Mothers and Mother Figures: Exploring Embodiment and Disembodiment
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For Dr. Adolph’s English Senior Seminar class, Sheryl Klingbeil, in her essay “Mothers and Mother Figures,” chose an aspect of feminist theory and applied it to the texts utilized in classes.

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There are two texts I have chosen to discuss, both by Helen Dunmore. The first is Talking to the Dead, which focuses on the relationship between Isabel and her younger sister, Nina. The second is The Siege, which examines starvation in World War II Russia, through the eyes of Anna. Both of these texts explore the physicality and disembodiment of women’s perceptions, desires and intellect. The women are represented through their thoughts and actions, not their bodies, creating them as disembodied. These women might be considered disembodied as a result of masculine oppression, as mothers they are no longer allowed to enjoy their bodies. Additionally, mothers are disembodied as a result of their abandonment of their children. Daughters who are left behind are pushed into fulfilling society’s gender role of the caring substitute parent, which can be problematic.

Of all the characters in the novels, Isabel is the most complex. She is simultaneously embodied and disembodied. Isabel is embodied through her anorexia and breastfeeding, but disembodied through her anorexia. Isabel explains her anorexia:

All those people thinking they had to have food all the time or they’d die, always thinking about it and talking about it and going out to the shops for it and then sitting chomping it down, and yet it wasn’t really necessary at all. All the world turned on something you could do without. I wanted to shout and tell everyone the Ruth. (Dunmore 185).

She speaks as though imparting secret wisdom to her sister: food is unnecessary. Her denial of food is denying her body of the thing it needs to live. In this way, she is denying that she has a body. She does not need to nourish something that does not exist.

By denying food, Isabel denies her body, yet she is embodied in the very attempt at disembodiment. She is embodied because anorexia inscribes on the flesh. Susan Bordo explains, “slenderness, set off against the resurgent muscularity and bulk of the current male body-ideal, carries connotations of fragility and lack of power in the face of a decisive male occupation of social space. On the body of the anorexic woman such rules are grimly and deeply etched” (171). Anorexic women internalize the images of feminine ideals, which are then transcribed onto their bodies. They change their bodies to reflect their internalized images, thereby leaving society’s messages etched onto their bodies through their emaciated frames. Since Isabel is a self-proclaimed anorexic, she has these inscriptions written on her body therefore, she does have embodiment. She has a body which she starves, but the act of starvation, of trying to negate the body, gives meaning to the body, allowing her to be embodied. This creates a complexity in Isabel. The result of her actions (self-starvation) causes the very thing she is determined to avoid (embodiment).

Another way that Isabel is embodied is through motherhood and breastfeeding. The act of giving birth separates mothers from childless women. Mothers are grounded in their physicality: their bodies have carried and delivered a child. In the same way, breastfeeding signifies embodiment. The mother’s body serves to provide nourishment and comfort to the infant. This physicality puts the mother firmly in the realm of the body. According to Dagmar Estermann Meyer and Dora Lúcia de Oliveira, “the representations that signify and inscribe motherhood in the body (and in the ‘soul!’) of women, in different locations and times, are at the same time, incapable of fixing it, once and forever, a true, defined, homogenous group of marks/meanings” (13). While the inscription of motherhood onto a woman’s body are fluid, and may change depending on the time period or society she lives in, motherhood nonetheless inscribes upon the body. The mother’s body is inscribed upon by the physicality involved in carrying a child.

Isabel is physically described in relation to her experience of motherhood. Nina describes seeing the Caesarean scar: “the scar is a reddish-purple line, with what looks like rows of teethmarks above and below
it” (Dunmore 26). The scar has physically marked her as having given birth to a child. Her body is also related to breastfeeding: “Her long fingers pluck, pluck at the bedclothes. They are thin, and her wrists are oblong, showing their bones. Only her breasts are heavy” (Dunmore 56). Her body is skeletal, as a result from the attempt to negate her body. In contrast, her breasts, which are inscriptions of motherhood, are heavy, Isabel’s body is related to motherhood and breastfeeding; the rest of her body is almost non-existent.

