"…more kind of caring to others and looking out for themselves at the same time": Methodological Issues in an Investigation of Adolescent Girls' 'Envisionings' of Motherhood.

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Abstract

This paper emerges in the course of a doctoral study which explores the role of cultural texts (those found in both curriculum and popular culture) in the construction of adolescent girls' 'envisionings' of womanhood. The paper offers a feminist post-structuralist/psychoanalytic approach to the analysis of one curriculum text and proceeds with a discourse analysis of three girls' responses to this text. The analysis reveals that the text serves to reinforce the girls' situatedness within discursive spaces that resonate with notions that are potentially 'mother blaming'. Most importantly, however, the analysis exemplifies that, whilst text analysis and discourse analysis are two distinct modalities, they can be synthesised to produce an insightful depiction of the textual construction of girls' subjectivities.

Introduction

My emphases on history, motherhood as an institution, on patriarchal constraints and unconscious male needs regarding the mother, on the mother-in-the-unconscious and, finally, on compelling motherhood images in the melodrama that dominated my mental landscape about what a mother should or should not be - these emphases

> helped me to grasp the long traditions of which my own experiences became a part. Indeed these traditions constructed my experiences as daughter and mother, and produced the unconscious operations that burdened me in ways in which, at the time, I was unaware (Kaplan, 1992, p. xii).

> What is it about this representation (of the patriarchal or Christian Maternal) that fails to take account of what a woman might say or want of the maternal...? (Kristeva, 1985, cited in Kaplan, 1992, p. 4).

In my study of the textual construction of adolescent girls' imaginings of womanhood, I have extracted several analytical modalities from feminist post-structuralist theory and psychoanalysis, which may be used to analyse the texts that the girls talk about. One of the study's central aims is to point to the potentialities that inhere in the ways young women respond to the texts they read/view. In other words, these modalities constitute a central mechanism in the discovery of the ways in which discourses serve to construct adolescent girls' subjectivities and imaginings of womanhood.

However, an analysis of the elements enmeshed in a piece of literature without an analysis of each girl's unique response to that literature will only point to the possibilities that may inhere in her interaction with it. By itself, text analysis will not allow me to draw conclusions about how each girl in my study interprets particular texts in light of her lived experiences. As succinctly stated by Gilbert and Taylor (1991, p. 53),

> ....representational cultural texts are closely interrelated with lived social relations, and analyses of cultural texts are of little value unless there is also a consideration of how the texts are used in women's lives and how meanings are made of them...much more useful in our view is research...which attempts to take account of the complex relation-ship between text, readers and their social situation.

Thus, my study involves the analysis of girls' responses during their conversations with me, as well as an analysis of those texts with which they interact. The study is most concerned, therefore, with the nexus between the myriad of discourses contained within texts and the ways in which the constructions of girls' conscious and unconscious selves are choreographed by these discourses. This nexus calls for the use of an interpretive method that attends to the girls' responses to these texts and to their lives.

Given that language constitutes subjectivity, both texts and girls' accounts are forms of this constitution. Thus, in the study, I apply a discourse analysis approach to both the cultural texts and to girls' conversations regarding these texts. This technique assists in the creation of a workable thread that links one piece of analysis with the other. In concrete terms, this means that I approach the responses of the girls in my study in much the same ways as I approach the texts, as discursive constructions and not as reflections (accurate, distorted, or otherwise) of their 'true' experience (Gavey, 1997). It also means that the way in which I interpret and understand their responses is contoured by my own location within particular discourses. These discourses are not just those embedded in feminism, post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis, but are also those that emanate from my own

psychological and emotional positioning; a positioning that has been arrived at though a multiplicity of lived experience, and which reveals itself in a self-reflexive approach.

In this paper, the analysis focuses on both the ways in which images of motherhood are inscribed within a text and the resultant effects on the discursive positionings of three adolescent girls. This involves analysing both the text itself and the text derived from five interviews with three girls (two group interviews were undertaken as well as one interview with each girl). In this sense, the paper can be seen to be a microcosm of the study's larger undertaking, that which is concerned with the textual construction of adolescent girls' imaginings of womanhood.

The Discursive Construction of Subjectivity

My study presupposes that subjectivity is formed at the intersection of a range of competing and conflicting discourses (Walkerdine, 1997) and that girls exist in a myriad of discursive spaces at any one given point in time. Thus, of central concern, are the ways in which discourses embodied in texts merge with, intersect with, or collide with those discursive spaces the girls occupy and vice versa; thereby affecting the constitutive fragments that form a subjective self.

I argue that through their interaction with texts, girls are 'learning gender'; they are learning how to be feminised beings. For example, a young woman may 'try on' a positioning (discourses offer subject positions that may be consciously or unconsciously taken up) that is quickly discarded because it is not supported by the other (perhaps more powerful) discursive spaces in which she is immersed. Often the dominant discourses appear as 'natural', claiming their own impartiality and gaining their authority by appealing to common sense (Weedon, 1987).

