

# **THE MOTHER QUESTION**

writing about the diversity and complexity of contemporary motherhood

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An exegetical essay on the novel 'The Hum of Concrete'  
presented as part of the requirement for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Creative Writing  
Discipline of English  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
The University of Adelaide  
October 2007

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	ii
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	iii
<b>DECLARATION</b>	v
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	vi
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>THE COMPLEXITY OF CONTEMPORARY MOTHERHOOD</b>	3
Maternal Feminism	6
Motherguilt I	11
Working Mothers I	16
<b>PART II</b>	
<b>THE DIVERSITY OF MOTHERS IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION</b>	21
Writing Motherhood	22
Motherlove I	28
Problematic Mothering	34
Dissatisfaction	39
Diversity	43
In and Outside the Home	47
Motherguilt II	55
<b>PART III</b>	
<b>WRITING CONTEMPORARY MOTHERS: <i>THE HUM OF CONCRETE</i></b>	59
Ordinary and Extraordinary	59
Working Mothers II	67
Conflict and Tension	68
Motherlove II	71
<b>PART IV</b>	
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	74
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	80

## **ABSTRACT**

My major work, 'The Hum of Concrete', is a novel that takes the form of a series of stand-alone stories or meditations. It has five main characters, all women, and is set in Malmö, Sweden. The city itself plays a part in the narrative. The characters include Nassrin, a Muslim cleaner; Rhyme, a troubled street kid; Bodil, a middle-aged doctor; Estella, a black postie and Susanna, a lesbian teacher for immigrants. Each main character is presented in three stories, initially as a young woman and later as a partner and then mother.

Nassrin walks into the sea fully clothed with her new baby in her arms because she cannot cope with the fact that the child is of indeterminate sex. Rhyme spends the lead up to Christmas on a park bench and is offered ten dollars for a blow job. Bodil arranges her mother's last birthday party while coming to terms with being pregnant with her first child in her forties. Estella tries in vain to write a sexy story stumbling into new realms of her own sexuality as she does her research. Susanna is thick-skinned and stands between the violent boys and a fight. The stories in 'The Hum of Concrete' are stories of loss and lust, of grief, happiness, love and despair. They represent the diversity of life for women and mothers in the city today.

The minor component of the thesis, an exegetical essay, is a reflection on writings about motherhood: my own as well as others. Motherhood is an aspect of life that most women (and many men) take very seriously. However, motherhood must be balanced against work and other family commitments, relationships outside the family and other fulfilling personal activities. The exegetical essay argues for the diversity and complexity of mothering by focusing on fictional mothers who struggle with

some part of motherhood, whether it be pregnancy, labour, bonding with infants or coping with children as they grow older.

To what extent is a mother defined by her motherhood? Is a mother only a mother? The essay discusses a selection of texts that have influenced my own novel in one way or another. My interest in working mothers includes mothers who are writers. I discuss the concept of maternal feminism and draw on my Swedish background to explore the complex relationship between childrearing and work, showing how this relationship can differ between cultures in the Western world, depending on the support structures available to mothers. The essay explores the process of writing as a mother as a specific case of the challenges that face working mothers. Finally, I suggest that love between mother and child as well as realistic expectations might be key components when successfully balancing mothering.

## **DECLARATION**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree of diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I give consent to this thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if accepted for the award of the degree.

**Anna Solding**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all I would like to thank my children. Mereki and Lukaz, I love you more than the words of a thousand books can express. You will always be my greatest joy.

Along the way, the advice and ideas of many friends and colleagues have been very helpful to me in completing both parts of this thesis. I would like to thank you all, especially the staff and fellow students at the English Department of the University of Adelaide.

Many thanks to Sonja Dechian, Cassie Flanagan, Sam Franzway, Mel Kinsman, Stefan Laszczuk, Trisha Helbers, James Roberts and Lil Jedynak for being great writing buddies and reading early drafts of the major creative work, giving me useful hints on how to head in the direction of clarity rather than obscurity. Thanks also to Anne-marie Taplin, Sky Harrison and Sabina Hopfer for reading and commenting on individual stories within the framework of our trusty workshop. Extra special thanks to Jim for proofreading the essay as well.

A thousand thanks to Mag Merrilees for being such an insightful reader of both parts of the thesis and a special thanks for taking my sons for walks in the Botanic Gardens while I tried to frantically tie all the strings together.

Thanks to J.M Coetzee for encouraging my writing in a review of *On Edge* and as the judge of the Wirra Wirra Short Story Competition, in which the chapter/story 'Decisions' was highly commended.

Special thanks to my mentor Susan Johnson who has been a stern critic and a good friend whose opinions and advice I have taken very seriously, even in cases where I've ultimately chosen to reject them. Also, thank you to Peter Bishop at Varuna for believing in the manuscript enough to actively push for its publication.

Several of the chapters in 'The Hum of Concrete' have been published as short stories: 'Loneshine' in *Cracker!* (Wakefield Press, 2003); 'The Beginnings' in *The Body* (Wakefield Press, 2004); 'Decisions' was highly commended in the Wirra Wirra Short Story Competition and subsequently published in *Time Fractures* (Seaview Press, 2005); 'Frozen' in *On Edge* (Wakefield Press, 2005); 'A Walk in the Park' in *staples #3* 2006.

Many thanks to my first supervisor Tom Shapcott whose wise and encouraging comments helped me move forward from the first draft of the novel. My second supervisor Sue Hosking, whose rigour and academic skill guided me through many re-drafts of the essay, thank you. Also thanks to Nicholas Jose who came late to the project with an open mind, useful hints and much needed advice, and to Moya Costello who helped with the actual submission process.

I would also like to sincerely thank my wonderful Swedish and Norwegian friends Josefine Aaser, Jessi Larsson, Mikael Nilsson, Inger Ashing and Kattis Sjöstedt who have always believed in me and are currently sitting at home ready to read copies of my novel when it finally sees the light of day.

Infinite thanks to Peter Cassidy and Ross Williams who thought a writer should have a laptop and therefore decided to give me one. Melinda Best and Bel Schenk, thank you for being such wonderful and supportive friends when I needed you the most.

To Heather Taylor Johnson I give heartfelt thanks not just for reading and giving me very useful feedback on both parts of the manuscript but for always being there. Thank you for letting your life mesh with mine through our children's laughter and for always providing a safe place to express the ugliest feelings about motherhood.

Endless thanks to my parents Inger and Staffan Solding who have always supported me by reading everything I have ever published even though English is their second language. Thanks to my brother Petter for spurring me on by writing his PhD thesis at the same time as I wrote mine. And special thanks to *moder* for giving me life and always being my greatest inspiration in the art of motherhood.

Finally, the biggest thanks of all, to the man I love. My rock, the father of my beautiful children, the one who has cared for them both and done all the housework for years so that I can fulfil my dream to be a writer. Allan, this one is for you.

# THE MOTHER QUESTION

## INTRODUCTION

This exegetical essay discusses the diversity of mothers' backgrounds and experiences of mothering in a contemporary world, relating these issues specifically to maternal feminism. What is a mother now? The question of contemporary motherhood is examined from cultural, social and sociological angles and I use my own Swedish background as a frame of reference. Major differences in the sociological contexts of mothering are exposed when comparing Sweden with Australia and other countries in the Western world. My definition of 'contemporary' encompasses the last quarter of a century. All the contemporary literary works examined in this exegetical essay were published as well as set in the English speaking world after 1980.

In Part I the concept of maternal feminism is introduced along with motherguilt and a discussion of the issues facing working mothers. Part II brings up questions of maternal diversity and dissatisfaction while the issues of working mothers and motherguilt are expanded upon in relation to contemporary texts where motherhood plays a central role. Here the concept of motherlove is first introduced. In Part III my own major work is the focus. Ordinary and extraordinary mothers and the conflict and tensions they feel are discussed. Working mothers are explored from new angles alongside an expansion on the important issue of motherlove.

Motherhood is best seen not as a fixed entity but as a constantly changing process which can include many crucial elements in varying combinations—diversity, complexity, work, guilt, love and balance—at any particular point in time. Balance between motherhood and other aspects of life, as well as freedom from motherguilt, is

what the mothers in focus aim for. No mother is perfect in her mothering but the mothers in the texts I discuss here, who have realistic expectations of what motherhood can be, are the ones represented as most likely to be content in their role as mothers.

## **PART I**

### **THE COMPLEXITY OF CONTEMPORARY MOTHERHOOD**

In her introduction to *Motherlove 2* (1997), an Australian anthology about births, babies and beyond, Debra Adelaide suggests one reason why mothers (and fathers) don't write about their children is that 'children occupy an uneasy place in our collective psyche. We are expected to like the idea of them generally, but not to go overboard with our ardour; is this, I wonder, still a hangover of the terrible Victorian dictum that children should be seen and not heard?' (1).

Yet, women want to read about children. More importantly, for the sake of my argument, they also want to read about themselves as mothers. They want to see their own everyday dilemmas handled by fictional characters. If more writers are now writing about contemporary motherhood it could be because more writers are finding mother stories worth telling. More readers are also finding them worth reading. Perhaps more mothers are writing about their own experiences as mothers—as opposed to their experiences as children of their own mothers. Another reason for a possible shift could be that some women writers choose not to have children but feel the need to write through the arguments for and against to come to a conclusion, as is the case with Lionel Shriver, author of the widely discussed novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003). In an essay entitled 'Separation From Birth', Shriver admits that her ambivalence towards children inspired her to write the book. 'I can roughly divide my novels into two stacks. They either address what I want, or what I fear.' (2)

Perhaps more writers today are facing their child-related fears. Whatever the reason, there are certainly strong contemporary mother-centred narratives being produced in the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some will be further discussed in this exegetical essay.

Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) and Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* have received ample publicity and much praise from both critics and the general readership. The fact that the collection *Gas and Air: Tales of Pregnancy, Birth and Beyond* (2002), edited by Jill Dawson and Margo Daly, has been published indicates that publishers have identified a market for such mother-centred narratives. This could be because, in the Western world, having children has shifted from being just a natural part of life to something people want to plan for and read up on. Mothers want to share their experiences. Perhaps this is a logical progression when most people no longer live in households shared by more than two generations. Thanks to the pill and, lately, IVF, women are able to control their fertility, but only to a certain extent. Women in the Western world have fewer children now than they did 100 years ago; this is partly because more women choose not to have children at all, partly because many start trying to become pregnant later in life and their biological clock simply runs out of time.

According to Sylva Ann Hewlett's *Baby Hunger: The New Battle for Motherhood*, many high-achieving women in the United States never consciously choose not to have children, but do not have enough time in their lives to fit in a family and therefore end up successful but lonely in middle age (91-93). Many of the women Hewlett interviewed apologised for "wanting it all", to which she responded:

They were quite prepared to shoulder more than their fair share of the work involved in having both career and family. So why on earth shouldn't they feel entitled to rich, multidimensional lives? At the end of the day, women simply want the choices in love and work that men take so completely for granted. (90)

Having it all, or rather having a job and children, can be an inspired and empowering choice and many mothers want to read about other women's inspiring, or for that matter terrifying, experiences. Western women's growing interest in reading about issues surrounding motherhood, both in the gossip magazines and in novels, is a trend that has been picked up by publishing industry. In Australia we have seen novels such as Eva Sallis's *The Australian/Vogel-winning Hiam*, Tegan Bennett Daylight's *Safety* and Gay Lynch's *Cleanskin*.

It seems that not just serious literary fiction is on the rise. According to Catherine Price, chick lit—a term used to denote genre fiction aimed at young, mostly single, working women—could now be evolving into mom lit (written for and marketed to the same women who ten years ago read chick lit but now have moved on to have children of their own). Bridget Jones from *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding has recently given birth in her ongoing saga, serialised in *The Independent* (UK), and people want to read about it. Supply and demand rule in the world of publishing, as well as everywhere else, and this can have a homogenising effect. As CityMama complains on her website:

Why aren't Mom Lit books about the frumpy Pentecostal supermarket checker in Omaha with the truck-driving husband? Or the Methodist sheriff's deputy in Cheyenne with a school teacher husband and five kids all living in a trailer? Or the pagan midwife in Seattle with the lesbian natural foods chef partner and their blended family with kids from previous marriages?

Those are the stories I'd want to read. (2)

Those are the stories I would want to read too. Even more importantly: those are the stories I would want to write, and find an audience for.

### **Maternal Feminism**

In the last five years, there has been increased interest in a kind of feminism which takes into account women's as well as children's need for balance: a maternal feminism. Feminist Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) was one of the first to discuss motherhood from a personal as well as an academic perspective, describing it as an institution in a patriarchal system that has disconnected mothers from their bodies:

The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers. . . . We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe. (285-86)

Rich's vision is radical but still relevant today. Since the arrival of *Of Woman Born*, feminists have continued to expand on her ideas of motherhood and mothering. The second wave of feminism in the 1970s advocated women's independence from childbirth and childrearing as well as freedom of choice in these matters. In more recent theoretical feminist texts, such as *A Mother's Place: Taking the Debate about Working Mothers beyond Guilt and Blame* (1998) by Susan Chira, *Baby Hunger: The*

*New Battle for Motherhood* (2002) by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and *Motherhood: How Should We Care For Our Children?* (2005) by Anne Manne, a balance is sought between the needs for a woman to be a daughter, partner, worker and mother. As Marianne Hirsch writes in *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989): ‘Until feminists can find ways to speak as mothers, feminism as a social and intellectual movement will be unable to account for important experiential differences among women.’ (196). There is no doubt that all women experience their roles as mothers differently and this should be an important factor when studying texts on mothering from a feminist perspective.

