

In Sycorax's Kitchen: Metaphors of a Feeding Mother in Marina Warner's *Indigo*

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Abstract

Marina Warner's novel Indigo has long been interpreted as a postcolonial rewriting of Shakespeare's The Tempest, giving more space and voice to its female characters. However, there is another aspect in the novel that is worth exploring. Warner populates her novel with a number of female characters who play motherly roles and who provide their motherly care in different forms and on different levels. Warner employs the metaphor of feeding to uncover several aspects of womanhood and motherhood. The paper explores the metaphor on the biological, cultural, social and spiritual levels from the feminist perspective.

Keywords: body, feeding, identity, motherhood, Marina Warner

Introduction

The British writer Marina Warner (1946) is an author whose work is divided into two main areas: her scholarly work on myth, symbolism and fairy tales; and her fiction, in which she merges the mythical and fantastic with the real, often reshaping old texts using new voices which were previously unheard. Perhaps her most famous novel is *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (1992), which is a revision and rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The novel is set on the fictional Caribbean island of Liamuiga and in London, and it covers a time span of over three hundred years. It tells the story of Christopher Everard, who conquered and colonized the island, intertwined with the lives of its indigenous inhabitants, represented by Sycorax, the healer and indigo-maker, and her adoptive children. As the story moves from the 17th century colonial Caribbean to 20th century post-colonial London it follows the lives of these characters' descendants, the Everard family and their Carib nurse Serafine, who links the two spatial-temporal layers.

Given the theme of the novel, perhaps the most prominent approach is post-colonial, exploring the colonial past and the postcolonial present of the setting. Apart from Warner herself speaking of her coming to terms with her family's colonial role (Warner, *Signs* 264), scholars such as Chantal Zabus, Cao Li or María José Chivite De León have also rediscovered various aspects of Caribbean-British relations in the text. In addition, feminist criticism of the novel, represented by scholars including Richard Todd and Natali Bogosyan, focuses mainly on female voices – above all the voice of Sycorax, whom Warner (unlike Shakespeare) allows to speak.

However, there is another strong aspect in the novel which should not be overlooked, and which offers a different perspective. Motherhood and its many dimensions are presented here on an extensive scale. Richard Todd claims that “Marina Warner takes on recent feminist commentary that has noted the striking absence in the work of Shakespeare of figures of motherhood” (109). Indeed, Warner introduces a variety of mother figures, representing different approaches to this role. This paper explores motherly care through the prism of food and feeding; besides representing the mother's basic biological capacity, feeding also serves as a metaphor for other functions performed by the characters which may act as substitutes for nurturing, such as touching, healing, story-telling, or creating social bonds. The metaphor works on the biological, cultural, social and spiritual levels and allows for a multidimensional perspective on the protagonists.

Theorizing the Feeding Mother

Food, as a basic biological condition of human existence, is a multilayered concept, incorporating other meanings besides its biological necessity. Since the 1930s food has been acknowledged by scholars as a means of understanding culture,

with approaches ranging from anthropology and sociology to history and literature, discussing the actual and symbolic significance of food in human life.¹ Apart from the necessity of individual consumption, food also has a strong social aspect. Jon Holtzman argues that “unlike our other most private activities food is integrally constituted through its open sharing, whether in rituals, feasts, reciprocal exchange, or contexts in which it is bought and sold” (373). It is its social aspect in which we find the great symbolic power of food, and it is this aspect which draws the attention of scholars, writers and artists. Sarah Sceats claims that food “is a currency of love and desire, a medium of expression and communication” (11). Sharing food creates bonds in cultures across the globe, and ritual eating plays an essential role in many religions. Eating “is an act that (re)orders, constructs, destroys and mobilizes across cultural and geographical distances” (Lavis 2). Food, in its social aspect, facilitates the relation of an individual to the group or to another individual. This is the aspect I explore in the paper, focusing on the female characters of the novel.

The connection of food and women seems natural, as it is a biological capacity of the female body to produce food to nurture infants, “which categorises them [women] as feeders” (Sceats 2). When the biological aspect is taken a step further we find the stereotypical image of a woman tied to the hearth to provide food for the whole family. As Sarah Sceats notes, “in western culture women have traditionally borne most of the burden of cooking for and nourishing others” (Sceats 2). As a result, the biological connection of food and women/mothers has meant that women’s value has frequently been judged according to their ability to nourish others. All the other functions of a mother towards her children and family – love, care, acceptance and support, or the relationships she enters – are viewed through the prism of this basic need.

