

# FEMINISM AND THE MOTHER IN 20TH CENTURY QUÉBÉCOIS LITERATURE

## Introduction

- This study seeks to draw a link between a series of literary characters in a maternal or matriarchal role, within the context of feminine voice and second- and third-wave feminist theory.
- In seeking out the maternal voice, this study highlights four categories of mother-stories: stories of the "mystical woman," which explore the wise-woman character trope, matriarchal stories that highlight a female-centric family structure, lost-mother stories in which the protagonist is on a quest of identity, and mother-child stories told from the child's point of view.

## 2nd Wave Feminism | 3rd Wave Feminism

- Varying ideologies that often conflicted
- Pushed for choice in motherhood
- Primarily white and middle class - to the point of quasi-exclusion of queer, coloured and indigenous voices
- Collective action
- Intersectionality allows for varied points of view within the same ideology
- "Feminine feminism" - women embrace their sexuality as power
- Commercialism begins to play a role
- Individual choice

## 2. THE MATRIARCH

Petite, me disait-elle souvent, il faut être pleine de force. Faut avoir autant de force que de sang dans le corps. Tu verras un jour que dans un corps de femme, il y a plus de sang que d'eau dans tout un lac.

p. 63, *La mère des herbes*, Jovette Marchessault

- The grandmother in *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* is closely tied to the church and perpetuates traditional values; however, her influence in the family overrides that of the male family members.
- In the case of *La mère des herbes*, the grandmother demonstrates a rebuttal of the church through her dedication to the figure of the Earth Mother as an alternative source of wisdom and guidance.

## 3. THE LOST MOTHER

Est-ce que je ne serais jamais une femme de mon siècle ? Etais-je incapable de reconnaître la passion, la vraie, le grand amour, l'Amour ? Etais-je même une femme, au fond ... ?

p. 128, *Copies conformes*, Monique LaRue

- Another theme follows the mother figure who has lost her sense of self outside of the family structure, thus sending her on a quest of identity
- In *Copies conformes*, the protagonist is reawakened through an affair with a stranger - but she continually questions herself and whether or not she is truly a "modern woman".
- In *Kaki*, the main character, Laura, seeks out a new role for herself through her writing, which helps her to come to terms with her silenced childhood and her relationship to her own mother, and allows her to explore her own evolving sexuality.

## 4. THE CHILD

Je vois alors distinctement les deux boulets noués à ses chevilles, le poids effrayant que [maman] tire avec elle : à chaque pas, l'entrave de ses enfants.

p. 47, *Béatrice, vue d'en bas*, Michèle Mailhot

- *Soigne ta chute* and *Béatrice, vue d'en bas* were both written at the start of the third-wave feminist movement.
- Both feature a child protagonist seeking attention and love from the mother figure.
- This perspective allows for a deep criticism of the absentee mother and subsequently of second-wave feminism.
- Evidences the new intersectionality of feminism, advocating for an individual's right to define what feminism means to them.

## Corpus

*Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* | Marie-Claire Blais | 1965

*Kamouraska* | Anne Hébert | 1970

*L'Euguélonne* | Louky Bersianik | 1976

*La mère des herbes* | Jovette Marchessault | 1980

*Les voix du jour et de la nuit* | Mona Latif Ghattas | 1988

*Béatrice, vue d'en bas* | Michèle Mailhot | 1988

*Soigne ta chute* | Flora Balzano | 1992

*Kaki* | Lola Lemire Tostevin | 1997

*Copies conformes* | Monique LaRue | 1998

## Themes

- These novels explore characters who are on the outskirts of society, and yet are powerful in their ability to transmit knowledge.
- *L'Euguélonne* introduces this figure with the titular character, who is an alien recently arrived on Earth, and thus able to comment on and critique society from a unique perspective.
- In *Les voix du jour et de la nuit*, a spiritual, mysterious guide, not quite legend and not quite woman, represents the subtle power of women within her culture and the concept of collective memory.
- In *Kamouraska*, there is narrative contrast between the two versions of the protagonist: the respectable maternal figure, Mrs. Rolland, and her younger, freer self, who was wild and uncontrolled by society's rigid expectations.

## 1. THE MYSTICAL WOMAN

Je n'ai pas d'aversion pour la maternité, dit l'Euguélonne. Bien au contraire. J'en ai beaucoup cependant pour le temps qu'elle dure.

p. 302, *L'Euguélonne*, Louky Bersianik

## Conclusions

- Despite sometimes perpetuating oppressive traditions and ideals, the role of the matriarch in these earlier texts represented a shift of power within the family structure.
- The representation of the mother evolved along with feminist thought, as evidenced by these later works in which the daughters of second-wave feminism critiqued earlier feminist thought through their portrayal of this maternal figure.
- By selecting a corpus of exclusively female authors dealing with the topic of motherhood in four varied ways, this study was able to analyse the perceptions of the role of the mother through the eyes of these women who were, in the act of writing these texts, actively participating in the feminist discourses of their time.

## Selected References

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