I should point out, that I acknowledge that there is no essential reality immanent in the way texts are received by individuals. The way texts are read/viewed is formulated according to the social and historical positioning of the self and that self's interaction with those discourses that permeate the text. Thus, there is no *reality* that exists outside the individual's unique response to texts but rather a *subjectivity* that is both exposed and subject to discursive construction and re-construction.

A Brief Profile of the Girls

All three girls enjoy the privileges of middle class status and all but one girl (who referred to her Italian background) was of Anglo-Australian origin. All three girls are in year nine in the same all girls Catholic School located in a middle class suburb of Adelaide.

The Text: Discourses about Motherhood

Although the girls talked about several books they enjoyed, I have chosen in this paper to focus on one of these, 'So Much to Tell You' by John Marsden, discussion

about which permeated both group interviews and the three individual interviews. My rationale for undertaking a feminist post-structuralist/psychoanalytic reading of this text is based on two central points. Firstly, the novel is written from the point of view of a fourteen year old girl (interestingly, her age is consonant with that of the girls interviewed). Her story is told through diary entries which contain her intimate thoughts and feelings about herself, and her relationships with her parents and the girls with whom she resides at the boarding school. What she makes clear from the outset is that she does not speak; '... I just don't know what to say to people, and I can't speak anyway: my throat locks up and my tongue gets all swollen' (p. 12); her diary is her voice, her only form of communication that takes place outside herself. One of the interesting features of this form of story telling (apart from the compelling way in which *she* describes her lived experience) is the fact that the author is male. I believe that post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories can illuminate the choreography involved in a male author placing himself in the position of a troubled teenage girl (her narrative is supposedly based on a true story). They do so by emphasising the plural nature of language and the situatedness of the author (whether female or male) within language as a system that determines meanings (what it means to be female, for example) and thus, which constructs social reality.

Post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories pave the way for an understanding that would suggest that a male author's lived experience as a male person does not restrict his access to those discourses which constitute a 'feminised' being. And, these theories also suggest that the author is subject to the order of language and, therefore, does not have complete authority over the meaning of the text she or, in this case, he writes. However, most feminist critics have rejected the concept of the genderless 'imagination', and have argued that the imagination cannot escape from the unconscious structures and censure of gender identity (Showalter, 1997). These arguments suggest the 'impossibility of separating the imagination from a socially, sexually, and historically positioned self' (Showalter, 1997, p. 61). In other words, sexual identity is inextricably tied to literary activity. Although these arguments differ in terms of their understandings about gendered authorship, they emanate from a psychoanalytic paradigm that centres around the unconscious text of the author thereby enabling a fluid interpretation of the impact of gendered authorship on the gender contours and nuances in texts.

The second point underpinning my rationale for a feminist post-structuralist/psychoanalytic reading is the narrator's relationship between herself and her parents. Although her relationship with her father is presented throughout all but her final diary entries as marked by ambivalence - a mixture of resentment and concern for his well-being - she indicates only indifference towards her mother until her final entries. In sum, her diary entries take an interesting twist towards the end of the novel (at the point where she is emotionally propelled to see her father again) where the indifference she feels towards her mother is revealed as a deep resentment. At the same time, the confusion she feels towards her father is revealed as a mutual recognition of suffering and finally forgiveness.

The novel is written in such a way that answers to readers' questions gradually unfold, compelling readership to the final words. For example, I was compelled to keep reading to find out this young woman's name as if knowing her name could, somehow, provide the thread that would sew the fragments of her being together (the girls also commented on the frustration they experienced with not knowing this young woman's name). The young woman admits to her fractured self, but she is fractured to the reader not just because of this admission but because we only have access to her through what she chooses to write about herself. More specifically, I was compelled to keep reading to ascertain from where this young woman's emotions regarding her parents emanate, particularly her mother, whose hand-written notes permeate the text and in whose company she feels discomfort and a heightened stricture to speech. It is only towards the end of the novel that I fully realised the significance of her relationship with her father and in the last lines, her meeting with him giving way to the utterance of her first words in over a year.

A significant aspect of psychoanalytic theory recognises the young child's relationship with the mother (see for example, the work of Klein, Chodorow, Iragaray, Cixous and Kristeva) as the source of symbol formation and therefore of *language* and culture. Thus, it seems appropriate to apply those theories of psychoanalysis that may provide insight into the dynamics of the relationship between this young woman's turmoil (and speechlessness) and her mother. Moreover, such an analysis is consistent with my emphases on discourses about motherhood.

The relation between mother and daughter has become the locus of the reproduction of feminist psychoanalytic discourse. For theorists like Chodorow, Cixous and Irigaray, it is the problematic bond between mother and daughter that produces language, identity, and a provisional notion of 'self' in the little girl (Michie, 1997). Much of feminist thought has redirected attention from the Oedipal triangle to the pre-Oedipal period in which the girl struggles with her likeness and unlikeness to her mother before her entrance into and her inscription within the law of the father (Michie, 1997). In essence, motherhood and the maternal body have been seen as the location of language and self, the place where the female subject and female narrative 'I' are produced and reproduced.

