleted. Working long hours as a medical doctor, the character struggles among her professional responsibilities, the constant demands of childcare, and the emotional weight of a troubled marriage. Among all these, motherhood, already difficult enough to undertake, becomes a responsibility that produces constant pressure and vulnerability in the character's life. She is not able to undertake all these responsibilities and overcome the challenges of motherhood. She admits that she neglects her child while devoting her energy to save her marriage:

When my mother came to my room to say goodnight, I told her I loved her, and although I have said this many times before, this time she said, with a funny smile on her face, *I am surprised you love me, when I neglected you so much*. She said that before the divorce, she was focused on keeping the marriage together, not on loving her *kiddies*. She went on, *I paid attention to the wrong things*. [...] I asked her if motherhood had been the most important part of her life, and she blushed and said, No—at the very same moment that I interrupted her and said, You don't have to answer. I was there. (257)

She internalizes that motherhood is never a singular calling but one responsibility that requires a woman's full focus, energy, love, and time. Since she does not follow this maternal model, she finds herself as an insufficient, a dislocated, and a guilty mother. This point is in the dialogue with Sharon Hays's concept of "intensive mothering," which refers to the cultural expectations that mothers must give endlessly of their time, emotion, and energy, regardless of their needs (x). Looking at the character's life, she rejects the cultural and social requirements of motherhood and does not believe that motherhood is the most significant part of her life. Thus, she reverses the notion of intensive mothering. Through this experience, the text ultimately shows how powerful and overwhelming what is expected from mothers. It exposes the emotional cost and the suffering of mothers who cannot inhabit the ideal.

The text sheds light on the narrator's early, inward-turning impulse to interpret her mother's sorrow through her existence. As a child, she believed that she was the reason behind the mother's sadness. This belief becomes a defining lens through which she senses every moment of life. It raises anxiety, distorts her sense of self, and produces an early internalization of guilt. In this emotional climate, the boundaries between her inner world and her mother's suffering blur, producing childhood egocentrism in which the child holds herself responsible for every matter:

All through my childhood, I felt I had done something wrong. I searched my every gesture, my words, the way I sat upon a chair. What was I doing to make her cry? A child thinks she is the cause of even the stars in the sky, so of course my mother's crying was all about me. Why had I been born to cause her pain? (15)

This passage uncovers how the egocentrism of childhood operates. She places herself at the center of every cause and consequence. She interprets the mother's sorrow through the only available framework—her own presence, gestures, and supposed failures. In this early cognitive and emotional landscape, guilt forms the sense of self, which defines the child as the source of harm. In light of this, the narrator applies relational thinking and finds that if her mother cries, she must be the responsible one. Such a reading brings Jessica Benjamin's account of mutual recognition. According to Benjamin, children cannot separate their own lives from and mothers' experiences. Hence, they tend to explain mothers' sadness through their own faults (23). The novel reveals this dynamic and creates emotional tension. The text turns private misrecognition into a central motif, illustrating how a child's longing for meaning grows.

Motherhood constructs such a matricentric feminist narration that it neither leads the readers to blame the mother nor to ignore the child's wounded feelings. The text offers equal clarity for both the mother's and daughter's experiences, suggesting complex emotional dialogues shaped by the expectations placed on both women. It demonstrates the feelings and experiences of a mother who struggles in mothering by foregrounding her exhaustion, sadness, and emotional depletion. Likewise, it also presents the emotional state of the child who is shaped and sometimes harmed by the emotional climate of the home. However, as stated at the very beginning of the paragraph, this view does not result in mother-blaming. The narrator hinders any reductive moral judgment by saying, "it wasn't my mother's fault. And it wasn't my fault, either" (248). This perspective dismantles the Freudian understanding that places the mother as the primary psychic cause of the child's wounds. In rejecting the mother paradigm as the source of trauma, the narrative embraces a wider criticism that holds institutional motherhood responsible. Thus, the novel has a matricentric feminist understanding, which aims to uncover the structural forces and empower both mothers and daughters. Therefore, it does not blame the mother but tries to understand her psyche and the reasons behind her behaviors.