In sharp contrast to Isabel is her sister, Nina. Nina lives in her corporeal body. She is embodied, not through society’s inscriptions and self-starvation, but through her enjoyment of and acceptance of her own body. Nina tells Richard, “I’m not like Isabel’ […] I told you that before. I like food, and I like fucking” (Dunmore 94). She enjoys the sensual delights of food and of sexual intercourse; the gratification of her body. In the mind/body duality, the indulgence of her flesh places her firmly in her body. Moreover, her body is a lived, not a dead body, as “it is a being in relationship to that which is other: other people, other things, an environment” (Leder 123). The lived body is outside the other, but is connected. Nina relates to various things, such as figs: “The figs mean nothing to her (Isabel). Their white paper packing, the fragile, bloomy skin of each fruit, the way the seeds ooze slowly through the cracks in the flesh” (Dunmore 197). She is able to create a very sensual description of the figs by utilizing her body, by means of her senses. Others do not visualize the figs in the same manner as Nina; she has a connection to the physicality of the figs. Not only is Nina able to relate to figs, but she is able to relate to others, such as Richard. They develop a physical relationship while she is staying with Isabel. Her ability to relate to others defines her as a lived body, which signifies embodiment.

Another of Dunmore’s characters that is embodied is Anna, a character from The Siege. Anna combines the starvation of Isabel and the lived body of Nina. Unlike Isabel, however, Anna is not choosing to starve herself; she is being starved as the result of a war. The text discusses her body’s response to starvation:

Anna prepares for her daily walk to the bakery as carefully as a marathon runner. She eats the quarter-slice of bread she has saved from her ration, and tucks another quarter-slice into her pocket to eat if she begins to feel dizzy […] She does everything slowly, according to a set pattern. Whenever her heart beats too fast, she stops, and rests. (Dunmore 196)

She experiences the result of hunger on her body. She must move slowly and methodically. The hunger has changed the landscape of her body. Although her body is not being self-starved, it is still being inscribed upon by society, through its policies. Elizabeth Gorsz discusses Foucault “he argues that power is inscribed on and by bodies through modes of social supervision and discipline as well as self-regulation” (238). This is especially true in Anna’s case. The food that was consumed by her, and by other inhabitants of the city, was regulated by the hegemony. The authorities had the power to change the citizens’ bodies, by granting or denying food rations.

Although embodiment is represented by many different characters, disembodiment is exemplified mainly through one group of characters: mothers. Isabel, for example, although embodied through her anorexia and motherhood, is also disembodied. She does not live in her body like Nina and Anna. She exists almost exclusively through discourse. Her anorexia, while embodying, is also disembodying. Susan Bordo explains, “While the body is experienced as alien and outside, the soul or will is described as being trapped or confined in this alien ‘jail’ […] a typical fantasy, evocative of Plato, imagine total liberation from the bodily prison” (147). The act of attempting to leave her body disembodies Isabel. Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook state, “The very exemplarity of the female anorexic body […] reinforces the perception of corporeality as the passive ‘other’ of a violent yet necessary representational negation” (47). Isabel attempts to negate her body through starvation.

Additionally, Isabel is disembodied through the consumption of her body by her child. As an anorexic, Isabel is not providing her body with enough nutrients to keep her alive and produce breast milk simultaneously. This puts her at risk, according to Estermann Meyer and de Oliveira:

When Almeida (1999, 67) details the composition of maternal milk, he makes clear that the concentration of minerals in the milk is not affected by the mother’s diet. In practical terms this may mean that when the levels decrease so much as to mean a more serious situation, the maternal reserves are literally depleted, reaching, in extreme cases, the decompositions of tissues […] in order to maintain the levels of minerals in the milk. (16)