For Lacan, when the child aquires language, not only is s/he severed from the 'real', that inaccessible realm which is always beyond the reach of signification, always outside the 'symbolic order' (the order of language and culture which constructs one's sense of identity and reality) but also from the mother's body which s/he will spend all her/his life unsuccessfully trying to attain (Eagleton, 1983). 'We move among substitutes for substitutes, metaphors of metaphors, never able to recover the pure (if fictive) self-identity and self-completion which we knew in the imaginary' (Eagleton, 1983, p. 168). In other words, the child has to search for signs, figurative language, and any language that substitutes for the mother (Humm, 1995). Thus, throughout life one will pursue a phantasm of a *real* or authentic self, never finding it in a displaced chain of projected cultural images, such as good little girls, courageous boys, etc. (Morris, 1993).

In consonance with these underlying assumptions in psychoanalytic theory (both Freudian and Lacanian), Melanie Klein's work centres on her theory of reparation. This theory posits that society actively remodels the world into a sublimated version of the child's original pleasure; a projection of the child's sense of the mother's body (Durham, 1985). In other words, when access to the original pleasure is blocked (for example, the womb) the child can redirect her/his desire to an analogous experience (for example, suckling). Klein believed that from this redirection the outside world becomes an extended version of the mother's body. However, Klein also believed that this process could go awry, thus challenging these assumptions (Durham, 1985). Hence, if the original source of pleasure (that being the mother) fails and no analogous equation has been made, then the original pleasures become equated with potentially analogous ones within a category of unfulfillment and therefore of suffering (Durham, 1985).

It is this aspect of Klein's theory that serves to explicate the connection between this young woman's inability to speak and her final revelation of resentment towards her mother. Durham (1985, p. 172), using Klein's theory for the purpose of a feminist psychoanalytic interpretation of a literary text states that,

> The child then withdraws from both the painfully tantalising mother and the analogous outside world, and the result is paranoid delusion and inhibition, including as one extreme form the speech-inhibiting psychosis now termed autism. Putting the matter rather too simply: feeding problems can thus create stuttering and, at last, silence.

This girl's silence could be seen to be the result of trauma sustained on the day she is emotionally and physically scarred by her parents' relationship. The day when the acid her father meant for her mother is thrown accidentally in her face, marks for her the end of her life, with all days preceding it being described as 'Before I died...' (p. 23); 'Whatever happened to the happiest days of my life? Afraid of mirrors, afraid of photos, afraid of memories ... afraid of living, that's *moi*' (p. 23). However, Klein's theory paves the way for an understanding of this girl's silence as symbolic of the conflict within the reparative struggle. Her mother's lack of presence (both physically and emotionally) in her life (not only in the present but also in the past) is emphasised throughout the novel. It is witnessed, primarily, through her mother's letters which speak of being away and promises of postcards from these destinations, and finally through her own revelations of resentment towards her mother's relationship with another man, whom she refers to as her step-father (signifying emotional absence). Salient to this 'absence of mothering' Klein wrote,

> It is a question of a certain optimum balance of the factors concerned. A sufficient quantity of anxiety (that is, the mother's absence or other failure to satisfy the infant) is the necessary basis for an abundance of symbol-formation and of phantasy; an adequate capacity on the part of the ego to tolerate anxiety is essential if anxiety is to be satisfactorily worked over (1975, cited in Durham, 1985, p. 173).

Klein believed that in reshaping the world to our satisfaction, we try to recreate the environment that a mother can no longer provide and our standard of comparison (outside her body) is our recollection of the earliest moments at the

breast. All the civilised arts - writing, music, politics - become the means of replicating the maternal (Durham, 1985). Whilst this girl's lack of speech may signify a struggle with reparation (due to her mother's emotional and physical absence), her lack of speech giving way to her written narrative signifies her working through this struggle and reconciling with the outside world. Significantly, the way the novel ends (and implicitly her entries therein) could be seen to be symbolic of the end of her trajectory through the reparative struggle. Her writing gives way to her first spoken words and therein a new connectedness to the outside world, a connectedness that begins with reconciling with her father.

What is most distinctive and which also lends itself to a psychoanalytical examination is the author's way of extending the authenticity of this girl's account by 'writing in' her unconscious text. What may at first appear to be her account of an innocuous dream, on closer examination tells a great deal about the unconscious territory that inheres in the tortured soul of this young woman. The following passage taken directly from the novel, describes her dream, which at first seems out of context with the other entries in the immediately preceding and subsequent days in her diary but which upon examination reveals a grieving process of which she is not consciously aware:

April 13

I dreamt last night that I was on a kind of hill, a little dark knoll, and some people, I'm not sure who, brought me a huge white sea monster they had found, all dredged up for drowned, so wet and bloated and dead. Yet gradually, as I touched it, it came to life and thinned down and colour and warmth and life came to its own body. Then we went for a walk and after a while we came to a lake, which it slipped into, and, sort of saying good-bye to me, swam away. I was sorry to see it go, yet I knew it was right that it should, so it could be alive and independent (p. 48)

