

## Motherly and feminist reflections in contemporary narratives

written by women /

*Reflexões feministas e maternas em narrativas contemporâneas*

*escritas por mulheres*


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### ABSTRACT

The motherhood romanticization works as a means to control the bodies and reproduction in the patriarchal system, making it compulsory: building up the belief that women are only fulfilled after giving birth, also putting the mother's love as a means to exploit the act of caring, something that is not imposed on fathers. Although idealized, real motherhood women complain of exhaustion, solitude and lack of public policies and social support. The feminist movement must face motherhood as fundamental to the movement of freeing women, from the sexual and reproductive rights to the planning and division of tasks and mental overload. Race and social classes are also intertwined, being black women the most common victims of violent acts and their children victims of violent acts. Contemporary female writers are watchful to these questions and desecrate motherhood in many narratives. This paper has the objective of bringing a feminist reflection about mothering, not faced as something natural and impository to all women, but as a process that involves a series of cultural and political questions, from the reading and discussion of female authors such as Adichie (2017), Collins (2019), hooks (2019 e 2020), Mendonça (2014), D'Ávila (2019) and Gonzalez (2020) and from a host of narratives from female contemporary authors from Brazil, Canada, Caribbean and African countries like Atwood (2017), Condé (2020), Emecheta (2018), Evaristo (2016), Leite (2004), Luft (2012), Mukasonga (2017),

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Munro (2014), Ntshingila (2016) and Rezende (2014), which justifies the pertinence of the subject beyond its national borders.

**KEYWORDS:** Motherhood; Mothering; Feminism; Contemporary Narratives.

#### RESUMO

*A romantização da maternidade funciona como um meio de controle dos corpos e da reprodução no sistema patriarcal, tornando-a compulsória: constrói-se a crença de que mulheres só se tornam plenas após terem filhos e se coloca o amor materno como meio de exploração do cuidar, algo que não se impõe aos pais. Apesar da idealização, na realidade as mães queixam-se de exaustão, solidão e carecem de políticas públicas e apoio social. O movimento feminista precisa encarar as pautas maternas como fundamentais ao movimento de libertação das mulheres, envolvendo desde os direitos sexuais e reprodutivos à divisão de tarefas e sobrecarga mental. Também atravessam as categorias de raça e classe, sendo as mulheres negras e seus filhos as maiores vítimas de violências. Escritoras contemporâneas estão atentas a essas questões e dessacralizam a maternidade em diversas narrativas. Esse artigo tem como objetivo trazer uma reflexão feminista sobre a maternagem, não encarada como algo natural e impositivo a todas as mulheres, mas como um processo que envolve uma série de questões culturais e políticas, a partir da leitura e discussão de autoras como Adichie (2017), Collins (2019), hooks (2019 e 2020), Mendonça (2014), D'Ávila (2019) e Gonzalez (2020) e de um panorama de narrativas de autoras contemporâneas do Brasil, Canadá, Caribe e países africanos, como Atwood (2017), Condé (2020), Emecheta (2018), Evaristo (2016), Leite (2004), Luft (2012), Mukasonga (2017), Munro (2014), Ntshingila (2016) e Rezende (2014), o que justifica a pertinência do tema para além das fronteiras nacionais.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Maternidade; Maternagem; Feminismo; Narrativas contemporâneas.

## 1 Introduction

Compulsory motherhood and its idealized models built in patriarchal society impact the lives of women, whether they are mothers or not. Mothers feel loneliness and exhaustion; non-mothers, social pressure; to both, judgement and guilt. These impositions contribute for the motherhood or its non-experience to become a frustrating experience, even though women are aware of their advances brought by the feminisms.

When we proposed a mini-course<sup>1</sup> that aimed at the reading of some poems and short stories that problematize this sacralized motherhood, we realized how the participants longed for this type of space and found in literature a comfort and an identification that provided them with connection with their children, with their mothers and with themselves. We believe that maternal feminist reflections can recreate different narratives for women and cast a gentler look at mothers. From this experience, we have gathered other narratives from diverse origins that dialogue with our reflections, expanding the non-hegemonic repertoire and observing how multiple motherhoods are present in contemporary literature.

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<sup>1</sup> The mini-course “Feminist and maternal reflections on literature written by women”, has already been proposed twice in different events: in 2020, at the *V Colóquio Nacional 15 de outubro & VIII ENLIJE – Encontro Nacional sobre Literatura Infanto-Juvenil e Ensino*, and in 2021 at the *V Jornada Nacional de Línguas e Linguagens & I Jornada Internacional de Línguas e Linguagens*, always with a good number of subscribers and good participation in their own.

