

BREAKING THE IDEALIZED MOTHERHOOD: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE POETRY OF EAVAN BOLAND AND LOUISE GLUCK

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the representation of motherhood that is unconventional and quite contrary to the idealized in the poems of Eavan Boland and Louise Gluck. The study focusses on the theme of restraint, repetition, ambivalence and economic use of emotions. Using a qualitative, text-based close reading methodology based on feminist criticism of maternal ideology and ethics of care, it explores how both poets contest culturally ideal discourses of motherhood.

Analysis shows that Boland creates the experience of a mother by being vigilant and by being accountable to the ordinary domestic time; the same way Gluck creates the experience of a mother by remaining silent, distant, and denying emotional resolution. Although the poets differ in their style of poetry and culture, both of them portray motherhood as a condition which is actually lived and is ethically challenging because of limitation and not emotional fulfillment.

The results indicate that the use of unsentimental motherhood in modern poetry provides a closer and rational approach of understanding motherhood, and is therefore, an addition to the feminist literary research on maternal subjectivity.

INTRODUCTION

Instances of literary depiction of motherhood have been frequently influenced by idealistic, moralistic, sentimental overstatement especially in poetic practices where the maternal image is often raised to symbolism as opposed to being a subject of experience. The challenge of such constructions by feminist literary criticism has a long history in pointing out that idealized images are inclined to deny ambivalence, fatigue and ethical tension. Some modern women poets in turn have devised unsentimental approaches to writing motherhood, presupposing restraint and responsibility rather than fulfillment or myth. The poems by Eavan Boland can be viewed as an example of this change in an Irish literary tradition that undermined the domestic experience of women. Motherly poems by Boland do not accommodate symbolic uplift and emotional confirmation. They introduce motherhood as a state of vigilance, time-consciousness, and moral endeavor as a state expressed not with intensity but by understatement. The ethical attention and historical consciousness are strongly related to the maternal experience in her work, as opposed to the personal revelation. A similar opposition to idealization is found in the poetry of Louise Gluck, which is manifested through another poetic disposition.

The poems of the mother described by Gluck are characterized by emotional staleness and coldness. Instead of providing reconciliation or confirmation, they keep ambivalence and silence alive, showing motherhood as an interpersonal area where care and rejection have no resolution. In her work, she is always opposed to consolatory stories allied to the maternal identity. Despite the differences between the cultural and literary traditions of Boland and Gluck, both poets disregard the sentimental and mythical creation of motherhood. Neither is dependent on confession extravagance and symbolic abstraction. Rather, they portray motherhood as an experience of moral ambivalence, which is lived through the complexity of restraint and economy of emotion. Current literature has explored the subject of the mother in the works of the two poets, but comparative research that specifically addresses the topic of unsentimental and ethically based portrayals of motherhood has been scarce. The paper provides a comparative, textual examination of motherhood in the poetry of Eavan Boland and Louise Gluck and explores how the two poems explore maternal subjectivity in ways that do not tend to idealize it. The article attempts to hone the existing knowledge of motherhood in contemporary women poetry devoid of sentiment and myth using foregrounding of ambivalence, restraint, and ethical responsibility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework regarding motherhood in literature offered by Adrienne Rich in 'Of Woman Born' is one of the most significant ones. Rich differentiates between motherhood as a social institution and motherhood as an

