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# Mothering and Daughterhood in Women's Experimental Theatre. A Case Study

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**Abstract:** Motherhood as experience or, simply, mothering was defined by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*as the relationship between women and their potential motherhood, between mothers, collectively, between mothers and their children, or between mothers and nature. In short, mothering or motherhood as experience is defined as relationship, opposed to motherhood as institution that limits women's creation and freedom. Moreover, mothering could be defined as recognition of the motherwork and as an experience that is defined by both positive and negative feelings that do not erase the mother's identity and ego. The feminist experimental play chosen for analysis, *Daughters* (the first play from *The Daughters Trilogy*), written by Clare Coss, Roberta Sklar and Sondra Segal, mirrors the experience of motherhood / daughterhood by focusing on the need for closeness and separation in the mother – daughter relationship as a universal characteristic that transcends race, gender, or background.

## Introduction. Daughters and mothers

The mother-daughter relationship, perceived as over-identification or prolonged symbiosis, has always been considered the root of such feminine character traits as relatedness, interest in people rather than things, loose boundaries, the tendency to defer to others, and lack of self-assertion. More than one commentator has also remarked on the way "little girls do not play"; instead, they seem simply to prepare for their role as future mothers (Wieland 2002: 172).

Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Motherhood*, presents many examples of symbiosis from the work of other authors, and arrives at the conclusion that a "prolonged

symbiosis and narcissistic over-identification are particularly characteristic of early relationships between mothers and daughters" (1978: 104). Furthermore, she illustrates the way in which girls have a different sexual dynamics from boys and thus, different needs in a family, the author deconstructing the notions of the Electra complex. Chodorow ascribes this distinction to the fact that women are the primary parents of this society; mothers feel their daughters as if they were one and the same, as if their daughters continued their identity, daughters remaining a part of the mother-daughter relationship, while sons are perceived separately, as the others (92-111).Women 'mother', Chodorow argues, simply because they have been mothered by women. Most psychoanalysts, Chodorow states, would agree that the main factor determining the quality of mothering, in any particular case, is the quality of mothering which the mother herself received as a baby, because mothering is a psychological and not a biological phenomenon (meaning that it is not something predetermined biologically, but something that resides in the psychic).

Concerning the quality of mothering Chodorow talked about, Adrienne Rich emphasizes the negative aspects of the way mothering as a practice has been transmitted from mother to daughter, as she points out the fact that a submissive and powerless mother would nor teach her daughter the opposite: "The mother's hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter" (1979: 243). The need for a mother-daughter story that would mirror their relationship as a continuation of strength and as a symbol of empowerment, as a recognition of each other's selves or as a cathartic process of dealing with past wounds was therefore deeper than ever, since Christianity, for example valued the father-son relationship over the mother-daughter one. All the boundaries erected by the patriarchal societies led to a blurring of the experiences of mothering and that is why, since the 1970s, women playwrights and theatre groups chose to bring on the stage the multifaceted mother-daughter relationship.

Taking into account this context, WET (Women's Experimental Theatre), as well as The Performing Garage, the Open Theatre, or the Living Theatre, did nothing else but contest the barriers imposed by patriarchy and also by the traditional conventions of classic theatre, reclaiming the importance of matrilineage and creating a certain fluidity between actors and spectators by inter-mingling and reversing their roles."By rejecting

both realism and the genderized posturings of the male-dominated experimental theatre groups, the new feminist theatre meant to create 'woman-identified' productions." (Dolan 2012: 85). Through non-linear plays that addressed directly women and gave them a sense of collectivity, these groups became a kind of networks that offered support and raised consciousness in what concerns the common experiences that women, in general, and mothers and daughters, in particular, share. Focusing on the universality of their stories, they highlighted the significance of bonding and communicating or verbalizing the past in the new wave of American feminism.

WET's production *The Daughter's Cycle Trilogy* (1977-1980), written by Clare Coss, Sondra Segal, and Roberta Sklar, is a perfect example of the transformation of the invisible into visible while embracing the cultural feminist ideology and challenging traditional realistic performance practice. *Daughters*, the first play of the trilogy explores the dynamics of merging and separation of the mother-daughter relationship and experience, whereas the other two pieces, *Sister/ Sister* and *Electra Speaks* deal with sisterhood and reinterpreting the House of Atreus' myth, respectively.

