



## CHAPTER 8

---

# Contested Motherhood in Autobiographical Writing: Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti

*Margaretha Fahlgren and Anna Williams*

Whenever I pick up a new book by a woman I check the author biography on the back flap to see whether she has children. I'm not entirely sure why I do this and what, exactly, I am trying to gauge, but I think it has something to do with an abiding interest in how other women writers have arranged their lives and enabled their ambitions: Do they view writing as a sacrosanct vocation and themselves as secular nuns of a sort, for whom few distractions—especially one as time-filling as motherhood—are to be allowed? Or do they accept their creative aspirations as part of a larger, often messy whole that includes a child or children?

---

This publication has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 952366, and from the Centre for Gender Research and the Department of Literature at Uppsala University.

---

M. Fahlgren • A. Williams (✉)

Department of Literature, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

e-mail: [margaretha.fahlgren@littvet.uu.se](mailto:margaretha.fahlgren@littvet.uu.se); [anna.williams@littvet.uu.se](mailto:anna.williams@littvet.uu.se)

© The Author(s) 2023

H. Wahlström Henriksson et al. (eds.), *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing*, Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life,

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17211-3\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17211-3_8)

These questions are posed by the American writer and critic Daphne Merkin (2021, 27), and her curious inquiry highlights a crucial subject in contemporary literature. A wide range of fiction, autobiographical writing, and feminist theory on motherhood have shaped a new textual landscape (Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010). Some contributions to this landscape have even caused heated media debates.

Motherhood is a universal phenomenon as well as an urgent field of scholarly and scientific inquiry. It is a recurring theme in literature and life writing, which frequently scrutinize controversial issues with unsparing candor. Literature about the troublesome aspects of motherhood or about whether or not to become a mother have provoked especially intense discussions. Such discussions may well be responses to the critical assumption made by the French historian Élisabeth Badinter (2011), that the role of the mother has emerged as the most important in women's lives in recent decades, thus undermining feminist progress. In this chapter we examine contemporary autobiographical narratives which explore the notion of motherhood as the central issue in women's lives. These narratives have been important in offering alternative discourses and thereby broadening the concept of motherhood. We discuss them in the light of motherhood studies (DiQuinzio 1999; Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010; Badinter 2011), and theories about matrilineal narratives in contemporary literature (Yu 2005).

Works by two highly acclaimed Canadian writers are at the center of our study: Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (first published in 2001, 2008) and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018).<sup>1</sup> When Rachel Cusk published *A Life's Work* about her personal experiences of motherhood, the text stirred an emotional response among reviewers in which she was measured against an ideal image of the good mother and accused of narcissism. Similar to Cusk, Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* concentrates on the self in its poignant and philosophical inquiry into motherhood, relationships, and work, and into the impact of the choice to have or not have a child. Both volumes lean on emotions as well as intellectual argument, and ambivalence toward motherhood is striking in both works.

We follow two main lines of theoretical inquiry in our analysis of Cusk's and Heti's works. Firstly, we focus on what the literary scholar Toril Moi has identified in contemporary life writing as the "exercise of attention" (Moi 2017b). For the philosophical concept of attention she refers to Iris

<sup>1</sup>The study emanates from the research project "Mother Anyway: Literary, Medical and Media Narratives" (Dept. of Literature, Uppsala University), funded by the Swedish Research Council, 2017–2019.

Murdoch and Simone Weil, and observes that it is an important feature in prominent literature. It concerns a certain ability of attention, of responding to reality, on the part of the writer which in turn can inspire the reader to become more attentive to both reality and literature (Moi 2017a, 17–22, 14 f., 64).

One of Moi's literary examples is the acclaimed Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard in his autobiographical account *My Struggle* (2009–2011). In her reading, Moi observes how Knausgaard centers his attention on his ongoing life and uses description as an “exercise of attention.” Writing about his everyday life makes him aware of his own existence. What characterizes his style, according to Moi, is that he “insists on the importance of feelings without buying into the language of affects” (Moi 2017b).