For the purposes of this exegetical essay I am using a feminist perspective which embraces women’s right to choose their own destinies, whether this includes staying at home with their children or going out to work—or a combination of the two. In her excellent study of motherhood Anne Manne suggests that contemporary women want to make their own choices. She discusses the thesis put forward by Catherine Hakim in her groundbreaking study, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. By collating a vast range of international research, Hakim identifies three broad preference groups among women which exist in all societies: work-centred, home-centred or ‘adaptive’ (94). Manne explains that between 60 and 80 per cent of women—the percentage depending on ‘whether women’s preferences are supported or denied by governments and the broader culture’ (94)—fall into the third and largest group, the ‘adaptive’ mothers:

‘Adaptive’ women shape their working life around the demands of family life. They have multiple goals and want the best of both worlds. Very responsive to different family policies, they usually seek to combine work and family in two

clear patterns. Some combine work and family across the life cycle by doing it in sequence—a substantial work or career break followed by gradual re-entry. Others do so by combining work and family throughout, taking some leave and working part time while children are young. (94)

The women in this diverse ‘adaptive’ group try to balance motherhood and work in a way that suits them. Many women want their partners to work part time and share the childrearing when the children are young.

In texts that discuss feminist theory in relation to women novelists, such as *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists; Feminist Theory into Practice* by Susan Watkins, often the only chapters that mention motherhood are the ones concerned with psychoanalytical feminist thought. Freudian psychoanalysis can be an excessively male-centred way to start thinking about motherhood. Instead, for the purpose of this exegetical essay, I have adopted a more grounded and easily defined feminist method of interpreting the texts: a maternal feminism. This feminism is built on *caritas* or ‘loving kindness’ which takes into account not just the woman’s needs but also the child’s. Manne explains that this is not a step back to ‘the old “children first” dialogue which meant putting women last while sentimentalising their “sacrifice”’ (313). Rather, maternal feminism is all about balancing mothering. This new kind of feminism emerged in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century out of the kind of social feminism that is prevalent in Sweden. It is a feminism where a woman’s need to work is balanced with children’s need for care by the state’s provision of generous parental leave, short working days and affordable community child care. This is the kind of feminism that I have grown up with and know intimately from experience.

One of the most commonly discussed feminist texts on motherhood, Nancy Chodrow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*, has certainly advanced the thinking in the field of psychoanalytical feminism. Chodorow discusses reasons why women mother, from a biological as well as a social perspective, concluding that chromosomes 'do not provide a basis either for the wish for a child or for capacities for nurturant parental behaviour' (23) which means that, psychologically, both sexes are equipped to nurture. However, cultural and social norms prescribe women, rather than men, to mother. According to Chodorow there are also psychoanalytical explanations as to why women, rather than men play the role of mother, but the limited scope of this exegetical essay provides little opportunity for me to elaborate on contexts other than the cultural, social and sociological. Here, I am interested in how these particular contexts reflect the diversity and complexity of mothers and motherhood.

In her brilliant study, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, Andrea O'Reilly outlines Morrison's theory of black motherhood. Even though I have chosen not to specifically study any of Morrison's novels, as they are not set in contemporary times, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood* is still a very useful resource when it comes to talking about motherhood in literature from a feminist perspective. O'Reilly suggests that Morrison draws upon the important theme of black maternal practice and thought, which recognises that black mothers 'have always worked in and outside the home and mothering itself is understood to be a public and political enterprise' (23). According to O'Reilly, for Morrison it is not just possible but essential for mothers to 'regard nurturance and work as integrated—not oppositional—dimensions of their lives and selves' (23).

Referring to *Beloved* (1987) in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch points out that, 'Toni Morrison has done more than to shift the direction of her own

work and of feminist theorizing: she has opened the space for maternal narrative in feminist fiction' (198). She has paved the way for writers and readers who are interested in mother stories but who find 'mom lit' a little too light-weight.

Two of the novels I have chosen to discuss in this exegetical essay illustrate effectively what can happen when there is a disruption to what O'Reilly in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood* calls the 'motherline' (35). This motherline is the ancestral memory of cultural values passed from one generation to the next, not just from a mother to her daughters but also to her sons. In Morrison's view 'men are made complete and whole through connection with the mother and identification with the motherline' (37). Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is set in the USA and revolves around a mother coming to terms with the fact that her son has committed a high school massacre. In *Mother to Mother* (1998) by Sindiwe Magona, a poor black mother tells the mother of a murdered white girl how she slowly realised that her son was probably the one wielding the knife in an angry mob of people who stabbed the white girl to death. These are two very troubled young men who have distanced themselves from their communities. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Mother to Mother* are both stark portrayals of what can happen when the values of the motherline are ignored. Both young men are physically distant from their grandmothers and emotionally so from their mothers.

Theoretical texts on the subject of everyday motherhood are few and far between. In *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch calls for a more focused study of maternal subjectivity. 'Rather than daughters having to "speak for" mothers, mothers would be able to speak for themselves, perhaps "with two voices"' (197). Hirsch is only talking about mothers and daughters here, but I think there is at least as

great a need for mothers of sons to speak of their relationships, as Eva does in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*.

### **Motherguilt I**

One of the strongest, and—in the Western world—most well documented, feelings associated with motherhood is guilt. In *Naked Motherhood: Shattering Illusions and Sharing Truths* (1999), Wendy LeBlanc writes about the mythology of motherhood where there are only two kinds of mothers, the good ones and the bad ones. ‘The good ones never, ever harm their children and are patient with them all the time’ (146). In the real world of motherhood, it would be close to impossible to find a mother who never loses her temper and who is always patient. Yet most mothers sometimes feel guilty about how they behave towards their children. And, as LeBlanc rightly points out, this guilt often extends far beyond the children, ‘to a woman’s perceived inability to run the perfect household, serve the perfect meals, be the perfect wife, daughter, sister, friend—and her inability to remain emotionally stable at all times, never needing or asking for any form of support from anyone’ (146-147). Because mothers constantly feel the pressure from within and from their surroundings to be ‘good mothers’, they invariably fail, as no one can be loving, supportive and patient all the time.

Overwhelming feelings often abound among new mothers: feelings of love but also of fear and longing. In *Motherhood*, Anne Manne totally rejects the idea of instant bonding at birth in favour of attachment which evolves over the first year (138). I certainly agree that attachment is extremely important but also believe that early bonding can help both the mother and the child come to terms with their new positions in life.

According to LeBlanc in *Naked Motherhood*, only sixty percent of the women she interviewed said they ‘bonded immediately or within the first few days with their new babies’ (22). When the bonding works, it can be ‘all-consuming and wonderful beyond belief’ (22), but when the bonding doesn’t happen, perhaps for months or even years, the mother is ‘usually at a loss to explain it and afraid to admit it has not happened—even to herself’ (25). Society has such high expectations of mothers and when women feel that they do not live up to these expectations they feel guilty for having given their babies ‘a less than perfect start to life’ (25).

There are many reasons why women can have a hard time bonding with their newborn. Sometimes it has to do with a difficult pregnancy or birth. Sometimes issues from the mother’s own childhood emerge. If the baby is born into an already troubled relationship it often aggravates issues between parents rather than alleviates them.

Even though my personal experiences of mothering are overwhelmingly positive, I am very aware that for many women mothering is much more fraught. Susan Maushart, in *The Mask of Motherhood*, writes about the many strange paradoxes of human motherhood, arguing that ‘mothering is the most powerful of all biological capacities, and among the most disempowering of all social experiences’ (47). Women give birth but are not necessarily thanked for it. Whatever women do to be good mothers they are unlikely to get any rewards other than their children’s love or gratitude. And even that isn’t always forthcoming.

Children might feel obliged to love their parents or feel forced to be grateful for their very existence, rather than being overwhelmed with love the way some parents are, as Lisa Gorton discusses in her essay ‘Hostages to Fortune: Parents and Children’. In the late 1500s Montaigne pointed out that ‘every workman loves his

work better than his work would love him in return, if it had feeling' (quoted in Gorton, 37). Gorton goes on to elaborate:

'[m]utuality is an ideal of romantic love, but it is impossible for parents and children. For a parent's love, wherever it may end, characteristically starts with pride in creation' (37)

Is this parental love an indication of what it means to be a good parent or simply a selfish love of one's work? Love plays an obvious part in good parenting but so do many other things, such as supervision and guidance. What it means to be a good mother has always varied from one society to the next and from one time to another. In *A Mother's Place*, Susan Chira argues in favour of working mothers:

whether a child has a mother who works or one who stays at home is usually not the issue. What does matter, the studies indicate, is sensitivity and responsiveness on the part of both parents, coupled with good supervision and an ability to set limits. The research suggests that working mothers are just as able to provide such care as mothers who stay at home. (118)

Motherguilt and ambivalence towards children are recurring but changing phenomena. Stephanie Spinner, in her foreword to the anthology *Motherlove* published in 1978, discusses dark motherly feelings:

Mothers who wonder aloud why they ever had children no longer shock or alarm us. The notion of motherhood as a province of pain as well as joy, though not a new one, has been more widely accepted lately ... (10)

Spinner goes on to elaborate that in all the stories in *Motherlove* where motherly aggression occurs, the action of 'the "bad" mother is seen as the inevitable product of duress' (10). This willingness to see motherly aggression not as abhorrent and unfeminine, but as a mother's natural response to difficult situations, suggests that female authors in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, when the majority of the stories in the collection were written, were paving a way for the varied and nuanced accounts of mothers that have continued to appear since. In her study *Torn in Two; The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, Rozsika Parker argues that maternal ambivalence, when 'loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side', is an 'experience shared variously by all mothers' (1). As she sees it, the problem with Chodorow's ideas, as presented in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, is that the concept of mothering is based only on love, leaving no room for hatred or ambivalence. This makes sense from a psychoanalytical perspective, where the ego formation for female children is seen as the more problematic because the ego is pulled between love for the father and love of the mother, rather than love for the mother and identification with the father, as for male children. The argument is valid and important when investigating children's relationship with their parents. However, when looking at the question from the mother's point of view, Parker's ideas about ambivalence are more appropriate.

Society's expectations are never clear-cut and easily adhered to, but rather they exist as a complex web of unwritten rules regulating women's lives from the cradle to

the grave. Some women are more bound by them than others. In my view, mothers in cultures such as the Australian or the Swedish, who disregard certain societal ideas of how they should act, and spend more energy playing with their children than worrying about conventions, can feel less stressed and guilty, and also bring up happier children. In *The Mask of Motherhood*, Susan Maushart attempts to describe the contemporary mother's dilemma. The idea of the perfect mother as the happily married housewife, with a bunch of kids, who cooks nutritious meals every day, who is rarely tired and would never consider handing the care of her children over to someone else, is still entrenched in our collective psyche and many mothers (consciously or unconsciously) aspire to reach it:

It's not that we refuse to use daycare and disposables, or that we resolutely ban Happy Meals or 'only children' or – heaven knows – the possibility of separation and divorce. It's just that we feel guilty about these things. (13)

Others who have addressed the same problem are Ita Buttrose and Dr Penny Adams in *Motherguilt*. They think 'mothers are finding it increasingly difficult to live up to society's expectations of them and are worn out from striving to be like others would have them be' (3).

Mothers, more often than not, are still the ones who carry the heaviest burden when it comes to child rearing, especially during the first couple of years of a child's life. But no matter how much work the mothers do, they still tend to feel guilty in relation to their children. They work too much and do not see their children enough. Or they do not work outside the home and they feel guilty about not contributing financially. Perhaps they feel they are too strict or too lax in their childrearing. Maybe

they serve the odd freezer pizza. There is boundless potential for reasons to feel guilty, especially in cases where the children present problems or don't live up to expectations.

### **Working Mothers I**

Balancing work and motherhood can be a serious challenge for contemporary women in the Western world. In Sylvia Ann Hewlett's *Baby Hunger*, there is a sad chapter called 'The Sobering Facts' which talks about how career women often find themselves childless, not by choice but by circumstance. A high-powered career can stand in the way of both relationships and children. Hewlett points to a survey carried out among high-achieving women in the United States in 2001 which shows that forty-nine percent of the ultra-achieving women included in the survey were childless but only fourteen percent had, when they graduated from college, envisioned themselves as childless in the future (101). 'In other words, for high-achieving women there is a huge gap between their "reality" and their "dream"' (101).

Feminists have fought long and hard for women's rights to work. Many of the mothers I have come across in my readings return to paid work not just because they have to but because they want to. Working gives them access to adult company, to problem solving and independence from their child, if only for a few hours.

According to Susan Chira in her study, *A Mother's Place*, research 'debunks the idea that working means surrendering the chance to shape a child's fate and values' (122). Chira reveals that studies show that 'the family remains the overwhelming influence on a child' whether the parents are working or not (122). Chira points out that the few studies that have been done on working mothers suggest that 'a woman's satisfaction, her sense of effectiveness and accomplishments, are more important to

her children than whether she holds a job or not' (122). Her survey of research on mothers' employment reveals that 'most studies found higher levels of satisfaction among mothers who worked than among mothers who stayed at home' (129). The simple reason I decided to explore this kind of dissatisfaction more in the chosen novels than in my own work, 'The Hum of Concrete', is that almost all mothers in Sweden, and consequently in my novel, work.

