

Rewriting the Mother:
the Role of Secrets in *Daughters of the House*

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This cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted,
misused—is the great unwritten story.

----- Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*

[*Daughters of the House*] deals with inheritance:

of a house, and of its secrets.

----- Michèle Roberts, *Observer*, 13 October 1992

Discussions of mother-daughter bonds have been among the primary points at issue in feminist readings of British women writers' novels. Analyzing mother-daughter relationships in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch argues that modernist and post-modernist women writers' novels have overcome the limit which nineteenth-century women writers' realist novels had failed to overcome. In Hirsch's observation, nineteenth-century realism by women writers "participates in the process of placing the maternal into the position of silenced other" (52). She suggests that nineteenth-century women writers are affected by the patriarchal social code. The concept of "other" has theoretically been designated as the conventional position of women which patriarchy has established,¹ and women have been "silenced" since their autonomy is deprived by the hegemonic society. Such a patriarchal oppression on the maternal prevents mothers to develop their bonds with their daughters. In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, Adrienne Rich reveals the vulnerability of mothers as the 'other' under patriarchy: "[...] women have had either power nor wealth to hand on to their daughters; [...] the most they can do is teach their daughters the tricks of surviving in the patriarchy by pleasing, and attaching themselves to, powerful or economically viable men" (91). The passage discloses that women's identity is inevitably achieved through her relationship with,

or in a literal sense dependence upon, patriarchy. As such, Hirsh sees that the mother–daughter relationships in the nineteenth century literary texts by women writers are hampered by the patriarchal social code.

Hirsh continues to argue that the difference of the mother–daughter bonds depicted between the nineteenth century and twentieth century literary texts lies in the way in which to place women within patriarchal social contexts. Hirsh declares that the twentieth century women’s novels are remarkable for the presence of the mother. Hirsch notes that patriarchy is no longer an impediment to the maternal bonds in twentieth century women’s literature:

But for that suppressed mother–daughter connection to make its way into fiction, either the oedipal origins of plot would have to be reimagined and transformed, or oedipal paradigms abandoned altogether. Narrative itself would have to be enabled, at least in part, by maternal presence rather than absence. [...] Only thus could female plots get beyond the “blind spot of an old dream of symmetry.” (67)

By “maternal presence” Hirsch emphasizes the significance of the mother in the maternal bonds in the twentieth century women’s fiction. “The oedipal origins of plot” and “oedipal paradigms” refer to the Freudian sense of the patriarchal social system; “the ‘blind spot of an old dream of symmetry’” is the Freudian concept of men as superior and women as inferior within the hegemonic social code.² Hirsh claims that the mother–daughter relationship in the twentieth-century women’s novels undermines the Freudian paradigm of men and women within patriarchal contexts. Thus, Hirsh argues that the liberation from the patriarchal influence enables twentieth-century women’s literature to generate an alternative mother–daughter bond.

I would further point out that sisterly bonds are crucial in exploring an alternative mother–daughter bond in the twentieth century women’s fiction.³ An archetype of maternal genealogy, Sophocles’ play *Antigone* well proves the absence of the mother and the deficiency of the sisterly bond under the influence of patriarchy. In the play, Antigone buries the dead body of her brother Polyneices, a traitor to her uncle and father-in-law Creon’s nation Thebes. She is buried alive at the end of the play because she chooses to honor the blood tie against the

patriarchal social context. *Antigone* foregrounds the absence of the mother Jocasta in Antigone's confrontation with patriarchy. Instead of the mother, Antigone's sister Ismene plays an important role in the play as a woman who yields herself to the patriarchal power dynamics. The conversation between Antigone and Ismene dramatizes the gap between the laws of family and those of nation:

ANTIGONE: But I shall bury him
 And if I have to die for this pure crime,
 I am content, for I shall rest beside him; [...]
 But you, if so you choose, you may dishonour
 The sacred laws that Heaven holds in honour.
 ISMENE: I do them no dishonour, but to act
 Against the city's will I am too weak. (line 71-80)

Antigone and Ismene are in contrast in the understanding of "dishonour": the former respects "the sacred laws" or blood ties against the laws of nation while the latter cannot resist the laws of nation. As such, *Antigone* suggests that sisterly bonds are intertwined with the significance of the mother in exploring an alternative mother-daughter bond in women's novels.

