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LAS MADRES MALAS

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BAD MOTHERS

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Resumen

El mundo occidental ha estado desarrollando durante mucho tiempo, tanto en su dimensión cristiana como en su dimensión secular, una representación estereotipada ideal de "la madre devota". El feminismo y los grandes cambios sociales, económicos, legales y culturales han modificado esos estereotipos, revelando mecanismos inesperados en la construcción y deconstrucción de la feminidad en su versión materna.

Palabras clave

Mujeres, infancia, maternidad, medios, derecho.

Abstract

The Western world has been developing for a long time, both in its Christian and in its secular dimension, an ideal stereotyped representation of "The Devoted Mother".

Feminism and the great social, economical, legal, and cultural changes have modified those stereotypes, revealing unexpected mechanisms in constructing and deconstructing femininity in its mothering version.

Keywords

Women, childhood, motherhood, media, law.

I. Bachofen, Andersen and the holy Virgin

For a long time, since classical Greece, that is to say since the decline of what Bachofen called matriarchy, Western civilization has defined femininity without offering it autonomous identity roots, but imposing its roots in the values and roles mainly established by the patriarchy, to which femininity was only the appendix, or even the deviation. While the cultural discourse around nature and the human condition elaborated, through the centuries, the features of manhood, women condition was only the emanation, the consequence, the accident. As illustrated, among others, by Geneviève Fraisse¹, in the Western world Ulysses was the one to travel, to face and seize the day, while poor Penelope was to wait, faithfully and silently. Nevertheless, at the origins of our civilization women had a central role: they kept the memories of the group, they knew the secrets of agriculture and food preservation, and above all, they had the magic power to give life to another human being in a time when neither echography nor modern medicine was available. Sedentarization has, with the emergence of the poleis, slowly determined an irreversible slip of social power from the female ovulation space to the male strategic space², redefining topographically the social cartography by leaving public space to men and by relegating women into domestic space. There, from gynaeceum to Victorian mansion, an ideal Woman has been created by society, history, religion and culture, by shaping the distinctive features of female identity in terms of docility, passivity, obedience, silence³. And chastity⁴, that goes well with silence⁵, as Virginia Woolf⁶ writes: “it was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women” –in a secular, socially accepted version and in the Jewish and Christian tradition as well⁷ (not to mention the pre-Christian tradition, that prevents the overwhelming majority of women from rebellion). By insisting on young girls and women decorum, and by linking female sexuality, both in its secular and religious version, to procreation, the magical, powerful matriarchy was inevitably replaced by motherhood. It is not only a matter of vocabulary: matriarchy means a centrality of female power of action in the social life of the group, while motherhood is socially accepted only when linked to marriage.

1. G. Fraisse, “De la destination au destin: histoire philosophique de la différence des sexes”, in G. Duby, M. Perrot, *L'histoire des femmes en Occident*, Plon, Paris, 1991.

2. E. Caramazza, M. Vianello, *Genere spazio potere*, Dedalo, Bari, 2006.

3. N. Heinich, *États de Femmes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1996.

4. M. Haskell, *From reverence to Rape*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 1973.

5. C. Cosnier, *Le Silence des Filles: de l'aiguille à la plume*, Paris, Fayard, 2001.

6. V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Penguin, London, 2013.

7. I. Singer, *Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1982.

In other words, the traditional, pre-sedentary society accepts the social consequences of sex mainly in terms of survival of the group, while the sedentarised society, longing for order and discipline, brings sensual exuberance back to patriarchal control through the institution of marriage. And by exalting legitimate motherhood in spite of free love the strategic society builds a socially-safe space for sex where sexually active women, when fertile, can be exalted quite as much as the virgins are before marriage; thus women can have sex only when married or dedicate their lives to God by becoming nuns, while for all the others Victorian culture has created a specific word: redundant women. Great Literature has given us epic examples of devoted mothers who move us for their tenderness and abnegation even though they are not married. The touching mother of H. C. Andersen and Hugo's miserable Fantine fill our hearts, but motherhood can become a social cult only inside marriage. No offense is given or taken, we cannot ignore that the most diffused religion of the Western world, from the third century a. C. to the second half of the 20th century, is based on a sacred belief that puts motherhood inside legitimate marriage and eliminates creatrional sex from the scene! With all due respect, this sacred belief influenced the public morality and had an undeniable social impact in terms of sexuophobia⁸ and male domination⁹. All these complexes dynamics have been mirrored and at the same time influenced by media, especially by Anglo-Saxon cinema and, from the 60s on, by WesternTV in general.