Our work seeks to bring examples of feminist reflections on motherhood in various contemporary narratives of authors from Brazil, Canada and countries of the Caribbean region and the African continent. We believe that by incorporating maternal agendas as feminist agendas, the women's movement grows and destabilizes one of the main elements of body control and reproduction in the patriarchal system. It is necessary to hear what mothers have to say about their ambivalent experiences of motherhood.

Therefore, we bring below some feminist and maternal theoretical assumptions in order to collaborate for a conception of feminist motherhood, from authors such as Chimamanda Adichie (2017), Patricia Collins (2019) and bell hooks (2019 and 2020). We will also use Maria Mendonça's (2014) doctoral thesis, in which she shares Andrea O'Reilly's assumptions about matricentric feminism. We also use the text of Manuela D'Ávilla (2019), which merges her account of maternal experience and resistance in the current Brazilian scenario with the longings for social transformation of a candidate for vice-presidency, and Lélia Gonzalez (2020), who investigates the racist and sexist implications in Brazilian black motherhood. In the sequence, we trace multiple maternities and motherhoods in contemporary narratives written by women from Brazil, Canada, Caribbean and African countries such as Atwood (2017), Condé (2020), Emecheta (2018) ), Evaristo (2016), Leite (2004), Luft (2012), Mukasonga (2017), Munro (2014), Ntshingila (2016) and Rezende (2014), demonstrating the relevance of the theme in literature and feminisms that go beyond national borders.

## 2 Feminism and motherhood: a little history

The experience of motherhood is capable of empirically awake the feminist consciousness as we notice that all the discourse novelted about mothers does not find support in reality: patriarchal society cares little about women and children. Although it continues to condemn abortion and speaks in defense of the family, the conservative wave does not recognize maternal demands or offer public policies aimed at mothers, because it sees their needs as inherent obligations to the female subject.

This is a historically situated and socially reinforced construction in the media, advertising, and more recently on social networks. Mendonça (2014) locates the origins of the elastic mother<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The *Elastic Woman* is a concept of the Brazilian psychoanalyst Maria Helena Fernandes (2006, *apud* MENDONÇA, 2014) that refers to the character Helena Pera from the animated film *The Incredibles* (Disney Pixar, 2004), a superhero with powers of elasticity and mother of three children. According to the author, it is a synthesis of the ideal of

in the eighteenth century. Such roles became noble and were encouraged by the ideological discourses of maternal instinct and sacrifice. In the 19th century, romantic love operated the marriage between the woman and the home, establishing the nuclear family and the bourgeois home. Marriage by love comes to be seen as an ideal of happiness to be achieved by women, and thus sets itself as the horizon of personal fulfillment of women as mothers, wives, and stay-at-home spouses. It was in the Victorian era that domesticity was sentimentalized with the exaltation of the maternal figure, converted into an angel of the home, and the bourgeois home came to be seen from the perspective of the private world. The gaze on the child was also greatly transformed, thus operating the separation between the economic and political public world as a male matter, and the domestic, intimate and unpaid, as a feminine one.

In the between-wars period of the twentieth century, many of the bourgeois feminist claims were met with the participation of women in the workforce. However, in the post-war period, there was a state incentive largely reinforced by advertising the female return to domesticity. This is the period when Betty Friedan records the middle-class American women's discontentment in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), about the frustrations arising from marriage and domestic isolation, and childcare. Mapping this collective unhappiness was an important milestone for the feminist movement of the 1960s, also known as the second feminist wave. The white feminists of the second wave questioned the naturalization of sexual roles culturally imposed on biological reductionist arguments that the female nature was docile and intended for maternal and domestic care, and they would also be less intellectually capable. Such reductionism camouflaged the origins of oppression against women, which is the result of a historical process, situated in the patriarchal West and in the origins of the modern and capitalist world.

In this period, manuals on good maternal practices also proliferated. The industry had expanded progressively with publications on parenting, aimed mostly at the female public. Such publications taught techniques or brought assumptions from experts about raising children, teaching women how to be mothers.

However, these publications did not bring only benefits. In fact, they reinforce the model of the good mother, always present and patient, who should now anticipate the needs of her children. Maternal responsibility under the children's mental health was emphasized with such intensity that it ended up reinforcing feelings of inadequacy,

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postmodern women, overloaded with the accumulation of functions, which result from the expansion of ideals: mother, professional, wife, beautiful, accomplished, the Elastic Woman suffers from the guilt for not achieving unattainable standards of beauty and domestic efficiency imposed on mother women who work outside or at home, resulting in exhaustion, which would be the loss of this "superpower". Elastic disruption translates into stress, irritability, anxiety, depression, *burnout*, panic, among other psychopathologies.

anxiety, guilt and tension among mothers who thought they were unable to meet all these demands, because they worked outside or because they did not identify with "natural instincts". (MENDONÇA, 2014, p. 93, translated by the authors)

In the 1980s and 1990s, during the Conservative Wave of The United States, mothers and children consolidate themselves as profitable markets and there is a growing sophistication of products and advertising aimed at this segment, as well as magazines that deal with the theme. Mary Del Priore (2014) warns that in these decades the advertising market was incisive, and mother and son began to surround themselves with objects and images that actively inserted them in the world of consumption. The culture of motherhood is consolidated, today also reproduced through social networks.