Michèle Roberts' *Daughters of the House* presents an alternative form of maternal bonds within patriarchal social contexts. The novel deals with female secrets as a strategy for resisting the social context of post-World War II France and for exploring an alternative mother-daughter relationship. The narrators Thérèse and Lèonie have been brought up as cousins on the maternal side. After the war, Thérèse, brought up in a village in Normandy, leaves the house to become a nun. Lèonie grows up in London with her French mother and English father who has been killed at the war. The novel opens when Thérèse, nearly forty, goes back to the Normandy house after twenty years of life in a convent. Formerly owned by Thérèse's mother Antoinette, the house is now owned and occupied by Lèonie, her husband Baptiste, and their two children. In their childhood Thérèse and Lèonie learn the secret of the village during World War II from Lèonie's mother Madeleine: when Paris has fallen to Germans, the villagers have buried all the bottles of their cider and wine in the cellars in Antoinette's house for fear of the plundering by German soldiers (1993; 49). Yet, Thérèse and Lèonie know that there is another

secret not yet revealed—something in relation to the house. Once eavesdropping on the villagers, Lèonie learns that the secret has to do with Antoinette: the villagers say “[Antoinette’s] terrible experiences during the war” (1993; 27) and “Poor Mademoiselle Antoinette” (1993; 70). Connected with the house and the fact about the births of Thérèse and Lèonie, the secret about Antoinette is disclosed through the narrators’ fragmented memory and Antoinette’s letters accidentally passed to Thérèse.

This paper analyzes the mother–daughter bond within patriarchal social contexts in *Daughters of the House*. In the novel, female secrets play a crucial role in destroying, restoring, and transforming maternal bonds between the main characters. The novel illustrates that the mother’s secret is inevitably involved with patriarchal power dynamics. I see the mother’s secret as discourse which is itself embedded in the patriarchal social context but through which the daughters find a way to negotiate with the patriarchal social context. In this paper, I am going to explore the way in which the disclosure of the mother’s secret reshapes the daughters’ perceptions of the mother and of language in *Daughters of the House*.

In *Daughters of the House* Thérèse hardly interacts with her mother Antoinette. It is notable that Thérèse learns about her early childhood not through Antoinette but through Antoinette’s letters addressed to her sister Sœur Dosithée, a bundle of which are returned after Sœur Dosithée’s death by a convent where she has served as a nun. Due to her anxieties about the lack of the maternal strength—as she writes in the letter (1993; 33)—, Antoinette leaves Thérèse to the care of the neighbor Rose Taillé. Antoinette’s letter also discloses that it is Rose who has breastfed Thérèse (1993; 31). By referring to Alice Rossi’s claim that “[. . .] in first breast-feeding her own child a woman may be stirred by the remembered smell of her own mother’s milk” (Rich 220–21), Rich confirms the significance of breastfeeding in building the mother–daughter bonds in *Of Woman Born*: “Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other [. . .] a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal” (220). Both “subliminal” and “preverbal” suggest a space in conflict with the conscious and the verbal which the hegemonic society represents. It could be argued that by the term “subversive” Rich offers the possibility for the maternal bonds to destabilize the hegemonic society. Such a lack of the maternal interaction between Thérèse and Antoinette leaves Thérèse the sense of the loss of the mother in her early

childhood. According to Antoinette's letter, "Rose was the world" (1993; 33) for Thérèse as a baby. In contrast to Thérèse's affection for Rose, Thérèse recognizes Antoinette as "a stranger" (1993; 33). Roberts writes about the first night when Antoinette picks Thérèse up at Rose's: "Thérèse screamed all the way across the farmyard. She screamed for most of that night until at last she fell asleep" (1993; 33).