experience personally lived, which is not a singular and simple activity. Her argument has influenced subsequent feminist literary criticism by providing a lexicon by way of which ambivalence, exhaustion and moral strain of the mother figure can be discussed. Critical reading of motherhood in Eavan Boland's poetry is focused to a great extent on the way she criticized masculine literary traditions and sedimented patriarchal structures. In "Mothers of the Nation. Womanhood and National Identity in the Poetry of Eavan Boland," Jody Allen-Randolph, criticizes Eavan Boland, claiming that she undercuts the symbolic figure of "Mother Ireland" by basing it on domestic reality and not national myth. Allen-Randolph approaches the poems by Boland written in her motherhood years as political reclamation by women of their own personal lives as poetic topics. Although this paper helps determine the cultural importance of motherhood in the work by Boland, it mainly handles the maternal experience as a symbolic resistance to the work. A more specific analysis is found in the article of Pilar Villar-Argaiz, *Matrophobia or Matrocompliance? Motherhood as Experience and Institution in Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan Poetry*. Citing Rich directly as a source of theory, Villar-Argaiz uses the conflict between maternal ideology and maternal subjectivity in the Irish women poetry as the driving force of discussion. She highlights the mother-daughter relationships and the stress of the institutional demands on the maternal identity. Even though this work provides a significant intervention on the basis of the focus on motherhood as lived experience, such emphasis is directed more towards the ideological conflict than the ethical texture of maternal responsibility and emotional economy in the poems by Boland.

Other scholarship places the writing of domesticity in the context of the larger poetics of domesticity and historical consciousness in Boland. Virginie Trachsler, in her article *Domestic Labour and Poetic Authority in the Poetry of Eavan Boland* contends that domestic routine and maternal labour are sources of poetic discipline and not limitation. This objection is important in interpreting the opposition of idealization by Boland because it conceptualizes motherhood in terms of attention, repetition, and responsibility. Nevertheless, Trachsler fails to create a properly ethical interpretation of maternal ambivalence, which still leaves room for this analysis.

In critical studies of Louise Glück, motherhood has predominantly been examined through psychological, mythological, and formal lenses. In her article, 'Address and Ethics in Louise Glück's *Ararat*', Jane Hedley explores the interplay of familial voice and emotional distance; she contends that the poet's controlled and restrained lyric address subverts the expressive openness typically expected of confessional verse. This analysis by Hedley is significant in the perception of the unsentimental tone of Glück, but the concept of motherhood is handled in the sense of a larger family relationship instead of being a separate state of ethicality.

Discussions of the later work of Glück are dominated by myth-based readings. In "Rewriting Persephone. Mother-Daughter Relations in Louise Glück's *Averno*," Cristina

Salcedo González interprets the maternal figures in Glück in the light of classical myth. She places a strong focus on the distance to the narrative and the abstraction represented by symbols.

Although such a method throws light on how Glück is working with myth, it serves to project motherhood onto an allegorical plane, and supports a critical inclination to interpret maternal ambivalence allegorically instead of morally. The maternal poetry of Glück is also subject to the influence of psychologically oriented criticism. The article by Lisa Sewell is a powerful one, titled as "'In the End, the One Who Has Nothing Wins'. Louise Glück and the Poetics of Deprivation" is an understandable interpretation Louise Glück's austerity in terms of deprivation and control of emotions. Though this argument by Sewell makes sense of the opposition of sentimentality by Glück, it puts maternal distance in its first place as a psychological failure. The possibility that restraint and ambivalence might be conscious ethical stances instead of emotional inadequacies remains unexplored.

Although much research has been conducted on both poets, there are limited direct comparative studies of Boland and Glück, and the few that exist are not often concerned with motherhood. Besides, the criticism that exists is inclined to give preference to symbolic, psychoanalytic, or ideological interpretation of maternity. No long-term research exists that interprets motherhood in these poets as an ethically perplexing, unsentimental, and disciplined way of living. The paper fills that gap by providing a comparative, text based look at the theme of motherhood in the poetry of Eavan Boland and Louise Glück. The article uses foregrounding of ambivalence, restraint, and moral responsibility instead of symbolism or psychology. It attempts to narrow down what has already been discussed in feminist discussion of maternal representation and thus brings a more accurate picture of motherhood beyond that of idealism.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do Eavan Boland and Louise Glück render motherhood outside the mythic and sentimental constructs through the restraints and repetitions and use of economy in their poetry?
2. How are motherhood, responsibility, limitation, and unresolved relational tension defined in the writings of Boland and Glück?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is a feminist literary approach, which takes motherhood as an experience of living, relating and an ethically