In 1986, Adrienne Rich published "*Of woman born*", a precursor work in maternal studies when addressing the ambivalence of feelings repressed by the culture of motherhood. "By revealing her intimate feelings and questioning the culture of motherhood that was over the white Middle Class of America from the 1950s to the 1970s; Rich deconstructed the figure of the "natural mother", as the only identity with which women would find their greatest gratification, by staying at home all day with their children" (MENDONÇA, 2014, p. 88, translated by the authors).

In Brazil, of course, the feminist movement presents a distinct development. When Betty Friedam came to Brazil in 1971, at the invitation of Rose Marie Muraro, we lived under a military dictatorship. The feminist cause appeared united with democratic claims promoted by the left wing and the Catholic Church. These factors propitiated a series of impasses around women's claims. It is also observed that Friedam's ideas did not apply well to Brazil, given the evident differences between the conditions of white middle-class American women and Brazilian women, especially black and poor women. Our colonial and slave-owning past have implications of race and class that add up to gender issues.

But it is precisely that anonymous black woman, inhabitant of the periphery, in the lows of life, who suffers most tragically the effects of terrible white guilt. Precisely because it is she who survives based on service delivery, holding the family duties practically alone. This is because her man, her brothers or her children are the object of systematic police persecution. (GONZALEZ, 2019, p. 245, translate by the authors)

In *Racismo e sexismo na cultura brasileira*, Lélia Gonzalez (2019) analyzes discourses about race in Brazilian culture that she characterizes as "a neurotic teenager". "For us, racism is the symptom that characterizes *Brazilian cultural neurosis*. In this sense, we will see that its articulation with sexism has violent effects on black women in particular" (GONZALEZ, 2019, p.

238, translated by the authors). Three denominations are discussed to reflect on the condition of black women in Brazilian society: biracial person, domestic and black mother.

She's the mother in this crazy Brazilian culture. Since the girl is the woman, then the "bá" is the mother. The white woman, the so-called legitimate wife, is just the other one who, however impossible as it may seem, only functions to give birth to the children of the lord. She does not perform the maternal function. It is done by the black. That is why the black mom is the mother. (GONZALEZ, 2019, p. 249, translate by the authors)

Patricia Hill Collins (2019) talks about the ambiguities of black motherhood. If on the one hand there is the cult of archetypal motherhood, in which we find an appreciation of motherhood, on the other hand there is the reinforcement of the discourse of devotion, sacrifice and unconditional love.

Black motherhood is a fundamentally contradictory institution. African American communities value motherhood, but the ability of black mothers to deal with the intersectional oppressions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation does not mean that they are necessarily able to transcend the injustices that characterize these oppressions. (COLINS, 2019, p. 322, translate by the authors)

These black matriarchs are usually described as "warrior women," a notion that camouflages gender and race inequalities. One way in an attempt to overcome these crossroads is precisely the one of politicization.

Some women see motherhood as a burden that stifles their creativity, exploits their work and makes them complicit in their own oppression. For others, motherhood promotes personal growth, elevates status in black communities and serves as a catalyst for social activism. These apparent contradictions coexist both in African American communities and families and in women individually. (COLINS, 2019, p. 296, translated by the authors)

The depoliticization of motherhood is the result of this historical process situated in the formation of the modern capitalist State that has surrounded women's freedom, operating the division between economic production and social reproduction, and it was deeply studied by Silvia Federici in *Calibã e a bruxa* (2019). This process also involves what feminists denounce as the feminization of poverty. "Reproduction was relegated "to the family", where it was feminized and sentimentalized, defined as "care" as opposed to "work", performed for "love" as opposed to money" (ARRUZZA; BHATTACHARYA; FRASER, 2019, p. 109, translated by the authors). These human resources spent on compulsory motherhood hinder the emancipation of working women, because there is in the patriarchal and racist capitalist system an intersectionality in oppression among the categories of gender, race and class (AKOTIRENE, 2019). Capitalist society does not

value reproductive work to give birth, take care of and maintain human beings, although the economy also depends on it.

### 3 Feminist motherhoods: contributions of the matricentric feminism

The Canadian Andrea O'Reilly is considered responsible for the institutionalization of *motherhood studies*, proposing a matricentric feminism. It is from her publications that we have more clearly the distinction *between* motherhood, *linked to* the biological power of pregnancy and the institutional, symbolic and cultural meanings of the term, and *mothering, practical experiences and the* maternal work of taking care of children (to mother)<sup>3</sup>. We can also say that in our society, "being a mother" has a much broader meaning than simply "having children", if we compare it, for example, with the social meaning of fatherhood. Some talk about "active fatherhood" to refer to current male efforts to participate more consciously in raising children, which only reinforces the distinction. Our society gives men the option of choosing whether to engage in paternal issues, even to become parents or not to the children they may have and to abandon or belittle. The same is not the case for women, to whom motherhood is compulsory.