In *Baby Hunger*, Hewlett explains the thinking of European social feminists (and, incidentally, the Swedish government):

The belief is that because women are wives and mothers as well as workers and citizens, they need special compensatory policies in order to accomplish as much as men in the world beyond the home. In the words of Anna Greta Leijon, a former Swedish minister of labour: "If women are to achieve equal results they need to be overcompensated in various ways." Overcompensation in Sweden has translated into an elaborate set of benefits and services for working mothers—and increasingly, fathers. (140)

The Swedish social system is structured in such a way that either parent can take 480 days off with eighty percent pay (which is paid by the government). Some make the parental leave days last (by perhaps only using three or four days a week) so that they can stay at home for two years before returning to work, often part time. Praising the Swedish model for how it effectively decreases the gap between earnings for men and women, Hewlett writes that 'professional women are not under the same pressure to clone the male competitive model and are much more likely to have both a career and children' (23). The countries most of her comparisons are based on are the USA,

the UK and Australia. To show just how different some European countries are from Australia in this matter, she points out that ‘Australia has the dubious distinction of being one of only two rich democracies that fail to provide paid parenting leave for working mothers. The other is the US’ (23). Paid maternity leave and flexible working hours for mothers are crucial measures not only when it comes to women’s earnings but also when you look at motherly satisfaction.

In societies where mothers have to work to support their families there does not seem to be as much soul searching about choices as in other societies. No one in Sweden would judge a mother for going back to work after the parental leave has been used, as that is what is expected of her. But if she chose not to breastfeed and went back to work six weeks after the birth, like women occasionally do in Australia (some because they want to but others because they feel they have to) I suspect she would be frowned upon, no matter who was entrusted with the care of the baby, and ‘motherguilt’ would most certainly set in. Likewise, she might be called unusual if she chose to stay at home until the children started school and would most probably feel guilty about not bringing in any money to the household. These contrasting social contexts are reflected in the lives of the mothers in a range of novels, discussed below, including my own.

How men react to women’s decisions about work and child rearing is crucial, both at work and in the home. Patrice DiQuinzio points out in her study, *The Impossibility of Motherhood*, that the shift in acceptance of mothers in the workforce hasn’t necessarily brought with it a corresponding acceptance among men to take ‘greater responsibility for child rearing and other domestic activities’ (xi). It has not brought a greater acknowledgment among companies of the important role fathers have to play at home and not just at work as breadwinners. For some men (and

women) paid work might be ‘a socially legitimated form of self-centredness’ (Manne, 181).

Different societies look very differently upon working mothers and mothers who choose not to work. In societies where women tend to have careers before they have children, as is the case in both Sweden and Australia, the mothers sometimes find that they are treated quite differently once their babies are born, but also that they feel different. In *Naked Motherhood*, LeBlanc writes about her own experiences, as an academic, of becoming a mother:

What I never expected was that I would become a completely different person from the moment Daniel was born. I did not realise that everyone else would suddenly treat me as though I had no value, no contribution to make and no valid opinions anymore. I had not understood how closely my identity was bound up with being a person with a ‘significant’ job. Certainly my expectations of babies were way off beam and nothing, nothing had prepared me for the exhaustion, the fear of not mothering him perfectly and the overwhelming love I had for him. (6)

Personally, I never felt that people treated me differently in Australia after my first son was born, at least not in any negative way. Not even later when I wandered the corridors of the university two weeks before my second child was due to join us did anyone seem to have anything but admiration for me. I have chosen to combine my different roles as writer, PhD student and mother, as closely as I can by reading and writing about motherhood and discussing all facets of the experience with people around me. I am not going to lie and say that it was easy to leave my sixteen-month

old son at the daycare centre two days a week so that I could cycle to the university and spend my days writing in front of a computer instead of playing with him. But I have always been dedicated to my writing and I know that if I hadn't made that choice at the time I would not be nearing the completion of my thesis now. Occasionally, when my teary-eyed eldest pleads for me to bring him along to the university, motherguilt creeps up on me. But the feeling disappears when I return and he jumps into my lap bubbling with joy to see me back and my youngest crawls over to me grinning from ear to ear. The eldest is only temporarily upset with me for not being at home on the days that their dad cares for him. What matters the most is how happy he is when I arrive into his arms once more. And my happiness matches his.

## **PART II**

### **THE DIVERSITY OF MOTHERS IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION**

When I was sitting at my computer writing the second draft of this exegetical essay I could feel tiny jabs from within, as if the little person inside my tummy wanted to make sure there was a place for her or him in the telling of the essay. Now, writing my seventh and final draft, that little person is already nine months old and of course there is no better place than here to write about him. As I read and re-read, write and re-write this essay, I constantly return to my own experiences of pregnancy, birth and motherhood for reference and inspiration, much more so than while writing the novel. My firstborn has already grown into a glowing three-and-a-half-year old with a mind of his own. He is the light of my life but when the second child arrived life changed dramatically, both for him and for us. Life is never the same after you have had one child. Before my second son was born, I could not even begin to imagine what it would feel like to have two children. Now there is nothing more natural than having to constantly divide my attention between two equally loved children with differing needs. When I was writing the second draft, Sprig, as the baby was then called, was hurrying me along, growing at the same pace as this essay. Now when he is a little person in my life, I have less time and energy to spend writing and I always knew it would be so. Yet for months before conception, I wished for nothing more than those two blue lines, to know life had begun inside me a second time. Because pregnancy is such a special gift.

Pregnancy certainly does not always come easy, in fiction or in real life, and it does not always go to plan. Through fictional accounts of pregnancy I intend to show the diversity of mothers' experience. As Sylvia Ann Hewlett recounts in *Baby Hunger*, women try for years, use IVF, miscarry and have stillborn babies but they

often persist until they reach the miracle of life. There is something special about the creation of another human being. Yet women often have mixed feelings about the pregnancy once it is confirmed. Perhaps it happens too quickly. Sometimes being pregnant makes us feel sick or even invaded. Some of us can't sleep, our bodies balloon. And it suddenly dawns on us that there is no way back. Motherhood is forever.

### **Writing Motherhood**

*Gas and Air*, edited by Jill Dawson and Margo Daly, is a collection of accounts of pregnancy, labour, birth and child rearing by contemporary writers. Nikki Gemmell's lovely month-by-month account of pregnancy in 'Tales of the Recent Past' evoke the wonders of pregnancy. In this story the protagonist, a writer, gently guides the reader through both the doubts and the celebrations of her pregnancy:

I do not know the effect a child will have on me. I have heard the horror stories: how it will be difficult to go to the toilet with a baby, or have a shower, or wash the dishes, or write a book. How a child saps your looks, especially a girl. How making love after having a baby is like throwing a sausage down the Channel Tunnel. (215)

This is when the writer is only one month pregnant, before she realises how little these things will actually mean to her once the baby is around. This is not to say that all women feel the way she does once the baby is born. It might very well mean a lot to some mothers that one cannot have a shower in peace or that one has to sweep and mop the floor every day. At seven months, Nikki Gemmell's narrator can sense that

the baby does not like her working: ‘You yawl and tug when I sit at the computer. It is as if you are saying, “Hey, swing your focus back to me” ’ (220). In the ninth month she wonders if the baby is urging her on by wriggling when she writes. The pregnancy has not been an easy one physically, as she has thrown up for months. Nor has it been easy mentally, as her partner has gone overseas and has not returned for the birth. Yet, in the last part, ‘*now*’, which is set six weeks after the birth, there is sudden elation:

I write this in ten-minute bursts once a day—it is all you will allow me. I sit at my computer in that wonderfully clear, bright, curious time in the morning when your day hasn’t been corrupted by nappy changes and wind and too little sleep. ... My breasts have ballooned and dropped, they are marbled with blue veins like river lines on a map. When I urinate it feels ragged and loose. None of this matters.

Such love. (223-224)

The writer is alone with her child but this is the way she wants it; she does not grieve for her absent partner, even though seven months ago she had asked herself ‘What could be more lonely than having a child by yourself in hospital?’ (216). Some of her worst fears about birth and motherhood have thus become reality but this has only made her realise that she can cope with whatever life deals her. Motherhood has made her both stronger and more vulnerable through the love of her child.

This seemingly contradictory aspect of motherhood is explored by many mother-writers in the texts I have studied. As the protagonists approach motherhood they all act out their own set of fears and desires. Most mothers in *Gas and Air* describe their first pregnancy but a few have been through the experience before.

Rosie Waitt's 'In The Stars' is written from the perspective of a mother unexpectedly pregnant with her third child. Unlike many of the other narratives, this story does not dwell on the physical aspects of pregnancy. Because the narrator has been pregnant twice before, she can predict the physical as well as mental changes in herself. 'I knew from experience how scatty I get when I am pregnant. How could I write and travel and be pregnant and be a good mother?' (260) This is a complex question, which she finally answers by simply doing it all. Many working mothers feel torn between work and motherhood. In this respect, I do not think mothers who are writers differ much from mothers who are lawyers or doctors. Taking your profession seriously and prioritising it even after you have had children is difficult. Perhaps it is harder for writers whose work may not have the same level of recognition, remuneration or externally imposed structure as that of other professionals. Their work may even be regarded as a self-imposed indulgence, an optional extra without social validation. An important difference, however, is that writing mothers tend to reflect more upon their feelings, positive as well as negative, as they attempt to capture the moment in words.

Waitt's narrator is a mother and a writer but also piles on the added stress of travel and pregnancy. She worries about it all but ultimately she seems to manage very well, at least that is how she portrays the situation. The most admirable thing about the story is that while she describes in detail the outback they travel through, she chooses to write specifically about pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, subjects which are seldom explored in travel narratives.

Distinguished writer Susan Johnson discusses many of life's physical uncertainties when she writes about both her pregnancies in her memoir *A Better Woman*. Attending antenatal classes with her husband she feels quite separated from

the rest of the class because of her advanced age. She imagines the other couples being blissfully ignorant of Down's syndrome babies and other things that could go wrong, things that she herself worries about constantly. Yet, ultimately, she concedes that '[c]learly, to all of us, the creation of human life was at heart fundamentally inexplicable' (29). No matter how much we know about conception, the birth process and childrearing, we can never really imagine what it will be like until it actually happens and even after the fact it is a difficult concept to fathom, let alone describe to a readership. But because we are writers, we try, even if not always successfully.

In her memoir *A Better Woman*, Susan Johnson writes poetically about the birth of her first son Caspar:

If I had known then what giving birth was to cost me, would I have ever dared to fall pregnant?

Yes, yes. A thousand times, yes.

Even now, remembering all the pain and suffering I have lived through, I would go through it all again. Even now, knowing that the freakish outcome of Caspar's birth was to make me feel like a freak all over again, I have never once wished him away. Every day I count myself lucky to have him. (12-13)

In the case of Johnson's narrator, Susan, the birth experience leaves her with a fistula, a miniscule passage running between the vagina and rectum following a repair of a third-degree tear. The reader would have understood if Susan had harboured resentment towards the son who inflicted this upon her but of course she does not. It is not the child's fault. She loves him unconditionally. Instead she is angry with her own body and its limitations. In memoir, hindsight plays an important part in the

narrative, as the author here acknowledges. She knows that what she writes will only ever be one version of events and she even makes the writing itself a theme throughout the book in a kind of meta-narrative.

If Susan had resented her child, would she have included her resentment? Possibly. There can be tension in a memoir too, in the same way that novels and short stories are built on unresolved questions, differing opinions, unreliable memories of moments long gone. Susan talks openly and honestly in *A Better Woman* about what life as a writing mother is like for her when she says:

the reality is that there are jagged days when I could murder myself or my children, and other drifting days when Caspar talks to flowers and the three of us practise butterfly kisses on each other. In reality I am the good mother and the bad mother. (219)

All writers use conflict in one way or another to create characters with depth, characters that readers can sympathise with even though they are flawed and sometimes resent their children. Isn't that how it must be? Aren't all mothers torn in their mothering? Does it actually make you a bad mother that you sometimes want to kill your children? Even mothers who choose to kill their children (such as Sethe, who slits her daughter's throat in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*) may not be inherently 'bad mothers'. Sethe kills her daughter to spare her from becoming a slave. Circumstances can make a mother feel and act in damaging, horrifying ways and these situations can be explored powerfully in literature as part of the complexity of motherhood.

The narrator expresses this brilliantly in Johnson's text by undermining what she has previously written about how she is coping with the dual demands of writing and childrearing:

Did you believe me when I wrote that I had somehow managed to blend my writing life with life as a mother, as far as I was able? Did you guess that the real story is much darker and more complicated, that I often feel frustrated and angry because I can no longer write in a composed and orderly way for uninterrupted blocks of time? That I cannot finish writing this, for example, because I currently have only one and a half days a week in which to do it, as well as dinner to cook, washing to hang out, a house to clean, children and shopping to pick up? Do you know that at this moment I am writing as fast as I can before *Teletubbies* is over? (219)

Many writing mothers would be able to relate to this. Working mothers in general often feel much the same way. When I read that passage I thank my lucky stars for the support my partner lends me, day in and day out, when he stays at home with our sons, plays with them, hangs out the washing, cooks dinner, dusts and vacuums, washes the car and even brings our baby down to uni so that I can continue breastfeeding him even though I am working full time. And he does all this without making me feel guilty for pursuing my dream. I am fortunate. In my world it is possible to be a writer and a mother. But the question of balance is still unresolved and constantly active in my mind because the longer I stay at work to write, inevitably the less I see of my children.

## **Motherlove I**

The love of a child can be one of the most liberating and at the same time overwhelming feelings a mother will ever encounter. To start from the beginning, becoming a mother is generally perceived to be about pregnancy, labour and those first precious weeks with a new baby. But in Barbara Kingsolver's fascinating novel *The Bean Trees* (1988), motherhood involves adopting a three-year old Native American girl. Later named Turtle, the child is thrust into the arms of Taylor, the protagonist, with a request for the young woman to care for the neglected child. Taylor has just left home to get away from a small town where the girls around her are getting pregnant and having babies as soon as they finish school. Then she finds herself heading up the road with a strange child next to her:

“Are you a girl or a boy?” I asked the child. It had a cereal bowl haircut, like pictures you see of Chinese kids. She or he said nothing. I supposed I would find out eventually.