Starting from the premise that every woman is a daughter, the first play, *Daughters*, (1977) is made up of four parts: 1.The Primary Connection, 2.The Homecoming. The Daughter Speaks for the Mother, 3. Home. The Daughter Begins, and 4.The Writing of the Contract, beginning and ending, as if closing a circle, as a symbol of continuation and wholeness, with the uttering, voicing out the Matrilineage, in a ritual of naming the mothers and foremothers and establishing thus connections between each daughter and her kinship. The characters are generic daughters and their mothers, together with a Chorus, as a reminder of the collective Greek character that mirrors the experiences of daughterhood by echoing the similarities and repetitions of the mother-daughter dialogues. There are also some characters named "witnesses" represented by the performers that are silent on the stage, emphasizing thus the witnessing role that was usually ascribed to women throughout history, and also a Mother / Daughter Totem, performed by two women, signifying daughterhood.

The play is set in the domestic area (the kitchen, the shared bedroom, the dining table) in an attempt of offering new interpretations to the ordinary spaces women were confined to, but also in order to recreate a sense of intimacy between spectator / reader

and performer/ character. Taking into account that the play, as mentioned before, contests the traditional theatrical form, *Daughters* cannot be summed up as a classical play. It blends together images, moves, spectators and performers (at the end the spectators are invited to name their motherline), dialogues and monologues that become part of a hypnotic chant in a ritual of rebonding with *herstory* and of shattering the stories told by the others; mother and daughter refuse marginality and claim their place in the center while empowering one another.

**Daughterhood: each woman is a daughter**

"Every woman is a daughter"—this is the motto of *Daughters*. If Chodorow emphasizes that each human being is mothered by a woman, and Rich underlines that each of us is born of a woman, the authors of the play analyzed focus on the result of motherhood, that is daughterhood and try to bring to the center the long-forgotten trivialized mother-daughter relationship, by focusing on the unity in diversity that characterizes womanhood, in general. Taking into account the fact that not all women are necessarily mothers, they all are, at least, daughters. The recitation of the Matrilineage from the "Prologue" counterpoints the historical identification of the family members with the father; here, each woman recalls the mother, the grandmother, and so on in an attempt of re-valuing and celebrating the feminine heritage and also of recreating the motherline in order to address the female collective memories.

I am Sondra
daughter of Lille
daughter of Sara Rebecca
daughter of Tzivia
daughter of a woman from Austria

I am Clare
daughter of Alistine
daughter of Marie Josephine
daughter of Marie Josephine

daughter of  woman from southern France (D. 143)

The lack of punctuation marks and the structure of the genealogical presentations resemble the writing of a poem, while reinforcing fluidity and continuity. What is more, the diverse backgrounds of each of the four women that introduce themselves in the beginning (Sondra, Clare, Mary, and Roberta, three of them being the playwrights themselves, who have roots in Austria, France, China, and Odessa) underline one more time the universalities of daughterhood and the common thread that unites them with herstory: they are all daughters. Not only the playwrights get involved in this recitation that receives the allure of a chant but also the audience (that is supposedly formed of women, as well).  The "Epilogue" represents both a repetition of the "Prologue", offering thus a circular, unifying aspect to the play and an invitation to the spectators to do the same. Concerning this moment, Clare Coss herself emphasized "how affecting and effective the device was: Women would come back with their mothers, their daughters, their sisters. They would come back [to the recitation of the matrilineage] add the names that they had recalled. They would go home and call their mother and their grandmother and find out names. Women who had never thought about themselves through their matrilineage were so excited about it. It was thrilling to have generations come back." (qtd. in Canning 2005: 127). Therefore, saying out loud the names of the foremothers represented a recognition of the influence of past generations of women and a means of offering a voice to the ones that were silenced for too long.

The Brechtian and expressionistic elements that characterize the production of the play are defined by the episodic and brief scenes, by the blackouts and moments of "frieze" and also by the direct style. The Chorus, for instance, as a reminder of the Greek collective character echoes the mother-daughter dialogues / monologues by repeating them, explaining them, or by adding necessary details. Moreover, the Chorus addresses directly the spectator / reader: "How do you like to spend your time? / Where's your mother? / What did you want for yourself?" (D. 154-155), the pronoun "you" resembling the collective "we" and thus marking the inclusion and merging of the audience with the performers. In addition, the Chorus introduces the so-called "primary connection" in the first part of the play underlining unity and division, over-identification and continuity of

oneness, defragmentation and yearning for the original wholeness: "The primary connection. / We were once one person./ then you split open." (D.146), and later : "We were once a person. / Then you split open. / A totem. / the fragments speak" (D. 147). The temporal adverb "once" could be interpreted as referring to atemporal times, when there existed only one person: the Mother who represents the beginning of life, as a counterpoint to the biblical creation (Life began with One Mother, reminding thus of Chodorow who emphasized that each human being has been mothered by a woman and Rich who underlined that each humanbeing, regardless of its gender, has been born by a woman).