For O'Reilly, the institution of motherhood is defined by patriarchal culture based on ten ideological assumptions that make the practice of maternalization oppressive for *women: essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologization, specialization, intensification and depoliticization*. Maria Collier de Mendonça (2014) argues that these ten assumptions are neither natural nor inevitable to maternal practices, so they can be deconstructed. That is why we defend the importance of knowing more counternarratives of motherhood that encourage feminist and empowered maternal practices.

This ideology of patriarchal motherhood, as Mendonça (2014) states, weakens the relevance of motherhood, socially devalues maternal work and her endless working hours, masks the difficulties that exist in reconciling paid work and maternal work, makes mothers feel overwhelmed, fatigued and guilty due to the arduous work and set of responsibilities they assume alone.

According to bell hooks (2020), feminist motherhood and fatherhood permeate and promote an anti-sexist education. In rebutting the arguments that feminism would be contrary to the values of the family institution, hooks states that "the feminist movement is pro-family. Ending the

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<sup>3</sup> We use the translation presented by Mary Collier Mendonça (2014).

patriarchal domination of children, whether by men or by women, is the only way to make the family a place in which children feel safe, in which they can be free, in which they can know love" (HOOKS, 2020, p. 116, translated by the authors). That would be the power of revolutionary parenting promoted by feminism.

In proposing an anti-sexist education in *Para educar crianças feministas: um manifesto*, the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2017) lists fifteen suggestions addressed to her friend Ijeawele to raise her daughter Chizalum as a feminist. The author herself warns in the introduction that "now I am also the mother of a charming little girl and I realize how easy it is to give advice for others to raise their children, without facing this tremendously complex reality" (ADICHIE, 2017, p. 8, translated by the authors).

First suggestion: Be a complete person. Motherhood is a wonderful gift, but it is not defined only by motherhood. Be a complete person. It is going to be good for your daughter. [...] Don't believe the idea that motherhood and work are mutually exclusive. [...] Call for help. Wait for help. There is no such thing as a superwoman. [...] But above all, focus on continuing to be a complete person. Take some time for yourself. Meet your personal needs. Please don't think of it as "taking care of everything." [...] The work of taking care of the house and children should not have gender, and what we should ask is not whether a woman can "take care of everything", but rather what the best way to support the couple in their double obligations in employment and at home is. (ADICHIE, 2017, p. 14-18, translate by the authors)

The difficult and important advice given by Adichie to her friend to remind her that no one is *only* a mother reminds us of one of the reflections on motherhood and resistance proposed by Manuela D'Ávila (2019) in her book *Revolução Laura*.

Living motherhood does not mean giving up freedom. It can't mean. Just as it is not compulsory, just as it is not the only thing that makes women happy, just as it may not be necessary, it is also part of what we can be and we need to reinvent it urgently. It takes a community to raise each child. It takes a world in which our affection is not a crime. It takes a world in which women occupy public spaces and the absence of children is as marked as their presence. Because for every powerful man with missing children there is a woman locked in the house after her working time. (D'ÁVILA, 2019, p. 115, translated by the authors)

The placements of Chimamanda Adichie and Manuela D'Ávila bring us the reflection that socially there is a *romanticization of motherhood* as an element of personal fulfillment for women, which allows us to speak of *compulsory motherhood*; because even the right of choice is given in a culture that impels us to have children. To owe such molds, bell hooks (2020) proposes a *feminist parenting*, in which all caregivers, men and women, take responsibility for educating antisexist children, as it is the right of children to have the effective parental care of their fathers, mothers, and society. On the other hand of this collective engagement, we have the reality of solo *mothers*.



There are 11 million Brazilian single-parent families composed of women and children. Half of these families live below the poverty line. Expressions trivialized as "warrior woman" to refer to this population romanticize the suffering of overload and conceal paternal abandonment.

Parenting would no longer be seen as private responsibility and would become community, which involves the need for public policies: day care centers in the workplace; expanded maternity/parental leave; reduction of working hours, retirement, restructuring of society in the rescue of village practice (support network, whether paid or solidarity). Isolated parenting (centered on mother and children) evidences the unfair division between work and family. Especially in the current scenario of the Covid-19 pandemic, working mothers need to work without having any support network for childcare. When we type in the keywords "women" and "pandemic", all the main results shown by Google point to the mental burden and illness of these women. This isolated parenting is the opposite of parental happiness. Bell hooks (2020) warns that community involvement is different from "outsourcing". Patricia Hill Collins points out that this is imposing the logic of private property on family relationships. "African-Americans who continue the community care of children call into question a fundamental presupposition of the capitalist system: that children are "private property" and can be treated as such" (COLINS, 2019, p. 304, translated by the authors).