After a while I began to wonder if perhaps it was dead. ... I told myself to calm down. I remembered that the baby's eyes had been open when she put it down on the seat. But then again, so what if the eyes were open? Had it blinked? What was the penalty for carrying a dead Indian child across state lines?

After a while I smelled wet wool. “Merciful heavens,” I said. “I guess you're still hanging in there.” (20)

This passage shows what a wonderfully funny and open mother Taylor will make. Instead of being upset about the child peeing on the seat, she is thankful that it is alive. After the initial shock of becoming an instant mother, Taylor takes her

responsibility for the child seriously, but she still does not make it seem like motherhood is the only important thing in her life. She feeds and clothes the child, she buys her books and defends her when others consider her stupid because she does not talk or show much personality. Most importantly, she makes her feel loved. Taylor takes on all the responsibilities of a parent and in the process becomes one. It is not uncommon for birthing narratives to talk about the mother as being born anew when the baby arrives, but this narrative goes one step further as the birth experience is only about the birth of the mother. This is naturally the case for many adoptive mothers who know nothing or very little about when or under what circumstances their children were born.

Sindiwe Magona illustrates this birth or emergence of a mother in *Mother to Mother* (1998), where the main character Mandisa describes her feelings before, during and after the birth of her first child at age fourteen. Even though she seems to cope well with her pregnancy physically, mentally it is difficult for her to come to terms with the fact that this child has altered her entire life, even before he was born. She is angry with the father but just as angry with the child for worming his way into her womb. ‘Throughout the pregnancy, I had had mixed feeling about him: anger, sometimes; joy sometimes. On the whole, though, I think anger was uppermost’ (127). The fact that his birth is excruciatingly painful inevitably makes things worse:

The terrible pain that tore me apart with the savageness of the jaws of a shark, killing all feeling below my hips, thighs dead numb while my centre was blazing, a hot raging fire tearing through it, told me I hated this child ... hated him or her with a venom too fierce ever to die. (127)

Yet, from somewhere this young mother manages to find maternal feelings for her child while giving him her breast to suckle for the first time. She fumbles for words to describe this ‘incredible moment of oneness’ (127). As Mandisa goes from hating her child to loving him in the space of a page she becomes a complex and compelling character.

The love one feels for a child is one of the most difficult things to express in words. One reason for this is probably the prevalence of proclamations of love surrounding us. We hear love songs on the radio, see love stories develop and fall apart in television drama and read classic tales of love in our favourite novels. Writers want to avoid saying what has already been said many times before but we only have so many words at our disposal when we express these intricate feelings of love, whether it is love for a partner or love for a child. Soon after the birth of her son Mandisa exclaims:

All I know, all I felt, was this all-infusing, light-headedness that came over me. My heart melted, all pain forgot, all disappointment and bitterness, all grudges, everything negative, ablated. Joy, pure and simple ... I think that comes closest to describing what I felt. (127)

Language can scarcely accommodate all the feelings that exist in that moment of physical bonding between mother and child, all the things that are expressed in gestures and gentle touches. Even though Mandisa goes back to having mixed feeling about her son, especially when he turns out to be both lazy and a trouble maker, that initial moment of bonding is real and she never stops loving him. He is her firstborn and always remains special in her mind.

As such texts show, the first few weeks with a newborn can be both confusing and bewildering, tender and heart wrenching. While most mothers may remember this as a special time to bond with their child, whether it is their firstborn or not, it is also a time for the mother to adjust to being alone in her body and a time when the differences between being a mother and a father become blatantly obvious. In her short story, 'The Twilight Zone', (collected in *Gas and Air*), Jill Dawson describes what it can feel like the moment a woman meets her partner again after a first night alone in hospital with her newborn.

While I had lain in bed, my hand on my belly, trying to persuade myself that no one was in there any more, that I was now only myself again, and not believing it; feeling my boundaries dissolve and waver, making me blur out of focus like a bad photograph; during all of that Simon had simply gone out and downed a pint of Guinness. (90-91)

The unnamed mother resents Simon and the freedom he still has to do as he pleases. All he wants is to help out with the baby, but she is not letting him into the new world she has created with their son. She imagines that baby Finn speaks to her, but only to her, and feels like her boundaries of self have become hazy. When a woman has carried another human being inside her for nine long months, this feeling should seem quite natural. But in our individualised society, if the symbiosis with one's child is taken one step too far it is deemed pathological. In 'The Twilight Zone', the midwife who comes over for a home visit goes through the *Post-Natal Depression Checklist* with the unnamed mother whose feelings do not quite register on the official scale. On the fifth day, the new mother finally bursts into tears as she tries to tell her

partner how her life will never be the same again, how she hates him and everyone else, apart from Finn. The feelings of bewilderment are utterly overwhelming. As she enters the screaming child's room the terrifying thought occurs to her that she has 'never loved anyone this much and a newborn seems too small to bear that burden' (104). She is scared of how her life has changed and will continue to change, scared of Finn's 'world of milk teeth wrapped in cotton wool' (104), but most of all she is scared of her own feelings of love for a child she hardly knows yet. Through precise and delicate descriptions Dawson manages to convey these feelings and still make the reader understand that things will turn out fine in the end.

Mothers who, unlike Taylor in *The Bean Trees*, have gone through childbirth sometimes experience feelings of not being quite at home in their own torn, stitched and often heavily bleeding bodies. This can be a kind of mourning period but also a time for celebration of the body. In *A Better Woman*, after Susan arrives home after the birth, she feels like she inhabits her own body for the first time. She is celebrating her own skin, all her senses are 'roaringly alive' (44). As this feeling is such a difficult one to describe she begins with the immediate sensation of her physical being and then moves to the more abstract emotional state:

Each time Caspar let out a sound, a small cry or a whimper, my nipples clenched and throbbed, squeezing out a teardrop of milk.

I felt my body had finally been taken up and used, that life had wrenched its way up and out of me. I lay on the bed, drenched in happiness, heat and exhaustion, wanting for nothing. (44)

Unfortunately, even when the love is strong, labour and birth do not always turn out well. In 'Living Death: An Online Elegy', Hannah Fink writes about delivering her stillborn child. To go through labour and give birth to a child you know is dead must be one of the most painful things a woman can ever experience. Even so, most of the story revolves around the new-found friendships she develops through writing to other grieving mothers on the internet. She is the writer but often she finds that these women who do not work with words on an everyday basis are able to put feelings into words in a more simple and true way than she can do herself. It is remarkable how many of the narratives told from a writer's perspective emphasise the impossibility of writing about the strong feelings connected with motherhood, whether it involves strong love, or as in this case, painful loss:

'I am so depressed all the time I feel like a dead person inside a living body,' wrote Shannon, and I was riveted by the rightness of her phrase – it hit me with all the force of a cliché realised. I had written reams trying to articulate and there it all was in eight words. (244)

To have gone through pregnancy and given birth indicate that one is a mother, but what happens when the child dies? In Hannah's case she has only ever desired to be a mother but never felt like she actually became one, because she has never lived in the world of motherhood, never been able to care for her child the way she would have liked to. The saddest moment in the story is when a little boy puts his hands on her shoulders and mistakenly calls her mummy.

I could feel his wet lips on my ear, and I didn't so much hear as feel the absolute trust and intimacy of his small voice, deep in my body as though from inside a sea shell. For one second I knew what it was like to be the mother of a living child, to live in the world of motherhood. (246)

The short story or personal essay are well suited for such exploration of motherly love (and sometimes grief) but perhaps less so for darker, more ambiguous maternal feelings of dislike and hatred, which need more scope to grow. To consider these questions I now turn to some celebrated recent novels.

### **Problematic Mothering**

When problems occur during any stage of motherhood, mothers tend to have very different ways of dealing with the issues. The stunning and sad *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver touches on 'the pressures of parenthood, and society's expectations of women' (Lawless, 1). It discusses in some detail, with the benefit of hindsight, preconceived notions of what childrearing will be like. The novel is written as series of letters from a woman to her husband, who is also the father of her murderous child. Eva, the protagonist, returns to how it all started with the couple endlessly discussing the possibility of parenthood, each taking turns being the one arguing against it. In hindsight, she even catalogues the downsides of parenthood that she might have felt before the baby arrived. The list of ten points includes:

1. Hassle
2. Less time just the two of us. (Try *no* time just the two of us.) ...
7. Dementing boredom. (I found small children brutally dull. I did, even at the

outset, admit this to myself.) 8. Worthless social life (I had never had a decent conversation with a friend's five-year-old in the room.) (25-26)

What makes this list poignant, with its 'pygmy misgivings' (26) is that it cannot anticipate what actually happens, that her son grows up to become a killer. Why would it enter her head? Would any of us ever have children if we worried that our offspring would turn on us or on the people around us with a gun or a knife, or as in this particular case, a crossbow? The amazing thing is that even though Eva has always found her son cunning and positively nasty, she still decides to bear another child, never for a second contemplating the fact that child number two might turn out the same.

Occasionally the baby does not bond with the mother. This is the case with Kevin. Of course, Kevin's sister Celia is instead a little angel, who bonds instantly with both her mother and the rest of the family. In one of her letters Eva muses on the difference between the children at birth, describing Kevin's emotional tone and colour as: 'the shrill high pitch of a rape whistle, the colour was pulsing aortal red, and the feeling was fury' (220). Celia on the other hand:

didn't cry when she was born, and if she emitted a figurative sound it was the quiet, meandering tune of a rambler far from home who is enjoying the walk and doesn't think anyone is listening. As for the ascendant emotion that exuded from this blind creature – her hands not grasping the air but wandering, wondering at it, once led to a nipple, sucking right away – it was *gratitude*. (220-221)

This strong bonding between a breastfeeding child and her mother is in stark contrast to how Kevin refused to ever take the breast at all. 'He had sucked a time or two, but turned away, the bluish milk running down his chin. He'd cough, and, perhaps I imagined it, he even seemed to gag' (86). This is one of the most difficult rejections for a new mother to take and Eva keeps trying very hard to get Kevin interested until she finally ends up in hospital with severe mastitis.

On the other hand, bonding and attachment can certainly take place even in the most difficult of circumstances. Taylor, in Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, is thrust straight into motherhood without any kind of warning or time to adjust. The first few precious weeks with her daughter are in a sense even more bewildering to Taylor than to other new mothers because it dawns on her what horrific events the child she has been given by the roadside must have been through:

There was a bruise twice the size of my thumb on its inner arm. I threw the soggy shirt in the sink to soak. The child's hands constantly caught my fingers and wouldn't let go. "You little booger," I said, shaking my finger and the little fist. "You're like a mud turtle. If a mud turtle bites you, it won't let go till it thunders." I hadn't any sooner gotten the hands pried loose from my fingers before they grabbed onto my shirt sleeves and my hair. When I pulled off the pants and the diapers there were more bruises.

Bruises and worse.

The Indian child was a girl. A girl, poor thing. That fact had already burdened her short life with a kind of misery I could not imagine. I thought I knew about every ugly thing that one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl. (22-23)

This scenario would be horrifying to most people but Taylor is surprisingly calm, perhaps too shocked for any feelings to register. After this Taylor decides to call the girl Turtle, because of her strong grip. Just like a newborn, Turtle (who Taylor guesses is about two but who turns out to be closer to three years old) begins to show her distinct personality over the next few weeks and Taylor acts accordingly. Before making any decisions she always tries to take into consideration what she thinks the girl's needs might be. Even though Taylor bonds well with Turtle, it does not occur to her until months later that perhaps she should have consulted a specialist about her daughter's injuries, physical as well as mental. In this sense, her thinking has not yet adjusted to her newfound role as a caring mother. By this I do not mean that mothers in general should or would automatically choose professional help. Taylor tries very hard to do the best she can for Turtle and in this case the injuries are obviously quite serious. By not bringing Turtle to see a doctor she protects her from further prodding, but she also neglects her responsibility as the carer of a young child.

The issue of motherly hatred is intimately described in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Throughout the book Eva is writing letters to her husband, struggling to come to terms with having borne a child so full of rage and devoid of empathy that he could carefully select fellow pupils and a teacher, lure them to the gym with an elaborate hoax and finally shoot them one by one with his crossbow. All the way through the novel the reader knows that she is now visiting Kevin in jail and is thus still struggling to love her son, despite all he has done. What is brilliantly kept secret from the reader until the very end is the fact that Kevin also murdered his father and sister the same day before he went to school. The question that looms large both on the lips of strangers and in his mother's mind is *why*? In her column in *The Guardian*, Shriver

herself writes: ‘Whether Kevin was innately twisted or was mangled by his mother’s coldness is a question with which the novel struggles, but which it ultimately fails to answer. That verdict is the reader’s job’ (2).

In the two years that Eva has been visiting Kevin she has never asked him the ultimate question. But in the last visit described in the book she finally does and for the first time Kevin’s veneer of arrogance and hatred slips:

“So please, look me in the eye. You killed eleven people. My husband. My daughter. Look me in the eye and tell me why.”

Unlike the day he turned to me through the police car window, pupils glinting, Kevin met my gaze this afternoon with supreme difficulty. His eyes kept shuttering away, making contact in sorties, then flicking back toward the gaily painted cinder-block wall. And at last he gave up, staring a little to the side of my face.

“I used to think I knew,” he said glumly. “Now I’m not so sure.”