We view both Cusk and Heti as similarly endeavoring to understand the existential condition of the self in relation to motherhood by exploring their everyday experiences. Their investigations acknowledge the deep impact of emotions while formulating questions with artistic accuracy: Is becoming a mother equivalent to losing one's sense of self and identity as a writer? What will remain of the life they know and appreciate? In the case of Sheila Heti, the “exercise of attention” is primarily focused on her intellectual and emotional exploration, pursued while life goes on day by day. Rachel Cusk puts her attention to the reading of child manuals and observing what others, mothers, and medical staff convey to her about motherhood.

Secondly, the texts by Cusk and Heti bring to the fore the feminist examination of the definition of motherhood and mothering in a social context. In her groundbreaking book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Adrienne Rich defined the concepts by both sharing her own personal experiences of mothering and displaying how they were regulated by the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Sociologist Tina Miller continues the investigation in *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach* (2005), where she brings forward what she calls “cultural scripts”—discourses that affect societal and subjective views on motherhood and gender. Miller's definition of the more existentially oriented “motherhood”—different from “mothering”—takes into account the broad context of a complex phenomenon:

‘Motherhood’ on the other hand refers to the context in which motherhood takes place and is experienced. The institution of motherhood in the Western world is, then, historically, socially, culturally, politically and, importantly, *morally*, shaped. In turn, it powerfully shapes our experiences as women, whether or not we become mothers, because of the cultural assumptions related to women's desire to be mothers. (Miller 2005, 3)

Knowledge about reproduction and motherhood is shaped by “cultural scripts”—discourses in different times and environments which are especially strong if sanctioned and supported by structural conditions in society. Miller puts it thus: “where dominant cultural scripts are underpinned by social structures and practices which serve to reinforce and legitimise them, they become accepted as the ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ way to do things and, as a result, may be difficult to resist” (2005, 29).

As feminist research has shown, women’s identities are still closely linked to their reproductive ability, whether or not they become mothers (Miller 2005, 54 f.). A woman without child is the exception that needs to be explained or examined. This means that cultural scripts on motherhood are especially difficult to resist, since they are closely related to female identity.

Additionally, cultural scripts about motherhood are not easily modified. They are closely linked to the idea of the good mother (a figure properly challenged in *A Life’s Work*). As Patrice DiQuinzio (1999) has observed, the perception of modern motherhood is divided, immersed as it is in policies for equal opportunities, on the one hand, and, on the other, the focus on woman’s exclusive biological relationship with the child.

Our goal is to shed light on how the texts discussed here relate to—and to a certain extent rewrite—cultural scripts about motherhood. We examine how the autobiographical subjects describe their lives and what they pay attention to, from the assumptions that motherhood is still a contested field and that women’s identity is still to a large extent attached to their reproductive capacity. We argue that the questions of motherhood and mothering in the texts are delineated as a dynamic negotiation between individual, social, and political circumstances. Thus, we pay attention to both style and ideological content in order to understand how the writers communicate and evaluate their personal experiences of the deeply existential issues of motherhood and mothering.

### THE SOCIAL AND BIOLOGICAL QUESTION: WOMEN AND MOTHERHOOD

Sheila Heti’s *Motherhood* has been labeled a novel, but it is obviously a hybrid between novel, memoir, and autobiography. Lara Feigel (2018) identifies its most novel-like characteristics as the use of the present-tense narration and the assumption that “the book knows more than the

narrator does.” Heti herself calls her work a “wrestling place” (2018, 284). There are obvious similarities between writer and narrator, but we will refer to the narrator as “Sheila” and consider her as a protagonist which is not necessarily identical with the author.

The book is an intimate account of a difficult time where Sheila—thirty-six years old when the story begins—finds herself at a decisive moment in life: the biological clock is ticking and she has to figure out whether or not she wants to become a mother. Her literary quest for an answer is made not only through reading, thinking, and talking to friends and her boyfriend Miles but also through the unconventional method of flipping coins. She poses a question (“Am I handling my relationship wrong?”), flips a coin, and receives a simple yes or no. This unusual practice contributes to the structure of this first-person narrative and creates a suggestive trajectory of chance, determinism, and coincidence.