In the figure of the mother, the individual and the social aspects of food are combined. She herself must eat to be able to give herself, her milk, to feed others. Food may therefore act as an extension of the mother’s body, to retain or to create a bond with the child. It also assists her in creating communities, in tying the family together. The mother often projects her love into her offerings of food, which can take various forms and degrees of intensity. Excessive nutrition from the mother, or its opposite – undernourishment – is often associated with her (in)ability to love or care. In the metaphorical language of psychoanalysis, this is transformed into the archetype of the Great/Terrible Mother. In Carl Jung’s theory, the Great Mother archetype symbolizes creativity, birth, fertility and nurturing. She reflects “all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, furthers growth and fertility” (Jung 82). However, this positive force has a dark side, the Terrible Mother with her destructive power. She “connotes what devours, seduces, and poisons” (I 82). The limitless power to create/destroy can be perceived in parallel with the mother’s power/failure to feed. In a similar way as she generates life, she can support that life with food, with her nurturing. In spite of the great power that resides in the figure of the

mother, her position is ambiguous, as she is socially and politically powerless due to her domestic position, which is perceived as inferior in Western culture.

The ambiguous character and position of a woman/mother is also discussed in Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, which draws on the Freudian perception of the mother by her child. As the mother and her child form a biological unity, the child being dependent on her/his mother, the child perceives the mother as another, close subject and not as a distant object. "She is the other subject, an object that guarantees my being as subject" (Kristeva 32). She therefore becomes abject – close, yet separate, at the same time repulsive and attractive, both loved and feared for her great power. The awkward relationship with the mother figure is perhaps caused by her granting us life, but life which is mortal and full of pain (Kristeva 158). Food is frequently used to set up, continue and ease this relationship. It can symbolize the life that the mother can generate, but feeding others can be perceived as the execution of the mother's power as well.

The several dualities embodied in the figure of the mother – individual/social, creative/destructive, powerful/powerless, (un)able to feed/care/love – all contribute to her ambivalent status, which becomes evident when she provides food to meet the needs of her dependents. Food acts as an instrument for her to create or enhance relationships with her children or society, and also to form her identity. It is within these terms that I analyze two major and two minor female characters of the novel – Sycorax, the 17th century indigo-maker and healer, Serafine, the 20th century old storyteller and nurse, plus Gillian and Astrid, two young but dysfunctional mothers living in the 20th century.

Sycorax: The Indigo-Maker

In *The Tempest*, Sycorax is "the blue-eyed hag" (1.2), the witch who is not in fact given the space to express herself, but is only mentioned as a former ruler of the island. In Warner's version of the story, Sycorax is given a voice, and she plays one of the main roles. Sycorax represents the island viewed by the first colonizers as a place of wonders and materialized fantasies.² Her transition from an 'ordinary' mother, through an indigo-maker and healer, to a transcendental level of existence is marked by her specific use of food. Here I explore her use of food as a creative/destructive force which contributes to her (dis)connection with her family and community.

As a young wife and mother, Sycorax lives in the centre of her community. Although she is not an ordinary woman (being the daughter of one chieftain and the sister of another) the reader expects 'ordinary' behaviour in terms of her providing food and care for her family. However, Sycorax does not conform to the traditional image of a mother. Her preparation of food is unconventional, and the food is often inedible, making her "family run to other, more dependable cooks; who were not

always experimenting” (*Indigo* 109).³ Sycorax’s great knowledge of the local flora and fauna, and her desire to experiment, makes her exceptional. On the other hand, food does not become a safe way of creating a bond with her children, and her youthful egocentrism means that her children are on the margins of her interests, left to the care of others.

Warner parallels Sycorax’s passion for food experiments with her bodily passion. As a young woman she “used to turn men into beasts” (I 110). Her body is “undiscovered territory” (I 108) to her, and she discovers it in a similar fashion to how she explores the properties of plants and animals. A Freudian analogy of food and sexuality is presented, with certain foods, like oysters, symbolically expressing Sycorax’s attitude to both. “Some of her ways with spices were quickly adopted: [...] with a sprinkling of ground pepper and chilly bean, and a drop of lime juice, they [oysters] tasted more savoury” (I 108). At this stage she is neither a functional mother, nurturing and nourishing her children, nor a virtuous wife. Nevertheless, she is still accepted by her community.

