

Mother, She Wrote

*Matrilineal Narratives in
Contemporary Women's Writing*

Yi-Lin Yu



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PETER LANG

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

*Mother,
She Wrote*

"Yi-Lin Yu's deployment of powerful psychoanalytic ideas of subject-relation theorists is complex and persuasive, her wide choice of literary texts challenges oversimple formulations of matrilineal narratives, and her attention to narrative structure demonstrates her attention to textual detail and structure. In addition, the exposition is beautifully lucid and the scholarship well grounded."

*Alison Easton, Senior Lecturer in English Literature,
Lancaster University, United Kingdom*

"Yi-Lin Yu's exciting and innovative work on matrilineal family romances is an admirable study of theories and texts in the most recent phase of feminist maternal scholarship. Her feminist readings of matrilineal narratives extend into new areas, such as the diasporic narrative, bringing the complex insights afforded by literary texts into a new synthesis of theory and literary practice."

*Tess Cosslett, Author of Women Writing Childbirth:
Modern Discourses of Motherhood*



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For my parents and
in memory of my late grandparents

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Introduction

Women who write fiction write stories about mothers and daughters. Often, a woman writer's first published story is about the relationship between a mother and a daughter. Nor do women writers abandon this subject as they grow in their craft and their lives. They return to the literary contemplation and portrayal of mothers and daughters again and again throughout their careers. Women of every race, ethnicity, religion, region, and historical period write stories about mothers and daughters, and the similarities among the stories are greater than the differences because what we share as women, at least in terms of this primary relationship, is more than whatever else divides us.¹

Here Susan Koppelman suggests a close connection between women's personal experience and their creation of literary texts. The personal experience in question is the one almost all women share as their first, most intimate relationship: the mother-daughter relationship. The theoretical aspects of the mother-daughter relationship have received attention and respect, especially in women's studies, since the appearance of Adrienne Rich's book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* in 1976. One of the chapters in Rich's book, "Motherhood and Daughterhood," which she calls, "the core of my book,"² is a blend of autobiography, myth, fiction, interviews, and anecdotes, covering a variety of disciplines: literature, psychology, sociology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology. Rich's chapter on mothers and daughters indicates the depth, the diversity, and the complexity of the subject and stimulates a new interest in it. This new interest has been particularly evident among feminist scholars, and it has manifested itself in various kinds of women's writing. In literature, for instance, women have written about mothers and daughters in poetry, plays, fiction, short stories, novels, and autobiographies. As Koppelman mentions, the mother-daughter relationship has long been an important preoccupation of women writers, and it seems to serve as an unfailing source of inspiration for them. In their use of the genres of memoir, autobiography, biography, and fiction, twentieth-century women writers such as Virginia Woolf, Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Maxine Hong Kingston have devoted themselves to writing about mothers and

daughters. This similarity among women of different cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds is what Koppelman envisions as a shared preoccupation of womanhood.

Realizing the important place of mother-daughter relationships in the works of several women writers, I have chosen this subject as the main concern of my book, but I will focus in particular on an exploration of texts by a host of women writers published predominantly from the 1970s to the present—Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, Joy Kogawa, Amy Tan, Jung Chang, Marianne Fredriksson, Margaret Forster, Margaret Drabble, and Judy Budnitz as well as many feminist maternal writers and thinkers. A majority of these women writers participate in the development outlined in the previous paragraph: the subject matter of their works circles around motherhood, mothering, and mother-daughter relationships. In their presentation of these topics, they are all involved in the textual practice of breaking genres: of interweaving autobiography, biography, fiction, memoir, and other literary genres. Furthermore, their common experience of being women in male-dominated societies creates similarities in their delineations of the mother-daughter relationship. However, at the same time, given their considerable differences of race, class, culture, and geographical and historical locations, we are able to comprehend how mother-daughter relationships might be nuanced according to these valences. Through the recognition of their differences, we can enrich our understanding of both mothers and daughters.