It is here that the processes of Condensation[1] and Displacement[2] can illuminate the unconscious space of this young woman and therein extend our understanding of the exigencies that contour her emotional state. Although at first not apparent, her dream combined with her thoughts in the following diary entry are symbolic of her moving forward in a process of mourning or grieving (caused by the loss of part of her face as well as her innocence). It is here that she makes reference to the loss of the person she once was:

May 29

…the person I once was is lost and gone forever. I miss her, but she has slipped away like a spirit and has disappeared into a land of spirits, and she will never, never return (p. 75)

Her coming to terms with herself as an entity that 'has slipped away like a spirit' is consistent with her accepting the retreat of the white, sea monster. In this sense, the white, sea monster is the embodiment of the pain that she feels, or even an embodiment of herself. Her giving of life to the sea monster is representative of her desire to retreat from pain and to heal herself. Similarly, her enabling the sea

monster to leave her, accepting that 'it was right that it should' is representative of her growing acceptance of herself and her circumstances.

A post-structuralist/psychoanalytic approach to text analysis provides the scope for an enriched and multiple-layered reading of any textual material. Thus, my analysis of 'So Much to Tell You' should be seen to represent only a partial reading. Whilst this is the case, my focus on Klein's theory with regard to the reparative struggle enables me to engage with the discursive repertoire inherent in girls' responses to the text. In other words, there is a clear connection between my particular reading of the text and girls' responses to the text. This connection becomes more evident in the discourse analysis that follows.

Analysing Discourse

Discourse analysis provides a way of analysing interview text that is consistent with the overall theoretical underpinnings of my thesis; feminism, post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis. Potter and Wetherell (1987) state that there is no distinct method of discourse analysis. Rather, it is a broad theoretical framework concerning the nature of discourse and its role in social life in conjunction with a set of suggestions about how discourse can best be studied as well as convincing others that findings are genuine. It is a form of analysis that is attentive to both detail in language and to the wider social picture (Gavey, 1997).

One feature common to all forms of discourse analysis is that participants' discourses are approached in their own right and not as a secondary route to phenomena beyond the discourse like events, attitudes or cognitive processes. Discourse is viewed not as transparent information channel but as 'potent, action-oriented medium' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 160).

The form of discourse analysis that I use is primarily concerned with identifying the social discourses available to young adolescent girls in a particular culture and society at a particular time. Specifically, I am interested in those discourses which emanate from cultural texts (those found in both curriculum and popular culture) and their impact on the construction of young adolescent girls' 'envisionings' of womanhood. The central premise herein, is that these discourses provide subject positions which constitute the subjectivities of girls; thereby reproducing or challenging existing gender relations (see for example, Walkerdine, 1986). I will be approaching the girls' responses therefore, with a view to discerning discursive patterns of meaning, contradictions, and inconsistencies. In this way, I will be identifying and naming language processes the girls use to constitute their understandings of the texts they read and view, in light of their experiences of girlhood and womanhood. These processes are related to the reproduction of, or resistance to, the distribution of power in gender relations and are viewed as fragmented, inconsistent, and contradictory rather than static, fixed and orderly (Gavey, 1997).

My study seeks to locate girls' accounts of their understandings and imaginings of womanhood in relation to specific discourses concerning femininity contained in texts. Thus, the discourse analysis is nuanced by the girls' references to positionings of femininity contained in the texts they read and view. The girls' responses that I interweave in the analysis, in the form of direct quotations, emanate from five interviews with three girls; Holly, Jenny and Sonia (pseudonyms). Two group interviews were undertaken as well as one interview with each girl. These interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed for analysis.

The Girls' Responses: Discourses about Motherhood

Reverberating throughout the interviews was a discourse about being considerate of and protecting significant relationships with others. It was a discourse that seemed to oscillate between a desire to be strong and able to 'stand up' for oneself, and using this strength to defend and care for others. These discourses were evident not only in how the girls perceived or desired to see themselves but also affected how they saw other girls and women in their lives and in texts. Examples of 'being strong for self' and 'strong for others' include:

> [I admire] normally if they're   kinda strong...more willing to do things for other people and for kinda...I guess themselves to an extent but not like really kinda...everything for themselves.

> ...more kind of caring to others and looking out for themselves at the same time.

> Well, in the 'Princess Bride' … I admired her for the way she stood up against the characters… she stood up against the 'baddies' and wouldn't give in and stuff…standing up for others…yeah.

A discourse of autonomy and free agency was also significant in girls' responses, but this discourse invariably operated within the context of a discourse of consideration for others, particularly other family members, friends and potential husbands and children. Examples of the positioning of being autonomous but not at the expense of others include:

> ...it's a good thing they're showing that women have power but I think it should be equal power…because you don't want to overpower someone else.