Motherhood must occupy public spaces and be seen as political. "During my political campaign, I was told that the strangeness of the presence of a woman with her baby in the political environment only reinforces the need to the presence of more women in politics" (D'ÁVILA, 2019, p. 59, translated by the authors). The antidote against this maternal loneliness permeates its politicization and this path is pointed out by feminisms, there are growing movements of women mothers to claim better conditions of motherhood, because as Márcia Tiburi (2017) states, "feminism is the opposite of loneliness".

#### 4 Multiple motherhoods in narratives written by women

Doing motherhood includes embracing a set of efforts to participate consciously in the raising of children and, alongside this practice, surprises and difficulties arise attributed directly to the woman. After all, is being a mother suffering in paradise? In the ironic title of Buchi Emecheta, *As alegrias da maternidade*, the Nigerian author invites the reader to rethink the concept of

motherhood from the impositions dictated by her culture and brings reflections about the positivity imposed on motherhood.

It is through Nnu Ego, Agbadi's daughter, the leader, Naif's first wife and mother of the eldest Oshia and six other children, that the search for identity as a woman is put in check in the face of the losses and gains of motherhood. It is interesting to observe how this identity is constructed by its relationship with the men of the family and around the theme: "I don't know how to be anything else in life, I only know how to be a mother" (EMECHETA, 2018, p. 313, translated by the authors). The protagonist seeks within herself, contents that can be the object of dialogue with other women and concludes that she would not know how to talk to another woman who does not have children and if they were taken away from her, she would not know what to do with her life.

The first experience of pain in the face of this role that was imposed on her occurs when she lost her first child, as a baby; Nnu Ego has the ability to be a questioned woman and tries to take her life: "She was forced to face the fact that she not only failed as a mother, but also in killing herself; even if she had been unable to accomplish successfully." (EMECHETA, 2018, p. 107, translated by the authors). The protagonist mother is questioned for not keeping her offspring alive, questioned for not enduring the pressure of what they imposed on her becoming a burden, reminds us that there are a number of other Nnu Egos who live so close to us in the world of non-fiction.

The title of the book suggests to the reader the encounter with the state of the living satisfaction of being a mother. However, in the final lines, after Nnu Ego's trajectory, the feeling of contentment is transformed by other perceptions:

The joy of being a mother was the joy of giving everything to children, they said. And what was Nnu Ego's reward? Didn't she happen to have the longest burial Ibuza had ever seen? Oshia needed three years to be able to pay all the money she had borrowed to show the world what a good son he was. So, people didn't understand why Nnu Ego didn't answer the prayers they addressed to him, because what else could a woman wish for, besides having children to give her a decent burial? (EMECHETA, 2018, p. 316, translate by the authors)

Joy was translated into the pleasure of the other, in the donation to the children and was far from a restitution for herself. It is ironic how Nnu Ego's "reward" only takes place after death, although burial has revealed more about the ego of his firstborn. And even after she's dead, the protagonist continues to be harassed and judged by her motherhood. There was a charge that her name was a reference on the other side of life, and it was also ironic that she did not answer fertility prayers, as if it were, actually, a favor she would do to women.

The narratives written by women provide us with a considerable number of characters who walk on paths distinct from those believed to be the maternal paradise. Just like Nnu Ego and the battle she faces for the lives of her children born throughout the narrative, Stefania, the protagonist of *A mulher de pés descalços*, authored by Scholastique Mukasonga, a Rwandan author, also goes through the construction of a woman who becomes a mother and leader of the family: "But my mother wanted that her home, even if it did not have the desired dimensions, had at least the refinements indispensable to the dignity of the family" (MUKASONGA, 2017, p. 37, translated by the authors). Being a mother does not necessarily go through a process of choice in Rwanda in 1950; Stefania is a mother because she needs to be and adapts to that obligation masterfully. The narrator, daughter of this barefoot woman, draws from her memories the way the matriarch would conduct this lack of alternative in relation to motherhood:

With my little hoe, I would imitate my mother's gestures. It was exhausting to be bent over all day. Mom would listen to my moans and say, without turning to me, "Mukasonga, you still have nothing to complain about, wait to suffer when you have to use the hoe with a baby on your back." (MUKASONGA, 2017, p. 43 – 44, translated by the authors)

The daughter, as a child, would observe Stefania's efforts and as she matured, by rummaging through her memories, she saw the maternal resistance of the one who stirred the seeds of scorch all day and did not even complain. But beyond that, in her mother's words there was the lack of alternative, carrying a baby on her back while weeding was not optional.