More significant, having this mother-daughter matrix as a frame of reference for my main investigation in the book, I will also look at a wider parameter, the grandmother-mother-daughter triad, which has formed a distinct mode of women's writing, matrilineal narratives. Tess Cosslett defines matrilineal narratives thus: "a 'matrilineal narrative' I define as one which either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how the identity of a central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors."³ Cosslett's definition rings true to Jo Malin's study of the embedded maternal narratives in twentieth-century women's autobiographies. Featuring the blurring of the boundary between autobiography and biography in women's writings about themselves and their mothers, Malin claims that the interweaving of two life stories with the mother as "a subject or rather an 'intersubject' in her daughter's autobiography" establishes a dialogic relationship between mothers and daughters.⁴

What I would like to add to Cosslett's definition of matrilineal narratives is a further expansion of matrilinealism, which I will develop at length in my book. As will be elaborated on in parts 2 and 3, there are certain important features concerning the representations of

matrilinealism. First, there is a sense of strong identification between mothers and daughters, as highlighted in both Cosslett's and Malin's studies. Second, women writers' preoccupation with female family relations often leads to the relative obscurity of father figures in most matrilineal narratives. As will be shown later in my textual analysis, the theme of matrilinealism becomes differently inflected in the literary texts written by women who are nonwhite and nonmainstream. Even though it has been a global phenomenon that women of different classes, races, and cultures engage themselves in the writing of matrilineal narratives, matrilinealism is also significantly the lifeline and the family line that sustain and safeguard the continuation of marginalized, endangered cultures or subcultures. In addition, by delving in my books into the texts written by nonwhite women, the definition of matrilineal narratives will be expanded further to include both the biological and nonbiological aspects of motherhood and mothering. That is to say, the concept of matrilinealism goes beyond its essentialist and relational definitions.

Further, when addressing the issue of matrilineal narratives, one cannot eschew the sustained relation between feminism and matrilinealism. The questions worth pursuing are: What is exactly this relation between feminism and matrilinealism — What are their mutual influences? Would their alliance reflect, represent, and/or revise recent feminist development of maternal studies for the last three decades? And how will my research into matrilineal narratives fit into current feminist study of motherhood and mothering — While admitting women's writing of matrilineal narratives "as a part of the feminist movement's recovery of the mother/daughter bond," Cosslett also argues that the proliferation of mother-daughter texts, both "autobiographical and fictional," for example, Rich's *Of Woman Born* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* published concurrently in the year of 1976, should not necessarily be seen as a causal relation between "the rise of second-wave feminism" and matrilinealism.⁵ Moving into the 1980s further, as Andrea O'Reilly notes, feminist writers, "both lay and academic," have been united by their concerted efforts to uphold and "celebrate mother-daughter connection" exhibited distinctly through writing of "maternal narratives, the motherline, feminist socialization of daughters, and gynocentric mothering."⁶ O'Reilly envisions this development of feminist writings about mother-daughter relationships since the 1980s as "an alternative mother-daughter narrative scripted for empowerment as opposed to estrangement," as prescribed in the works of certain 1970s influential Anglo-American feminist theorists.⁷

What both Cosslett and O'Reilly have marked respectively regarding these particular periods of feminist thought on motherhood and mother-daughter relationships signals significantly a historical tendency for both feminist and women's writers to consolidate the mother-daughter bond and connection in response to feminist advocacy of relationality. With the burgeoning development of feminist discourses on motherhood for the past three decades, the attempt to explicate the intricate relation between feminism and matrilinealism and to situate where one's study stands becomes daunting and elicits far more complicated issues than one would expect. In what follows, I will turn to a broader historical framework where feminist contentions of relationality and recuperative motherhood are questioned. But, in contrast, I will argue that alongside this feminist questioning of relationality, a revisiting of and an illuminating approach to thinking about motherhood and feminist relationality via feminist matrilinealism can also be developed.

Elaine Tuttle Hansen, for instance, sketches out three phases of feminist studies of motherhood for the last three decades beginning as early as the 1960s. To summarize this wide-ranging and prolific strand of feminist development, Hansen puts it succinctly and aptly thus:

The story of feminists thinking about motherhood since the early 1960s is told as a drama in three acts: repudiation, recuperation, and, in the latest and most difficult stage to conceptualize, an emerging critique of recuperation that coexists with ongoing efforts to deploy recuperative strategies.⁸

Hansen's declaration of "the latest and most difficult stage" in feminist development on the subject of motherhood emanates from the focus of her study on "the most inadequately explored aspect of *mother* as concept and identity: its relational features." And as the title of her book *Mother without Child* attests, her main aim is to look at the nonrelational aspect of maternity with reference to those mothers who either voluntarily or involuntarily leave or live without their children.⁹ Ellen Ross, another feminist maternal scholar, corroborates Hansen's view by indicating that "the celebratory mode of the 1980s" inadvertently bypasses and excludes the demoralizing or even agonizing aspects of motherhood and mothering, one of them being those of nonmothers.¹⁰ What Hansen interrogates further in her pioneering study of "the figure of the mother without child" in a series of contemporary women's fiction is the double-sided maternity, as portrayed in the characterization of the mother without child. Contesting the social and cultural normalization of a mother as a relational entity, Hansen maintains that "the figure of the mother

without child," despite the absence of her child, does not subscribe to the dichotomous "categories of criminal or victim, bad or good mother"; instead, her presence suggests a liberating proposition by playing out these two roles simultaneously.¹¹ The overall arguments both Hansen and Ross point to are that feminist recuperation of motherhood launched since the 1970s is not necessarily denounced at the most recent stage but subject to change in its present reformulation and transformation since the mid-1990s.