The shift occurs when the dead bodies of African slaves wash up on the shores of the island. The fact that Sycorax can hear their voices and brings life out of death – she delivers the baby Dulé from his drowned mother’s body – shows her power, which is feared as well as respected in her society. Her previous failure to feed her own children is now, in her fifties, shifted into her capacity to breastfeed the orphaned baby. The witching, unnatural character of an otherwise natural act of nursing a baby can be perceived as a subversive act against the law of nature, and it results in Sycorax’s alienation from human society. As a “wise woman”, a sorceress, she becomes abject and has to move out of the village, marking her position as liminal. Her difference means that she is perceived as a heterogeneous element, the ‘filth’ which the community, the ‘self’, must exclude. She represents a form of pollution which endangers the community’s integrity. In her seclusion she builds a new autonomy and becomes an indigo-maker as well as a famous healer. The shift is not perceived by her as a punishment, but as a liberation from her previous life and the social rules that bound it. In her new position she is able to devote herself to her passion for ‘cooking’, and to develop her powers.

Warner parallels the alchemy of indigo-making with the preparation of food. It is described as a long process, consisting of several steps, with the necessary ingredients and the right conditions, temperature and timing. The smell of indigo, compared to the cooked beans, sometimes carries through the air to the villagers, who laugh: “That stinking Sycorax at her stews again” (I 90). Indigo-making is viewed by Warner as a creative activity, bringing pleasure as well as prosperity to Sycorax. Together with her healing, her art is appreciated and respected, as opposed to her previous ‘ordinary’ preparation of food.

Under the influence of her new ‘cooking’ her body is changed as well. The trade of indigo-making is imprinted on her skin, the whites of her eyes, and also her tongue, since she tastes the indigo grain to see if it is smooth enough. She takes on

a bluish shade, a sign of her trade. Metaphorically, indigo becomes her 'bread'; it enters her body, disrupts her body's boundaries, and it becomes the route which re-connects her to her society, similarly to how her healing does. The giving, helping nature of her trade makes her a Great Mother character, "the maternal imago" (Zabus, "Power" 135). Although she failed as a biological mother, she succeeds as a foster mother to Dulé, and later to the Arawak girl Ariel, and also as a spiritual Mother of her people, feeding them her remedies – both material (her potions and concoctions) and mental (her advice). These two levels are linked. Sycorax's advice (words) can be viewed as a form of non-material nurturing. Although discourse is usually associated with paternity (Kristeva 45), it is also one of the maternal functions to nurture not only with food but also with words of comfort and support, such as those which Sycorax offers to her people.

Further changes to Sycorax's body and identity come with the arrival of the European colonizers. They see her first as an animal (climbing a tree), then as a witch, and they try to smoke her out of her refuge. This echoes the witch hunts taking place in Europe in the same period, and ordinary Europeans' fear of single women with a certain type of knowledge. In the encounter she is severely injured, and she suffers immensely. Although Ariel saves her, she is in pain and her body remains deformed. Her destroyed, repugnant body can be perceived as abject – unruly, grotesque, and resistant to categorization, as defined by Kristeva (4). Mary Russo associates the grotesque body with animals, degradation, filth, death and rebirth (Carson 125), and it is in this way that Sycorax is viewed by the colonizers. In unbearable pain, she is no longer able to be a nurturing, giving Mother, and instead she changes into a malevolent witch. She curses those around her, and her speech becomes destructive, revealing her as a Terrible Mother.

The process of Sycorax's transformation culminates in the final stage of the novel, when, after her death in the battle between the colonizers and the indigenous inhabitants, she is buried under her tree, but her spirit remains alive. The bodiless Sycorax is embodied in the island, and she moves to the mythological and transcendental level of existence. She becomes a *genius loci*, worshipped by the locals who come to the tree to have their wishes fulfilled; this echoes the crowds praying to the Virgin Mary. Sycorax in this respect can be viewed as a motherly figure patiently listening to her children's complaints and desires. She is also identified with the powers of the island and presented as the ruler of time. Here again the writer returns to cooking and preparing indigo. The islanders' conception of time is cyclic, compared to a bowl, "in which substances and essences were tumbled and mixed" (I 122). Sycorax is depicted as the one holding the spoon and stirring the contents, commanding the elements to return "in the churn of the heavens" (I 212). Time, according to her, is blue like the indigo she used to make. The colour blue, usually associated with water, gives time a shape-shifting character, in this case a circular shape of a bowl, allowing for a creative approach such as that adopted by Sycorax.