Her body must produce milk that meets the child’s nutritional needs, regardless of the consequences to Isabel’s body. Because Isabel is so clearly malnourished, her child is literally consuming her flesh. This is another attempt Isabel makes at negating her body.
Another mother who appears disembodied is Nina and Isabel’s mother. The reader only knows of conversations and of her actions. Nina recalls, “My mother never wore a yellow dress. She wore smocks that smelled of clay and dust, and she worked all day long and earned more money than my father” (Dunmore 282). When Nina describes her mother, she does not mention any physical characteristics, but instead focuses on her actions and her smells. Interestingly, she is described as smelling of the earth, but yet remains disembodied. In fact, she is so disembodied that the reader never knows her name, she is only referred to as “my mother.”

Similarly, Anna’s mother, Vera is disembodied. She is identified through her career. Anna recalls, “Vera was already thinking of her work. There, she glowed with life” (Dunmore 175). She lived more in her mind than in her body. As with Nina’s mother, there is no description of what Anna’s mother looked like. Her body has been negated. Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook discuss the negation of the body: “women’s bodies are positioned as prerepresentational, silent, negated, and violently objectified by an active reason” (37). Vera’s body is silent, replaced instead with reason and intelligence, typically masculine characteristics.

Anna, as well, does not live in a lived body; her body is a dead body. While she does live, she does not gain enjoyment from her body. It is merely a means of living. She goes through the motions of her life. Like many of the mothers in Dunmore’s work, much of the description of Anna occurs in relation to her work or her actions. “She sets the tables, scrubs the little toilets that Lyuba never cleans properly, checks menus and food deliveries. And does as many of the dozen jobs on the list inside her head as she can” (Dunmore 24). She is realized through the work she does, rather than through the enjoyment of her body.

Significantly, the disembodied women in these texts are mothers or mother substitutes. Nina is the only one who remains embodied throughout most of the text; however, that begins to change once she takes on the mother role. Once her sister is missing, and she becomes substitute wife for Richard and substitute mother for Anthony, she no longer is able to achieve the instant gratification she was used to as a lived body. She and Richard are in the garden, and they make love; however, she does not receive pleasure from their intercourse: “I look up over his shoulder at the sharp black leaves and the mist and the moon. I’m cold and shrunken, and it hurts when he comes inside me” (Dunmore 276). As the mother, she no longer is free to enjoy her body. Her lack of gratification continues as she attempts to achieve the closeness and pleasure she had sought in her unsuccessful attempt with Richard: “I was dead to him in the garden, but now I’m aching. It could have been a slow, perfect fuck, but I didn’t give it my attention” (279-80). She is no longer in sync with Richard; she is no longer connected to him. The connection with others marks a body as lived. The lack of connection with Richard implies the lack of connection to her body, as she was too distracted to enjoy the pleasure of her flesh.

Why does Dunmore represent mothers and mother-substitutes as disembodied? Why must enjoyment of the body cease once one begins to take on the motherly role? Perhaps Dunmore is remarking on the ways in which mothers become part of the patriarchy, helping to inscribe their children’s bodies with society’s messages. Nancy Chodorow suggests that mothers collude in the oppression of their daughters. Chodorow discusses her writing:

My book, The Reproduction of Mothering, implied that women’s mothering was the cause or prime mover of male dominance. [...] That we are mothered by women, that in all societies women rather than men have primary parenting responsibilities is an important social and cultural fact that still bears remarking and analyzing (185)

Women are the primary caregivers; as a result they are the chief ones who teach children to accept and model the hegemony. It is not implausible that Dunmore is suggesting that such women are therefore embracing the typically masculine characteristics, and would reject the feminine: the body.