challenging life, but not a symbolic or psychoanalytic form of existence. This analysis is pegged on three particular theoretical positions which are applied on a purposeful basis. First, the paper relies on the separation between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution as defined in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as a Process and as an Institution* (Rich). The formulation by Rich is applied to establish the ways in which poetic representations are opposing culturally idealized images of maternal self-sacrifice and emotional satisfaction. The framework by Rich used in this work is a disease diagnosis tool that is able to identify institutionalized maternal ideals against representation of lived maternal reality where there is ambivalence, fatigue, and moral responsibility (Rich).

Second, the research is based on the lessons of feminist ethics of care, especially as these lessons were expressed by Carol Gilligan in *In a Different Voice* and Nel Noddings in *Caring* (Gilligan; Noddings). According to these theorists, moral experience is relational, context specific and is based on responsibility as opposed to being principle based. Motherhood in poetry is discussed in terms of such a view as being an ethical state brought about by sensitivity, duty and restraint. Notably, the framework does not assume care to be sentimental and nurturing in nature, but rather, as morally demanding and even conflicted.

Third, the research takes a critical position on psychoanalytic models that are normally used on maternal representation. Even though psychoanalytic criticism has found its way into studies of motherhood, especially in understanding emotional distance or ambivalence as pathology, this paper does not make use of such models.

Maternal restraint, silence and ambivalence is rather interpreted as a conscious poetic effect, which expresses ethical gravity instead of a psychic inadequacy. It is in this context that the poetry of Eavan Boland and Louise Gluck is critiqued using close textual reading. The interpretation of maternal subjectivity is informed by the feminist theory but does not predetermine conclusions. The framework allows making a comparative analysis that is sensitive to difference in culture and poetry and centered on mutual approaches to the representation of motherhood beyond idealization.

Selection of Poems and Rationale

This paper is the analysis of a small and narrow set of poems by Eavan Boland and Louise Gluck that portray motherhood without a halo. Among those by Boland we take *Night Feed*, *The Pomegranate*, and *Hymn*. *Night Feed* portrays motherhood as alertness in place of satisfaction. *The Pomegranate* offers myth as ethical choice and risk in motherhood. The motherly responsibility in *Hymn* is placed in the everyday domestic time. Work by Gluck, *Metamorphosis*, various poems by Gluck, and some by Ararat, and the *Matins*, sequence are all discussed. These poems demonstrate motherhood as distanced, restrained, and unresolved ambivalence, and opposed to emotional assurance and confessional understandings. These poems combined allow one to draw a comparative reading of motherhood as an experience of living, which is ethically complex, and expressed with restraint instead of sentimentality.

METHODOLOGY

The research is based on close reading methodology, which is qualitative in nature and is grounded on text. The analysis is on the representation of motherhood in the chosen poems by Eavan Boland and Louise Gluck, through the emphasis of themes, poetic voice, imagery and tonal controls. They are read together in thematically related poems to conduct a comparative analysis to determine the convergences and the differences in their representation of motherhood. The interpretation is informed by feminist ethical perspectives, but theory acts as an interpretive lens as opposed to a prescriptive model.

The poetry about motherhood by Eavan Boland is defined by an ethics of attention, and not of an affective exaltation or symbolic uplift. In all her maternal poems, the maternal does not come out as an ideal nurturance or sacrifice; rather, it is made by recurring actions of care which occur in mundane, sometimes tiresome time.

The ethical power of the poem '*Night Feed*' lies in its compulsory-non-declarative way of the maternal responsibility to exercise its role. The presence of the mother is not portrayed as emotionally gratifying or ethically ideal. It is framed as necessary. The poem finds significance in the process of not going to sleep, holding the child in the arms and going back to the interrupted slumber again without implying that the repetition is a source of satisfaction or transcendence (Boland, '*Night Feed*').