> In real life there are some really powerful women that get really high in their jobs and things and they're in charge of everybody. But I think it's sort of, there's not as many, you get the occasional person. But then in books and stuff, and movies and 'soapies' and stuff, they often try and change it around to sort of interest people, saying, "oh the women are really high up in this and stuff". But it's not making them equal, there's still either one or the other that's got to be higher.

> [Society in general would describe the ideal woman as an] independent and confident person. I don't think they sort of think about it as much, but happy in the family, I think that's the really important thing that you need to be happy and they don't see it as just like a person with an important job and stuff. It's like the first thing that probably comes to most people's minds, like a big important business woman, I guess, but then you've got to think about the families and stuff...

With specific reference to their own lives and imaginings of womanhood it is evident that each girl is trying to secure a positioning for herself that encompasses both a discourse of autonomy and a discourse that enshrines the care of children.

Holly: Yeah, I think I'd be…more inclined to have a career first, then children…

Jenny: but I'd still like to work when I do have children…part-time while they're young, probably not at all when they're babies…

Sonia: I'd like to be there for my children, like always be there and be someone that they can talk to, but I'd like not to be confined, like because I'd go pretty crazy if I just couldn't do anything to take my mind off what's happening at home…

The discourse of 'independence' (or autonomy as I have referred to it thus far) was not perceived as conflicting with the 'happiness of others' discourse. The girls imagined that they could incorporate and balance both dependence of themselves within a relationship and the dependence of others on them (for example, children) with 'something for themselves' (for example, a career). Holly's comments exemplify the train of thought voiced by all three girls:

I'd like to be doing journalism…and I think I'd like to be kinda either beginning or having a family and still having a career and stuff, and still have kinda like recreational things to do.

In trying to locate a positioning that incorporates a 'balance' between child care responsibilities, and career, all three girls cited specific examples from their own mothers/families. I believe that their citation of these examples signifies their attempts to collapse the span of time that exists between their present girlhood and future womanhood. This is, perhaps, less difficult to do with familiar/familial images than with textual ones.

Holly: …we've got the father and the mother either both working or…both helping out in the house or…one doing the gardening, one doing the cooking kinda thing…

Jenny: …my mum doesn't work…she stays home and she does the cleaning. But she still has a life, like she can still go out and do things, except she would really like a job…but now it's just been too long for her, and she doesn't feel motivated enough to get a job…

Sonia: …my mum used to be a teacher, she's a librarian at the moment, but she used to be a teacher, and I think she's always like been willing to help us with our homework and stuff, and I think she still really enjoys doing it…

In their 'envisionings' of what they would be like as adult women, images of their own mothers were cited by all three girls. Moreover, two of the girls aspired to be like their mothers. Although not explicitly stated, it appeared that all three girls perceived that their mothers were leading fulfilling lives, balancing both work and career, although Jenny spoke about how her mother desired to be more independent in terms of career.

However, these perceptions were not translated to their own desires and 'envisionings' of womanhood/motherhood in terms of 'uncovering' the possible difficulties in achieving an autonomous and fulfilling life for themselves (about which they all spoke in one way or another). Instead, there is an implicit acceptance, visible in the descriptions of other women's lives (both textual and lived through their own mothers), of their own individual responsibility and ability in achieving some kind of equilibrium between their own happiness and the happiness of others. Indeed, it seemed that the girls did not view their independence and the dependence of others upon them as categorical opposites, denying one to keep the other. Rather, they imagined an identity in womanhood within which both would happily co-exist. This is interesting especially if one considers that much of the beginnings of a feminist stance emanated from the disharmony between autonomy and dependence.

What was most interesting however, was that in describing and commenting on textual images of motherhood (as opposed to their direct lived experiences of motherhood through their own mothers) all three girls demonstrated a slightly different positioning to that indicated in their conversations about their own mothers. All three girls were either implicitly or explicitly critical of mothers in texts who are in some way presented as autonomous and powerful. Their critiques, in my view, are indicative of their situatedness within discursive spaces that are resonant with traditional understandings and expectations of motherhood. For example, Holly is implicitly critical of the behaviour of mothers who do not fit the traditional mould when she discusses a character in 'Home and Away':

> I think the character that I would most likely aspire to [be like] would be Chloe because she's kinda she's really smart and she puts everyone else's…what they want kinda thing before her own. She had a child and instead of going to 'uni', and she was going to do some course that she could do really well in, she decided to stay with her child, bring her up, and then go back and do it.

Jenny is explicitly critical when she describes the mothers in Soap Operas:

> ... I guess it's a good thing they're showing that women have power but I think it should be equal power…because you don't want to overpower someone else.

Sonia is also explicitly critical when she describes the mother's behaviour in 'So Much to Tell You':

> … it's like the mum's away on holiday…she's like always going off somewhere different...but then she didn't really care that much for her daughter, like she was sort of ignoring her daughter …

At the same time, however, all three girls respected and admired their own mothers for maintaining autonomy and exercising power.