Without thinking, I extended my hand across the table and clasped his. He didn’t pull away. “Thank you,” I said. (397)

However unsatisfactory, this answer indicates that Kevin has finally begun to change and see himself as pathetic. Throughout her son’s short life, Eva has always been bewildered by him. She has been trying to understand him, to account for his meanness and total lack of enthusiasm, but it is not until this late exchange in jail, when Kevin is beginning to grasp the impact of his own actions, that she can finally reach out to him: to love him more than she hates him, because he is, in his own way,

beginning to change. 'For Kevin, progress was deconstruction. He would only begin to plumb his own depths by first finding himself unfathomable' (397).

### **Dissatisfaction**

Those first few weeks of symbiosis with a newborn baby turn into weeks and months and before we know it we have toddlers running around the house. We are pregnant again, the kids celebrate their second and third birthdays, they start school, we take them to music and swimming lessons, they become teenagers and declare their hatred of all that their parents stand for. We are hurt, baffled, confused and bemused. Could these pimpled monsters really be the same children that we nurtured with our own bodies? We know it must be so because the love is still there, the inexplicable bond that was there from the start but also the even stronger bond which we have forged with endless patience over many years of living together and sharing each other's lives. This is, of course, not the case for every mother-child relationship. Some mothers never bond with their children. Some grow to hate their offspring and never speak to them again after they have moved out. No matter how the mother feels towards the child over the years, the simple fact is that, unless the child dies prematurely, it grows up. How the relationship between a mother and her children develops as they mature is part of the complexity of motherhood.

In *The Hours*, Michael Cunningham represents two quite different kinds of mothers. One is a contemporary figure, Clarissa, living with her female partner and the daughter she had nineteen years ago with help from a sperm bank. The other, Laura, is an outwardly traditional, but inwardly troubled, housewife in 1949. Based on Cunningham's own mother, Laura bakes cakes, makes dinner and takes care of her three-year old son, but all she really wants to do is read. Even though the main tension

in the book lies not between the mothers and their children, neither mother has an unproblematic relationship with their offspring.

Laura is almost scared of the intensity of her son's love and finds it hard to cope with him when they are on their own: 'He is transparently smitten with her; he is comic and tragic in his hopeless love. He makes her think sometimes of a mouse singing amorous ballads under the window of a giantess' (44). She feels like she is playing roles as mother and wife, but not playing either well enough. As long as her husband is present she remembers how to treat their son 'firmly and kindly, with an affectionate maternal offhandedness that seems effortless' (47), but when she is left alone with her son she 'can't always remember how a mother would act' (47). Her insecurity has more to do with preconceived notions of what motherhood is, or should be, than with her own mothering; her son obviously loves her very much: for him she is a great mother, the only mother he knows.

Laura is a dissatisfied housewife who suspects she should move on to bigger and better things than baking the perfect cake for her husband on his birthday. Before getting out of bed in the morning, she has to convince herself that it is the right thing to do. 'She does not dislike her child, does not dislike her husband. She will rise and be cheerful' (41). To not dislike is of course not the same as to love. There is something standing between Laura and the possible enjoyment of motherhood and the love of her son, even with a second child on the way. She does not understand it herself, all she knows is that she constantly fights her urges to return to her bed and her reading. Throughout the novel she never stops trying to convince herself that she will not commit suicide like Virginia Woolf, that she will go on living, thriving in domesticity:

It seems she will be fine. She will not lose hope. She will not mourn her lost possibilities, her unexplored talents (what if she has no talents, after all?). She will remain devoted to her son, her husband, her home and duties, all her gifts. She will want this second child. (79)

Laura does in fact abandon the family home. At some stage she walks out, leaving her husband and two children to fend for themselves, to long for her and wonder what they did wrong. The wonderful, subtle quality of Cunningham's prose makes us sympathise both with the mother who has to leave to survive and with the son who is left behind to dream about his mother for the rest of his life. Christopher Lane suggests that Cunningham builds on themes indicating that we 'must strive for happiness in whatever forms are satisfying' (6), a notion similar to that expressed in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, the inspiration for *The Hours*.

Clarissa, on the other hand, a generation or more later, has a more openly fraught relationship with her teenage daughter. Like many mothers of teenagers she doesn't want to acknowledge that her daughter Julia needs to carve out a life for herself, without her mother's influence. Julia needs the freedom to choose her own friends, find her own style, perhaps more defiantly than the way Clarissa did when she was young:

Julia doesn't wear dresses, she insists on spending her youth, the brief period in which one can wear anything at all, stomping around in men's undershirts and leather lace-ups the size of cinderblocks. (Why does her daughter tell her so little? What happened to the ring Clarissa gave her for her eighteenth birthday?) (21)

In the end, what really matters is not what Julia chooses to wear, but the fact that mother and daughter don't communicate as well as Clarissa would like.

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Eva concedes to her son that she might never have actually wanted him. "I thought I needed a change," I said. "But no one needs a change for the worse" (56). The truth, which comes out in the letters she writes to her husband Franklin, Kevin's father, is that Franklin was desperate for a child and she loved him so much that she was scared that, if one day he disappeared, she would have nothing left to remind her of him. Ironically, the child will eventually be the one who makes him disappear from her life. Kevin is the one who kills his own father and sister, leaving Eva to grieve her husband and daughter. Having a child seemed like a good idea at the time. But motherhood wasn't exactly what she expected:

"I'd anticipated mopping up vomit. Baking Christmas cookies. I couldn't have expected—." Kevin's look dared me. "I couldn't have expected that simply forming an attachment to you," I phrased as diplomatically as I knew how, "would be so much work. I thought—." I took a breath. "I thought that part came for free." (57)

Forming an attachment to a child who doesn't want its mother's love is difficult. All through Kevin's childhood Eva disapproves of the things he does and says, the way he acts towards her and other people. The fact that her disapproval is something Kevin feeds off is clear in her mind, but she simply cannot help how she feels. At one point, when her son is in prison, Eva talks to her own mother about Kevin and the older woman offers support: *'That boy had something missing*, she pronounced, in the

past tense, as if he were dead. She was trying to make me feel better, though I worried that what Kevin was missing was a mother like mine' (110). The fact that mothers often take on a large proportion of the blame for how their children turn out has not escaped her. She disapproves of what Kevin has done but she also finds it difficult to come to terms with her own lack of feelings for him, so different to how she experienced her own mother's smothering love for her as a child. She continually questions her own role in shaping the disaster that Kevin has become.

### **Diversity**

One major challenge for contemporary women is to find a balance in their mothering; to find a state which takes into account the circumstances surrounding them and their children at that particular point in time. For working mothers that balance might consist of long working days but weekends full of fun with the children. For poor mothers the time spent with their children doing a free activity such as a play in the park could make up for a lack of toys.

Are there physical and psychological traits that define how a mother will treat her children? Does it matter if the mother is young, black, disabled, lesbian or poor? All mothers mother differently. They even mother different children differently, whether the children are of the same gender or not. This is because the mother-child relationship is always unique in the same way that any other relationship is unique. But to say that all mothers mother differently is not to say that a certain trait or situation does not affect the way they parent. Poverty places restrictions on mothers but being a poor mother does not mean handling a difficult situation a certain way.

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* is a great example of how the complexity of motherhood can be displayed in literature through a non-biological mother. One of

the reasons I find Taylor in *The Bean Trees* such a wonderful character is that the tension is not between her and her child. She is as loving with her daughter Turtle, and as fiercely protective of her, as any of the other mothers, but she also creates a new life for herself, making new friends, finding a job and falling in love during the course of the book. The tension comes from outside the family unit, from Turtle's unknown background of abuse as well as the hiding of refugees at Taylor's workplace, not from within. It is perhaps ironic that out of all the mothers I have chosen to study, the adoptive mother Taylor (along with my own characters Susanna and Estella in 'The Hum of Concrete') is the closest to approaching a balance in her life where motherhood stands alongside work and love. Her own needs are met at the same rate as those of her daughter. She can enjoy work without constantly feeling guilty about leaving her child at home. She also has enough time and space, thanks to helpful friends and neighbours, to pursue her own interests and even fall in love, though she still spends most of her time caring for her daughter.

The racial diversity of mothers was important when I chose which fictional texts to discuss, as diversity plays a large part in 'The Hum of Concrete'. Issues of race and ethnicity feature prominently in the novels, intimately related to questions of identity. Who are these mothers? Are they mothering differently depending on their racial or ethnic backgrounds? Their identity is in turn entwined with their socio-economic standing, especially for first generation immigrants like my character Nassrin who regularly attends horse races to make money for her family. In other novels, such as *The Bean Trees*, economic hardship is experienced first-hand. In *Mother to Mother*, questions of money (or rather the lack thereof) tend to occupy a great deal of Mandisa's time, creating tension between motherhood and the need to support her family, with motherguilt to follow.

Cultural difference can be a source of conflict. In a much less dramatic fashion than Eva in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* or Mandisa in *Mother to Mother*, Manthri, in *If the moon smiled*, disapproves of both her children for different reasons. Neither of them has killed anyone. All they have done is grow up to become Australian, as opposed to Sri Lankan. Manthri feels strong pressure from her cultural group to conform to their views of success and to be able to tell them how well her children have performed. When her son Devake fails his exams and does not get into Medical School, it means his father Mahendra practically stops talking to him. Devake spends all his time locked in his room playing his guitar. At one point he tries to move out of the oppressive home. Manthri is devastated:

‘Why are you trying to break my heart, putha?’ I ask him. I can’t keep the bitter excess of love from pouring out of my mouth. ‘You are my only son, and now you want to leave us?’

Mahendra would say that this was the result of mixing with a culture that cared nothing for one’s parents.

We should have returned home. Oh, we should have. (111)

Manthri feels guilty about everything her children do. She always wanted to go back to Sri Lanka but they end up staying in Australia. Her husband is very quick to point out that all the problems with their children are her fault as she is the mother who should have taught them better. Even though she does not always agree with him she very rarely stands up for herself, or for the children. Instead she internalises his criticisms until they become truths. ‘I’m a failure in everyone’s eyes’ (100). This is perpetuated by the rest of the Sri Lankan community who love to gossip and tell

Manthri about the successes of their children. Providing a kind of balance in perception, her own mother, who still lives in Sri Lanka, is always very supportive and consoling.

Different sexual orientation can be another source of tension. In 'Pearl', by Julia Darling, a story from *Gas and Air*, we get the slightly different perspective of a lesbian mother. She already has a daughter who goes to school and is old enough to have been hurt by other kids, being told her mother is a pervert. For her second pregnancy the protagonist has been given sperm through a self-help group. She 'administered it with a cake-icing syringe' and was, understandably, 'incredulous when it worked' (59). She says it felt like an immaculate conception and tried to explain it to her daughter but 'she's taken to talking about storks' (59). The snappy and funny style moves quickly and the mother doesn't linger on the birth but still gives the reader a great insight into what it might have been like:

That night my contractions start. They are like cart horses galloping through my body. I am having a home birth. My friends loom over me with sponges and ice. The midwife has to fight her way through cheering lesbians to deliver my baby. (59)

There is no mention of labour pains in her descriptions but that does not mean she does not feel the pain of motherhood in other, less physical, ways. Her daughter makes her wear a dress and lipstick, which only makes her feel as if she is acting. She is isolated, 'as if there is a subtle silence in the air' (61). Yet, ultimately, what comes across most strongly is her love for both her children. No matter how difficult it can be to be a mother, the unnamed mother in the short story keeps doing it because she

reaps the rewards every single day. The rewards for mothers are found in their son's giggles or their daughter's cuddles and there is nothing they would rather have than those very special rewards, even when most of the day has felt like punishment. Children soon learn from their surroundings what a mother is supposed to be. They develop expectations of how a real or good mother should act, dress and speak. These preconceived notions surround mothers to varying degrees even though some may, like the narrator of 'Pearl', try hard to resist societal pressure to conform. It is sometimes impossible to know whether we do things a certain way because we are convinced it is the right way or because that is simply the way most people do it. The challenge for most women is to find a balance in their own way of mothering.

### **In and Outside the Home**

Mothers work very hard, both in and outside the home, but often get very little recognition for the difficult job of childrearing. In Jonathan Franzen's study of American upper middle class life, *The Corrections* (2001), the elderly mother Enid thinks back over her years as a wife and mother of three children. In her mind, questions of marriage and motherhood are too intimately linked to ever be separated. Her husband Alfred has always been a bore who, in her younger days, she used to attract sexually by feigning sleep. She remembers the conception of her last two children, which suggests how infrequently they actually made love. Enid has clear ideas of what she wants but has learnt to walk the tightrope of marriage, never requesting or suggesting much. She has always wanted three children and is desperate to get pregnant a third time to show her neighbours that her husband does make her 'feel super-special in that special way' (243). When it finally happens, seven years after their middle child, she loses her balance and falls off the tightrope:

Made happy this way by pregnancy, she got sloppy and talked about the wrong thing to Alfred. Not, needless to say, about sex or fulfillment or fairness. But there were other topics scarcely less forbidden, and Enid in her giddiness one morning overstepped. She suggested he buy shares of stock. (243)

Pregnancy makes Enid forgetful and less careful about suitable topics for discussion. She wouldn't normally meddle in Alfred's affairs. In this instance, he gets so upset by her insistence that he leaves to go on a business trip for eleven days without kissing her goodbye. When he returns all he can talk about is the fact that she hasn't taken care of the mess at the top of the stairs, *the one thing* he asked her to do while he was gone:

But it seemed to her that he'd asked her to do more than "one thing" while he was gone. He'd also asked her to make the boys three meals a day, and clothe them and read to them and nurse them in sickness, and scrub the kitchen floor and wash the sheets and iron his shirts, and do it all without a husband's kisses or kind words. If she tried to get credit for these labours of hers, however, Al simply asked her whose labour had *paid* for the house and food and linens?