Such rejection of aestheticizing maternal work is analytic. Boland fails to make fatigue virtuous and tenderness a spectacle. The poem deprives the reader of the emotional appeal typically associated with romanticised motherhood. This isolates motherhood in the realm of non-emotional validation. The mother subject is not in need of emotional intensity to be able to stay morally involved. Care continues even when there is no feeling. This image confronts institutional discourses of motherhood which equate good mothering to only emotional warmth, self-sacrifice and devotion on the surface. Motherly ethics in '*Night Feed*' are not only determined by feeling. The poem suggests implicitly that what makes motherhood moral is being attentive even without expecting any reward, even without

recognition, even when it is laborious.

However, the ethical power of this poem resides in its failure to interpret and rationalize the ambivalence of mothers. The voice of the mothers in this poem fails to confess in order to be pardoned. This voice also doesn't shun responsibility but automatically stays in existence with all its taxing labour and exhaustion.

This ethics of self-restraint pervades the entire scope of 'Ararat', where maternal presence is positioned within a family constellation of loss, conflict, and repression. In these poems, maternal presence is not re-inscribed as a position of refuge either. This occurs because maternal presence is positioned within an imperfect system of relationships. In 'Ararat', maternal presence remains neither idealized nor pathological. It is implicated rather than positioned within a binary structure of either nurturing or destructive functions of motherhood, where there exists a tension between either/or constructs.

Instead of presenting mother's love as a corrective to familial dissolution, the poems recognize that mothering must function within those fractures. Care is present, but it is present with no illusion about it. The refusal of comfort is no refusal of responsibility. It is a demand for ethical truth-telling. Gluck's refusal of comfort reveals the cultural mandate of mothers to provide emotional coherence to family, no matter what the condition of it may be.

These critical impulses which find psychological deficiency within the maternal restraint of Gluck's work disregard this moral aspect. In these poems, the management of emotions is not symptomatic. It is strategic.

Through the non-explanation of the emotional, Gluck resists the reduction of the mother to the performance of the emotional. In the maternal subject, the self is not at the disposal of moral judgment. It is opaque, opaque as a form of resistance to the transparent requirements of institutional motherhood.

However, the Matins sequence further articulates this stance by correlating the concepts of motherhood and self-reflection. Patterns become a place of moral investigation rather than consolation. Patterns do not confirm identity. Indeed, they disturb identity. This particular identity, that of the mother, continues to encounter the confines of comprehension and care. This state of motherhood symbolizes a task that must be maintained despite its association with discomfort or confusion (Gluck, Matins).

The mother figure is very clear in articulating what she is capable of knowing or preventing. In 'The Pomegranate' by Boland, the Persephone myth is also reversed not towards maternal authority, but maternal uncertainty. The speaker understands that love is not an ability to be foresighted or protective; she acknowledges that even knowledge is incomplete. It is the fruit that makes me come to know as the only legend I have ever loved, not because it is reassuring but because it is a name of loss as something that cannot be avoided (Boland, "The Pomegranate"). Motherhood, in this instance, is ethically defined by acts performed without full foresight of their outcomes.

In 'Metamorphosis' by Gluck, the voice of the mother is not the one that interprets and explains the transformation of her child. The poem does not present the mother as a source of facts or moral instruction. This silence is not evasive. It is principled. Gluck attempts to defy the cultural norm of mothers having to know the lives of their children and being able to tell them in a coherent manner. (Gluck, Metamorphosis). The responsibility of the mother remains without the epistemic authority.

These common accents on partial knowledge redefine motherhood as a moral state of humility. Caution is taken without knowing. Love does not grant insight. This form of model disrupts the sentimental ideals of maternal omniscience and positions motherhood in their place as part of ethical risk.

In both poets, motherhood is expressed in a less assertive way, as opposed to confessional poetry. In 'Night Feed', the speaker of the poem, Boland, barely affirms a steady self. The subject of the poem is still the child, the activity, and the time of night. The maternal 'I' is disintegrated into routine. The erasing of the self is not done violently but diluted by responsibility. This style is opposed to autobiographical self-exhibition. The mother is more a subject of ethical focus than a lyrical focus that wants to be acknowledged (Boland, Night Feed).