It could be argued that such an ambivalent mother-daughter relationship shapes Thérèse's perception of the mother. Thérèse's perception of the mother echoes the nineteenth-century perception of the mother. By the nineteenth-century perception, I mean an incorporeal maternal figure, which could be equated with 'an Angel in the House,' the patriarchal definition of an ideal female figure in Victorian England.⁴ Thérèse has wished to be a nun since childhood. She describes her favorite color as white: "Thérèse liked white. She liked the words that described it: spotless, pure, immaculate" (1993; 55). "Spotless, pure, immaculate," as Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "a symbol of purity, goodness, truth, joy, etc," suggest the Virgin Mary, the archetypal mother figure as containing both virginity and maternity. In her teens, Thérèse always admires the image of the Virgin Mary in blue: "what comforted her, [...], was the sight of her statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. The Madonna with a heavenly look, a light veil over her fair hair, blue sash about her girlish waist, hands clasped in ecstasy and a rosary dangling from one arm" (1993; 76). "A rosary" emphasizes the religious aspect. "A heavenly look" adds not only a religious sense but also the sense of the incorporeality of the ideal mother figure. Thus, Thérèse's description of the Virgin Mary corresponds to biblical passages and avoids the tangible maternal body as it seeks out something spiritual. Thérèse's image of the Virgin Mary in blue is repeatedly referred to in the novel (1993; 89, 114). Evoking the worship of 'an Angel in the House,' Thérèse's perception of the mother links itself with the patriarchal definition of an incorporeal mother figure.

Thérèse's hatred for her own body in her teens embodies her rejection of the mother's body. Nursing a dying mother at the age of thirteen, Thérèse refuses food at a dinner table, saying "I'm not hungry" (1993; 73). Roberts writes that Thérèse hates "her stomach which stuck out as though she were pregnant" (1993; 73) and "her breasts" (1993; 73). Her abhorrence of the stomach demonstrates Thérèse's abhorrence of the maternal body as she associates the figure with the

“pregnant” body. Helena Michie links an anorexic inclination with the Virgin Mary. Michie writes: “Fasting [. . .] purifies the body by obliterating signs of sexuality; the Virgin Mary, predictably, inverts the fall by replacing sexuality with chastity, hunger with self-denial” (21). She suggests that the female body, implying “sexuality,” is the antithesis of chastity, the characteristic of an Angel in the House, an incorporeal female figure, in Victorian England. In her analysis of *Daughters of the House* in relation to the Bible, Jeannette King writes that “Thérèse’s rejection of the flesh also means rejecting her own mother, who is consistently represented as her daughter’s opposite, in terms indicating sensuality and passion” (66). As King points out, Thérèse repudiates the tangibility of the mother. Thus, it could be argued that Thérèse’s perception of the mother as incorporeal is confirmed by Thérèse’s denial of the maternal body.

Thérèse’s repudiation of the maternal body leads Thérèse to desire an attachment to the incorporeal mother figure, the Virgin Mary. It could be argued that Thérèse’s further desire for mutilating her own female body parts is also reflected by her strong attachment to the Virgin Mary. Roberts goes on to write: “Thérèse stared at the bread knife. She wanted to apply it to her newly grown hips and breasts, to pare off, with quick disgusted flicks of her wrist, the fat that clung to her” (1993; 73). “Her newly grown hips and breasts” represents the tangible aspects of herself. In her work on social feminist theory, Iris Marion Young writes that breasts are “the daily visible and tangible signifier of [a woman’s] womanliness” (189) and “a primary badge of sexual specificity” (194). Young’s observation confirms that the mutilation of breasts as the “tangible signifier” of the mother is lead to one’s orientation toward intangibility of the mother. Hence, Thérèse’s rejection of the tangibility of the maternal could be associated with her attachment to an intangible mother figure, the Virgin Mary.