The novel breaks the possibility of the daughter's blaming the mother through her admiration for her. It is shared that the mother locates in a different apartment for several months to focus on studying for her exams. When she was a child, the narrator visited the mother with her father and watched her carefully. She is fascinated by the world of her. She illustrates the setting of the mother and her excitement as follows:

When I was little, I would often find my mother sitting in bed under the covers, with pens and markers all around her, highlighting through the heaviest medical textbooks. [...] There seemed to be nothing so glamorous or romantic in the world as a mother who lived alone in an apartment with her colored pens and books. I wanted to grow up to be like her. I wanted to live in an apartment, too, with no one around to bother me. I loved to visit her there. (74)

This scene suggests the mother not as emotionally absent or neglectful, but as a figure defined by intellectuality and self-possession. The child does not sense the mother's temporal separation as abandonment. Rather, she romanticizes the productivity and autonomy. The mother, evoking the feeling of emulation for the daughter, becomes a living embodiment of what Virginia Woolf highlights: "[A] woman must have money and a room of her own" (7).

Also, the setting is the moment when the mother becomes apparent to the child, not only as a parent but also as a woman living in her own inner world. Therefore, the scene allows the mother figure to be seen as multidimensional, not solely tied to maternal identity, and possessing individual desires. Rich's refer to the mothers as, "we need selves of our own to return to" (54), is realized in the novel. By inventing a life focused on self-development, the mother asserts intellectual independence, and by doing this, she becomes a role model for her daughter, who learns a form of womanhood exceeding maternal identity and legitimizing a room, a life, and a world of one's own.

As the daughter grows up, she also desires to have a room of her own, which indicates the continuation of the familial tradition. When she finishes high school, she moves out of her parents' house and rents a room. She depicts this room as, "[i]t was such a depressing little room, with a tiny bathroom attached. But for me, it was absolute heaven" (39). The narrator adopts the mother's intellectual and individual heritage. In light of Sara Ahmed's argument, she builds a feminist life that is oriented by the accumulation of ideas and desires, emerging from what Ahmed describes as "an affective inheritance" (20). The daughter's embrace of her small rented room echoes her mother's earlier experience. Taken as a whole, the daughter's and mother's parallel quests for solitary space transform the room into an intergenerational field. Through this transference, the daughter inherits not only a place but also a feminist consciousness.

However, the text's feminist evoking voice is interrupted by the mother's worries about her daughter. Although the daughter's move into her own space follows the mother's early steps toward autonomy and independence, the mother cannot recognize this gesture as a continuation of self-discovery and growth. She becomes upset, confused, and feels abandoned:

My mother stood there crying, hurt. Why had I left our family, and why had I left our beautiful home, to live in this lonely little room, with only a hot plate, no kitchen, and just enough room for a bed and a desk? My mother also left home when she was seventeen—to attend medical school in the nearest town. But she didn't see my moving out as a similar act to hers—moving out in order to start my life and write, both of us ready to work as soon as we could, eager to work forever. (40)

The room turns into a place where desires, independence, and familial expectations collide. The mother's reaction exposes the emotional weight that feminine heritage carries. In this

tension, the bond between the mother and daughter reveals itself as a complex and fragile matter. The daughter's desire for freedom is interpreted as a threat and causes an ambivalent maternal structure. It somehow implies hierarchical bond, which positions the mother as an authoritarian figure and the daughter as a subject who must negotiate her autonomy within the emotional boundaries the mother sets. Having the same discussion point, Luce Irigaray's *And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other*, a hybrid text that blends philosophical inquiry with poetic and psychoanalytic reflections, captures this ambivalent mother-daughter relationship with striking clarity:

You take care of me, you keep watch over me. You want me always in your sight in order to protect me. You fear that something will happen to me. [...] And I no longer need your belly, your arms, your eyes, or your words to return or to leave. I am still so close to you, and already so far away. [...] You've prepared something to eat. You bring it to me. You feed me/yourself. But you feed me/yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up completely with your offering. (321, 322)