If the primary connection refers to pregnancy and the "internal motherhood", defined by psychologist Gina Ferrara Mori as a "psychic container" that establishes "the preconditions for developing bonds, affection, and their [the mothers'] relationship with the baby once it has been born" (2015: 1), the split refers to the actual process of giving birth, which is celebrated as a power generator and as a crucial ritual in a woman's life, the moment when she brings life but she is born as a mother, too. What is new in *Daughters* is the fact that, after the Mother remembers and re-experiences the birth story in an empirical way ("You are splitting open. / You are looking down. / And feel. / And see." D. 146—the pronoun "you" marking the direct address to the Daughter while inviting her to reiterate the moment), the daughter not only repeats the actions and feelings of her mother as she becomes a mother herself, but she also lives the experience of being born, as she becomes aware of a double consciousness: that of a mother and a daughter, as well.

Mother: Do you wonder why you feel so connected
to your mother?
[Each Daughter speaks with the experience of giving birth, of being born. The Mother of the Mother/ Daughter Totem remains seated while the other daughters advance towards the audience with a held urgency.]
Close your eyes.
Spread your legs.
Feel the heat between your legs.
[…]You are splitting open.

You are looking down.
You feel.
and see
a hard
round
head
emerging
emerging from your body.
Mother: Do you wonder why you feel so connected to your mother? (D. 146-147)

The recurring Mother/ Daughter Totem that sometimes splits into mother and daughter and sometimes functions as a collective character exactly as the chorus reinforces the ambivalent relationship characterized by dependence and independence. There are scenes when the Totem acts the mother-daughter dynamics while the chorus verbalizes it, thus completing one another. In part I, scene 3 ("The Body Remembers Its Primary Connection), for example:

Mother /Daughter Totem
Image. Separated from one
another, the mother and
daughter appear as fragments.
They re-enact the struggle to
merge and to separate, this time
on their own bodies.

Chorus
We were once one person
Then you split open. (D.151)

The totem stands for the generic mother-daughter bond, yearning for the intimacy of the primary connection and also for the creation of new identities as both a continuation and a separation from the primal Self. These dynamics of closeness and distance are metaphorically measured by a ball of yarn.

Not only daughterhood is reinterpreted, but also the domestic space. Taking into account that women used to be associated to the closed sphere of the house, while men belonged to the public active space, the play sets the iconic mother and daughter figures in

the domestic area, but not as a critique; this setting is rather a transformation of the ordinary into something extra-ordinary and mysterious. The third part entitled "Home" equates the home with mothering; it is a mystical space where daughters reconnect with their mothers. The obsessive question "Ma, you home?" underlines the attempt of finding one's self and universal story into familiar places. There, "the mother sees her own mother. The mother watches her own daughter" (D. 162) and in the end "Daughter moves closer. Mother takes daughter's hand." (D. 163), while "it's getting very late. Time passes." (D. 163). The physical reconnection suggested by holding hands is transferred to the daughter's mind that defines a dream world in the third scene of the third part: "The Terrain", a terrain that mingles "sound traces, elusive imagery, fragments of song, ancient memory" (D. 165). The memories of the daughter embrace collective remembrances of daughterhood in relationship to the experiences of motherhood contoured by images of diverse feelings that characterize this relationship, such as rage, anger, longing (so-called negative feelings that were shunned from the institution of motherhood by patriarchy), but also excitement and comfort.

It is no wonder that in this context the kitchen becomes the place of signing a contract and of taking an oath. This happens during a dichotomic scene: while washing the dishes the mother empowers her daughter by asserting courage and self-confidence: "Daughter: I'm afraid. / Mother: Don't be!" (D. 169). The oath recalls the stereotypical expectations of the male society and evinces the doubleness of mothering as mentioned previously when discussing Rich's and Chodorow's theories: mothering may limit daughterhood or it can free it.