*Motherhood* touches upon most of the contextual aspects observed by Tina Miller and illustrates how the institution of motherhood “shapes our experiences as women” (Miller 2005, 3). At the core of Heti’s inquiry is the question of whether motherhood is a biological instinct or a socially constructed demand imposed on women. The protagonist’s first priority is writing, and she realizes that a child would have irrevocable consequences for her way of life. A thought-provoking reflection deals with the regulating aspects of gender identity. Dwelling on her writing, Sheila feels guilty about prioritizing art over motherhood: “Maybe I have to think about myself less as a woman with this woman’s special task, and more as an individual with her own special task—not put *woman* before my individuality” (25). This brings to light an important difference between male and female artists that was thoroughly addressed by women writers in the nineteenth century, as they grew more visible in the literary field. Up until the present, female artists have systematically been identified by their gender to a much larger extent than male writers who constitute the norm. It has been necessary for women to take into account their gender identity, both due to their subordinate position and because of biology. Traditionally they were responsible for taking care of the family, and if they chose a life devoted to art, many declined marriage and children.

The conflict between being a creative person, a writer, and a mother is likewise explored in Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work*. When the story begins she is already pregnant. Being a writer, “a modern privileged woman,” she has not reflected on the implications of biology. Not until she becomes pregnant does she realize that she cannot escape biology and bodily

changes. She feels as if she has boarded a train which is heading toward “a vista of unfamiliar hills, leaving everything vanishing behind it” (25). Her pregnancy starts the journey to motherhood, an unknown territory which Cusk explores as a writer.

When her book was republished in 2008 Cusk wrote an introduction in which she addressed the vehement criticism of the book when it was first issued in 2001. Cusk dismisses the criticism, insisting that the book was never intended to be a “childcare manual.” Instead, it is “governed by the subject *I*, not *You*” (4). The focus is not on the reader or the child, the book deals with the self in the light of motherhood: “I wrote it because I am a writer, and the experience of ambivalence that characterises the early stages of parenthood seemed to me to be kith and kin of the writer’s fundamental ambivalence towards life; an ambivalence that is obscured by the organised social systems human communities devise, and that the writer or artist is always trying to recover and resolve” (4).

Cusk acknowledges the conflict between her identity as a writer and as a mother only when she becomes a mother, whereas Sheila in *Motherhood* wants to resolve this conflict before she decides whether or not to be a mother. After a talk with Miles, in which he declares that it is impossible to combine art and parenthood and succeed with both, Sheila admits to feeling sad, despite agreeing with him. “All morning I felt a kind of coldness in my chest towards him. Why must I be one of the people he’s talking about?” (36) The narrative underscores how the self and the social cannot be separated, and it is done by laying bare Sheila’s emotional response which opens up for different reactions.

*Motherhood* dwells upon not only the social and biological pressure of motherhood but also the idea that not wanting to have children might be a biological or even a sexual orientation in its own right, comparable to the desire to have them—obviously a thought-provoking argument which challenges the script of woman as a natural mother figure. When conveying this reflection, Sheila immediately connects it to her personal experience, a recollection of how as a child she perceived the world and her existential position in it:

Wanting not to have children could even be called a sexual orientation, for what is more tied to sex than the desire to procreate or not? I suspect the intensity of this desire lies deep within our cells, and then there is all that culture adds, and that other people add, which skews our innate desires. I can look back at being a tiny child and see that I did not want children then.

I remember sitting at the kitchen table with my entire family, and suddenly knowing that I would never be a mother, for I was a *daughter—existentially*—and I always would be. (161 f.)

By recalling this distinct memory, she vividly links her childhood self on an ordinary day at the kitchen table to the issue at the core of her quest.