> Holly: ...my mum went back to work like really early after.... not really early but quite early after I was born and it didn't make any difference to me, it kinda showed me that I think that women can have both...

This statement is quite crucial in that it exemplifies the readiness of the girls to critique textual images, rather than actual and lived ones, even if these images are almost identical. Here, Holly is not at all critical of her mother's return to work when she was a small child. However, in the statement above, she clearly aspires to be like a textual character who does exactly the opposite. These contradictions could be viewed as the result of the girls' feeling safe to navigate the multiple subjectivities that inhere in texts, rather than the more cumbersome territory of actuality. However, more significantly, I believe that they represent the girls' participation in a myriad of discursive spaces and the precariousness of a single, stable positioning.

It is here that the discourse of 'being considerate of and caring for the needs of others' divides the girls' 'envisionings' of how motherhood should be lived. It is apparent, that even though the girls viewed their own mothers as maintaining some autonomy/power/equality in their relationships, they still saw their mothers as caring and considerate of their significant others, especially themselves. Moreover, they admired textual images of mothers/women that are represented as putting their own needs behind those of others, especially children, and were critical of (m)others who did not demonstrate this capacity. This indicates that the girls are moving towards a positioning that is situated within a traditional discourse that elevates the 'good mother'.

The Girls' responses to 'So Much to Tell You': Discourses about Motherhood

What was most prominent in my discussions with the girls about the novel was their blaming of Marina's mother (we discover her name when she recalls her father's utterance of it in her final entry) for her daughter's physical and emotional state. They do so, even while acknowledging that it was the father who had thrown the acid in her face. The girls view Marina's mother as neglectful because she goes on holidays and sends her daughter to a boarding school.

> Holly: [She] left her at the boarding house…and went overseas and stuff…but it got a bit like annoying because you think…you should blame the father and not the mother…but by the end you could see that the mother was not very nice.

> Jenny: …she got sent to a boarding school and her mother went off with some other guy.

> Sonia: …it's like the mum's away on holiday…she's like always going off somewhere different…but then she didn't really care that much for her daughter, like she was sort of ignoring her daughter…

The girls agreed with Holly's comment that it was only towards the end of the novel, in parallel with the unfolding nature of Marina's diary, that the mother is to blame for what happened to Marina and her family and that she "was not very nice". Before that her notes and postcards to her daughter indicated that she was a 'caring' mother. As Sonia states:

[The mother would] write to the boarding house lady…and she'd be like going, "Oh how is she going and bla, bla, bla", and then, they'd make it sound all happy and stuff. But…she'd send her the post-cards when they were away on holidays and stuff and make her feel really bad.

It is at the point where Marina's diary unfolds to disclose more about her feelings towards her mother that the latter is resented by the girls because she is seen by them as selfishly pursuing her own desires at the expense of a significant other, her daughter. In essence, the discursive repertoire voiced by the girls regarding the 'bad mother' takes centre stage, and even excludes the possibility of a discourse that articulates the devastating and ubiquitous nature of male violence. This indicates that the girls are moving towards a positioning on motherhood that both signifies the overwhelming importance of the mother to the child and the derision of bad or absent mothering.

Deconstructing the Text/Constructing the Subject: Subjectivity as Mosaic

The girls' blaming of the mother and absolving the culpability of the father can be understood in terms of the way girls are *interpellated* by the discourses embodied within the text. The term 'interpellation' was used by Louis Althusser (1971, cited in Morris, 1993) to describe the way in which language calls or 'hails' us into an identity as we recognise a self in its system of meaning and take up our expected position it its structure. This notion takes central place in the analysis as it assists in the exploration of that space where discourses contained within texts intersect with the constructions of girls' conscious and unconscious selves. The notion is also consistent with both psychoanalytical and post-structuralist thinking in that it challenges the concept of the individual as an autonomous, coherent, rational, unified being, and the intentional author of her or his own words, thoughts and actions.

In this case, the text serves to situate the girls within a discourse that blames the mother by presenting an image of womanhood/motherhood that is 'other'. 'Other' to what they had experienced themselves through their own mothers (all three girls perceived their mothers as caring and giving), and 'other' to the dominant discursive spaces representing motherhood within which they are located. For example, the sharp dichotomy between good and evil found in melodrama and fairy tale (the latter especially, which may well be the female child's first encounter with texts and discourses about motherhood) is perpetuated by the wicked stepmother; that mother who denies the child some pleasure (Durham, 1985). As Bruno Bettelheim states, 'The typical fairy-tale splitting of the mother into a good (usually dead) mother and an evil stepmother serves the child well. ...The fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty about one's angry thoughts and wishes about her' (1976, cited in Durham, 1985).

Given the 'otherness' of the mother in 'So Much to Tell You', the girls did not try to look further to offer reasons as to why she was neglectful of Marina, but found ways to excuse the horrible act of the father.

Holly: I think the reason why she blames her mother was 'cause the mother was going to take the children away from the father so the father was angry...he got really mad.

Jenny: [The father] was trying to aim for her mother and he missed.