Warner employs the phenomenon of cooking as a metaphor for constructing Sycorax's identity, from the preparation of food, through cooking indigo as a creative and emancipating activity, to 'cooking' time – representing her transcendental and mythological powers. In the character of Sycorax Warner subverts the image of the mother as pure, perfect and stable. She brings together two opposed poles of womanhood – the witch with her fantastic, abject, anarchic body, and the good, virtuous, bodiless mother – close to the ideal virgin mother, the Madonna, discussed in Warner's work *Alone of All her Sex*. The result of the long transformational process is a picture of a complex woman with a metamorphic identity who is able to cook who she is.

Serafine: The Storyteller

The contemporary counterpart of Sycorax is Serafine, an old nurse/servant in the Everard family, who can also be viewed as a Great Mother archetype, not only towards children but also within the wider community. She can be viewed as a descendant of Sycorax, inheriting some of her healing capacities, but on a smaller scale. Her character is depicted on two levels. The first is her ability to feed/care for others, and the other is her story-telling capacity. Both levels are interconnected and allow Serafine to fulfill at least some of the maternal functions.

Serafine is a West Indian woman born on the island of Liamuiga, who always belonged to the household of the Everard family. As a young woman she was taken to England when the family moved there, but she had to leave her own daughter on the island. Although perfectly capable of fulfilling her maternal functions, under these circumstances she becomes a dysfunctional biological mother. However, she becomes a very welcoming 'shadow mother' in the Everard family, taking care of both children and adults alike. As a nurse and maidservant she has a specific position in the family – although only a few years older than the head of the family, Ant, she was his nurse after his mother's death, and possibly also his concubine after the death of his first wife. She was a nurse to his son Kit and also, at the time when the novel is set, to Kit's daughter Miranda and Xanthe, Ant's daughter by his second wife Gillian. Serafine's specific position is symbolized by the key to a private garden that the family can use. The garden in general is a common symbol for fertility and the feminine, also representing an enclosed and protected space (Stewart 184). As the keeper of the garden key, given to her by Ant, Serafine represents a protective force. In psychoanalysis the garden also symbolizes consciousness, while the forest, as a wild and open space, symbolizes the unconscious (Stewart 184). In Serafine the garden aspect prevails, although deep inside her she remembers the Caribbean rainforest of her youth. It is as if her life was divided by the ocean and by her forced move to London. Her London life is associated with the garden, a tamed version of natural space, and its positive,

protective connotations which she embodies – though she can still remember the dark forest of Liamuiga that she had to leave behind and bury deep in her heart and mind.

Serafine provides for the biological and emotional needs of the family, serving them food which is comforting (e.g. golden syrup sandwiches, soothing tea with plenty of sugar in it, and baby bottle-feed). Sweetness is the most prominent taste associated with her, underlying her motherly character. Her flat smells of something sticky, and even her descriptions of the environment are sweet. “On the leeward side of my island, the water’s often calm and heavy as syrup, the breath of the wind sweet and shallow like a young girl sleeping, aïah” (I 217). Serafine’s sweetness of character is symbolically linked with sugar, the main crop of the Liamuiga plantations, a much-desired taste and a valuable commodity in European households. As Warner points out, “I put something sweet into almost every chapter of the book – stealthily – just to hint how pervasively sugar flows through our world” (“Rich Pickings” 30). Serafine’s feeding role is emphasized by the kitchen, a space she is associated with. The kitchen is a symbolic and actual space of her own, where she belongs and feels safe. There she is able to oppose Gillian in the argument over the baby Xanthe. As an experienced nurse providing feeding, as well as baths, care, emotional help and safety, she meets all the requirements of a perfect mother.