### CHALLENGING THE SCRIPT

The narrator in *Motherhood* is confronted with a range of arguments for and against having children in her encounter with family, friends, and professionals such as physicians and psychologists. She recounts a conversation she had with her doctor when she had an abortion in her early twenties: the doctor tried to convince her to keep the baby (31). Her boyfriend Miles, who already has a daughter from a previous relationship who lives with her mother, leaves the decision in the narrative present to Sheila. He does not want another child. “If I want a child, we can have one, he said, *but you have to be sure*” (21). Several female friends think that she should attempt to conceive. In one instance, at the age of thirty-nine, she describes the prospect of wanting a child when it has become too late as an “anvil that will fall on my head to the laughter of all” (181). Somewhat contradictorily, though, she also comments: “I have always feared that I would regret having had one [child], more than regret *not* having” (189).

The book delivers a range of statements and rhetorical questions that emerge as challenging at the beginning of the twenty-first century when women in modern western societies have obtained an unparalleled level of freedom of choice concerning reproduction. She writes, for example:

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)

What is a woman—who is not a mother—doing that is more important than mothering? Is it possible to even say such a thing—that there is anything more important for a woman to do than mother? (134)

And I don’t want ‘not a mother’ to be part of who I am—for my identity to be the negative of someone else’s positive identity. (157)

The hardest thing is actually *not* to be a mother—to refuse to be a mother to anyone. To not be a mother is the most difficult thing of all. (168 f.)

Sheila refers to the woman who has children as “the normal sort of woman” (22), indicating her awareness of a cultural script that she wishes to challenge. The narrative shifts between positions of acceptance and dispute, thus demonstrating how deep the discourse of motherhood and “normality” is embedded in thinking and practice. This is even more convincingly demonstrated by the narrator’s meticulous effort to openly attend to her own feelings and observations in every detail.

In a review of the Swedish translation of *Motherhood*, the feminist critic Nina Björk (2018) critically notes that the book conveys “an absolute opposition between freedom and motherhood, and that freedom from such a relationship is a prerequisite for creative work.”<sup>2</sup> To be seriously dedicated to creative work is incompatible with motherhood and mothering, in her reading of Heti. Björk draws attention to the fact that the freedom of choice that Heti describes is historically unique: today, many women can independently choose whether or not to have children. Björk’s critique highlights differences not only in existential perspectives but also in social and political conditions. Sweden is a country with a comparatively generous and flexible child-care system which allows parents to continue their professional careers, and it is more or less taken for granted that women return to working life after their parental leave. From Sheila’s Canadian middle-class perspective, she conveys the impression that her female friends seem to expect to lose their autonomy and professional position when having children, and that once they become mothers, they dedicate the major part of their time to motherhood. This is a reminder that class and economic demands shape reality as well as expectations related to motherhood. For Sheila, professional life seems impossible to combine with mothering, and as Alexandra Schwartz (2018) concludes in a review, the heart of the matter here is the act of writing: “A mother must make herself always available. A writer needs to shut the door.”

The loss of a previous independent life is at the core of Rachel Cusk’s narrative. She first notices this when she enters her home together with the baby: “It is only when I walk through the front door to my house that I realise things have changed. It is as if I have come to the house of

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Swedish are our own.



someone who has just died, someone I loved, someone I can't believe has gone" (56).

The writer she used to be is no longer. But her way of approaching motherhood is by reading what others have written on the subject. She is given manuals by medical staff during her pregnancy but gets no help from the patronizing advice which tells her that the baby will get liver damage if she eats paté or that she must stay away from cats if she does not want a baby with toxoplasmosis. The single topic, child birth, where Cusk really wants to be informed, is the only one where the manuals are less specific. When the baby is born Cusk has problems breastfeeding and turns to the manuals only to meet pictures of beautiful mothers who breastfeed their babies. Her difficulties are not reflected in the manuals where all mothers seem to be happy and content. This makes her feel even more lonely and inadequate. The focus on the *I* reinforces this sense of isolation. A partner, a man, is briefly mentioned, but Cusk stands alone as a mother. Becoming a mother is a transition from the known, the person she used to be, to an unfamiliar new world where she has to maneuver on her own. This is further underlined in the way she distances herself from others; she reads manuals on her own and she never reaches out to other mothers.