Never mind that his work so satisfied him that he didn't need her love, while her chores so bored her that she needed his love doubly. In any rational accounting, his work cancelled her work. (251)

This way of looking at Enid's work as a mother and housewife makes a lot of sense to a contemporary readership (of both women and men, one would hope). Yet

that was not how the world was shaped in the fifties and sixties when Enid was a housewife with small kids. Women received very little thanks for their efforts in the home and with the children. It was just expected that they would clean, cook, do the shopping and the laundry, as well as help the children with their homework.

Housework and chores to do with mothering simply counted for nothing because they didn't bring in any money. They were just what women did. Even though men today might be more thankful for the work that women perform in the home, I suspect it will still be a while before the division of what kind and how much paid and unpaid work women and men perform will even out, if it ever will. According to Sylvia Ann Hewlett in *Baby Hunger*, a study of more than 200 scholarly articles and books on household labour published between 1989 and 1999 showed that wives and mothers still do much more of the housework than their husbands; 'roughly three-quarters of the total' (136). This figure is unrelated to whether both parents work or not.

Enid continues to worry about the house and the children for another thirty years or so, long after the children have moved out and had children of their own. There is no doubt that she loves all three of her children; they are one of her main reasons for living. James Wood suggests that Enid yearns to live through her children (46). But this yearning also promises pain 'because it is painful to be self-corrected: sure enough, Enid is tormented by the sense that her children have corrected her too sharply and too publicly' (5). By this he means that the children have not taken the road chosen for them by their mother.

Though overbearing in her love, Enid is also surprisingly insightful about her children's shortcomings: 'Enid was remembering things about her elder son which she liked to forget when he wasn't around' (477). Towards the end of the novel when Enid is trying desperately to get the entire family together for one last Christmas, as

Al is slowly fading from Parkinson's, Gary the eldest turns up without his wife and children. Enid is devastated, not just because Gary arrives alone but also because he refuses to go to Al who sits shouting for help in the bathtub. She tries to make Gary feel guilty about not at least bringing Jonah, her favourite grandchild, but he will have none of it:

She had an intimation that the family she'd tried to bring together was no longer that family she remembered—that this Christmas would be nothing at all like the Christmases of old. But she was doing her best to adjust to the new reality. She was suddenly *very* excited that Chip was coming. (476)

When one child does not live up to her unrealistic expectations she simply transfers her hopes to the next, who in this case happens to be Chip, the middle child. This is symptomatic of a mother who has only ever had her home and her children to care about. She cannot afford to lose all hope and Christmas cheer so she needs to recreate what Gary has ruined by imagining Chip arriving almost like a new Messiah. 'Franzen's narrative radiates outward, brilliantly weaving a web between the local and the global, the individual and the big picture' (Strecker, 122). Through these little people and their ordinary lives, we see the wider world beyond, similarly to the way I attempt to show life in 'The Hum of Concrete'.

We laugh at Enid but we also pity her. How can a mother get so wrapped up in the idea of celebrating one last family Christmas? None of the other mothers are quite as obsessive about their roles in the family, except for perhaps Laura, in *The Hours*, who throws a cake in the bin and bakes a new one for her husband's birthday because the first one is not quite perfect.

Enid blames both her husband and her children for not letting her live the way she would have preferred. She has sacrificed her own happiness to provide a stable home for her family. However, such bitterness or depression is not unique to Enid. She can feel her life coming to an end and she has almost resigned herself to the fact that it is too late for change. She has had her chance to live her life as she saw fit. She has seen her children grow into adults and have children of their own. But she is still bitter. That is part of what drives her.

The point is that the older the children get, the more independence they crave and the more rejected and lonely the mother might feel if she has nothing but her home and her children to concentrate on. This could probably apply to any mother, anywhere in the world, who has invested too much in 'only' being a mother. But to be able to convey this in my novel I had to do it through an immigrant character as Sweden currently has no culture, like the one still prevalent in Australia, where mothers choose to stay at home to look after their children until they start school or even longer. Also, a mother of a foreign culture and nationality might find it difficult to find a support network in the new country and therefore be more pained by her children's rejection.

I was influenced here by an example from Chandani Lokugé's poetic novel *If the moon smiled*. The mother, Manthri, stays at home, looking after her husband and their two children. Even though one might think she should be close to the children as she sees them all the time, both her teenage son and daughter clearly mark out their own territory. Manthri wanders around the house trying to connect with someone in her emptiness.

I go in search of the children. Devake has shut himself up in his room. He is laughing into the telephone. What an infectious laugh he reserves for his friends. I walk into Nelum's room. She sits on her bed, sketching. I peer over her shoulder. (62-63)

Manthri always wants the best for her children but she has a difficult time accepting that they are carving out an existence for themselves, that she is no longer the most important figure in their lives. She has been relegated to peering over her daughter's shoulder in a desperate attempt to connect. Part of the problem is that she cannot relate to the way her children have become individual people in a different country with hopes and wishes of their own. Seldom does Manthri leave her own feelings aside and simply praise the children for the good things they do. All she can see when she peers over Nelum's shoulder is a 'swirl of colour' (63). She can't make out a design or pattern and wonders why her daughter does not draw something she would consider beautiful, such as 'a lotus unfolding petal on velvet petal for the sun' (63), even though, at the back of her mind, she is aware that her daughter does not know the lotus the way she does. This is a powerful image of 'the raw feelings engendered by the problems of adjusting to a different culture' (Saravanamuttu, 101).

The mothers who do not work, notably Enid in *The Corrections*, Laura in *The Hours* and Manthri in *If the moon smiled*, are the ones most dissatisfied with their own lives and disillusioned with their relationships with their children. In Manthri's case, her dissatisfaction obviously also has to do with cultural differences (including an arranged marriage) but it is interesting to consider whether from their author's perspective, these women would still have been depressed if they had been able to enter the workforce. To an extent, Manthri's daughter Nelum represents en

endorsement of a contemporary Western view of women where career and casual relationships play an important part. She is happier than her mother because where her mother has been 'unable to properly settle down in Australia and to phlegmatically accept the children's acquiring habits and tendencies that are alien to her' (Perera, 215), Nelum rejects her background and chooses her own path.

Eva in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* feels a certain responsibility for her son's actions and wonders throughout the book if things would have turned out differently if only she had stayed at home with him. But the truth is that she enjoyed working more than she enjoyed staying at home with her young child and she is not the first or the last mother to feel that way. Even though Eva never really manages to form a strong natural bond of mutual loving and respect with her son, he is still heavily influenced by her, her opinions and especially her views on American society, whether she is working or not. The fiction confirms the point that Chira makes in *A Mother's Place*. Eva was unfortunate not to bond with Kevin straight away but Shriver makes clear that that in itself does not fully account for the fact that they do not approach each other emotionally later either. From Shriver's perspective, sometimes things simply do not turn out the way mothers would like them to.

For Taylor in *The Bean Trees*, work provides a positive aspect of life. Her boss becomes one of her closest friends, who teaches her as much about the tyres she repairs as about the refugees she hides in her home. Taylor is lucky enough to have a wonderful friend in her housemate Lou Ann, who takes care of Turtle while she works. Later in the novel, when Lou Ann takes on a job herself, Taylor returns the favour and often looks after Lou Ann's son Dwayne Ray. The working mothers help each other out to the best of their abilities. 'The novel pictures an underside of life: independent women with children scratching out a meagre existence. They are able to

do so because of their mutual interdependence, and that's a lesson in living' (Kelly, 62).

Occasionally when both mothers have to work at the same time, a neighbouring couple of elderly ladies, one of whom is blind, take care of both children. This is a satisfactory arrangement until the day Turtle and the elderly blind neighbour play in the park till after nightfall. She does not notice that it is getting dark and suddenly Turtle is being attacked by a strange man. Fortunately, the old woman hits him with her stick and he runs off. Even though Turtle is unharmed in the attack, memories come flooding back to the child because of the abuse she has previously endured, before Taylor became her mother, and she enters a catatonic state while Taylor plunges into depression. As a mother, Taylor feels she should have been there to protect her daughter but she was not. To her credit, she never blames her elderly neighbour, only herself, as mothers tend to. Yet, she never contemplates quitting her job to stay at home and care for Turtle. How could she then provide for her? Barbara Kingsolver acknowledges Taylor's balancing situation with sympathy and clear-sightedness.

The mothers who have chosen to or been forced to stay at home, rather than the ones who work, are in a sense the most homogenous group, where they all have trouble relating to their children and constantly find faults with them. Yet, in all the novels or longer texts, whether women stay at home or go out to work, they seem to have one thing in common: they are presented as feeling guilty about their way of life. If they stay at home they feel guilty about not bringing in any money, like Susan in *A Better Woman*, or guilty about being bored with childrearing and housework, like Laura in *The Hours*. If they have to, or simply choose to, enter the paid workforce, they feel guilty about not being there for their children, about handing their care over

to someone else, as Mandisa in *Mother to Mother* and Eva in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. As a range of contemporary authors present motherhood, there is no easy resolution to a complex set of internal and external conflicts.

## **Motherguilt II**

Susan, the protagonist in *A Better Woman*, like Enid, has children late in life. She feels as though everyone else in her childbirth classes is ten years younger than her. But her mothering takes place in the 1990s, not the 1950s or 1960s, and most of the time she has the solid support of her husband. The problems that arise for her as an older mother are more connected to her way of life. Because she has lived longer, she is more set in her ways. She is used to a certain standard of living and when she no longer is able to contribute to the family financially, guilt starts creeping up on her.

With the same benefit of hindsight as Eva in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the black mother in Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* looks back upon her own and her eldest son's life, trying to entangle her guilt and find answers to questions about why her son has turned into a killer. *Mother to Mother* is structured as a monologue where Mandisa attempts to tell the dead white girl's mother about her own and her son's upbringing in the ghettos of Cape Town, not in any way excusing her son's behaviour, but rather attempting to come to terms with the facts of it. Mandisa feels surrounded by guilt but she is still clearheaded enough to see that her son did what he did independently of her:

*My son killed your daughter.*

*People look at me as if I did it. The generous ones as though I made him do it. As though I could make this child do anything. (1)*

She knows that society itself, including the poverty in the black ghettos, the unfair treatment of black workers, the institutionalised violence and the lack of schooling, coupled with peer pressure, played a larger part in her son's downfall than she did. Yet, of course she still feels guilty and ashamed:

*God, you know my heart. I am not saying my child shouldn't be punished for his sins. But I am a mother, with a mother's heart. The cup You have given me is too bitter to swallow. The shame. (4)*

These feelings of shame are echoed in Nassrin's lament over her intersex baby in 'The Hum of Concrete'. The shame is almost great enough to overcome her. Even though both Eva and Mandisa try desperately not to fall into the trap of self-pity, where Nassrin is helplessly stuck, they understandably often balance on the edge of it. Eva uses her self-deprecating humour and Mandisa her inner strength to cope with the situation.

Taylor in *The Bean Trees* simply follows her instincts and trusts that whatever happens will be the best for her child. But that does not make her immune to motherguilt which arrives in relation to things other than the usual home/work dichotomy. On one occasion she has a late night drunken conversation with Estevan, the married man with whom she is falling in love. He and his wife Esperanza are refugees from Guatemala. Their daughter Ismene is taken from them before they manage to make it to the United States. Esperanza has just tried to commit suicide so Estevan has come to Taylor for support and they end up talking about the very essence of parenthood:

“All this time I’ve been moping around because of having the responsibility of Turtle forced on me, and now I feel guilty.”

“That responsibility is terrible if you don’t want it.”

“Oh, big deal. The exact same thing happened to about sixty percent of the girls in my high school, if not the whole world.”

“If you look at it that way,” he said. He was falling asleep.

“I guess that’s just the way the world has got to go around. If people really gave it full consideration, I mean, like if you could return a baby after thirty days’ examination like one of those Time-Life books, then I figure the entire species would go extinct in a month’s time.”

“Some people wouldn’t send them back, “ he said. “I would have kept Ismene.” His eyes were closed.

“Did you get up in the middle of the night to do the feeding and diapering?”

“No,” he said, smiling a little. (138-139)

Taylor feels guilty about ever having wished the responsibility of Turtle away when she knows how much Estevan and Esperanza would have loved to be in her shoes. Yet, at the same time she recognises that Estevan might have a glorified version of parenthood because he is a father, not a mother.

Some men in the novels discussed here certainly make an effort to provide the mothers with an opportunity to balance their lives more easily. Notably, Jax in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Pigs in Heaven* (1993) does a good job. But most of the time the mothers are shown as bearing the heaviest burden. In some cases, men work actively

against those women who are more interested in returning to work than staying at home with their children. Franklin, Eva's husband in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, is one such man. Even though he obviously enjoys being with young Kevin much more than Eva does (which has a lot to do with the fact that Kevin screams all day until his father comes home, when he instantly settles), in his mind the mother is still the one who should stay at home. In this case, as Shriver presents it, his attitude cannot even be rationalised in financial terms, as it often is, by saying that they would lose too much money if he chose to stay at home, because she owns a company and actually earns substantially more than he does. She eventually does return to work anyway and the family ends up employing a seemingly endless stream of nannies, which does not help to boost Eva's motherly confidence. A few years down the track, after coming back from a long business trip, Eva announces that she has decided to be a stay-at-home mum once again to reconnect with Kevin. She does not really want to, but is consumed with motherguilt. For Shriver's character the issue does not get any easier with time.

Balancing mothering with work commitments and other parts of a woman's life is a delicate operation, as has been shown through the texts above. None of the fictional mothers have found a complete balance, a state devoid of motherguilt, but they are all striving for it in their own ways.