Sonia: so it was like an accident.

Indeed, the ways in which the girls view the mother and father in the text mirror those thoughts and feelings they attribute to Marina.

Holly: she actually blamed her mother more than her father…so he went to jail and, but she found him and when she found him she talked to him for the first time for about a year.

Jenny: …she doesn't talk but…she doesn't blame her father.

Via the powerful narration of Marina's thoughts and feelings, the text has made a suggestion to the girls about what 'appropriate' womanhood and motherhood is about. It presents what the girls perceive as a totally 'inappropriate' example of womanhood and motherhood; that which is embodied in Marina's mother. Moreover, the text 'hails', 'interpellates' the girls to perceive it in this way by presenting an image that is contoured around how they may (consciously and unconsciously) perceive themselves, the image of the fourteen year old daughter. As Althusser would have it, the girls have been positioned in and through their recognition of a self within the text. Their entry into the text solicits their compassion for this girl and their rejection of her mother.

In being able to relate to the daughter (even if it is just in terms of age and gender), they are drawn to her and her desires, and therefore are as resentful of the mother and as forgiving of the father as she is. The fictional character of the daughter in the text therefore, can be seen to be the antecedent; the pivotal factor that urges the shaping of the girls' understandings and imaginings of what womanhood, and especially motherhood, should be like. In large part, this correlates with how motherhood is already being 'lived' by the girls and therefore what they envisage for themselves as mothers. Who we are now as women and as (m)others is embedded in all that has lived in the lives of women, and culture, before us. Thus, what we know as women and as mothers about (m)otherhood is all that has been inscribed in our psyches by our foremothers and their foremothers. Thus, we can hardly differentiate between these inscriptions and what we 'truly' know about or desire from the maternal.

What is significant is that even though the girls blame Marina's mother, completely, for her emotional and physical scarring, Marina does not. Rather, she emphasises the dynamic between both her parents. This is exemplified in her recollection of her time spent at the home of Mr Lindell (the principal of the boarding school), and his wife and children. It is here that Marina describes what she perceives to be a healthily functioning family (although she does not use these words) and compares it to her own. However, the grievous impact on a young woman of 'bad' mothering is implicitly stated and appears to leave an indelible

mark on the girls. I believe that a text which features 'good' mothering in a more obvious sense, or, conversely, a text which derides 'bad' mothering, would not serve to position the girls as profoundly as this novel appears to have done. The Lacanian principle that propounds that meaning emanates from and is produced by opposition or difference can be applied here to explicate this process. For Lacan, there is a separation between the world of reality and world of language; reality does not endow language with meaning, but rather our system of language is the means by which we are able to make sense of the world (Morris, 1993; Weedon, 1987). Morris (1993, p. 101) explains that 'We place the grid of signs over the continuum of experience. It is from their structural relationship to each other within this grid that signs produce meaning.' The girls' positioning on motherhood (which to a large extent is contoured around the 'naturalness' of 'good' mothering) is reaffirmed through the representation, not derision, of its opposite; an 'other' 'bad' mother. It does so by giving the account of the daughter, a girl who is the mirror image of each of them, and thus, revealing the deleterious consequences of 'bad' mothering from her (their) point of view.

Conclusion

The girls' positioning on motherhood (which, as I have shown, emanates from discourses about motherhood as a caring and giving enterprise) is reinforced by the novel which offers the opposite to that positioning; a selfish and uncaring mother. The girls' reading of the dominant discourse pertaining to motherhood in the text served to reinforce both the need for 'good' mothering as well as the 'naturalness' of 'good' mothering. To further illustrate this process; even though I read the same dominant discourse within the text about motherhood, my positioning on motherhood (which is rooted in feminism) is also reinforced; however, producing a different position from that expressed by the girls. Whilst my positioning mobilises a deep compassion for Marina, it is also firmly embedded in feminist discourse which enables me to have compassion for her mother as a *woman* located in a dominant culture that is oppressive to her gender as well. More importantly, it enables me to critically analyse (as I am doing now) the representations of motherhood (and their effects) in texts.

My largely psychoanalytic reading of the text (which becomes itself a discourse producing powerful mother representations in culture (Kaplan, 1992)), reaffirms the devastating effect of 'absence' of 'good' mothering on the life of a young woman. Thus, in this sense, it could be seen to be antithetical to a feminist reading, which would disavow mother-blaming, instead turning its gaze towards family dynamics and the patriarchal functioning of families. However, my reading, which is one of many possible readings, correlates with the mother blaming responses of the girls. In other words, it could be viewed as paradoxically feminist in that it corresponds with and serves to highlight the ways in which the novel reinforces the girls' positioning within discursive spaces which emphasise that girls, women, and mothers should place the needs of others ahead of their own.

The ways in which girls are interpellated by discourses contained within the text are largely based on the dominant discursive spaces in which they participate.