Everyday life is portrayed as claustrophobic, with Cusk and the baby alone in an apartment: "I have given up my membership of the world I used to live in," she writes in a chapter called "Hell's Kitchen." She describes how hard it is to respond to the baby's needs which always seem to be changing. As the baby grows she transforms from being "a rucksack" to an "escaped zoo animal" (143). The choice of words does not adhere to the way a loving mother is expected to describe her child, and Cusk's seemingly careless approach to her baby fueled criticism. When the baby starts to crawl Cusk is even more afraid to leave home since she fears what might happen. She feels increasingly trapped in the apartment and tries to figure out how she can get help. A nanny would be perfect but is a possibility only for the wealthy. The outer world enters her narrative when she hires immigrant women to look after the baby. The focus, however, is still on the *I* and there is a troubling distance in the way Cusk talks about these underprivileged women. The attention is on her feelings and that she cannot stop thinking about the baby after having left her at home: "I couldn't fit my world into a space carved, as it seemed to me, from my daughter's own flesh" (163). Even if she buys herself time it is impossible to retrieve her old self.

Cusk's earlier life and identity as a writer is incompatible with motherhood. Even if she manages to get time of her own she cannot use it. The thought of the baby stands in the way. There is, however, one way in which motherhood connects to her previous life. She reads differently, which changes her outlook on literary texts: "Reading books to my daughter revives my appetite for expression. I read books that I have read before, books that I love, and when I do I find them changed [...]. Could it be true that one has to experience in order to understand? I have always denied this idea, and yet of motherhood, for me at least, it seems to be the case" (128). Cusk puts literary texts in dialogue with her narrative. Rereading Coleridge's poem "Frost at Midnight" she discovers that she has never before noticed the baby who is peacefully sleeping. She now perceives how Coleridge captures a moment in this poem, together with his infant, and how "his love finds a voice." Having experienced motherhood, Cusk reads the poem with a different attention. A connection is after all established between herself as mother and her previous self.

Correspondingly, Sheila Heti describes a life dedicated to writing, publishing, and related activities: readings, travels to book events, talking to people about issues that transform into literature. To this writer, the very exercise of attention appears to be added to the list of reasons not to have children.

### THE MATRILINEAL NARRATIVE

Both Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti depict the modern woman as in many ways self-reliant and autonomous. Both narratives, however, recognize the maternal lineage, albeit in different ways. As Jo Malin has noted, in autobiographical writing the mother figure is often "embedded in a complex, narrated relationship between mother and child" (Malin 2000, 2 f.).

With Heti, the extent to which her book is permeated with the relationship between mother and daughter is striking. The impact of this complicated relationship on Heti's indecision concerning motherhood has been thoroughly examined by Gretchen Shirm (2022) from a psychoanalytical perspective related to Melanie Klein's ideas about motherhood. Sheila broods on her social responsibility as a complicating factor: her family are Hungarian Jews, her grandmother experienced the Holocaust, and several members of the family were murdered in Auschwitz. Families were destroyed, and consequently reproduction is often seen as a moral obligation. Shirm reads this account as a "testimony" of an inherited trauma of

double consequence for Heti: “She’s inviting us to draw a comparison between the personal and the public, and their respective effects on the individuals who experienced them.” Three generations are in different ways affected by the “intergenerational trauma” (Shirm 2022, 15, 12).

Sheila’s mother left Hungary (and her own mother) to get married in Canada. She was a trained physician and spent long periods working away from home when Sheila was a child. Early in the book, she recounts that she grew up with a mother who always cried and that she as a child was convinced that she was to blame for her mother’s sadness (15). The memory still afflicts her. Her mother dedicated herself to her work and neglected her children who were raised by their father. From childhood, Sheila carries with her the image of what defines a mother, making it tangible by imaginatively placing her on a chair in a room of her own: “That is what a mother does: she sits in her room and works hard” (40).