To the degree that sex was the equivalent of the self, surrender to sex was to lose oneself, whereas abstinence would insure its safeguarding, if not its salvation. Our instincts were substantiated by the movies: the "Virgin" was a primal, positive figure, honoured and exalted beyond any merits she possessed as a woman (and eventually made to pay for her "superiority" in the professional virgins and teases of the fifties), while the "whore", americanized into the good-bad girl, was publicly castigated and cautioned against- and privately sought by men¹⁰.

These words, written by Molly Haskell¹¹, refer to the 20th century, but also reflect the traditional dichotomy female private space/male public space, conquered women/

8. A. Corbin, *Les filles de nocés. Misère sexuelle et prostitution au XIXe siècle*, Flammarion, Paris, 1982.

9. P. Bourdieu, *La domination masculine*, Paris, Seuil, 1998.

10. M. Haskell, "Introduction", in *From Reverence to Rape*.

11. "We felt, obscurely, that we were safe if we did not go all the way, and so, for fear of blighting in the bud that ego would have little enough chance to survive, we cauterized our sexual responses before they could develop freely. Those of us who were ambitious would use our femininity like Scarlet O' Hara used hers: would flirt, tease, withhold sex, to get what we wanted. It would rarely occur to us to ask outright for a place on the starting line, to enter the ranks of competitive male activities and thereby lose our place on the pedestal and our "preferred" passive position in the game of love. We became 'superfemale' rather than 'superwomen'. We lied and manipulated and pretended to be helpless and were guilty of conspiring in our own idealization –and our own oppression". M. Haskell, "Introduction".

conqueror men, women being assigned roles/men defying existence also outside social impositions, serving women/men being served. And being served especially by mums. As Virginia Woolf wrote, for centuries it has been in the comfort of an exalting image of himself, an image provided by wives, and above all mothers, that men have created, legislated, conquered, discovered new territories. The more society got strategically sophisticated, the more it became essential, for the patriarchal order, to assign women a precise role. Motherhood could turn sexuality and all its dangers into a positive energy and that energy would be used at its best if motherhood would transform into a monolithic, monodimensional mask. An iron mask worn by Penelope up to Lynette Scavo; a smiling mask that has been in discomfort for centuries, a discomfort called, among other things, Bovarism.

II. The Big Lie: from Bovarism to abortion

The big lie perpetrated on Western society is the idea of women's inferiority, a lie so deeply ingrained in our social behaviour that merely to recognize it is to risk unraveling the entire fabric of civilization. [...] The prejudice against women is no less pernicious because it is based on a fallacy. Indeed, to have sanctioned by law and custom a judgement that goes against our instincts is the cornerstone of bad faith on which monuments of misunderstanding have been erected¹².

How does society make sure that all her women, once they become adult, are docile¹³ in the roles they have been born for? Several discursive techniques, in the Foucaultian sense, can be useful: inception¹⁴, myth, models, narrative. That is to say, it is necessary to instill the idea of maternity¹⁵, cultivate the myth¹⁶ of motherhood¹⁷, glorify and exalt self-denial maternity models and animate the collective imagination of all these ingredients through the narrative dimension, dynamic nucleus within which converge the ideas and models that can motivate and influence social actors seeking for their virtues' rewards. That is why it is imperative that Pamela does not have sex before marriage,

12. Ibid.

13. J. Donzelot, *La Police des Familles*, Minuit, Paris, 1977.

14. S. J. Douglas, M. W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: the idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined all women*, Free Press, New York, 2005.