Without power of choice, motherhood as personal fulfillment does not fit in this and so many other contexts. Del Priore (2014) states that, here in Brazil, in 1916, the number of July of *Vida Doméstica* ensured that motherhood was the woman's first duty and warned that the one who was not a good mother would therefore cease to be a woman. The physiological character turned her into a prisoner of a misogynist determinism: "The concern was to convince the woman that maternal love was inborn, pure and sacred, and that only through motherhood and the education of children did she perform her 'natural vocation'." (DEL PRIORE, 2014, p. 136, translated by the authors). Also, in the book of Mukasonga (2017, p. 147, translated by the authors) it is possible to see that this 'natural law' can be put into practice in the context of other cultures:

One of the biggest concerns of women was pregnancy. Having a child was to conquer the pinnacle of admiration, respect and power desired by all women. They were waiting for a young married woman for her to get pregnant as soon as possible. If a wife were slow to announce the pregnancy, her husband would be worried, she felt the look of contempt from the other men, and the gossip about him began to circulate. Soon they would advise you to discreetly reject the barren wife.

Motherhood, unlike maternal care, can be exclusionary. As in the above-mentioned passage there are those who are physiologically unable to gestate and generate. For these, there is either a certain look of compassion, in more current contexts, or of marginalization, as in the culture of the Rwandans of Nyamata, reported in the memoirs of Scholastique Mukasonga dating back to the twentieth century.

In the field of infertility there is a production of significant impact on the literature of female authorship dated from the 1980s. Margaret Atwood, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, deals with a dystopian future in which fertile women are society's most valuable bargaining coin. The narrative presents the life of the handmaid Offred, a handwoman from the Republic of Gilead who, at the age of 33, is torn from the coexistence of her daughter and husband for the purpose of generating children for commanders and their infertile wives.

Feminist and maternal reflections go hand in hand in this dystopia. The protagonist handmaid is placed in a purely reproductive position – "We are wombs of two legs, just that: sacred receptacles, walking chalices" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 165, translated by the authors) – and this biological power of gestation is imposed on it under a negative bias; Offred is subject to institutional meanings; Offred is not a free woman. By activating her memories, she remembers the choices her mother had when positioning herself from the perspective of a matricentric feminism:

I gave birth to you when I was thirty-seven, my mother said. It was a risk; you could have been born deformed or something. You were a child that I wanted to have, really wanted, really, and, in fact, I actually heard a lot of shit from certain people! [...] When she said that she'd ping and spy her chin on. (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 147, translated by the authors)

In Atwood's narrative, women who survived the dissolution of the U.S. and transformation of the democratic state into totalitarian and theocratic government lost freedom and rights and signified the concept of motherhood completely opposed to motherhood. After all, as soon as the children are conceived, the handmaids give them to the wives of the commanders and leave to serve as God's instrument in another house and be again raped by other commanders, generating and reproducing, procreating them for God, as if transported to the Middle Ages.

Motherhood in Atwood is imposed and simultaneously ripped from Gilead's women. There are no choices regarding the rapes they suffer, in the power relationship that the totalitarian system exerts on them, and neither, those who would like to maternalize their children, manage custody of the children. From them are extracted the rights to choose to maintain the pregnancy, as well as to raise or stay with their offspring.

The handmaids of Atwood's tale are the enslaved ones of the patriarchal system such as the protagonist of *Eu, Tituba: bruxa negra de Salem*, by the Caribbean author Maryse Condé, with the aggravating of this one, which is also mainstreamed by the race. From a dystopia to a historical character, Tituba is a black woman who experiences serious accusations of witchcraft, in a context of slavery and misogyny, and experiences motherhood in a painful manner.

In the first lines of the narrative, Tituba confesses that she was born of an act of aggression and contempt: a rape started the life of the one who would carry on her shoulders the pains of being a woman, black and enslaved. With this panorama, the character develops a distant relationship with her mother, Abena – who saw in her daughter the rape suffered – and at the moment she saw herself in the position of mother, she sees no alternative but abortion: "It was a little after that that I realized that I was carrying a child in me and decided to kill her" (CONDÉ, 2020, p. 83, translated by the authors). Motherhood, or rather, the absence of it was not a mere matter of choice, but of survival:

For an enslaved woman, motherhood is not a joy. She comes to expel us, in a world of servitude and abjectness, a little innocent, whose fate will be impossible to change. Throughout my childhood, I have seen enslaved people murder their newborn, planting a long thorn in the still gelatinous egg of their head, cutting with a poisoned blade their umbilical cords or, still, abandoning it at night somewhere traversed by angry spirits. (CONDÉ, 2020, p. 83 - 84, translated by the authors)