### **PART III**

#### **WRITING CONTEMPORARY MOTHERS: *THE HUM OF CONCRETE***

Fiction is invention and imagination, figment and falsehood. When asked about the research she did before writing *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Lionel Shriver says: 'no amount of non-fiction research was going to tell a good story from scratch for me; there's no substitute for sitting down and making it up. That's my job.' (2) Yet for successful fiction to convey to the reader the importance of the subject matter, the strength of the author's feelings, the substance of the characters' experiences, it requires the reader's empathy. As long as writers make the fiction come alive they can write about anything. The time it took to write my novel once I became a mother is another matter altogether. Therefore, the difficulty of working simultaneously as a writer and a mother is an important question for me. Is it possible to balance work, motherhood and other commitments? In 'The Hum of Concrete' and the other works discussed here none of the diverse group of mothers shows an easy way of balancing motherhood. That is one of the interests in, and an important focus of, my fiction.

#### **Ordinary and Extraordinary**

The structure of my novel, 'The Hum of Concrete', is quite complex. Short stories about five women living in the same city, interspersed with interludes about the wonders of the city make up an experimental and unusual whole. I wanted to write about the diversity of city life through the eyes of mothers. One, two or even three main characters would not have been enough to carry all the stories I wanted to tell. I wanted the characters to be connected, but only slightly. Their main connection was always going to be through the city they live in, which is the city of Malmö in southern Sweden where I grew up. By bringing the diversity of the city to life, I

intended to write about humanity, about us all. This may be a bold and in some ways obviously impossible idea, but I persevered and in some small way I think I have managed to achieve what I set out to do. I wanted to create flawed characters: women who try to be good mothers, women who love their children but still have lives of their own, who sometimes have to make difficult decisions.

‘The Hum of Concrete’ includes Rhyme, a lonely teenage mother; Bodil, a middle aged doctor coming to terms with her unexpected pregnancy; Estella, a feisty black mother-of-two who constantly changes the direction of her life; Susanna, a lesbian mother with her roots in South America; and Nassrin, a Palestinian mother-of-six who feels like her children are adopting too many of the new country’s customs. All the main characters are introduced before they become mothers. We never see what their own mothers thought of them as daughters. My intention was never to write an intergenerational novel. I wanted the perspective to remain mainly with mothers but found it useful to also show these mothers as teenagers before motherhood becomes a real issue for them.

Malmö, my home city (or ‘mother city’, if you will), is a very diverse and multicultural city, providing the background I needed to explore diverse experiences of mothering. Yet how diverse could my portrayal be? My focus is not on dramatic events. I wanted everyday life to be exciting enough. But even so I have managed to include, among other things, the death of best friends, nervous breakdowns and near-drownings. I have come to realise that by making my women characters quite different, all I have really done is create a diversity of mothers, not a diversity of motherhood. Ultimately, all the mothers in ‘The Hum of Concrete’ try to be good mothers, even if they do not always succeed.

Although I write about everyday people the texts that provide context for my work deal with complicated issues and extreme situations: murder in *Mother to Mother* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, child sex abuse in *The Bean Trees*, cultural displacement and misogyny in *If the moon smiled*, AIDS in *The Hours*, substance abuse in *The Corrections* and physical disability in *A Better Woman*. Perhaps it is the way that these issues are approached, without a hint of sensationalism, that has attracted me to these texts. That is how I aimed to write my own novel, with a serious but light touch. Ultimately, these fictional texts as well as my own are all portrayals of mothers who are struggling in one way or another. In ‘The Hum of Concrete’ I draw attention to important social issues such as racism, intersex conditions, infidelity and depression through the ordinary women that are the main characters.

It was my intention to show a random selection of the people one could meet walking down *gågatan* in Malmö on any given day. This random selection could have included a mother like Eva in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, who dislikes her child long before he becomes a mass murderer. But I feared that a mother with such strong negative feelings towards her child could easily take over the narrative and diminish the experiences of the other four women.

I have included several accounts of pregnancy to show how it can differ depending on cultural and financial circumstances, expectations and age. Bodil, who is in her forties, decided early in life that she did not want to have children, but she is faced with the revolt of her own body. For young Muslim immigrant Nassrin, pregnancy is an important and natural part of life. Troubled street kid Rhyme manages to hide the fact of her pregnancy even from herself. These characters represent the fabric of pregnancy, unwanted as Bodil’s pregnancy as well as longed for, as Nassrin’s.

By allowing a child into her life, Bodil also gives the father a fairer chance to show his love for her. Up until this point she has been alone but strong. Now she is suddenly surrounded by love, which makes her strangely vulnerable:

For the first time since childhood she craves her mother's arms around her.

She is insane. Not only is she about to throw away the life of her unborn child, she is also pushing away the most astonishing man she has ever loved.

What does that count for? Nothing? Everything? All for the sake of one decision made many years ago when she was too naïve to know she would ever feel this way. (105)

Sometimes pregnancy brings back memories of childhood thoughts and feelings. Many mothers want a better childhood for their children than they experienced themselves. Bodil wants a better childhood for her child than her best friend experienced. He was intersex and bewildered about what was happening to his body.

Although she has never been through pregnancy herself, Klara has become a mother by default. She is in a long-term lesbian relationship with Susanna. This means that Susanna's unexpected pregnancy does not simply pose questions of shared motherhood but also of infidelity. The fact that Klara chooses to take up the challenge of motherhood and decides to forgive Susanna her indiscretion reveals the kind of person she is.

Rhyme does not acknowledge her own pregnancy. She sits on a bench in the middle of the city during the busy time of Christmas shopping, watching life pass her by. It is only through the conversation of onlookers after she has fallen out of a tree she has attempted to climb that we find out that she is pregnant. The complexity of

feelings about motherhood and pregnancy can of course, as in Rhyme's case, include denial.

In 'The Hum of Concrete', I have included all five women in one story which is set in the hospital where they all give birth on the same night, and is narrated by one of the midwives. This story stands out in the novel because it is the only one that is not narrated by the women themselves or told from their perspective. It is intended to show the reader how the characters can be perceived by an outsider:

*'Would you like to see?' Hilda holds a mirror between the girl's legs so she can see the swirls of dark hair. The girl almost stops breathing, that's how unreal it all is. In a few minutes she will have a new baby. Life will never be the same again. Hilda doesn't know much about the girl's background, what she knows is what she can see here and now. And that is pure joy. The girl's face is lit up from within and for the first time in two weeks she smiles. (118)*

Rhyme is a sensitive young woman who has had a hard life up until this point. She will continue to struggle for a while longer, but somehow the actual birthing process brings out joy in her. The reader knows that this is the second time Rhyme gives birth but the fate of her first child is never explained. One can only imagine what a fraught experience the birth of her second child would be when she has lost her first, no matter how it happened. In this way all my characters carry certain burdens of history; some that readers find out more about, others that are only hinted at.

The experiences of labour and how the women handle stressful situations are quite different from one woman to the next in 'The Hum of Concrete'. In a sense they

illustrate how varied labour and birth can be for many different reasons, often beyond the woman's control:

*'An episiotomy?' the woman says, dazed. 'I thought I was doing well.'*

*'You are but the baby has had enough now. It needs to come out.'*

*The woman nods, understanding. She is a doctor herself after all. But Hilda can see disappointment in the corners of her mouth. After all this time, all the pain, the pushing, the poos, she will still have to deliver with the help of a vacuum extractor.*

(119)

Bodil is the sensible doctor who knows about all the things that can go wrong in childbirth. Even so, she has romantic ideas of how the birth of her own child should be without medical interference. Natural and uncomplicated births are high on the wish lists of all the mothers, but it does not quite work out that way for Bodil.

Susanna fares even worse and is in immense pain after labour is induced:

*'Is it meant to be this bad? Isn't there anything you can do?' She stares accusingly at Hilda and the doctor.*

*The foetal monitor starts beeping furiously. Something is seriously wrong and the woman's expression shifts from anger to fear.*

*'What's wrong? There's nothing wrong with my baby is there?' She almost cries it out. (121)*

Her baby is in distress and she ends up having an emergency caesarean without her partner Klara by her side, which is obviously distressing. Through these snippets,

my intention was to show that giving birth is a serious, and sometimes even dangerous experience, which can also be filled with joy and feelings of empowerment. All five women in my novel take their birth experiences very seriously.

I wanted to write about lesbian motherhood as a natural part of the complexity of motherhood. In ‘The Hum of Concrete’, Susanna and Klara are both extremely loving parents to their daughter Lili. They help illustrate the diversity of mothers in today’s society. A friend of mine who is a writer and also a lesbian wrote comments after reading the novel and she was not enthusiastic about the way Lili was conceived (“this is the stereotype answer to lesbianism – ‘she just needs a good man’”). She later conceded she knew people who had done exactly the same thing as Susanna, fallen pregnant after a one-night stand. My response was to make Susanna’s bisexuality clearer to the reader as the attraction to Juan should seem natural. Like any other mothers, lesbian (and bisexual) mothers mother to the best of their abilities. In this case, Susanna and Klara happen to have a fantastic daughter who is intelligent and fun so most of the time they do not find mothering too difficult. In her interviews in *Lesbian Mothers: An Exploration of Canadian Lesbian Families*, Fiona Nelson finds that many of the lesbian couples are struggling with questions concerning reproduction and what it means to be a family. These questions are obviously not unique to lesbian parents, but there are some that are: Who should be the ‘mother’ and who should be the ‘other parent’ and what should they be called? These are things heterosexual couples do not have to consider to the same extent and therefore I found it important to include the story of Lili’s conception in ‘The Hum of Concrete’. It shows only one, conventional, way for lesbians to get pregnant and I am not

indicating whether it is a good way or not. I want my readers to make up their own minds about my characters.

For the same reason, I have included the birth of an intersex child in the novel. One in two thousand babies (or more) are born with ambiguous genitalia or chromosomal variations such as XXY, which leaves them somewhere in between being a girl and a boy: so called 'intersex'. Intersex people can feel that they are both male and female. As Michael Noble writes in his paper 'I am me and I am O.K.':

Intersexed people defy man made classifications or models of what nature should be like. According to modern Western medicine there are two sexes, male and female. However, according to nature, there are no clear boundaries either between the sexes, genders or identities. Yet, rather than accepting the fact that sex, gender and identity exists within a spectrum of unlimited potentials, science and medicine have sought to 'modify' people in order to fit them into what is considered to be the 'norm'. Even though around one in eight hundred people have some kind of Intersex condition, as a consequence of the abuse we have received from the medical profession and society in general, few of us have 'come out of the closet' to reclaim our space in society.

Consequently, because Intersexed people have been rendered invisible, today most people do not know what an Intersexed person is. (1)

Further research supports this account. I decided to make this little-known condition a focus of maternal anxiety in my novel, not only as a highly charged symbolic element but also to draw wider attention to it. To be asked to choose the sex of one's child can be a traumatic experience for any parent, which I try to illustrate in

the story in 'The Hum of Concrete' where Nassrin brings her baby to the beach. I am not Nassrin and even though I know more about the condition than she does, I can't imagine how I would have reacted if my children had been born intersex. I hope that I would have stayed as calm and composed as I was when my firstborn decided to appear six weeks premature and ended up in an incubator being fed through a tube up his nose. But how does anyone ever know how they will react to anything before it happens?

### **Working Mothers II**

The mothers in 'The Hum of Concrete' are concerned about being good mothers but the issue of paid work is not as fraught for my Swedish characters as for the fictional mothers from the USA, Australia and South Africa. As I have explained earlier, the Swedish system has long been based on extensive parenting leave. Before the parent (usually the mother) returns to work she or he has spent around two years at home with the child. When the mother returns to work it is often part-time until the child is older. In 'The Hum of Concrete', the only mother who is at home with her children longer than this is the teenager Rhyme, who has had mental health issues and has never had a conventional job.

Estella is first a postie and later becomes a councillor. Bodil is a physician and academic. Susanna works as a teacher of Swedish for immigrants. All three enjoy working. Work, to them, indicates worth. It becomes part of who they are. Estella's shift in employment to become a councillor after further studies indicates that her working life is highly important to her. She keeps searching for fulfilment through her work, as well as through dabbling in writing and caring for her daughters. Ultimately,

all three have chosen employment where they have the opportunity to extend themselves and help other people—and are satisfied when they do so.

One of the few glimpses of dissatisfaction with domestic life in ‘The Hum of Concrete’ comes with Nassrin, as she waits for her husband to return home when she is pregnant with their first child. She is bored and lonely. Before coming to Sweden it had never occurred to her that she could take up paid employment. But only a decade or so later, as her children grow older, she finds herself quite happily working as a cleaner.

In my novel housework does not play a big part but small details indicate that Bodil’s partner Ben bakes cinnamon scrolls and Estella’s husband Olof cooks dinner. Nassrin’s husband Mohammed is devastated when he sees his wife burdened by postnatal depression and vows to help out more at home, which would of course only be part of the solution.

### **Conflict and Tension**

The mothers in ‘The Hum of Concrete’ all have different kinds of conflict in their lives, different ways of coping with motherhood and life in general. None of them are supposed to illustrate good or bad ways of mothering. They are simply human and try to get on with their lives as partners, daughters and working parents – as well as being mothers. I am trying to show how five everyday people with quite different backgrounds handle motherhood. By choosing people with different backgrounds I was ultimately hoping to illustrate how much alike many mothers are when it comes to loving and caring for their children.