15. E. Goffman, "The Family" and "The Ritualization of Subordination", in *Gender Advertisements*, Harper and Row, New York, 1979.

16. S. Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood. How culture reinvents the good mother*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1994.

17. J. Swigart, *The Myth of the Perfect Mother*, London, Contemporary Books, 1998.

Griselda is patient and Bridget Jones feels a failure until she can marry Marc Darcy. And that is also why it is necessary to control dangerous readings, when it comes to women¹⁸: audacious novels and romance, in general, must be discouraged in order to avoid women's imagination to fly over the wild oceans of adultery, romantic love, sexual self-fulfilment, and anything in general conflicting with marital duties, moral decency and urbanity decorum.

According to Dante's V Chant of the Inferno, as well as to Flaubert, courteous literature, in all its derives, is the main cause of failure, sin and social and moral condemnation. Would Emma have ever developed all her perversions¹⁹, in she had not read the keepsakes secretly borrowed by her roommates? Maternity is a myth to her, just as marriage. She barely remembers her own mother, who died when she was little, but both myths coexist in her soul: motherhood, family and marriage on one side, *bahuts, salles de gardes et ménestrels* on the other. And the doubt that fantasies and everyday life can be irreconcilable does not even touch her mind. When maternity arrives, after sensual disillusion and acute physical suffering, she has already learnt how deeply boring and cruel life can be. Yet a last, androgyne hope does not abandon her: to give birth to a male who would have made the geographical and sentimental journey she had always wanted to take. In discovering that she has given birth to a girl, Emma faces the collapse of maternal myth and becomes a bad mother. Her daughter Berta suffers the repercussions of her inability, of her depression. Berta, that Emma considers "ugly", only exists when Emma needs to recover from her disillusion. Emma is a bad mother because she does not grant her child the unconditioned love she needs. The look Emma gives to her daughter is a distant, cold betrayal: it is a symbolic abortion that comes after a long series or other deaths –of her hopes, of her dreams, of her taste for life. In this perspective, we might say that abortion is a male act, indirectly imposed by the myths and the rules that patriarchy has insinuated into society. A patriarchy that asks mothers to be perfect can only generate frustration, and the desperate wish to abdicate a role that society makes unsustainable. Moreover, patriarchy has always excluded women by the knowledge and control of their own bodies. The witch hunt is only the tip of an iceberg called control.

18. M. De Giorgio, "Il divieto e la lettura", in G. Duby, M. Perrot, *Storia delle donne in Occidente. Vol 4, L'Ottocento*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1992.

19. L. J. Kaplan, *Women Perversions. The Temptations of Emma Bovary*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 1991.

III. Happy-ending addicted: the Charlotte York syndrome

Although patriarchs have done everything to cut their wings, women seem to have not lost their desire to fly. Defying gravity, in cultural terms, means revenging Emma, Anna Karenina, Effie Briest by accepting that according to the patriarchal rules good mothers go to heaven, but bad mothers go everywhere. In this sense, bad moms are the women who defy the limits imposed by their role. If patriarchy is the driving idea that social reward is achieved by pursuing passivity and docility, it is not surprising that fairy tales told to little girls²⁰ from one generation to another describe passive feminine figures who, the less they do, the more they are successful.

Sleeping Beauty is awakened to life by the kiss of true love; so is Snow White (just a tiny more active than Aurora), while the Princess on the pea's sole merit is to have complained about a legume! After doing almost nothing, all these characters get their reward: they will live happily ever after and have many children. Nothing is written about the lack of sleep, doubts, quarrels that will follow the pink sunset, no recipe is furnished to survive the storms waiting for the couple just on the other side of the rainbow. The only certainty seems to be the rainbow itself, the colourful life true princesses will live when they will finally get married and pregnant. In our contemporary opulent society, filled with contradictions and traps, the new version of the happy ending is not very different. Women can feel like princesses once they have joined the best of everything, as Rhona Jaffe²¹ teaches well, and that best includes what I call the three magical M: money, motherhood, marriage (not necessarily in this order, we are postmodern, after all!). The great difference from the past representations of women is that work, the usual way to get economic independence, is now included in the picture, as a contemporary remedy for traditional Bovarist boredom. Having found a successful job, the job she does not even need a vacation from, because she has realized her dreams, the postmodern Cinderella should feel all right: she is now independent, she can be her own fairy god-mother, so why is she so neurotic? Because independence is scary! Women's hidden fear of independence has been defined by Colette Dowling as an unconscious desire to be taken care of by others, a complex said to become more apparent as a person grows older²² and considering how late nowadays economy allows women independence we can