Irigaray's speaker dramatizes the conflict between the mother's care and the daughter's effort to claim an independent self. The mother's gestures of care, watching over, protecting, feeding, appear as nurturing on the surface level; however, these gestures cause a deeper anxiety, blurring the boundaries and damaging the autonomy. Similarly, the daughter of *Motherhood* stands at the edge where intimacy and separation encounter. As Eichenbaum and Orbach argue in their study of mother-daughter dynamics, the emotional intensity of the mother often complicates the daughter's attempts at separation. However, the narrator insists on establishing an independent self, which is learned through the mother's life. The character seeks to have a feminist bond and desires to continue, develop, and transform the power she receives from her mother. Thus, she enacts what matricentric feminism asserts as the daughter's active effort for the maternal bond, which is saving it from the patriarchal line and creating a renewed relational space.

The daughter believes that writing is the way of establishing, celebrating, and healing the mother-daughter bond. While writing this novel, the narrator leaves the position of helplessness in childhood, which is unable to understand and heal the wound of the mother. She now becomes the one who approaches the intergenerational story of mothers in her family. She trusts that writing enables a restorative power: "So I will stop her from crying. Once I am finished writing this book, neither one of us will ever cry again" (16). In claiming

such power, she asserts authorship as a form of maternal care that can dismantle the emotional ruptures passed from the mother to the daughter. She hopes to transform inherited sorrow into something bearable, perhaps even curative: “I think this book is the most healed and loving form I can make” (276). The mother accepts the narrator as the bridge between generations due to her writing. She becomes the one who gives birth to their family story. When she receives an e-mail from her mother after reading the pages she has written, the mother affirms this situation by saying:

My mother was the person I loved the most, was the most important person in my life for the longest time. [...] You will be soon forty years old and she died about forty years ago. You never knew her, and you are the one who will make her alive forever. It is magical! And yes, the Universe is back to perfect” (283).

The narrator, who does not want to be a mother biologically, achieves to sustain her familial circle through writing. She keeps their family lineage alive by telling the stories of the women before her. Due to this effort, she lightens her mother’s pain, and sorrow fades away. Writing allows her to understand what her mother could not express and to give shape to what remained unresolved trauma. Thus, without giving a biological birth, the narrator performs another kind of creation, which celebrates her and her family through language.

To conclude, *Motherhood* offers the bond between a mother and daughter as a complex matter. It is not a stable bond but a dynamic terrain shaped by emotional difficulties and unmet expectations. The mother is opposed to the traditional image of maternal selflessness. She is wounded and psychologically burdened, which hinders an intimate connection to the daughter. The daughter, who cannot understand the reason for her mother’s depression as a child, now seeks in adulthood to approach her pain with awareness and to engage it through her writings. Writing through a matricentric feminist sense, she achieves to build a bridge in her generation. The intergenerational exchange of stories with writing becomes a way of refusing silence and sustaining the broken relationship between a mother and a daughter. It affirms experience and creating new forms of connections that do not based on biological reproduction or traditional models of care. Ultimately, *Motherhood* suggests that the mother-daughter bond can be redesigned through feminist motivation. It allows women to inherit, transform, and empower the legacies that shape them. As Virginia Woolf writes, “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (83), Sheila Heti also turns toward the

maternal past, using writing as a tool to think through maternal dynamics and the complexities of motherhood.

4.3.5. Structural and Experiential Fragmentation: Maternal Counter-Narrative

“Her sense that society, adulthood, marriage, motherhood, all these things, were somehow masterfully designed to put a woman in her place and keep her there—this idea had begun to weigh on her.”

Rachel Yoder, *Nightbitch* (2021)

In contemporary fiction, maternal counter-narrative is rare. Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* occupies a pivotal place within this field. The novel presents a female figure rejecting motherhood and suggesting alternatives to biological maternity. Her rejection is built around the themes of the female body, biological clock, medical authority, partner relations, literary production, motherhood between existential and social dimensions, and mother-daughter bond. The work meticulously draws a line between cultural obligations of motherhood and personal desires. While doing this, the novel applies the autofiction technique, which makes the work quite personal, intimate, and self-revealing. Centering the matter of motherhood refusal, *Motherhood* carries the text to the framework of matricentric feminism. The character experiences the concept of motherhood not through a biological form but through artistic creativity and maternal epistemology. Through this narration, Heti destroys the linear destiny of motherhood and builds an ongoing inquiry, autonomy, and creativity.