The importance of the mother-daughter relationship is underscored by the fact that a significant part of the agony around motherhood seems to stem from the constantly negative attitude transmitted by Sheila’s mother: that the children were a burden, that when they arrived her husband’s love was transferred from her to them (82), and that work was more important than the children. Her mother’s constant dissatisfaction makes the child Sheila draw the conclusion that it is her fault, that something is wrong with her (80). Her mother’s grief has been transmitted to her, creating a life-long pain (143 f.). That the complicated relationship has an impact on her approach to motherhood is obvious: “Or maybe I feel betrayed by my mother, for not devoting herself to me and creating whatever loving memories must be created in a child to make her want to repeat the process again” (128).

The absent mother is notable also in Cusk’s writing. She is mentioned, but mother and daughter do not seem to have a close relationship. When Cusk describes her fear of giving birth, her mother only replies that she should take any drug that they offer her during labor. This only reinforces the daughter’s fear. The mother does not support her, and Cusk concludes that mothers today are on their own. This explains why child-care manuals play such an important role in the narrative. There is no generation of previous mothers to turn to.

The absent mother in Heti’s book gradually becomes more visible during the course of the narrative. The narrative emerges as a process of reconciliation which is completed when Sheila sends her manuscript to her mother and receives a loving response. Gretchen Shirm (2022) describes

this exchange from her psychoanalytical perspective as “a degree of reparation” (34). Sheila is finally to some extent at peace with her child-free life, which incidentally mirrors her childhood definition of what a mother does: “she sits in her room and works hard.”

The acts of identification with and recognition from her mother seem to be determinative in finding an answer to the overriding question in *Motherhood*, and the book is a significant example of the matrilineal narrative that according to Yi-Lin Yu signifies much contemporary literature by women writers. Motherhood exists in a web of connections between generations. In order to understand these connections, the narratives explore the complicated bonds that continue to influence new generations. Yu defines matrilineal narratives in accordance with Tess Cosslett: “A ‘matrilineal’ narrative I define as one which either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how the identity of a central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors” (Cosslett 1996, 7; Yu 2005, 2). Sheila revisits not only her mother but also her grandmother, in an attempt to come to grips with her understanding of motherhood. However, her exploration of the meaning of motherhood is characterized by consistent loyalty to her own perception, her own “exercise of attention” that contributes, as Moi formulates it in her Knausgaard analysis, to “create a world” (2017b). It is the protagonist’s point of view, her field of vision, that is the starting point for the comprehensive contemplation on motherhood.

This also applies to Cusk’s approach. She describes her experience of motherhood with no attempt to adjust it to the expected story of motherhood as a self-fulfilling practice. She takes care of and loves her baby, but she finds the endless daily chores exhausting, frustrating, and boring. This sets her apart from other mothers. When her family moves out of London to a university town, she notices that men are nowhere to be seen, but that she is surrounded by mothers. Cusk observes them, many older than herself, and they are everywhere with their small children. She does not approach them but sets herself apart as an observer. To her, life in the small town soon feels like a prison sentence, but she understands why it attracts mothers: “Its residential recesses were ‘geared’ to the good mother. This, I came to understand, was why so many mothers lived here. Here you could be free from the torments and temptations of life on the outside” (172). To Cusk, it only reminds her of the life she has lost. A health visitor advises her to join a toddlers group and she describes the event:

The organiser was bringing out cups and saucers which clattered loudly in her shaking hands. [...] She went about the room, bending discreetly towards the groups of talking women. *Coffee*, she mouthed to each one in a stage whisper, as if she were interrupting important meetings. Nearby, Cordelia's mother was discussing Cordelia's proclivities. Whenever she sees a black person, she said fondly, she just bursts into tears! It's quite embarrassing really, she added above the laughters of the others. She's obviously, you know, *a bit frightened*. They nodded their heads sympathetically, hands over their smiling mouths. *Coffee?* whispered the organiser next to my ear. (176 f.)

Cusk observes the interaction between the mothers which she does not take part in. This perspective reinforces the impression that she has nothing in common with the other mothers. Cusk is a writer, not a mother who adheres to the script of the good mother. She cannot devote herself to the baby in a self-effacing way and she cannot compromise on her intellectual integrity. This explains why *A Life's Work* challenged established norms on motherhood and stirred so much anger.