Emotional austerity is a strategy that is increased by Gluck. In 'Ararat', motherly voice is frequently indirect, and at a distance. Maternal feeling as expressive content is not the focus of the poems; rather, it anticipates relational tension and repress self-justification. The interlocutor does not want to accept herself as a victim or as someone who is in love. This self-denying turns into a moral denial of instrumentalizing motherhood as personal testament (Gluck, 'Ararat').

Both poets defy sentimental plots of motherhood by making motherhood less about emotional self-sacrifice and more about maternal self-assertion. Maternal authority is, instead, based on ethical presence and not expressive visibility. Idealized maternity usually serves as a redemptive process, healing trauma, conflict resolution, or regaining coherence. The two poets openly denounce this narrative logic.

The poems of Boland repeatedly reject redemptive closure. In 'The Pomegranate', there is no healing or justification of separation. The myth predicts a cycle of returning, but the voice of the mother is geared towards loss and not towards renewal. The poem does not allow a change of maternal pain into wisdom or consolation. History or desire is not redeemed by motherhood. It just survives through them (Boland, 'The Pomegranate').

The redemption is more strongly rejected by Gluck. Change in 'Metamorphosis' does not result in reconciliation. The name indicates change, but no change can be witnessed by the reader; the poem does not allow the story to get better. The relations of the mother continue without repentance. (Gluck, 'Metamorphosis').

By rejecting redemption, both poets assert that the concept of motherhood has to be perceived in non-teleological terms. Motherly care is not a guarantee of meaning; in fact, it too requires accountability as well.

Another analytical extension is the redefinition of maternal love by both poets as exposure, as opposed to protection. Instead of shielding the child against the risk, maternal love leaves mother and child vulnerable.

In the work of Boland especially in the book *The Pomegranate*, love is the state that renders loss conceivable. Loving the child means to be aware of the unavoidable separation. Mommy attachment fails to maintain safety. It intensifies risk. The poem, therefore, redefines maternal love as an ethical exposure to pain instead of just emotional protection (Boland, *The Pomegranate*).

A similar exposure is expressed by Gluck. Fracture of families is not mediated by maternal presence in 'Ararat'; instead, it exists within it. Love does not resolve damage. It coexists with it. This denial of motherly love as a protective shield provokes sentimental ideologies which view motherhood as a secure moral cage (Gluck, Ararat). It is this common re-framing that leaves motherhood an ethical openness to vulnerability instead of control or defensive mechanism.

Both poets do not consider silence as nonexistence, but as maternal agency. Silence prevents maternal experience from being appropriated and rendered as spectacle. In 'Hymn' for instance, what remains unarticulated carries greater weight than what is explicitly articulated, rendering thus, silence a significant source of meaning. Gluck's silence is more confrontational. In 'Matins and Metamorphosis', silence breaks the anticipation. It does not want to be explained, confessed, and reconciled. This silence determines the assertion of maternal agency through the rejection of emotional labour required by cultural discourses of motherhood (Gluck, Metamorphosis; Gluck, Matins). Maternal subjectivity in both poets in guaranteed silence is untouched by ideological ensnaring; it does not aspire to be narratively digestible.

While Boland concentrates on a sense of continuity as her substance of ethics, Gluck's routines tend to show a struggle. Care lingers on, but there is no comfort. This marks an important distinction between them. While both poets move away from idealism, they construct maternal ethics of divergent experiences of time. Boland's maternal experience is cyclic.

Her maternal experience is repetitive and interrogative. However, in both Gluck and Boland, maternal duty is not entitled to compensation.

When read comparatively, Boland and Gluck meet in their refusal of the idea of sentimental motherhood but part ways in their expression of ethical seriousness. While Boland emphasizes vigilance and decision in regular time, her maternal figures act, think, and decide within limits of protection. Gluck emphasizes self-restraint, silence, and the refusal of resolution on all accounts. Her maternal figures are ethically engaged but offer no reassurance.