Contrarily, perhaps Dunmore suggests that women who become mothers no longer are permitted by society to enjoy their bodies. Lucy Bailey describes the feelings of many first time mothers: “Many of the women found it difficult to describe themselves in sexual terms after the birth of their child [...] ‘you feel like someone’s mum and not a woman’ [...] I feel like my body is less sexual”(118). Their bodies become only a means of taking care of their families. Bailey continues, “The desexualization of their bodies in discourse around pregnancy and motherhood led to a redefining of their bodies as existing for another” (124). These mothers become the “Angel of the house” sacrificing themselves for their family. They could no longer use their bodies for physical gratification. Jill Matus discuss this in her book chapter critiquing Anne Bronte’s Agnes Grey: “The normal state of affairs is that ‘the best mothers, wives, and managers of households’ feel only the passion of ‘love of home, children, and domestic duties’ and suffer intercourse as a means to a maternal end without desiring ‘any sexual gratification’ for them-
Mothers who renounce their sexualities also renounce their bodies. Bray and Colebrook quote Grosz, “in the social devaluing of the body that goes hand in hand with the oppression of women” (48). Anorexic women try to negate their bodies, which are not valued by the hegemony. Thus, these women try to exist more in the mind, the masculine, in order to be valued.

My argument is that the mothers and mother-substitutes are not only disembodied as a result of anger at collusion and societal expectations, but also because of their abandonment of their children. Nina and Isabel’s mother is emotionally unavailable for them, while Anna’s mother has died, abandoning Anna. The mothers are not there for their children, so why would their bodies be? The older daughters who are abandoned then take on the mothering role, leading them to become disembodied. Additionally, becoming mother to their siblings causes these girls to act inappropriately or to be angry and overwhelmed.

Psychoanalysis offers some explanation for the abandoning mother. A child must disassociate from its mother in order to reach maturity. Marianne Hirsch explains, “the child’s development necessitates a rupture from the mother, that the mother is overly invested in her child and is devastated by the break” (171). A mother knows that they must differentiate from her children and is afraid to invest emotionally in a child that will eventually abandon her, so she rejects her child before her child can reject her (Hirsch 170). Children ground the mother to the body: through the physicality of giving birth, mothers are embodied. The mothers leave their children, the source of their physicality, thereby disembodifying themselves. The rejection of the flesh that they conceived leads to the rejection of their own flesh. They escape through work, which relates to the masculine realm of intellect. They embrace the masculine and reject the feminine, which is the realm of the body. It is not unsurprising, therefore, that the mothers become disembodied.

Nina and Isabel’s mother is emotionally abandoning. She retreats into her world of art, leaving the children to fend for themselves. Nina recalls:

“It’s my mother, but I don’t know her. [. . .] I think of her closed door. We always knew we mustn’t disturb her. Sometimes I would stand there, outside the door, listening to the pulse of her wheel as she molded the clay. I would wait and wait and time would seem to stop, leaving me trapped” (292-3)

Although their mother was in the house, she was not to be disturbed. Nina or Isabel would not dare to interrupt her for a kiss or a hug, or to share some moment from their day, they could only wait and wait. She was not a presence in her children’s lives. Isabel and Nina were able to consider themselves emotional orphans: “Many unmothered women who still have one or both parents nevertheless describe themselves as spiritual or emotional orphans. Their mothers, though physically present, offer them little emotional support” (Edelman 101). Although Isabel and Nina’s mother is there physically, she is not available to them, they must see their mother when she allows them to. This type of orphaning can have disastrous results on the children, “Whether a mother leaves physically or emotionally, the result is invariably a blow to her daughter’s self-esteem [. . .] An abandoned daughter is left feeling angry, resentful, and sad. She also has the emotional injury of having been given up” (Edelman 83). Nina and Isabel had to struggle with the feeling of not being wanted by their mother, particularly in the joy she apparently took in her son. Nina remarks upon finding a picture in Isabel’s drawer of her mother holding Colin, “I start at the photograph. My mother sits there holding baby Colin, her face open, alive with love” (Dunmore 293). The loss is compounded by the realization that the son was not rejected, only Isabel and Nina.