### SCRUTINIZING MOTHERHOOD

An important characteristic of both narratives discussed here is the astute and carefully described recognition of feelings of ambivalence and frustration. All kinds of irrational and unpleasant feelings are exposed. Sheila grieves the loss of friends who have children, being the one left behind. Cusk grieves the loss of the self she used to be. Both writers delve into their own emotional reactions to remarks, advice, or behavior among friends and family. The style connects to reality in a similar way as that which Moi observes in Knausgaard—a writing with a “capacity to convey reality,” committed to “*attention*” (Moi 2017b). As Moi underscores, such an endeavor involves both reader and writer:

But this means that the reader has to be willing to look, to examine her own world in the light of the writer's or the critic's invitation. For their part, the critic and the writer have to try to describe what they see as fully as possible. In so doing, they will necessarily reveal who they are, by which I mean they will reveal the specific nature of their own capacity for attention, at the same time as they say something about the world. (Moi 2017b)

This might help to explain the intense reactions triggered by the works on motherhood. The subject is apt to engage readers on a personal level as mothers or children, as having experienced complicated or non-existent relationships: experienced loss, grief, satisfaction or happiness. In our interpretation, the response is to a certain extent explained by the writers' ability to narrate reality, to engage themselves and the reader through careful attention to their perception of everyday life and its connection to existential questions (cf. Moi 2017b).

Furthermore, both texts illustrate simultaneously the individualization in modern society and the impossibility of making decisions about motherhood entirely on one's own. A recurrent point of reference is the human environment, indicating the dependence on social and emotional relations, and a timeline before and beyond the self.

As previously stated, motherhood is still a contested field. On Mother's Day in 2021 a young critic, Greta Thurfjell (2021), published an essay in a major Swedish newspaper, relating how when she was pregnant she was fed with horror stories about child birth and life with a baby to the extent that she felt relieved about how smooth everything turned out to be for her as a mother. She argued that it is time to balance all the dark stories with more positive ones.

Thurfjell was inspired by Elizabeth Bruenig's article "I Became a Mother at 25, and I'm Not Sorry I Didn't Wait," published on Mother's Day in *The New York Times* (Bruenig 2021). Bruenig had her first child in the midst of trying to launch herself as a journalist. There is a huge difference in how she experienced motherhood compared to Rachel Cusk. To Bruenig, the daily care of the baby was a relief "[f]or this member of a generation famously beset by anxiety." In Cusk's narrative there is an unbridgeable gap between the I, the self she wants to retain, and being a mother. This gap is never reconciled. Cusk explores motherhood, but this does not change the self in the text. Not so with Bruenig: "You never know who you are, because you are always changing." In her article Elizabeth Bruenig refers to Sheila Heti's book and describes the narrator as "a cynical writer contemplating whether to have kids before it's too late." Bruenig implies that Heti is too self-absorbed.

Elizabeth Bruenig's and Greta Thurfjell's articles show a generational difference, a sign that career and motherhood are no longer completely incompatible. They were both born in the 1990s. Moreover, the work of mothers is being reevaluated. Cusk disparages this work: "It erodes your self-esteem and your membership of the adult world" (13 f.). To Bruenig, motherhood has a positive impact on her professional life. Cusk's narrative

stirred aggravation, but Bruenig's article also elicited reactions. Being both a young mother and a successful journalist, she was criticized for speaking from a white, privileged position, giving the impression that women can have it all. Nonetheless, Greta Thurffjell and Elizabeth Bruenig challenge the notion advanced by Cusk and Heti that being a mother and a writer is not compatible.