To illustrate my point, all three girls referred to feminism without prompting and provided points of view that could easily be described as feminist:

> Holly: I'm kinda a bit too much of a feminist sometimes…yeah I think it's more my parents have brought me up that way because I have a younger sister and it's all girls in my house except for my dad…

> Jenny: Yeah, I'd like to…have a higher job…hopefully by then society would have changed and women will be just as equal as men in everybody's eyes.

> Sonia: [A favourite snapshot of myself as an adult woman would show me with] a good job, like something that I really enjoy, and being a confident person, not letting people run over you and stuff.

Indeed, the girls have many opportunities to immerse themselves in a feminist discourse. They are part of the Catholic girls' school system in which ideas to do with female autonomy have become widely accepted. Indeed, each girl demonstrated a consciousness of gender. Further to this point, it could be argued that a white middle class background would predispose (and to a greater or lesser extent free) the girls to incorporate the principles of a feminist agenda developed around white, heterosexual, middle-class women's accounts of gender oppression.

At no time, however, did any of the girls reconcile their notions of feminism with what they perceived about motherhood in the novel. I have argued that subjectivity is formed at the intersection of a range of competing and conflicting discourses. Thus, their location within a feminist discourse, at this point in their lives, appears to constitute only a small fragment of their subjectivities. Instead, they are more clearly and firmly positioned by those discourses, arguably of the dominant culture, which both blame and idealise mothers. The work of Nancy Chodorow, which is centred on the mother/child relationship, illuminates the construction of this discursive repertoire,

> For the infant, the mother is not someone with her own life, wants, needs, history, other social relationships, work. She is known only in her capacity as mother. Growing up means learning that she, like other people in one's life, has and wants a life of her own, and that loving her means recognising her subjectivity and appreciating her separateness. But people have trouble doing this and continue, condoned and supported by the ideology about mothers they subsequently learn, to experience mothers solely as people who did or did not live up to their child's expectation. This creates the quality of rage we find in "blame-the-mother" literature and the unrealistic expectation that perfection would result if only a mother would devote her life completely to her child and all impediments to doing so were removed. Psyche and culture merge her and reflexively create one another (Chodorow & Contratto, 1989, p. 90).

My reading of both the text, and the girls' responses to the text and to their lives, indicates that it is within the discursive spaces which both blame and idealise mothers that the girls' 'envisionings' of motherhood are firmly embedded. The girls' reading of 'So Much to Tell You' has served to reinforce their embeddedness within that paradoxical space which depicts mothers as both omnipotent and yet victims of their children's needs. In compelling narrative, the novel shows the negative impact of 'bad' (and absent) mothering on the life of a young woman (and

the mother's power and omnipotence therein). As my reading of the novel has shown, Marina's loss of speech is the result of her mother's dysfution, rather than the trauma sustained at the hands of her father (or at least, the mother's dysfunction caused the father's violent act). The power of the mother to take from, or impede, the speech of the child reaffirms not only her omnipotence but also her failure to mother appropriately. Paradoxically, this perception of failure places her in a far less powerful position. It is a position that leaves her open to harsh criticism, and to experience the victimisation that her daughter has endured. Indeed, as evidenced here, Marina's mother attracts harsh criticism from these young readers.

It is within the cultural ideology of the mother as both omnipotent and victim that the discourse of mother blaming is fertilised, and a discourse about the need for 'good' mothering is allowed to grow. The girls' reading of the novel has served to reinforce their positioning within discursive spaces that are resonant with traditional notions of motherhood. As is evidenced in girls' responses towards the mother in the novel, these discourses are potentially mother-blaming. The novel invites the girls to remain positioned within discursive spaces that enshrine the 'caring' and 'giving' mother by depicting in an emotionally charged way, the devastating pain of their opposition; those spaces which constitute motherhood as 'other' than a 'caring' and 'giving' enterprise.

This paper has demonstrated that the coalescence of a feminist post-structuralist/psychoanalytic textual analysis with a discourse analysis of girls' responses to texts and to their lives provides a powerful analytical tool. Although my analysis of the text and my analysis of three girls' responses towards it are two distinct pieces of work, they become inextricably linked in that each needs the other to effectively explore the textual construction of subjectivity. Whilst my analysis of the novel will remain fixed (in the sense that the text itself will not change, only the readings of it), girls' responses to it will be transformed by their emerging and shifting subjectivities. As my analysis has shown, each girl was trying to work towards a discursive positioning with regard to motherhood. In this process, there were many 'slippages' and contradictions. Their hold on any positioning will, at best, be precarious as they walk through the slippery terrain of multiple subjectivities fashioned by language and discourse.

Acknowledgement

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ENDNOTES

[1] *condensation*: a single image or idea in the unconscious becomes a central point or intersection for a cluster of associated feelings, repressed primal memories and desire. In other words, a single image, word or sound can evoke through its compression a range of repressed wishes, emotion and thoughts (Morris, 1993).

[2] *displacement*: the libidinal energy associated with a particular unconscious desire is displaced through a chain of what appears to be innocuous images and ideas enabling its way through the censorship barrier (Morris, 1993).