Isabel and Nina’s mother’s lack of presence caused Isabel to take on the role of mother. This is not uncommon in older daughters who are faced with a loss: “It is an unfortunate byproduct of a culture that has long expected women to care for the children and the home that the eldest or next-to-eldest daughter – even when an older brother is present – is the one expected to step into the mother’s role” (Edelman 52-3). As the eldest daughter, Isabel became a surrogate mother to Nina, and is extremely successful. Nina considered Isabel to be her mother, rather than her unavailable biological mother. Nina remembers, “She loved me so much, I always knew that. I always knew that Isabel loved even more than my mother did, because she told me so [. . .] I was safe with Isabel” (Dunmore 148). Women in Isabel’s situation face “three options: she can try to meet the demands fully, meet them partially or not meet them at all[. . .] Either they become overachievers and exhaust themselves trying to meet their own expectations, or they get out of the responsibility in some way that’s unhealthy” (Edelman 53). Isabel takes both routes and tries to become the perfect mother to Nina by murdering their brother. She tries to meet not only all of Nina’s needs, but also her desires, including fratricide. Nina recalls the exchange in which she made her request for the death of her brother to Isabel:
‘I’d do anything for you.’ Isabel’s voice is stronger than the hungry sea under us. ‘Would you? Would you really?’ I stare at Isabel, who could change the world for me [. . .] The baby has opened the door to my mother’s room and then closed it again behind the two of them, leaving me outside. [. . .] I speak. ‘Will you really do what I want?’ ‘You know I will,’ she answers. ‘I’ll do whatever you want.’ Nina asks Isabel to murder their brother, and Isabel, in the role of the perfect mother for Nina, does. Isabel did not feel as if she had a choice except to commit the fratricide. If she did not do as Nina wished, she would not be the ideal mother she feels she must be. Isabel feels that she must protect and take care of Nina, no matter what the consequences are. Isabel does not wish Nina to suffer from the lack of a mother that she did.

In direct contrast to Isabel, Anna is not abandoned by an emotionally absent mother. Her mother dies as a result of complications of childbirth. Anna does, however, feel the need to become mother to her younger sibling, just as Isabel needed to become mother to Nina. She also became an overachieving mother; however, she did not commit fratricide. Instead, she gave up all of her hopes and dreams in order to become mother to her brother, and caretaker to her father. Anna had dreamt of going to the university, but was forced to put that dream aside when her mother died: “She has five-year-old Kolya, her job at the nursery, and her responsibilities. It’s no good letting her dream of student life” (Dunmore 3). While Anna takes on all of the responsibilities left behind by her mother, she resents the demands placed on her, as well as her lack of freedom. Anna becomes overwhelmed by all of her responsibilities:

But I’ve got Kolya to think of, and the nursery children, and I’ve got to find a way of keeping rabbits out of the lettuces, and pickling enough cabbage for the winter, and keeping Dad from getting too depressed, and Kolya’s grown out of his shoes again, and he needs vitamins, and the girls in white dresses have graduated while I – I can’t, I simply can’t think about everything else on top of that (Dunmore 33-4)

Like many daughters who are thrust into the position of mothering their siblings, Anna is frustrated. She is angry at having the role of mother thrust upon her when she was so young, and for having to give up going to the university.

In two of Helen Dunmore’s texts, Talking to the Dead and The Siege, mothers, as well as mother-substitutes, are disembodied. Mothers may be noted as disembodied as a result of anger at mothers. Nancy Chodorow’s theory explains that mothers conspire in the oppression of their daughters through indoctrinating them with the hegemony’s messages. This may also occur as a result of society’s image of the perfect mother: desexed and undervalued. Upon becoming a mother to their siblings, these daughters no longer have a right to their bodies, and must become self-sacrificing. A combination of these two theories along with the theory that mothers are disembodied because they abandoned their children explains the preponderance of disembodied mothers. The mother is not there, either through abandonment or death, and so their bodies do not need to be represented.

Works Cited