In contrast to Thérèse, Léonie hates white: “everything [Léonie] hated was white” (1993; 55). For, she finds something secretive and hypocritical in whiteness. Roberts continues: “breast cancer, [Léonie] thought, was white. Whiteness of skin and bones, bandages, hospitals. All the words adults did not say” (1993; 55). “All the words adults did not say” includes the secret of the village which has to do with Antoinette. Likewise, Léonie’s recurrent image of the Virgin Mary in red provides a contrast to Thérèse’s perception of the Virgin Mary in blue. Roberts writes that Léonie “saw the fine rainy air become solid and golden and red,

form itself into the shape of a living and breathing woman” (1993; 86). It could be noted that Lèonie sees the Virgin Mary as a human— “a living and breathing woman.” “Solid” implies something tangible like a human. Lèonie continues to explicate her vision of the Virgin Mary: she has a daydream of “the red lady. The golden woman in red” (1993; 87). Associated with blood, the color ‘red’ represents the body itself. Roberts further writes that “everything about [the Virgin Mary], her long nightdress and the mist she was held in, was so golden-red that even the dark gold skin of her lovely face had a reddish tinge to it” (1993; 88). The figure of the Virgin Mary in Lèonie’s eyes is illustrated as a tangible woman. “Skin” indicates the tangibility of the Virgin Mary in Lèonie’s vision.

Lèonie’s vision of the Virgin Mary provides a way to solve her anxiety about language. Her perception of the mother as tangible—as opposed to the traditional perception of the mother—encourages her to establish her perception of language. Failing to locate the maternal within society, Lèonie finds a space for herself outside the dominant social context. Half-French and half-English, she has lived in England in her childhood. Lèonie describes her anxiety about her not having an exclusive mother tongue as such: “French was foreign when you were far away, home when you were close” (1993; 35). When Lèonie sees the image of the Virgin Mary in red, as I have argued above, she thinks that she retrieves the sense of language, something she has lost: “Something was restored to her which she had lost and believed she would never find again” (1993; 86). She continues: “A language she once knew but had forgotten about, forgotten ever hearing, forgotten she could speak. Deeper than English or French; not foreign; her own. She had heard it spoken long ago” (1993; 86). Her sense of language as restored refers to language in the unconscious level. Never solely belonging to either England or France (1993; 35, 36), Lèonie finally finds “her own” language. Lèonie’s perception of language which is not designated as any singular language— “deeper than English or French; not foreign” —confirms the deficiency of establishing a singular dominant language. Calling it “the secret language” (1993; 86), Lèonie sees that her perception of language transcends the patriarchal sense of language.

As such, language Lèonie finds is located outside society, therefore Lèonie’s perception of language confirms its incorporeality. Lèonie’s perception of language is gained by way of dealing with her anxiety about identity. As a child, Leonie believes that a linguistic border exists between English and French in the center of

the English Channel. Lèonie imagines that at the very point where “the Channel became *La Manche*[the Channel in French]” (1993; 35):

[. . .] true language was restored to her. Independent of separated words, as whole as water, it bore her along as a part of itself, [. . .], streams of words and non-words, voices calling out which were staccato, echoing, which promised bliss. (1993; 35-36)

By “independent of separated words” Lèonie refers to a space located outside the linguistic sphere. It could also be noted that Lèonie’s perception of language—“true language”—belongs to the unconscious since it is “restored” to Lèonie. The “whole(ness)” of Lèonie’s perception of language foregrounds an incorporeal aspect. Although it seems that Lèonie finds her own language to demolish her anxiety about identity, her perception of language is nevertheless intangible. Thus, I would emphasize that such an incorporeality of Lèonie’s perception corresponds to the incorporeal aspect of Thérèse’s perception of the Virgin Mary.

The disclosure of the mother’s secret toward the end of the novel thus explores a way to negotiate the daughters’ perceptions of the mother (Thérèse) and of language (Lèonie) within the patriarchal social context. The secret foregrounds Antoinette as a sacrificial figure. It is Thérèse who learns the secret from the letters Antoinette has sent to Soer Dosithée. Roberts writes: “[. . .] one of the Germans stationed in the house got suspicious of Antoinette hanging about near the cellar door and made her give him the key and go down there with him so he could see what she was hiding. [. . .] Then when she had twins she gave one to her married sister” (1993; 151-52). The letter discloses two major unsettling incidents for Thérèse and Lèonie: that Antoinette has been raped by a German, and that Thérèse and Lèonie are twins. The secret dramatizes the very body of the mother under the patriarchal oppression. It should also be spotlighted that Thérèse accidentally receives those Antoinette’s letters since the letters are addressed to “Miss Martin.” Martin is Antoinette’s maiden name, but now Miss Martin indicates only Thérèse. This accidental incident suggests that the mother and the daughter are interwoven with each other within the patriarchal context. It could thus be argued that the disclosure of the mother’s secret provokes the possibility for the daughters of relocating the maternal bonds.