When we compare Serafine to Sycorax and her higher level of motherhood, we may notice that Serafine is also an expert at healing. It is possible to view her knowledge of herbs and spices and their properties as inherited from Sycorax, although this knowledge is not so prominent in Serafine. She is able to relieve discomfort and assuage people’s problems: “Gillian used a paregoric Serafine had brewed for her from peppermint and ordinary tealeaves, and the crack healed quickly and she never ran a fever” (I 54). However, Serafine has her own way of helping, which is storytelling. Usually her speech is not extremely informative in terms of facts, but it is interwoven with stories which have a similar function as her food – to calm, to sooth, to bring comfort, and to educate. Storytelling can thus be paralleled with feeding. As Kristeva points out, “[there] is language instead of the good breast” (45). However, Serafine not only substitutes but also complements the biological (food) with the mental (language). Serafine adapts the stories according to her listeners, which only adds to the perception of her as a ‘sweet’ character. “The stories of Manjiku she heard on the island, when she was herself a girl, had not had happy endings [...] But this savage story isn’t seemly for the little English girls, so Serafine has adapted it, as storytellers do” (I 224). Her creative approach to storytelling links Serafine to Sycorax, whose creativity finds an outlet in food. Even the fantastic aspects of Sycorax’s activities – as a sorceress – are mirrored in Serafine, who can “conjure” the island in her stories “even for those who had never been there, like Miranda” (I 51). Warner claims that “the storyteller often occupies a position both inside the society to which she belongs, and outside,

sequestered from it” (Warner, *Signs* 266), a position from which she can understand her own world and understand what lies ahead. Serafine occupies that liminal position, linking her with Sycorax in her position of a healer and a sorceress, which parallels the ambivalent character of the mother figure. Serafine is abject on the social level. Although she is accepted and welcomed by the children, adults perceive her as the other, placed on the other side of the border. Her skin – along with her cultural and social background – qualify her to remain abject within the family. She never becomes an integral part of the family ‘body’ and is perceived by some of the family’s members (Gillian) as ‘filth’ threatening this ‘body’.

A very strong element of Serafine is her hands. Just like her stories, her touch can bring comfort and care. Little Miranda loves Serafine’s hands “for these were the hands which washed her in the bath and patted her dry and spooned food into her breakfast bowl and beat up the milk powder till the lumps were gone and spread jam on her bread” (I 4). Her hands can be perceived as an instrument of giving, as an extension of the mother’s body which helps to create the bond with the child or other people. Touch can have a creative quality (Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel), and a healing or comforting power (a mother’s touch to ease the child’s pain), as well as a destructive character (examples are endless). Serafine’s hands also represent a symbolic connection to Sycorax and her production of indigo. Indigo is “the colour of the ink used for the first pattern”, suggesting there is “the story or scheme that lay beneath the visible layers” (Warner, *Signs* 265). Serafine’s palms look as if they have been steeped in ink. Her palms are like paper or a page in a book from which she reads/tells her stories, although Serafine’s storytelling is based on orality and not on reading a written text. However, her hands can be perceived as having many layers (of skin) uncovering ever-deeper meanings.

At first sight Serafine seems a one-dimensional, ever positive, good-mother figure, without the shadow of the destructive Terrible Mother. It is also difficult to perceive her as abject, since Warner describes her as being loved by the children without any reservations. However, her position among the adults is problematic, and her power(lessness), her liminal position within and on the margin of the family, makes her an ambivalent figure. Although the positive aspect of Serafine is highly pervasive, she has a deep, dark side which is hidden as if under many layers of ink, of her skin, where she hides her memories and her wounds.

Dysfunctional Mothers

Apart from Sycorax and Serafine, there are two more mothers in the novel who are worth mentioning. Both Gillian and Astrid belong to the Everard family by marriage, but they are antagonistic to each other. Although they do not display the complexity of the two great mother figures mentioned above, they complete the

spectrum of female characters perceived in the novel through the prism of nourishment. Both of them can be viewed as prototypes of a dysfunctional biological mother based on their attitude to and use of food, which on a greater scale reflects their inability to create bonds with their children, with the wider family or society.

Gillian is a rich woman who married her much older husband Sir Ant Everard to achieve a higher social status. Although successful in her life, she is insecure in her new position. For this reason she puts a lot of effort into showing that she belongs to this higher class. This is reflected in her wish to find a more appropriate apartment for the family, her showing off of wealth, or her servile behaviour when speaking to people of higher rank. Although she is described as a loyal wife, as a mother she is not very effective.