The novel reflects the circulated nature of the female body and its experiences through its narration and fragmented structure. The novel is divided into twelve chapters, which are titled according to the narrator's physical tempo and bodily rhythm. This twelve-part design can be interpreted as corresponding to the twelve months of a year, implying that the text follows a timely process. Deepening the structural design of the novel, the first chapters are organized around physical spaces—*New York*, *Home*, *Book Tour*, and *Home*, respectively. The author introduces many minor characters across these sections, and they collectively raise the tension between the idea of institutional motherhood and motherhood as an experience. When the narrator confronts people, her feeling of anxiety intensifies and leads to many internal and external conflicts. On the other hand, when she directs her lens to the body more,

Motherhood starts to present bodily chapter titles, starting with *PMS* and ending with *Ovulating*. The last chapter of the novel, *Ovulating*, is crucial in terms of not returning the narrator to PMS or menstruation again. The novel's end with the *Ovulation* chapter tells that the cycle has fulfilled its purpose, which refers to the narrator's literary birth.

Motherhood enriches the grief of not deciding and uncertainty through a set of images and motifs—the knife, the two dogs on the platform, and Jacob Wrestling the Angel. These images and motifs operate collectively to shape a coherent visual and emotional language for the narrator's conflicts. The image of a knife, for instance, indicates the sharpness of decision. It implies how painful it is to decide on and give up one side. Moreover, the image of two dogs on the platform, one of which gets into the train and the other leaves behind, visualizes the same tension. It symbolizes the decision she made and abandoned. Finally, the motif of Jacob Wrestling the Angel carries the struggle of choice into an existential realm. This motif refers to the character's inner struggle between two opposing forces. When she finally decides on one side, this battle is resolved, and the character can speak with a sense of peace: "Then I named this wrestling place Motherhood, for here is where I saw God face-to-face, and yet my life was spared" (284). These recurring images trace a continuous movement from uncertainty toward decision making. They embody abstract struggles of the character and reflect the physical and emotional difficulty of creation.

In the character's development, Heti does not portray the narrator as moving toward a traditional resolution. Instead, she presents the growth of the character through her ability to indecision to certainty. The transformation of the character is subtle and quite personal. While she is desperate at the very beginning of the novel, she reaches relief and self-understanding at the end. This transformation actualizes thanks to reaching a certain decision for motherhood. When she finally understands that she does not want to be a mother but rather to dedicate herself to literary creation and experience the other possibilities of motherhood, she has a profound sense of clarity and alignment. The resolution comes with the character's realization that writing itself is a generative act, a form of giving birth through language.

The text offers a new perspective on the concept of motherhood. It demonstrates that not becoming a mother biologically can also constitute a meaningful engagement with the experience. The character's question, "[b]ut how do you describe the absence of something? [...] My lack of the experience of motherhood is not an experience of motherhood. Or is it? Can I call it a motherhood, too?" (159), explicitly extends the biological boundaries and

rejects fixed identities. This perspective of the novel is equal to the ideas of matricentric feminism, which treats motherhood not only as a biological experience but also as an epistemological standpoint in which social, cultural, psychological, and political forces are analyzed. Created through this perspective, *Motherhood* transforms biological maternal experience into a form of feminist intellectual creativity.

As the discussion draws to a close, Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* is a counter-maternal narrative that rejects biological motherhood and embraces literary creation. Heti's narration allows one to think about motherhood from different possibilities. The text clearly demonstrates literary production as a generative act that includes creative energy. It explores a space of thought, self-interrogation, and the possibility of identity transformation. Having a tone between anxiety and relief, the work reveals how the concept of motherhood is surrounded by patriarchal forces. As a counter-maternal narration, *Motherhood* embraces motherhood as an experience and refuses motherhood as an institution.