The vulnerability of the place in which Tituba is located explains the main reason for the lack of willingness to occupy the place of a mother. Feminism, alongside maternal issues, comprises abortion as a right of choice. Given the practical experiences of the character, such as daughter and caregiver of children of the Great House, the fiction points to problems present in the issue of reproductive rights raised by feminism. Not being a mother, being entitled to that choice, is a political act in favour of caring for yourself and the other. Bell hooks (2019) recalls that aborting, at one point in the history of the feminist movement, by the 1970s, challenged the notion that the reason for the existence of women was to raise children. The character Tituba understands that her body is not limited to this, as well as, despite all the pain of this traumatic process, concluded that the circumstances did not allow the exercise of a healthy motherhood. Enslaved, without rights, and an accusation of witchcraft hovering in the air, there was no other alternative, as she confesses: "I fought to recover from my son's death. I knew it was for the best." (CONDÉ, 2020, p. 86, translated by the authors).

In *Olhos d'água*, by Conceição Evaristo, the approach to the theme of abortion is put from a place of choice by women. Natalina, the central character of "*Quantos filhos Natalina teve?*" had

three abortions, until deciding, in the fourth pregnancy that she really wanted to be a mother: She smiled happily. It was her fourth pregnancy, and her first child. Hers alone." (EVARISTO, 2016, p. 43, translated by the authors). The narrator explains that the previous children were as if they had died even before they were someone, for they were not a choice, but an imposition of each circumstance lived.

The other pregnancies she had hated. She couldn't stand to see herself stewing, stewing, heavy, swollen and that thing, that thing moving inside her. Her heart was full of hate. She was sick and vomiting a lot during most of her pregnancy. On the third one, she threw up even at the time of delivery. It was the worst pregnancy for Natalina. (EVARISTO, 2016, p. 43, translated by the authors)

In the three pregnancies, the children came and went without her feeling the animus to maternalize. In the first two ones, it was boyfriends who fertilized her, in the third one, she was used by the bosses to give them a son: "The nuisance she carried in her belly would make happy the man and woman who would have a child that would come out of her. She was ashamed of herself and theirs" (EVARISTO, 2016, p. 48, translated by the authors). In the last pregnancy, Natalina was raped, but she wanted her son, because "[...] I wouldn't let him be indebted to anyone. [...] She owed nothing, as in the second belly, when she was in debt to the fullness of Tonho, who was fully placed on her, hoping that she would live with him continuous days of a couple who she believed was happy" (EVARISTO, 2016, p. 48, translated by the authors). Despite being the result of a brutal situation as a sexual violation, Natalina felt fulfilled with her son. She killed the one who hurt her and finally held the power of choice and no account to give to anyone: "She was happy. She was looking forward to breaking up in the world at any time. She was anxious to look at that son and not see anyone's mark, maybe not even hers. She was happy and only with herself." (EVARISTO, 2016, p. 50, translated by the authors).

In South Africa, Futhi Ntshingila approaches motherhood and maternal care *Sem gentileza, sem delicadeza*, from the characters Zola and Mvelo. Mother and daughter become pregnant in adolescence and face the obstacles of an unplanned pregnancy, AIDS, and poverty. Zola, who grooms Mvelo, is expelled from the house in the face of strict Christian rules imposed by her father. Zola's mother remains to accept oppression and pray for the daughter who alone in the world would stay. Mvelo is born without the presence of his father – who had died in an accident before she was born – and grows up seeing her mother as her great reference.

The initial conflict of this plot occurs when Mvelo, an exemplary and obedient daughter, goes to church to sing and faces the Reverend's harassment. He asks the young woman to go to

the back room in order to pray and strengthen the girl with the holy spirit, for only then could her gift come out. In an act of cowardice: "His hands were agile, finding what they wanted. He threw himself upon her in a rampant and brutal way, snaring her world of illusions. Her gaze and her innocence were gone. Deflowered and destroyed." (NTSHINGILA, 2019, p. 17, translated by the authors). Mother-Mvelo was born from rape.

The fourteen-year-old girl, still pregnant, loses her mother Zola to the HIV virus and makes it truly clear to the reader that being a mother is not a will, especially in the context of the baby's conception:

Mvelo looked at the umbilical cord that looked like a snake linking the baby to her. The sordid memories of that day in the Church once again tormented her. She tried not to look at the baby, with her life swarming in her pores, covered in white mucus and Mvelo's blood. The nurse cut the cord and wrapped the child in a blanket. Mvelo fell asleep, exhausted and relieved that the baby had left her body. (NITSHINGILA, 2019, p. 33, translated by the authors)

The separation of bodies leads to O'reilly's maternity and maternal care oppositions commented earlier in this article. Mvelo's biological power is enclosed in the donation of the daughter to an adopting couple. The care dedicated to the child born of this brutal act is transferred to a mother who does not have the power to conceive, but also to be a mother in the practices and experiences of the creation of being.