On the basic biological level, Gillian fails as a nurturing mother. Although she attempts to nurse her newborn baby, after a breast inflammation she refuses to continue. Her body has the capacity to 'produce' food but she is not willing to feed it to her daughter Xanthe. Neither is she willing to feed her daughter from a bottle, as it interferes with her life of comfort, so she leaves this feeding function to Serafine. On the whole, Gillian finds her daughter's "physical processes repulsive" (I 54). Gillian's problematic attitude to the physical aspects of mothering resonates with Kristeva's notion of motherhood as polluting. The female body is often perceived as without firm boundaries, leaky, oozing bodily fluids.⁴ These represent the filth transgressing body boundaries and belonging to its margin (Kristeva 69, 71). As the fluids disrespect the body's boundaries, it can be perceived as if the body itself were threatening its own integrity from within. Since Gillian insists on the firmness and the cleanness of her body boundaries, her feeling of threat grows. Mary Douglas says "pollution is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined" (113). Gillian is afraid to have her body boundaries disrupted by her own 'filth' (milk, blood) as well as by her daughter's (excrement, vomit), which can be perceived as a rejection of her own body as well as of motherhood as such.

Gillian's inability to create a physical bond with her daughter through nourishment parallels the lack of an emotional bond between them. Gillian feels guilty for not feeling enough love for her daughter. Instead, "[h]er principal feeling when she was near Xanthe was fear" (I 53). Relating herself emotionally to her daughter means for her another form of breaching boundaries, of endangering her identity. According to Kristeva, "abjection acknowledges it [subject] to be in perpetual danger" (9). With its boundaries breached, the subject (mother) may feel endangered by the child who disturbs the system and order of the mother's body and life. Gillian embodies the paradox that on one hand she wants to defend her body boundaries, her identity, against her child and the maternity that Xanthe symbolizes, yet on the other hand, if she wants to create a bond with the child, her boundaries must be disrupted, whether physically or emotionally. However, as she is not capable of 'opening up', of giving herself, to her daughter, she only

remains an observer of her daughter's early life, unable to cater for her emotional and other needs.

Unable to create genuine, either physical (through food or touch) or emotional bonds, Gillian relies instead on a formal relationship. Her superficial mothering is reflected at the christening ceremony, when she views her baby as a trophy to present to the prominent guests, and to be proud of. "Gillian held out her child like a picture she was considering whether to buy, and when she began to turn her head and gnaw at her fist and cry, begged her, 'Don't start that, please don't'" (I 51). She is unable to calm the baby naturally because she does not understand its needs. Nevertheless, Gillian wishes to be in control, but again her desire is only superficial, corresponding with her control of her body boundaries. With all her natural maternal functions delegated to Serafine, Gillian feels threatened by Serafine's experience and expertise. The conflict between them over the baby culminates at the christening, where Gillian uses her formal power, originating from her higher social status, over Serafine's earned respect and experience. As a result she attempts, and succeeds, in expelling Serafine from the house.

The other dysfunctional mother to be discussed is Astrid – the wife of Kit, Ant's son from his first marriage. She is Belgian by origin, with a husband who is not very successful or supportive. Living in the shadow of the great Sir Ant and his rich wife Gillian, they remain marginal within the family. Besides this, they also have to fight their own demons. Astrid suffers from a lack of money and esteem, but also from psychological problems and alcohol abuse. All these problems contribute to her feelings of restlessness, insecurity, and exclusion, which are reflected in her problematic motherhood. Her (dys)functioning as a mother is revealed in her attitude to cooking, as well as in other aspects of her relationship to her daughter Miranda.

Astrid's kitchen is a telling symbol of her attitude to cooking and feeding. It is not a place of warm acceptance, calmness and unselfish giving, like Serafine's, but it is presented rather as a battlefield where Astrid fights with her husband and vents her anger towards the in-laws and herself, "where she now banged her head [on the table]" (I 15). In a rage she throws kitchen utensils on the floor, and instead of using them to produce nourishment for her family she curses Ant's family with them. "One by one she had picked up the cooking utensils from the floor, and with each one, as she aligned it in its place in the drawer, she cursed – her husband, her husband's father, his wife, [...] and above all, [...], the new Everard baby, Xanthe" (I 27). The image of the kitchen as a positive space, as the centre of family life, is distorted. Instead, it is presented as the centre of its destruction, with Astrid as a Terrible Mother type, and also as a malevolent witch – paralleled with Sycorax in her later years. Although Astrid's use of speech is destructive, it must be stated that she does not aim her anger toward her daughter. However, her negativism has a great influence on her mothering capacity.