> I agree not to think for myself.
> I agree to be sweet and quiet.
> I agree not to say I'm afraid.
> I agree not to be conspicuous.[…]
> I agree to be the victim. […]
> I agree to make the same agreement over and over with everyone always."(D. 171-172)

Yet in the same kitchen, against the somberness and the limitations to the spirit imposed by the contract, the mother, as if breaking her chains, appears as a goddess playing

with the four elements of life: earth, fire, water and air, a scene in which "femaleness is evoked in its relation to nature" (Dolan, 2012: 89) The daughter gets empowered by witnessing a transformation of the ordinary action of washing the dishes into a mystical identification with nature: "My mother works with fire and water and knives and air and earth. My mother works with mysteries that cannot be explained. And I as a woman have my hands in fire and water and knives and air and earth. And I as a woman have my hands inside my mother." (D 174)

The letter from the epilogue addressed to the ageing mother retells once again the story of mothering as comprehended by the daughter, the journey from dreams that "never woke me up" (D. 174) to mother's dreams that " are waking me up […] / though we are a thousand years apart" (D. 175], having as a result a final atemporal embrace that would keep the world moving and surviving: "so you and I can stand up straight / and start all over again."(D.176). And therefore the ritual of naming the matrilineage starts all over again.

All in all, motherhood cannot escape the impact of social and cultural transformations and this is the reason why "women felt compelled to explore the ties that bound them to their mothers" even though they were "often bearing a somewhat confrontational position within their communities (whether within the feminist community because of their race, ethnicity, or culture or within their cultural, racial, or ethnic communities because of their feminist politics"(Canning 2005: 126). As Naomi Lowinsky strongly emphasizes, women need history because it is history that gives them a sense of perspective and "enables them to look back and identify with their motherline [their foremothers], whilst considering the future and future mothers, on three levels of experience-personal, cultural and archetypal" (qtd. in Porter 2000: 6), embracing, as a result, the diversity of mothering and maintaining motherhood collective.Even if femininity cannot and should not be equaled to becoming a mother, each and every woman, on the other hand, is a daughter and "until a strong line of love, confirmation and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness" (Rich 246), and,therefore, mothers, feeling themselves powerless and guilty will keep identifying with their daughters through their weakness, and not their strength.

**Conclusions**

In a century when technology accelerates time and children are in a hurry to grow up, girls and young women need role-models more than ever. The teaching and studying of feminist works, such as *Daughters*, would definitely offer them somebody to relate to, as a counterpart for the so-called plastic women, highly promoted by the media. Romania, in particular, is a traditional country that has started timidly to open to the West, especially when it comes to gender issues and the roles women and men should have in society. Moreover, the literary works studied in highschool do define male characters as being strong-willed, brave, assertive, and competitive, whereas most of the women are mirrored as the opposite: weak, fragile, insecure, always willing to sacrifice and in need for help, and always defined by or through marriage or motherhood.

*Daughters* succeeds in highlighting a journey of empowering through the dynamics of both identification and separation; the mother and daughter's history is redefined with the help of dialogues and monologues, images, moves, chants, blackouts, shattered laughters and the direct inclusion of the spectator/ reader in the performance. Even though the play confines women to domestic settings, such as the home or the kitchen, *Daughters* confers a mystical aura to these enclosed areas, as the daughter witnesses her mother working with the primary elements of life (earth, air, fire and water), reminding thus of the primary connection with nature, but also of the fact that the house was and still is the first place were nurturing and teaching mingle. The deferred dreams become comprehended in the letter to the ageing mother in the epilogue of *Daughters*, as the daughter chooses to rebond with her mother in an attempt of celebrating and reiterating the mother's power of generating life and also of recognizing the universality of the motherline that brings together all women as daughters of a mother, and in the end of the Mother, reclaiming thus history/ herstory, regardless of the gender.

Nancy Chodorow's urge for a feminist raising of the children, through the equal implication of both men and women, and without the inclusion or division according to the culturally ascribed roles would detach motherhood itself of its gender defined characteristics and would blur the struggle for receiving power against that of empowering by acknowledging both participants in the process (mother and daughter or mother and son) as subjects. Therefore, women and young girls need to be empowered, and raising awareness

about feminism and its true goals would mean the chance to discover herstory and dare do more, by changing the perspective of reporting to life in and out of the family.The play invites each reader and participant to tell her story and become part of herstory and matrilineage, mostly because the generic characters (Daughter and Mother) could mirror each daughter and would-be-mother without linking them to a fixed role, suggesting the possibility of transcending the traditional overimposed roles.

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