The link between them is their rejection of the institutionalized motherhood. Neither of these poets identifies good motherhood with warmth and stereotyped representation. However, both of them instantiate motherhood as a lived, ethical experience that is inscribed by tiredness, impermanence, and relationship troubles. Emotional control becomes a common tactic, but it has a different impact on both poets' work. It elevates mother's work but simultaneously unmasks relationship troubles.

This comparative reading illustrates that the negation of idealized maternity is not absence of emotions; instead, it is ethical perseverance. Care is neither quantified in terms of emotions nor defined by emotional fulfillment. Both poets alike convey that maternity and subjectiveness can coexist in an ethical and commendable form that is devoid of emotional satisfaction. They go against societal myths regarding maternity and thereby open up new vistas for the representation of maternity in contemporary poetry.

The meaning of motherhood in these poems does not reside in its symbolic or moral signification. It consists in its status as a condition that requires endless moral involvement. Boland and Gluck demonstrate that the moral role of motherhood continues even in the face of emotional breakdown, even when understanding fails, or when, as in care, there is no resolution of conflict. Such insistency deconstructs harmonious discourses about motherhood in terms of emotional fulfillment.

Freed from cultural narratives, the unidealized motherhood is no way anti-maternal; it surely is anti-mythical. In highlighting the importance of moderation, complexity, and responsibility, Boland and Gluck provide poetic interpretations of motherhood that avoid mythological distortions with an emphasis on ethical complexity. Motherhood is significant from the ethics it maintains rather than the promises it keeps.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to investigate how motherhood is figured beyond idealization in Eavan Boland's and Louise Gluck's poetry. The analysis undertaken in this study has illustrated that both poets refuse to buy into ideologically influenced cultural myths of motherhood.

Boland's poetry always finds the meaning of mothering in attentiveness and continuity. Through night care and separation imagery, the meaning of mothering appears as ethical alertness practiced in the everyday. Her mothering figures never aspire to symbolically dominant roles. They remain ethically active through persistence and recognition

of boundaries. By prioritizing the repetitive and the restrictive aspects of mothering, Boland contests conventional narratives of motherhood by exposing the arduous labor hidden beneath idealized expressions of maternal care. Boland, the ethical significance of mothering specifically arises from its everyday and unremarked character. Gluck's poetry challenges cultural narratives about motherhood; it embodies an even more ascetic but no less rigorous restatement of maternal ethics. Gluck's maternal characters embody self-control and silence. Maternal obligation proceeds without consolation, and caring happens without the assurance of emotional compensation.

A comparative reading reveals that while tone, cultural politics, and poetic approach are clearly different, both poets share a refusal of idealized maternity. Both poets present a view of maternity as an ethical gesture that must be maintained in conditions of tiredness, uncertainty, and imperfect comprehension. The use of emotional economy is a shared tactic. In Boland, it elevates maternal work through a refusal of spectacle; whereas in Gluck, one witnesses a refusal of consolation.

Through the lens of feminist interpretations of maternal ideology and ethics of care in Boland and Gluck's work, the present study has attempted to make three significant contributions to the field of research that investigates these poets. Firstly, it has reconfigured the concepts of maternal restriction and ambivalence as an ethical stance and not a psychologically or emotionally weak spot in a mother's personality. Secondly, it has provided a close reading that surpasses the symbolic, national, or psychoanalytic frameworks of understanding motherhood as a subject of study. Thirdly, it has shown that the poetic form can express the tenets of motherhood without the need to invoke mythology or idealism. Finally, this essay contends that a non-idealist conception of motherhood is not a reduced form of care. Through their exploration of endurance, limitation, and ethical presence, Boland and Gluck demonstrate how a non-idealist portrayal of mothers is conceivable and achievable within contemporary poetry. Their poetical efforts indicate that maternal ethics rest not on what is promised, but on what is sustained.

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