Sheila chooses not to become a mother. Whatever reasons women have for making that decision, it clearly challenges cultural scripts. "It makes me furious that 'voluntary' childlessness is still so often described as a project of self-realization, when in fact it contains an immense amount of more complicated issues," concludes the Swedish writer Annina Rabe (2013, 70). The works discussed here bring forward a similar viewpoint by highlighting a wide variety of aspects of motherhood and mothering—encompassing the personal and the political, the individual and the collective. For Sheila in *Motherhood*, the dichotomy between freedom and motherhood is all but fixed, ruling out the possibility of combining the two. On an existential level, however, the narrative is permeated with 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—but what is there to lose?" (21).

Where are the texts in which "the voice of the mother" is not embedded in a daughter's story but is written by the mother herself? Why has this direct authorization of the mother's narrative and the sound of the mother's voice been foregrounded by the story of the daughter in women's autobiographies and the feminist theoretical discussion of women's autobiographies? (Malin 2000, 91)

Jo Malin's call was published two decades ago in her book *The Voice of the Mother: Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth-Century Women's Autobiographies*. The works discussed here mirror the expanding range of theoretical and empirical reflection that has characterized research and literature about motherhood in recent decades. Today, the inquiry into motherhood merges the private and political, encompassing areas such as class, ethnicity, work, family, and home (Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010, Rye et al. 2018). Accordingly, Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti refer to professional and family life, sex, reproduction, child care, gender, and money. They reveal to what extent motherhood is not an isolated question, but a concern for society at large.

To learn to see is to learn a language, concludes Toril Moi (2017a, 26). The works discussed here belong to a compelling genre of life writing where the careful attention to everyday life and personal thought deepens the interconnection between the self and the world. With their sharp and sensitive reflections, both *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* recognize the complexity of a question that will remain important.

## REFERENCES

- Badinter, Élisabeth. 2011. *How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*, translated by Adriana Hunter, New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Björk, Nina. 2018. Sheila Heti har brännande funderingar i Moderskap, *Dagens Nyheter*, September 7.
- Bruenig, Elizabeth. 2021. I Became a Mother at 25, and I'm Not Sorry I Didn't Wait, *The New York Times*, May 7.
- Cosslett, Tess. 1996. Feminism, Matrilinealism, and the 'House of Women' in Contemporary Women's Fiction. *Journal of Gender Studies* 5 (1): 7–17.
- Cusk, Rachel. 2008. (first published in 2001). *A Life's Work*. London: Faber and Faber.
- DiQuinzio, Patrice. 1999. *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problem of Mothering*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Feigel, Lara. 2018. Motherhood by Sheila Heti Review – To Breed or not to Breed? *The Guardian*, June 6.
- Heti, Sheila. 2018. *Motherhood*. London: Harvill Secker.
- Malin, Jo. 2000. *The Voice of the Mother: Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth-Century Women's Autobiographies*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Merkin, Daphne. 2021. A Very Lonely Business, *The New York Review of Books*, February 11, 2021: 27–29.
- Miller, Tina. 2005. *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moi, Toril. 2017a. *Språk och uppmärksamhet*, translated by Alva Dahl, Stockholm: Faethon.
- . 2017b. Describing My Struggle, *The Point Magazine* online December 27.
- Podnieks, Elizabeth, and Andrea O'Reilly. 2010. Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives. In *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, ed. Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly, 1–27. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Rabe, Annina. 2013. Ingen rättighet eller skyldighet. In *Ingens mamma. Tolv kvinnor om barnfrihet*, ed. Josefine Adolfsson, 66–78. Stockholm: Atlas.



- Rye, Gill, Victoria Browne, Adalgisa Giorgio, Emily Jeremiah, and Abigail Lee Six, eds. 2018. *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Schwartz, Alexandra. 2018. Sheila Heti wrestles with a big decision in 'Motherhood'. *The New Yorker*, May 7.
- Shirm, Gretchen. 2022. Sheila Heti, Melanie Klein and *Motherhood*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. Published online January 3. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00111619.2021.2024128> (accessed February 16, 2022).
- Thurfjell, Greta. 2021. Att bli mamma var inte alls så jobbigt som de sa. *Dagens Nyheter*, May 30.
- Yu, Yi-Lin. 2005. *Mother, She Wrote: Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women's Writing*. New York: Peter Lang.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copy-right holder.