Astrid explains her lack of expertise with her daughter as a result of the young age at which she became a mother. Warner describes Astrid as egocentric, hysterical and always too immersed in her own problems. She is absent (or absent-minded) when nurture, support or comfort is needed by her daughter. “[Miranda] was crying too and wanted to take her mother’s hand and hear her voice; but Astrid’s spirit was somewhere else” (I 63). Her immersion in herself is best illustrated by the scene in the department store, where Astrid completely forgets that her daughter is there with her, so focused is she on her shopping. “‘Oh God, it’s so awful of me! I forgot I brought you!’ she exclaimed as the store detective pushed Miranda into her mother’s sleek legs, only to provoke a little skipping step to the side. ‘Careful! My best nylons!’” (I 240). The quotation suggests that Astrid avoids a full and close relationship with her daughter. Instead, she remains enclosed in her own shell, and the normal bond with her child, as a continuation of the prenatal state, is manifested only by an occasional touching of hands.

For Astrid the touch of her hands seems to be the only medium (different from food) to express her love for her daughter, who “liked the feel of her mother’s hands, working, smoothing, pinching, lifting, for it was seldom that she touched her” (I 17). The mother’s touch thus becomes a substitute, though rare, of other functions which she should fulfil. For Astrid, similarly to Gillian, the child represents a threat to her body’s boundaries and personal integrity, as theorized by Kristeva. In her mental state Astrid strives to keep her integrity intact, and to guard her own borders – which, as a consequence, increases the distance between her (subject) and her daughter (object). Her one-dimensional expression of love and care towards her daughter parallels her inability to create bonds with other members of the family and society, which confirms her marginal position.

Both Astrid and Gillian are presented as dysfunctional biological mothers, incapable of catering for the needs of their children. Sceats claims that “[f]ailures of nurturing don’t have to be associated with malignity, and may on the contrary reflect a mother’s own insecurities and inadequacies” (18). This applies to both women whose inability to feed their children/family uncovers their inner insecurity, whether stemming from a new social position or psychological problems. Warner further mirrors their failure to feed in the lack of bonds with their children and family. Both women are afraid of disrupting their body boundaries, of ‘stretching’ to create bonds. The distance between the mother and the child, the border territory of abjection, becomes too wide, and it remains empty. With their boundaries intact, Astrid and Gillian remain distant objects rather than abject. Furthermore, their desire to connect and their inability to do so cause them to occupy ambiguous and marginal positions.

Conclusion

In the novel Warner introduces a variety of mothers presented on different levels, occupying different positions, with their identity undergoing transformations. Perhaps the most complex character is Sycorax, with her creative/destructive approach to food and life, who embodies the abject mother of Kristeva's theory and also the Jungian Great Mother archetype, representing all dimensions. Serafine, with her 'mental food' of storytelling, is presented as a rather one-dimensional, prevalently positive character. The negative aspect is represented by Astrid and Gillian, who, each in her own way, fail in the maternal role, as reflected in their inability to 'feed' their children – which is linked to their lack of bonds with both their children and with society as a whole. In Warner's view the mother is an ambivalent figure, embodying great power but also powerlessness, occupying a liminal position with regard to her children/family/society. As the analysis has shown, this position presupposes the mother's willingness to transgress her own body boundaries in order to create a bond with the child and with society. The border territory of abjection is filled with offerings of food, touch or words as tokens of love, and it reveals the in/ability of Warner's motherly figures to play their roles. Warner develops biological feeding into a metaphor of motherly care sustaining life on many levels, confirming the mother's identity, position and relationships.

Notes

¹ The seminal work of the anthropologist Audrey Richards *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe: A functional study of nutrition among the Southern Bantu* (1932). Richards is considered the founder of nutritional anthropology - followed by Margaret Mead, who pointed out the centrality of food to human culture. Other scholars have also discussed food's ability to convey meaning, among them R. Barthes and C. Lévi-Strauss.

² Warner considers the Caribbean a "cross-cultural space, a mercantile and political confluence of heterogeneous peoples, histories, and languages, a shifting, metamorphic, and phantasmal zone" (*Fantastic Metamorphoses* 21)

³ Subsequent page references preceded with I are given in parentheses in the text.

⁴ Luce Irigaray discusses the fluidity of the female body in her work *This Sex which is not One* (215). See also Margrit Shildrick's *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics*.

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