20. M. L. von Franz, *La Femme dans les contes de fées*, La Fontaine de Pierre, Paris, 1990.

21. R. Jaffe's novel *The best of everything* (1958) is considered the first great literary work that gives life to a new genre of narrative, destined to be successfully diffused until nowadays: chick-lit.

22. C. Dowling, *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1981.

easily imagine how strongly this complex can be felt by the thousands and thousands of successful women in their thirties, dangerously joining their forties, if marriage and motherhood are still far away.

Charlotte York, one of the protagonists of the famous TV series *Sex and the city*, is the postmodern Cinderella icon: she has a Park Avenue castle (obtained from a painful divorce), she is a successful art gallerist, she has found a Prince named Harry Goldenblatt who is not very charming but makes her smile. She has earned, after a lot of disappointments, the best of *almost* everything: she cannot have children. Her crisis represents the crisis of many contemporary women who feel incomplete without a baby and when she finally gets pregnant Charlotte feels overwhelmed by the weight of the commitments her daughters involve. In one of the last scenes, she confesses how depressed and guilty she feels for being so exhausted while she should only be grateful for having two marvellous little girls. She will really conquer everything when her friend Carrie, by lending her apartment, will let her have, for once a week, a room of her's own.

IV. Nesting society

Charlotte is, in the end, a lucky, privileged woman, but most of the mothers, in our Western society, are not rich enough to afford the time and space they need for themselves. That is why we assist to bad mothers abandoning, aggressing or even killing their children when overwhelmed by weariness and depression. If we want a more humane society, we should no more let mothers alone.

Maybe the secret is just to accept mothers in all their outrageous humanity, accepting their weariness and limits, and granting them the cures a human being always needs, especially when in charge of caregiving. There will always be unhappiness, there will always be runaway fathers not always coming back from Neverland to take care of their children, mothers will always be tempted to delegate part of the burden their children involve to have some time for their own. Pain is part of life, but finding remedies is part of building a more humane world. Postmodern society will be more human if it turn itself into a nesting society, by stopping exalting the myth of the isolated couple and assume education and care as a social responsibility. A humanist society can no more polarize the mothering figure between self-denial devotion and badness. The old scheme of the traditional family already made livelier by new sentimental possibilities

and unexpected existential solutions, must above all be integrated by a diffused sense of common motherhood. There will always be slummy-mummies who won't stop until they have found their personal happy-ending, even in physical terms; there will be mothering daughters and parenting sons; some runaway dads will repent; there might always be mothers feeling so lonely and discouraged to choose to make an abortion. But a nesting society can offer release and support to parents and children. The way out of many of the crisis of contemporary society is maybe in this diffused, shared-motherhood that can turn the individualistic, adult-centered strategic space into a new, creative ovulatory space. This hysterisation of the social topography is the paradoxical cure to the many forms of female and male hysterias produced by postmodernism. We no more want a liquid, risky, confused society. We can accept all the possible contradictions with courage and irony, but we will always want, at a certain point, to feel protected. We will want, at a certain point, to share part of our responsibilities and burdens. A nesting society takes care of these needs through a more ethic system of welfare, to allow its members to fly with less fear, knowing there is always a community, a nest to go back to when our wings are tired²³.

23. For further reading see C. Castellano, *Building a Nesting Society*, Edizioni Suor Orsola, Napoli, 2017.