After the shocking disclosure of the fact about Thérèse's and Léonie's births, Thérèse reinforces her view of the Virgin Mary, an incorporeal maternal archetype, as her ideal mother figure. On early Sunday morning Thérèse goes to a church decorated for the harvest festival Mass (1993; 163–64) and reassures that “[the Virgin Mother of God] was the perfect mother who'd never had sex. To whom all earthly mothers had to aspire” (1993; 164). The term “earthly mothers” refers to the tangible mother figure including Antoinette. Thérèse's motive to be a nun has been to find “another mother” (1993; 165) in the Virgin Mary, and Thérèse sees her as: “Perfect, that Mother of God, that pure Virgin, a holy doll who never felt angry or sexy and never went away” (1993; 165). Suggesting an incorporeal being, “a holy doll” urges Thérèse's dependence upon the incorporeal element of the mother figure. Thérèse then recognizes that the incorporeal Virgin Mary is not compatible with society: “The convent was the only place where Thérèse could preserve that image intact” (1993; 165). Thérèse sees “the convent” as seclusion and finds that the Virgin Mary is irreconcilable with society.

Nonetheless, Thérèse recognizes that this irreconcilability does not confirm her perception of the mother: “[The Virgin Mary] couldn't console her any more for Antoinette's loss” (1993; 166). The disclosure of the mother's secret ultimately leads Thérèse to accept the tangibility of the mother, the Virgin Mary in red. Thinking that “what she needed now was a funeral, a fire” (1993; 166), Thérèse burns the statue of the Virgin Mary just as farmers burn fields after the harvest (1993; 166). “The funeral” refers to her ritual for a renewal of life. She then sees the Virgin Mary as becoming “red and gold lady” (1993; 166), which reminds readers of Léonie's description of the Virgin Mary as discussed. Thérèse's positive action of burning the Virgin Mary suggests that she is moving toward accepting the tangibility of the mother. Roberts concludes Thérèse's action as such: “She cried *Maman*, and flung herself at the church door” (1993; 166). Discussing the significance of the Virgin Mary in terms of the role of breasts, Marilyn Yalom notes: “[Mary's] significance always depended on a male more powerful than herself” (48). Foregrounding the patriarchal influence, Yalom suggests that the idea of the Virgin Mary as an ideal mother figure—as in Thérèse's former perception quoted above—is reflected by the male perception of the mother. As such, I would argue that Thérèse's acceptance of the tangibility of the

mother is achieved by the disclosure of the mother's secret.

Correspondingly, Lèonie's perception of language as intangible is transformed through Thérèse's inspiration. Roberts writes Lèonie's feeling toward Thérèse as such: "Lèonie had tried to cut Thérèse out of herself like the bad flesh from an apple. [. . .] Thérèse stood for the father, for God, for suffering" (1993; 171). "The father," "God," and "suffering" are all associated with Thérèse's earlier perception of the mother as incorporeal before the disclosure of the mother's secret. It could be argued that Lèonie entirely realizes the irreconcilability between Thérèse's perception of the mother and Lèonie's. As I have discussed, Lèonie's perception of language is located outside the hegemonic social context as the above elements represent. However, Lèonie continues to think: "But Thérèse had returned, she wouldn't be got rid of, she foretold a groan and heave of change" (1993; 171). It could be read that with pain Lèonie recognizes the patriarchal context cannot be detached from her perception of language.