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined Elisa Albert's *After Birth* (2015) and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018) through the theoretical framework of matricentric feminism. The study has recognized that in a patriarchal setting, motherhood is a socially, culturally, psychologically, and politically constituted institution rather than a biologically predetermined experience. By situating both novels within the socio-cultural atmosphere of fourth-wave feminism, the research has demonstrated how contemporary literature explores, questions, and re-imagines motherhood. Both texts challenge idealized maternal expectations by bringing to the forefront the interior, emotional, and existential dimensions of women's complex negotiations with maternity. Thus, it has been asserted that maternal subjectivity deserves sustained critical attention.

The analysis of *After Birth* has indicated that Albert's maternal narrative brings raw and often suppressed realities of postpartum life. Ari's maternal authoritarian voice draws attention to the emotional labor and vulnerability that remain hidden beneath societal expectations for the maternal figure. Through intense depictions of maternal rage, physical pain, psychological exhaustion, and the desperate need for solidarity among women, the novel dismantles the sacred cultural image of motherhood. The character's gradual movement from maternal isolation toward female solidarity signals a subtle but meaningful inner development. Her tone, which does not deny the challenging aspects of motherhood, carries the work into a sharp, self-reflective, and resistant narrative of motherhood. In this sense, it has been figured out that *After Birth* demonstrates how contemporary maternal narratives can resist, reject, and destroy cultural prescriptions by giving a space to the natural contradictions of motherhood.

The criticism of *Motherhood* has put forward that Heti's maternal counter-narrative leads to thinking about the possibilities of motherhood. The novel discusses that the refusal of biological motherhood and accepting a childfree identity do not signify a lack, but rather an alternative mode of creation. In this framework, the novel suggests that literary production can itself function as a form of birth, a generative act through which the narrator reshapes her

identity and agency. By positioning writing as a parallel to—and sometimes a substitute for—motherhood, Heti challenges the cultural insistence on a single, normative path for women and instead proposes an alternative among motherhoods. Considering these points, *Motherhood* suggests a maternal counter-narrative and demonstrates the harsh expectations of society, personal inquiries, the limits of the biological clock, as well as the personal growth from uncertainty to certainty.

These analyses have revealed that Albert and Heti contribute significantly to contemporary feminist literature by offering candid portrayals of maternal subjectivity. Their works reverse traditional expectations from women and open a space in which maternal ambivalence, rage, guilt, doubt, desire, and depression can be articulated within a feminist consciousness. Having subtle but consistent psychological growth of the characters, these works exemplify matricentric feminist Bildungsromane. The characters grow through their emotions, experiences, acceptances, and rejections. When they reach the resolution part, they exhibit quite different selves, shaped by not external transformations but internal change, self-knowledge, and a redefined relationship to motherhood. Therefore, it is possible to study *After Birth* and *Motherhood* as matricentric feminist Bildungsromane, which offers a new categorization into the center of contemporary feminist literary studies.

The study has shown that *After Birth* and *Motherhood* reject phallogentric tradition and embrace matricentric feminist narration in which female experience and questioning about motherhood are inhabited. Focusing on the female experience, the works portray how contemporary women struggle with institutional motherhood and search for a feminist community to affirm their ideas and desires. They demonstrate that contrary to patriarchal arguments, there is no single definition of motherhood but *motherhoods*. Although patriarchal sense accepts only biological maternity as the legitimate form of mothering, these novels reveal a wider spectrum of maternal identities. Thus, by shifting narrative authority from patriarchal perspectives to feminist ones, both novels dismantle the phallogentric assumptions. They are free from the male gaze. This thesis identifies this shift as a key narrative intervention for the contemporary maternal novel. Since they broaden the possibilities of maternal representation, the attempts of *After Birth* and *Motherhood* are quite significant.

Employing a matricentric feminist lens, the thesis has demonstrated that these novels not only elaborate mothers or maternal dilemmas, but they also structurally and thematically center maternal perspectives as the primary *epistemological* standpoint. In this context, the

thesis has approached the theme of motherhood as an experience, institution, and also as an epistemological being. In this thesis, matricentric feminism's emphasis on women's lived realities allows for a reading practice that values the characters' embodied experience and psychological states, as well as the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions that structure their maternal subjectivities. Due to the possibilities of matricentric feminism, this thesis is able to put forward that motherhood is not only a concept that remains within biological boundaries, but is also shaped by social, cultural, political, and psychological elements.



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