In many ways, the teenage mother Rhyme illustrates the simultaneous vulnerability and strength that occur in many mothers. In the beginning of her last

story, she grieves because she cannot soothe her own children at night, but has to let her mother do it. By the end of the story she has decided to change her life and for the first time ever she sees that she has the potential to care for her children without the help of her mother. In the Palestinian immigrant Nassrin's case, motherly vulnerability and strength do not show their full force until she has her sixth child, who happens to be born with an intersex condition. The fact that she cannot tell people whether the child is a boy or a girl has a huge impact on her life, to the extent that she almost drowns herself and the baby. This passage is a homage of sorts to Sethe's infanticide in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. But Nassrin chooses differently. She lets the child live. Even though the child might be restricted by society's tenets and labelled an outcast (a slave of sorts to society's ideals) it will have the freedom of expression and movement denied Sethe and her offspring in Morrison's compelling work.

Most of the conflicts in the texts I have read spring from problems between mothers and their children, but in 'The Hum of Concrete' I have tried to shift this slightly. The tension does not have to be between mother and child or between partners about their children simply because the main character happens to be a mother. Mothers can have problems quite unrelated to their children and can have great relationships with their children even when they are having a hard time generally.

Estella occasionally experiences racial tension in my novel. Estella's father is a black African and her skin is also quite dark which makes her a visible target. But the only way in which her race affects her mothering is that she makes sure her daughters are proud of their skin. Susanna does the same when she makes sure her daughter Lili

knows about her South American heritage and is able to speak Spanish to her grandparents.

I attempt to make the place itself, the city of Malmö, a kind of guiding character. All the characters in 'The Hum of Concrete' love the city they are in, even though they all have different backgrounds, especially Nassrin. She has been displaced and has made herself a new home in Malmö, while the others were all born and grew up there. Nassrin's relationship with her eldest son is thrown into question when she finds a pornographic magazine in his room. She is too bewildered, and secretly fascinated, to be able to bring it up with him. Instead she asks her eldest daughter if she knows anything about possible girlfriends, which of course is beside the point, and the daughter finds the question ludicrous. Like Manthri's children in *If the moon smiled*, Nassrin's children have grown up to become Westerners and their mothers do not always understand their way of thinking. Mothering in a country other than your own presents a challenge, which I explore through Nassrin. The fact that I am now doing the same thing myself has not escaped me. Is it easier to be a Swede mothering in Australia than a Palestinian woman raising her children in Sweden?

Even though Nassrin believes she has a close-knit family, her children have adopted the customs of the new country and feel quite Swedish in many ways. Yet that does not seem to separate them the way it separates Manthri and her children. The important difference between Manthri and Nassrin is that Nassrin does not expect her children to feel the same way about Palestine as she does, and she has no illusions of ever returning to her homeland, with or without her children. She is subconsciously striving for a kind of balance in her life, a state where she has an emotional and physical life, which is simultaneously entwined with and disconnected from the rest of her family.

## **Motherlove II**

Motherhood is certainly a site of both joy and pain for most of the characters in 'The Hum of Concrete'. Even though the mothers are from different backgrounds, they all have in common the fact that they love their children and attempt to be good mothers. And all of them are, at times, less than perfect mothers.

The youngest mother, Rhyme, is only in her mid-teens when she has her first child. By the time she is nineteen she is still living at home with her mother and has two children by different fathers. She has no contact with the fathers; she might not even know who they are, but she tries hard to be a good mother on her own. She is loving and fun to be around even though she has previously had mental health issues. She sings and tells her children stories, but at night she has subtle wordless fights with her mother about who really has the responsibility for the children, as Rhyme cannot seem to care for them when they wake up crying. In one of the stories, she takes her children on a day trip to the park, which they love, but she also recklessly leaves them alone outside a corner shop as she nips in to buy a loaf of bread to feed the birds. When she returns, only a few minutes later, the children are not there and she panics.

Rhyme, more than any other mother in 'The Hum of Concrete', is clearly aware of not always being a good mother and therefore tries very hard to improve. When the children turn up unharmed, she has learnt her lesson and vows she will never leave them again. Just like Mandisa, in *Mother to Mother*, she still has the innocence of a child even though she is expected by society to take on adult responsibilities. Her young mind helps her connect with her children, but it can also be dangerous and actually put her children at risk in the adult world, where she should be able to protect them.

Bodil's entire life takes a new turn when she finds out that she is pregnant, mainly because she never expected to be a mother at all. When she suddenly finds herself in love and pregnant she has to choose once and for all. Because of her advanced age she might never be lucky enough to become pregnant again. For Bodil, choosing whether to keep the baby or not is perhaps the biggest decision of her life and she refuses to share it with the father because she believes it is hers and hers alone to make. If she had been younger she might not have felt so strongly about it. But in her current situation she is old and wise enough to see that she can now deal with the uncertainties of love as well as the complexity of motherhood.

This disapproval of one's children, both hidden and open, and the strong love that accompanies it, are counter pointed in my novel. The Palestinian mother Nassrin is the character with most inner as well as outer struggle when it comes to her children's behaviour. Nassrin, like Manthri, does not reveal her misgivings to her children. Nassrin clearly loves her children but she also harbours resentment towards them. I believe that very few, if any, mothers never feel angry with their children, frustrated with what they are doing or upset at what they have done. Nassrin is horrified by the way her teenage son's Westernised behaviour reflects on her and the rest of the family. Estella, on the other hand, simply cannot and will not buy into the illusion that all mothers are patient and loving at all times. She is still young and vibrant and sometimes feels trapped by her conventional family life. But by the time her daughters are a few years old, she has learnt to really enjoy the moments she gets alone with her husband when Miriam and Millie are staying the night at her mother's.

This notion of how difficult it can be to let one's children choose their own paths is apparent in my own novel, especially when it comes to the Palestinian character Nassrin, whose children are growing into young adults. Nassrin would like

them to hold onto traditional beliefs but at the same time she is willing to compromise. That is why she never stops her daughter from playing soccer, as long as she keeps her headscarf on while she plays.

None of the mothers in 'The Hum of Concrete' ever come close to feeling such hatred for their children as Eva does for her son in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. They dislike them occasionally and are often bewildered by them but they never hate them, or the act of mothering, the way Eva does. She knows she has not lived up to her own or society's ideal of motherhood and she suffers for it every day.

All the mothers I have created are flawed in their own ways. Perhaps flawed characters are the ones readers identify with the most because they reflect or demonstrate the range of possibilities within human beings. My own experiences as a Swedish person living in Australia has obviously coloured some of my writing about Malmö. My perspective on the city is affected by both closeness and distance, sadness and joy. Writing about my home city in this way has revived fond feelings which are expressed in the interludes. They in turn are counterbalanced by the problematic nature of the lives of some of my characters.

Now that the writing of this thesis is almost over, I am ready to return to Malmö to experience the city anew. I want to show my sons some of the wonders it has to offer. Like the characters in 'The Hum of Concrete', I will then be seeing the city through a mother's eyes.

## PART IV

### CONCLUSION

We all have some kind of relationship to mothers and motherhood, be it as children of our mothers or mothers of our children. There are more ideas of what mothers are, or should be, than there are mothers in this world. As I have discussed in this essay, mothers are not a homogenous group but rather a diverse cluster of women from all places and walks of life. The complexity of motherhood is immense and the diversity of mothers boundless, but ultimately I have found that the love of their children unites many mothers who have nothing else in common. Many mothers in fiction, not just Western mothers but also Manthri in *If the moon smiled* and Mandisa in *Mother to Mother*, from Sri Lanka and South Africa respectively, struggle with aspects of motherhood and feel guilty about their own efforts in mothering. This struggle with motherhood led me to consider what is needed to achieve a kind of balance in a mother's life. I intended all my mother characters to strive for balance in their own ways.

Is there such a thing as balanced motherhood? A motherhood when mother and child live in harmony with each other as well as with their surroundings? Where mothers can choose to work and care for their children without feeling guilty? Where they are allowed to resent as well as appreciate the restrictions and opportunities childrearing brings to their lives? In her concluding chapter 'Reimagining Motherhood' in *A Mother's Place*, Susan Chira talks specifically about embracing a balanced motherhood that involves working mothers:

Reimagining motherhood requires understanding that working does not destroy the joyous sense of connection to a child or diminish the all-important influence

of family on a child's life. It means enduring children's resentment of work while explaining that work has value. And it means embracing a new psychological ideal of motherhood, one that abandons the pursuit of perfection and its reverence for sacrifice. (259)

The new psychological ideal that Chira mentions is evident in the way that some of the mothers in 'The Hum of Concrete' choose to mother their children. All but Rhyme are working mothers. Bodil, especially, has had to make substantial changes in her life as a single professional in her early forties to accommodate a child as well as a partner. I think balance between motherhood and other aspects of life, as well as freedom from motherguilt, is what most of the mothers in the texts I have read are aiming for. Still, they all struggle with different aspects of their motherhood. Even in cases when the relationship between mother and child is very close (as in *Pigs In Heaven*) there is a third force, in this case the child's Native American background, separating them.

In all good literature there needs to be conflict and in the literature that touches on motherhood the tensions arise both from the relationship between the mother and her children and from the relationship between mother, child and the wider world. The conflict can be extreme, as in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, or when the mother has a loving, balanced relationship with her children, quite subtle. In 'The Hum of Concrete' there is serious tension in several chapters which are not directly related to the relationship between mother and child. For example, Estella tries to write a sexy story and gets so involved that her own sex life shifts. In another example, Bodil goes skating with her family and collapses in a pool of blood. To me, as a writer, it is a

question of making a common domestic situation count as a legitimate and affecting topic to centre my writing around.

There is no doubt that mothers play a highly influential role in their children's lives, whether they are working or staying at home, loving or abusive, whether the children are girls or boys and whether they have siblings or not. The mother guides the child and tries to teach it how the world outside the family works. DiQuinzio's *The Impossibility of Motherhood* discusses, in similar fashion to this essay, a wide range of texts about motherhood from a feminist perspective. In the conclusion, she states that there is no such thing as a unified way of looking at motherhood. The texts she has studied, like the ones I have chosen to discuss:

make different assumptions about what defines or constitutes mothering, emphasize different aspects of women's situations as mothers and their experiences of mothering, and draw different conclusions about the meaning and significance of mothering in women's lives and the social reorganization of mothering. (243)

After analysing such varied accounts of motherhood in literature, I conclude that motherhood is best seen not as a fixed entity but as a constantly changing process. Mothers are physically and emotionally affected by the simple fact of motherhood itself but also by the way their children grow up to become people in their own right. A mother does not necessarily feel and act the same way towards all her children. Sometimes she loves one child more than the others although she will not usually admit it even to herself. In some cases love can turn to disappointment and even hate.

Through representations in my creative work I have tried to suggest something of the breadth of this spectrum of motherly feelings towards children. I have also tried to show that women feel strongly about things other than their children and that this is an important part in balancing motherhood. My mother characters have partners, parents, jobs, hobbies, plans for the future and memories of the past. To show the complexity of motherhood, 'The Hum of Concrete' includes many aspects of life, other than being a mother. That is why I portray Susanna's daydreaming in a manner that makes it matter as much as her interactions with her daughter Lili. Nassrin's relationship with her God is as important as her relationship with her children, or more so. Rhyme is wrapped up in her plans for a better future, Estella is consumed with trying to write a story about sex and Bodil is passionately involved in her job.

Issues of age, race and poverty, sex and sexuality, as well as place and displacement, play a part alongside issues of motherguilt, disapproval of one's children and motherlove. Finally there is the question of love. Not just the overwhelming love that these women feel for their children but also the love for their partners, their parents, their friends and even themselves. Their love of nature, of art, reading and writing. Ultimately, love is what matters in people's lives, as I try to show in my novel. Love is what keeps us going, as is shown in many different ways in the fictional texts and the memoir that have been discussed in this exegetical essay. If she had not still loved her husband and children, how could Eva have kept going after Kevin's killing spree? She still loved Kevin, she also hated him, and she knew he would one day need that love, so she could not kill herself even if she had wanted to. In *A Better Woman*, Susan isn't bitter about the damage the births of her sons have done to her body because she loves them. But sometimes when you love someone you have to let them go to be able to survive yourself, as Laura demonstrates in *The*

*Hours*. Laura contemplates suicide but ends up leaving her husband and children to make a life of her own.

There are so many social taboos surrounding motherhood and the way mothers feel about their children, the way they act towards them, that it can be difficult to broach motherhood even from a fictional perspective. This simply makes it all the more important that writers attempt to break through these taboos and write about all aspects of motherhood, including feelings of maternal hatred as well as love. We all know that mothers who abuse their children exist. On the other hand, we also know that mothers who have close and loving relationships with their children exist. Yet this range of experience seldom features in an undistorted, non-stereotypical way in fiction or in the media.

All the texts I have discussed here have added new and interesting dimensions to the way we read motherhood. My hope is that my own novel will add a further dimension to the range of motherhood writing.

Nine months ago I again became the mother of a small baby, my second. I am very fortunate to be the mother of two wonderful, happy and healthy children. And I know that my experiences as a mother are mine and mine only. Yet I see similarities between myself and some of the mothers in the fictional works, the same way I hope readers will recognise themselves in 'The Hum of Concrete'.

I try not to have unrealistic expectations of myself or of my children. I try not to add to the complexity of motherhood by constantly worrying about it. I know that there will be many difficult moments, and indeed there already have been many, but that is part of being a parent and that does not mean that I love my children any less. The relationship between a mother and her children is in one sense the same as any other relationship. It is constantly changing. Both parties have to give and take to

make each other happy. Yet in another sense it is the most basic, unbalanced and intimate bond there is. Children are totally dependent on their parents and all we can do is try our best to provide for them.

For me, working as a mother is as challenging as working as a writer or a PhD student. All the good work you put in is not always evident at first, but with time you notice it in loving hugs from your children or congratulatory exclamations from your readers. This is the kind of praise that spurs you on to work even harder while you still have the opportunity. Because you know that one day, sooner than you can imagine, you will have to let both your children and your writing go to make their own way in the world.

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