The disclosure of the mother's secret eventually reshapes Lèonie's perception of language as tangible as in Thérèse's perception of the mother. Roberts writes:

[Lèonie] had the idea that Thérèse was waiting for her on the other side of the door, along with the Jewish family and Henri Taillé. Her father Maurice was with them too. All she had to do was go in and join them, listen to what they had to say, unravel and ravel the different languages that they used. (1993; 172)

Lèonie comes to terms with society. Those who are waiting for Lèonie are associated with the patriarchal social context: "Thérèse" due to her earlier perception of the mother; "the Jewish family and Henri" due to the fact that they have been murdered by Nazi soldiers (1993; 7, 171); "Maurice," the absent father of Lèonie's who has been killed at war (1993; 28-29). The expression "unravel and ravel the different languages" indicates that Lèonie comes to accept the possibility of the multiplicity of language. Her perception of language is located within the patriarchal social context but does not offer the possibility of the predominant language. Clare Hanson finds Lèonie's conclusion as an act "to

recognize the importance of the father, the spirit and language” (241). I would add to Hanson’s remark that “the father, the spirit and language” with which Leonie finally negotiates is not predominant, capitalized terms but retain multiplicity. Located within the patriarchal social context, Lèonie makes language tangible.

Writing tangibility reflects Roberts’ philosophy as a writer. In her essay “Post-Script” Roberts writes: “I want to write in a way that relishes language, its materiality, like paint. The language is what matters. It has, is, body” (1998; 198). Associating the verb “matter” with materiality or tangibility, Roberts emphasizes the significance of tangibility in her writing practice. She links this tangible act with the maternal: “Writing feels like pulling something out of my insides; I’ve made it inside, now must draw it out, put it out” (1998; 200). By being connected with the image of a mother delivering a baby, Roberts’ writing reveals itself to be a tangible representation of the maternal body. For Roberts, the notion of God can be made tangible: she continues that “the image of God changing from a distant, absent, invisible and frightening authority figure of either sex [. . .] to that of a close, warm, present and nourishing body, which first I’ve imaged as female and maternal but now also find in the body of the man I love and desire” (1998; 199). She indicates that her earlier image of God— “a distant, absent, invisible and frightening authority figure” —is transformed into the one retaining tangibility— “the body of the man I love and desire.” As such, Roberts declares in the essay that she attempts to represent the tangible body, particularly the maternal body, in fiction. In discussing the representation of female sexuality in Roberts’ novels, Emma Parker argues that “[Roberts’] novels suggest that female sexuality transformed has the potential to transform the structures of patriarchy” (348). I would argue that Parker suggests the transformation of “the structures of patriarchy” is achieved through Roberts’ tangible representation of the maternal body in fiction.

At the opening of my paper, I have illustrated Hirsch’s argument for the presence of the mother in the twentieth-century women writers’ novels. In *Daughters of the House*, as I have argued, the mother is not always ‘present’; instead of the literal presence of the mother, the mother’s secret and its disclosure make her present in the novel and lead to relocate the maternal body within the patriarchal social context by the reshaping of the daughters’ perceptions. For that reason, I would argue that Roberts has achieved the remarkable distinction of being

among the twentieth-century women writers who represent the tangibility of the maternal body within the patriarchal social context.

Notes

- 1 Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan have established the hierarchical paradigm between men and women, in which women are placed in the position of men's 'other.' In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir describes the negative and subordinate position of women in society as 'an Other.' See my discussion in Chapter One in *Maternal/Material Effects through Language: A Feminist Reading of Virginia Woolf's Novels*.
- 2 Feminist critics confront and dispute the Freudian notion of women to explore their feminist philosophies. For instance, see Luce Irigaray's argument against Freud in "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry" (*Speculum of the Other Woman*).
- 3 Researches on sister bonds in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary texts have been carried out, among which are Helena Michie's *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), Masako Hirai's *Sisters in Literature: Female Sexuality in Antigone, Middlemarch, Howards End and Women in Love* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998), Diana Wallace's *Sisters and Rivals in British Women's Fiction, 1914-39* (2000). For other works on sister bonds, see the reference in Wallace 193-94n.
- 4 It is widely known that the word is taken from Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-62). See critical works on twentieth-century women writers' anxieties about an Angel in the House as well as its influence on nineteenth-century novels.

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