In this perspective, of mothers who did not want or could not, for any reason, devote themselves to this subjective condition of being a mother, well pointed by Del Priore (2014), there is a considerable number of examples of characters in the literature written by women that we can still remember. Just remember the trilogy of short stories, by the Canadian Alice Munro, present in *Fugitiva*, in which Juliet, a mother not very affectionate and attentive, finds herself abandoned by her daughter Penelope who gets tired of the relationship of coldness and silence between the two and seeks to move on with her life and form her own family. Her mother, Juliet, feels the loss, but somehow realizes that she was more like a biological mother than her offspring's affective mother: "She continues to have hopes that Penelope will speak out, but without worrying too much about it. She waits for the way people who have already learned her lesson wait for undeserved blessings, spontaneous remissions, things like that" (MUNRO, 2014, p. 166, translated by the authors).

The absence of emotional distress from this example above recalls another mother who is abandoned by her daughter, Aline, from *Quarenta dias*, by Maria Valeria Rezende. The daughter abandons her mother after questioning her presence and, contrary to what happens to Juliet who seeks this runaway daughter, the mother of the Brazilian narrative leaves in search of herself and

her choices in this journey that life has imposed on her. When moving to an unknown city, she decided to help another mother find her child and begins a trajectory of self-knowledge, without giving up on the maternal feelings that have always inhabited her: "Maybe it was, without me realizing it, the other mother's pain taking my place, a weird relief, a distraction, and I wanted to go around for nothing, through streets I don't know behind the blurry trail of someone I've never seen" (REZENDE, 2014, p. 92, translated by the authors).

There are many other fictional narratives, such as Lucia Castello Branco's "*Cuja mãe não disse*", and Ivana Arruda Leite's "*Mãe, o cacete*", a very ironic tale in which the narrator judges her mother and desecrates motherhood, "Mother is a cross in my life. I never liked mine, and I doubt people like yours as much as they say. When I was studying at the nuns' school, they said it was up to a sin to dislike their mother like that. Mother is a sacred thing." (2004, p. 205, translated by the authors), while performing a role of maternal care in relation to the man with whom she relates sexually,

Yesterday he brought a friend to dinner.

- Are you Rui's mother? " He asked when he saw me.
- "Mom? fuck you!" I replied stunned.
- "I am the woman who sleeps with him, who makes his food, who takes care of his clothes, of his house.
- "Practically a mother - the cynic completed.

God forbid I'm Rui's mother. Mother is the greatest disgrace in a person's life. It's because of the mothers that there are so many unhappy people.

(LEITE, 2004, p. 208, translated by the authors)

The end of the tale reveals the contradiction of society that at the same time is misogynistic and sacralizes motherhood, and also proposes reflection on the indefinitions of fatherhood:

When he left, I asked Rui if he saw me as a mother too, but he said no, never!

- "Because I like my mother very much. I have no problem with her - he said kissing my mouth with the usual burning.

Then he asked:

- And father... What's a father to you?

(LEITE, 2004, p. 208, translated by the authors)

Another example comes from Lya Luft's novel *O tigre na sombra*, whose mother is not a sacralized maternal figure, but someone who did not have in her subjective the pleasure of being a mother: "With my mother it was angry affection, there I searched in vain for a loving figure" (LUFT, 2012, p. 30, translated by the authors). In these narratives we see profiles of women who for some reason, whether cultural, religious, social, forced themselves to play a role that did not fit them and did not force themselves to comply with it as the social rules impose. Mothers without affection,



without love, without motivation, from life to literature they wear clothes that do not fit themselves and do not please the world or themselves. Motherhood, whether fictional or real, requires a world that often the woman is unwilling or able to give. Being a mother in a patriarchal society is a challenge.

## Conclusion

Motherhood is a key point within the feminist agenda. Because it is compulsory, it impacts the lives of all women. Our work has dwelled into several examples of feminist reflections on motherhood in different contemporary narratives of female authorship, by Brazilian, African, Caribbean, and Canadian authors. Despite various contexts, the representation of mother characters transit between those who exercised their right not to be a mother and those who, for many reasons, provided maternal care willingly or positively.

Our goal here was to present the various mothers, from various literary geographies, so that the reader understands that the longings are not located continentally but are within each woman who faces the challenge of motherhood. We believe that such narratives, by breaking with the common place destined to motherhood in our culture - which we seek to address as it is historically constructed in the initial topics - recreate different possibilities of identification for women and humanize mothers.

Literature appears as a sensitive means of revealing such issues, because, unlike manuals that dictate the rules of good motherhood, it raises an invitation to dive into these deep waters, destabilizing conceptions already established in us. The theoretical and literary texts addressed here reveal this other view on motherhood: Motherhood is political and in patriarchal society it is an act of resistance. These authors reveal to us how the revolution is feminist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and maternal.

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