In an analogous fashion to Hansen's study, my purpose in this book is also to embark on an innovative critique of this recuperative stage in conjunction with rethinking and recreating feminist mothering in new lights. However, rather than examining this nonrelational aspect of motherhood, I seek to invoke a feminist revisiting of relational motherhood and mothering. While I am definitely reluctant to eschew current feminist maternal scholarship on nonrelational and nonbiological motherhood, what I would like to highlight here is that, apart from the emergence of mother without child, whose significance reformulates contemporary feminist discourse of motherhood, there is also the resurgence of mothers with children. By saying so, I suggest that matrilinealism, as unfolded and developed continuously and notably in the delineations of female genealogy in contemporary women's fiction, calls forth not only a reaffirmation of relationality within feminist and women's writing of motherhood and mothering but also its readjustment and transition. To clarify my argument concerning a feminist revisiting of relationality within motherhood, I will go back to the 1970s to rediscover what relationality in accordance with the recuperation of motherhood could mean through the perspectives of several feminist and women writers from the 1980s to the present. Alongside my illustration of this feminist revisiting of relationality, I find it useful to refer to some of Hansen's arguments in order to elucidate, if not argue, my stance in relation to several heated maternal debates and issues.

As I will explicate in greater detail later in my book, the mid-1970s feminist accentuation of relationality and woman-centeredness, as explored in the two landmark studies Rich's *Of Woman Born* and Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*, departed from the original radical feminist critique and introduced a new outlook favoring a distinct and separate womanculture in which women's experiences and virtues such as motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, pacifism, and nurturance are celebrated and esteemed as privileges over men. Although the second-wave feminist movement of celebrating womanhood (motherhood) was an influential and significant event in the history of the feminist movement, this feminist embrace of

relationality also provoked confusion and dissension among later generations of feminists. The toughest critique leveled against second-wave feminist advocacy of relationality is its resorting to essential womanhood (motherhood) or what Hansen criticized as the taken-for-grantedness of the mother as a relational concept. In Hansen's opinion, as long as the notions of motherhood and mothering are still grounded in essentialist and "relational features," the "real and vexed" questions of whether motherhood and mothering should be seen as "biological" or "metaphorical" remain unresolved, and this politics of motherhood will continue to divide women and feminists.¹²

While Hansen's sharp observation pinpoints the blind spot of feminist allegiance to relationality and motherhood, her study, although innovative and worthwhile, reveals only certain truths about feminist development of motherhood and mothering for the past three decades. As noted by both Cosslett and O'Reilly, the proliferation of women's writing about mother-daughter relationships beginning as early as 1976, in the form of matrilineal narratives in particular, I would argue, suggests something else about the notion of relationality in connection with motherhood. The most crucial transformation of relationality, as I have mentioned earlier, is its expansion of the mother-child (daughter) relation from dyad to triad. Although the construction of matrilineal narratives still rests on mother-child relations per se, there are four significant aspects of matrilineal narratives that contribute to reconceptualizing and retheorizing feminist thinking on motherhood and mothering in "the latest and most difficult stage."¹³

First, the emergence of another maternal figure, the grandmother, manifests the representations of motherhood and mothering in its multiple dimensions. In a vein similar to the mother without child in Hansen's study, the figure of the grandmother is both a mother and a nonmother (or even better, an othermother, whose maternal practice and function are not bound in a strictly biological sense). This move beyond essential motherhood, coupled with the advent of the grandmother-mother-daughter triad, complicates the culturally perceived notions of motherhood and mothering. The triadic relation of grandmother-mother-daughter, as delineated in most matrilineal narratives, transforms the concept of the mother into fluid and flexible identities. In other words, through their mutual mothering of each other, the figure of the mother, whether being taken up by grandmother, mother, or daughter, is not fixed only by her relation to her child. More significant, as I will demonstrate at length in parts 2 and 3, the extension of the mother-child relation into a triadic one surpasses the "power-over"¹⁴ mechanism of the mother-child dyad, as grounded in the theoretical tenets of psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic feminism.